

# Ask Wisconsin Best Practices Guidelines

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## Introduction

The guidelines contained in this document are designed to ensure that Ask Wisconsin users get the best possible service while internal library operations run as smoothly as possible. By adhering to these rules and procedures, all Ask Wisconsin member libraries will be able to provide consistently reliable service to library patrons.

## Suggested Coverage Procedures

### Staff Training

Care should be taken to prepare librarians who will be providing virtual reference service. Besides the knowledge necessary to serve at a physical reference desk, additional prerequisite skills are needed to be online librarian.

See the appendix documents:

- ***Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers***
- ***Core Competencies for Virtual Reference***
- ***Internet Reference Competencies***
- ***Windows MultiTasking Competencies***

for a review of some of the computer proficiencies and training checklists useful for Ask Wisconsin librarian training.

Librarians on chat duty must be aware of the services provided by other member libraries. Familiarity with the information on the Ask Wisconsin Chat Support Page at <http://lepton.wils.wisc.edu/askwichtat/> and knowledge of the information covered in

the Tips for Helping a Patron of a UW Campus Library section of this document are therefore required before signing on to shared chat coverage.

### Accounts and Scheduling

Librarians can use a shared QuestionPoint account to answer questions, or have the local administrator create individual accounts for each librarian. Using individual accounts offers the ability to keep more robust statistics, and allows for easier tracking of questions where the librarian does not give a name.

To aid in chat coverage identification and the tracking of question histories, accounts used for cooperative chat coverage should contain the library ID as listed on the Ask Wisconsin Chat Support Page.

Since most member libraries have been providing e-mail reference service for some time, the practice of routinely checking for e-mailed questions in QuestionPoint should be easily adopted. A system similar to the scheduling of reference desk duty shifts may work best for member libraries providing shared chat coverage.

Cooperative chat coverage should not be provided by a librarian staffing a reference desk or telephone line at the same time, whenever possible. There are many reasons why reference desk workers should not try to offer chat services. The main reason is the fundamentally detrimental consequences to service levels.

### Quality Control

Internet users have come to expect rapid responses to e-mail inquiries. Member libraries should aim for a maximum of 24-hour turnaround time on all questions – if nothing else to confirm that the question has been received and is still being researched.

The accuracy of closed questions and chat transcripts should also be regularly reviewed by a librarian at each institution to ensure quality control. Follow-up answers and clarifications should be sent as necessary.

## **Refresher Training**

Training:

- Time should be provided for staff training and continuing education.
- Staff should be encouraged to participate in training offered by the Ask Wisconsin Librarians Consortium offered through PlaceWare / WisLine sessions.
- The Virt-Ref Virtual Reference in WI Libraries electronic mailing list <<http://titan.wils.wisc.edu/mailman/listinfo/virt-ref/>> should be read regularly in order to learn about new enhancements.
- A library's QuestionPoint administrator should subscribe to the QuestionPoint-L electronic discussion list

<<http://questionpoint.org/community/listserv/questionpoint-l.html>>, and forward to local staff announcements of new enhancements.

Incorporating new enhancements into what we do:

- Encourage and enable library staff member to meet regularly to discuss their experiences and new QP enhancements.
- Use the Virt-Ref electronic mailing list to exchange tips and information.
- Participate in QuestionPoint Virtual User Group Meetings  
<<http://questionpoint.org/community/usergroups/>>.

Staff should be encouraged to join a QuestionPoint Discussion Forum  
<<http://questionpoint.org/community/discussionforumsregpage.html>> to exchange ideas.

## Tips for Helping UW Campus Library Patrons

Even though each UW library will have an individualized set of online resources for journal article searching and full-text resources, there is a basic set of databases that UW System provides to all campuses. Most UW libraries will also have available many if not all of the BadgerLink databases, depending on local needs.

UW System provided databases available at all campuses as of July 2004 include:

Database	Subject	Full-text?
America: History & Life	North American history	No
ABI/INFORM	business	Many full text articles
American Chemical Society Web archives	Chemistry	Yes
BioOne	Biology	yes
BIOSIS (Biological Abstracts)	Biology	No
CINAHL	nursing	Some
Criminal Justice Periodical Index	Criminology	Quite a bit
Emerald Press	Management	Some
GenderWatch	Women's studies, gender issues	Mostly
Grove's Dictionaries Online—Art, Music	Art, music	Yes
Institute of Physics	Physics	Yes
ISI Web of Science	Science, social science humanities	No
LexisNexis Academic Universe	Business, news, law	Yes
LexisNexis Statistical	Statistics in federal government publications	Some
MathSciNet	Mathematics	No
Mental Measurements Yearbook	Psychological testing	Yes
Nature	Science	Yes
Oxford English Dictionary	Dictionary	Yes
Project Muse	Humanities	Yes
Science Online	Science	Yes

In most cases, off-campus access to library licensed databases and electronic reserves in the UW libraries is by IP address rather than individual database user names and passwords. Remote user authentication is done through a proxy server, usually via EZProxy. In most cases, a user is verified by logging in with their campus user name and password. Each campus uses a slightly different formula for generating and assigning user names and passwords. Even though students should have received information about their user name and password, they may become confused when they have other

passwords assigned, such as for their local student information system, online courses, etc..

Institution	Remote Access Info	E-Reserves Info	Article databases lists
UW Colleges	<a href="http://www.uwc.edu/library/proxy.htm">http://www.uwc.edu/library/proxy.htm</a>	<a href="http://washington.uwc.edu/library/OnlineReserves.htm">http://washington.uwc.edu/library/OnlineReserves.htm</a> (UW Washington County's Guide)	<a href="http://www.uwc.edu/library/e-resources.htm">http://www.uwc.edu/library/e-resources.htm</a>
UW Green Bay	<a href="http://ezproxy.uwgb.edu:2048/login">http://ezproxy.uwgb.edu:2048/login</a>	<a href="http://www.uwgb.edu/library/department/access/e_res.html">http://www.uwgb.edu/library/department/access/e_res.html</a>	Online databases dropdown menu on main page at: <a href="http://www.uwgb.edu/library/">http://www.uwgb.edu/library/</a>
UW Oshkosh	<a href="http://www.remote.uwosh.edu:2048/login?url=http://eres.uwosh.edu/">http://www.remote.uwosh.edu:2048/login?url=http://eres.uwosh.edu/</a>	<a href="http://www.uwosh.edu/departments/lr/reserves.html">http://www.uwosh.edu/departments/lr/reserves.html</a>	<a href="http://www.uwosh.edu/departments/lr/web.html">http://www.uwosh.edu/departments/lr/web.html</a>
UW Milwaukee	<a href="http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/ezproxy.html">http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/ezproxy.html</a>	<a href="http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/help/help1.html#3">http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/help/help1.html#3</a>	<a href="http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/subjects/">http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/subjects/</a> by subject or <a href="http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/databases/">http://www.uwm.edu/Library/ris/databases/</a> for alphabetical list
UW Platteville	<a href="http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/database/offcampus.htmlx">http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/database/offcampus.htmlx</a>		<a href="http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/database/offcampusdatabase.htmlx">http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/database/offcampusdatabase.htmlx</a> for alphabetical list or <a href="http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/resources/">http://www.uwplatt.edu/~library/resources/</a> by subject
UW River Falls	<a href="http://www.uwrf.edu:2048/login">http://www.uwrf.edu:2048/login</a>	<a href="http://www.uwrf.edu/library/ereserves/">http://www.uwrf.edu/library/ereserves/</a>	<a href="http://www.uwrf.edu/library/db/">http://www.uwrf.edu/library/db/</a> by subject or <a href="http://www.uwrf.edu/library/info/a2z.php">http://www.uwrf.edu/library/info/a2z.php</a> for alphabetical
UW Superior	<a href="http://www.uwsuper.edu/library/offcampus/index.html">http://www.uwsuper.edu/library/offcampus/index.html</a>	<a href="http://www.uwsuper.edu/library/reserves/index.html">http://www.uwsuper.edu/library/reserves/index.html</a>	<a href="http://library.uwsuper.edu/indexes/alpha.html">http://library.uwsuper.edu/indexes/alpha.html</a> for alphabetical list; <a href="http://library.uwsuper.edu/indexes/bysubject2.html">http://library.uwsuper.edu/indexes/bysubject2.html</a> by subject
UW Whitewater	<a href="http://library.uww.edu/guides/remote.htm">http://library.uww.edu/guides/remote.htm</a>	<a href="http://library.uww.edu/erspage.htm">http://library.uww.edu/erspage.htm</a>	<a href="http://library.uww.edu/indexes/articles.htm">http://library.uww.edu/indexes/articles.htm</a>

### Technical College Resources

Institution	Remote Access Info	Reserves	Article Databases
Chippewa Valley		<a href="http://www.cvtc.edu/Library/FAQ.htm#Q7">http://www.cvtc.edu/Library/FAQ.htm#Q7</a>	<a href="http://www.cvtc.edu/Library/Periodicals.htm">http://www.cvtc.edu/Library/Periodicals.htm</a>
MATC	<a href="http://matcmadison.edu/library/library/info/offcampus.htm">http://matcmadison.edu/library/library/info/offcampus.htm</a>	<a href="http://matcmadison.edu/library/library/resources/reserves/default.htm">http://matcmadison.edu/library/library/resources/reserves/default.htm</a>	<a href="http://matcmadison.edu/library/library/resources/articles.htm">http://matcmadison.edu/library/library/resources/articles.htm</a>
WISPALS	<a href="http://www.nwtc.tec.wi.us/Library/Passwords.htm">http://www.nwtc.tec.wi.us/Library/Passwords.htm</a> (NWTC) or <a href="http://www.moraine.tec.wi.us/services/library/faq.shtml#home">http://www.moraine.tec.wi.us/services/library/faq.shtml#home</a> for Moraine Park	<a href="http://www.nwtc.tec.wi.us/Library/PDFs/E-reserves.pdf">http://www.nwtc.tec.wi.us/Library/PDFs/E-reserves.pdf</a> (NWTC)	

### Borrowing Materials From Other Libraries

There are two major methods UW campus libraries use to borrow materials from other libraries. One is through traditional interlibrary loan, using the ILLiad system. The other is called “universal borrowing” or UB, and is done directly through our online catalog system.

With UB, the most common approach is for a user to click on the “other libraries” tab in the catalog, and select to search “all universal borrowing libraries” and then do their search. When they find an item they wish to borrow, they click on the “request an item” tab, and log in with their personal information. With UB, the major differences are:

- The request must be for an item that circulates, such as a video or book from the stacks—so no journal articles or reference materials
- You can not request something that is checked out
- You are requesting something from a particular library—the request is not passed along to another library if that library can not fill it
- Materials arrive in 3-4 days, and the system notifies the patron by e-mail

Other options are available to some patrons, including the INFOPASS system for Southeast Wisconsin library users. See UW-Milwaukee’s page “Options for Obtaining Library Materials” at <<http://www.uwm.edu/Libraries/ris/ill.html>> for more information.

## Chat Greeting Identification

The Best Practices group has no unanimously-agreed upon recommendation regarding whether or not the patron should be notified immediately that the librarian they were talking to was not from their local library, or whether that would discourage them from asking questions.

The sections below provide the different rationales for identifying the source library at the beginning of a chat session. Member libraries should weigh the factors involved with either option before deciding upon a standard practice.

### Not Identifying by Library

When greeting patrons, do not indicate which library you’re at. Suggested greetings:

- Use this script: “Welcome to the AskWI Chat reference service. Brought to you by the member libraries of the AskWisconsin Consortium. How can we help you today?” (This script is named “Howdy” in the Ask Wisconsin Librarians “Institution’s Custom Scripts”)
- Greet the patron by name, and introduce yourself by name.  
Example: “Hi Mary, my name is John. How can I help you today?”

Was a dropped chat session caused by problems with software or hardware, or did the patron purposely exit due to disorientation at being greeted by a librarian from a library different from his/her own? Even though we’re well aware that chat coverage is made possible through our consortium, many patrons do not read explanatory text that accompanies a library’s chat form, and expect to engage in chat only with a librarian at his/her local library.

To quote the ALA RUSA *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals*, “... the behaviors exhibited by the librarian should serve to welcome the patron and to place him/her at ease. The librarian’s role in the communications process is to make the patron feel comfortable in a situation which may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming.”

And as expressed by the Texas A&M University System Virtual Reference Service, “Expectations are a large component of patron satisfaction.”

Sources:

*Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals*, section 1.0 “Approachability”, URL: <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/guidelinesbehavioral.htm>

Texas A&M University System Virtual Reference Service, *The Reference Interview*, URL: <http://lib-oldweb.tamu.edu/vr/reference%20interview.htm>

### Identifying by Library

Begin a chat session by identifying the library you are working in. For example:

Welcome to our Ask Wisconsin Librarians service. I am a librarian at the UW-Milwaukee Libraries. How may I help you?

Such a script tries to make it clear that you are from a specific library, but are also on chat duty to help whoever connects.

It’s important for users to immediately realize that they’re participating in a state-wide service. This allows librarians to elaborate, if asked, that they can help users with research and basic questions about their library, but it is sometimes best to phone one’s local library directly.

Users get frustrated when, in the middle of a chat transaction, they are informed that they’re not talking to a librarian from their library, especially when the chatting librarian has withheld this information and then sandbagged the patron with it later as a means of referring them to another library. There is no way librarians who have not identified themselves can gracefully transition to doing so in mid-chat. To avoid this from happening, a welcoming script like the one above should be used.

### Identifying by Personal Name

QuestionPoint patrons will only see “Librarian:” next to librarian chat and e-mail messages. Librarians who are comfortable identifying themselves by name may find that patrons are more receptive and open with their information needs in return, and that patrons are able to receive better service as a result.

Librarians concerned about harassment may wish to refrain from identifying themselves by name. However, it is not appropriate to use fake names in library correspondence.

## Levels of Service Offered

“Reference librarians are expected to answer all parts of the question and practice good search strategies, as defined by the profession. The librarian should do his or her best to locate and recommend at least one resource for every question. If more in-depth research is necessary, give as much information as is reasonable and advise the patron to visit their local library. Look up a library for him/her if possible. Search time should be limited to amount of time that your reference section head recommends ... (from *Library of Congress Questionpoint User Guidelines IIIB1 and IIIC1a*)

“Librarians should use their own discretion and professional judgment to refer patrons to their local libraries when he or she determines that the question cannot be reasonably answered using this service. Situations that will need referrals to other librarians/libraries include:

1. Responses involving detailed information specific to the patron’s institution, such as periodical holdings details or patron record information, or institutional policies not commonly answered or located online.
2. Responses involving information or resources that might be handled better by libraries with particular materials or resources, or by librarians who have defined a particular subject specialty. (from *OhioLink Chat Reference Service Manual, III Referrals* - <<http://library.utoledo.edu/userhomes/wlee/ChatManFull.html>>

“Sometimes it may be appropriate to transfer the call to a subject specialist or local librarian. Other times you may want to follow up with them via e-mail, or refer them to their local librarians.” from *OhioLink Chat Reference Service Manual, III Referrals* -

### Recommended Length of Responses

Librarians will strive to answer questions in approximately 15 minutes. However, this will often be insufficient amount of time to provide a complete response. Librarians are expected to be aware of others waiting for assistance and responses that are too complex for the medium. In these instances, librarians are expected to either get the user started and ask that he or she return with more questions, ask the user if it would be o.k. to follow-up with him or her by email, or to follow the referral procedures below.” (from *OhioLink Chat Reference Service & Staffing Guidelines* - <[http://staff.lib.muohio.edu/~bbarr/webrefinfo/OL\\_Chat\\_Ref\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://staff.lib.muohio.edu/~bbarr/webrefinfo/OL_Chat_Ref_Guidelines.pdf)>

## Procedures for Referrals

If librarians determine through their own discretion and professional judgment that they cannot adequately answer a customer’s question they may wish to make a referral.

Situations that may necessitate referrals to other librarians/libraries include:

- Responses involving detailed information specific to the customer’s institution, such as customer account information, institutional policies and services, or special collections, not commonly answered or located online. Suggest to the customer that they call or email their own library, providing them with the phone number or email address if at all possible.
- Responses involving information or resources that might be handled better by libraries with particular materials or collections. Offer to email the target institution with the customer’s query. Click on *Profiles*, and then *Search Profiles* to locate the appropriate referral.

## Handling Inappropriate Patrons

“The QP institution Administrator may request that the individual desist from such activity or may delete the offending question without reply. If there are frequent offenders, it is recommended that the Administrator create an institution script to address the nature of what is and/ or is not an appropriate.” (from *Library of Congress QuestionPoint User Guidelines* IIA4).

Suggested steps:

- For a first occurrence, send a standard institution script (need to create one) that says something like: “Your question and/or language is inappropriate. If you have a library related question I would be glad to help you. Otherwise, I will end our chat session now.”
- For a second offense: End the chat session promptly. You may want to send a message right before ending it to the effect that you are doing so (could use the standard script). For anyone reviewing transcripts, it will be clear that the session was deliberately ended and there was no technical problem.
- For chronic offenses: Although technical countermeasures may be employed to guard against repeated abuse (such as detecting the user’s IP address and restricting Ask Wisconsin access from that address), in most cases, ignoring inappropriate activities is the best way to make them go away.
- For major offenses: More serious instances of threats, harassment or other criminal offenses should be referred to the proper authorities, possibly with a message to the user indicating as much.

Ask Wisconsin librarians should be aware of the possible variances in communication styles in chat and e-mail correspondence when compared to the standard niceties present during in-person interactions, particularly in regard to the “online disinhibition effect” as described at <<http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/disinhibit.html>>. However, instances of Ask Wisconsin patrons acting intentionally annoying (“trolling”) are rare.

## Shift Changes

1. The schedule will list specific times for each shift to begin and end. Libraries will not be able to make up alternative times for their shifts.
2. Librarians should make every effort to be prompt in signing on for their shift so the librarian they're replacing is not inconvenienced.
3. Librarians should stay signed on and available until their shift is completely over.
4. If a librarian's shift is done and no other librarian has signed on for the next shift, the librarian is not required to stay on duty.
5. If you are still involved with a customer at the end of your shift:
  - At your discretion, continue to help the customer if you determine that the question can be closed out quickly.
  - Alternatively, offer to complete the question via email, or give the customer the option of logging off your chat session and opening a new chat session to be handled by the new shift.

Member libraries signing on to discover a chat in progress may review the chat transcript, join the chat session, and offer to take over, at their discretion. Please note that technical issues make this option unadvisable at the present (as this can cause a disconnection).

Member libraries should not pick up chat sessions outside of their committed (scheduled and volunteered substitutions) hours. The only possible exception to this is when giving demonstrations and performing system testing. Whenever this is done, the person connecting to chat as a library patron should clearly denote [TESTING FOR ABC LIBRARY] in the patron name field, so that the member library on duty knows that it is not a genuine use of the service and can be ignored.

## Missed Chat Shifts

### Planned Absences

A planned absence happens when a member library cannot meet their chat obligations and it is known ahead of time. This can be if for example a member library will be closed, or a drastic staff shortage occurs.

When an absence is planned, a request for substitute coverage should be made to the Virt-ref mailing list. If a substitute volunteers, then another announcement should be made to that fact.

If no substitute coverage can be arranged, a warning message should be sent to Virt-ref. Member libraries should then adjust their chat hours information to reflect this change in coverage.

### Unexpected Absences

When a library is not relieved on time for the next chat shift, or when a library signs in for chat duty and the prior shift's library is not signed on, an unexpected absence has occurred.

When an unexpected absence has occurred, inform the local library's Ask Wisconsin representative about the lapse. The local administrator should make every effort to ensure that such lapses do not happen again.

To keep an accurate record of these problems, the absence should also be reported to the Ask Wisconsin Consortium's central chat scheduler (currently Mark Beatty).

### Obligations and Enforcement

Member libraries of the Ask Wisconsin group are ultimately responsible for providing chat coverage for their committed hours. Libraries are not obligated to be on chat duty outside of their assigned hours.

Member libraries repeatedly remiss in their chat duties should be recommended to the board for removal of participation in Ask Wisconsin service.

## **Patron Privacy**

Member libraries should commit to protecting library patron privacy.

In accordance with the American Library Association's *Policy Concerning Confidentiality of Personally Identifiable Information About Library Users* and *Policy on Confidentiality of Library Records*, the member libraries should maintain a strict policy of refusing to release any personal information to any non-governmental third parties; personally-identifying information about any patron's use of QuestionPoint should never be released to any individual, corporation, or non-governmental organization.

## **Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers**

### **Introduction**

The face of Reference Services has changed significantly since the original RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance were first published in 1996. Intended to be used in the training, development, and/or evaluation of library professionals and staff, the Guidelines have subsequently been favorably evaluated by the profession, and currently enjoy widespread acceptance as standards for the measurement of effective reference transactions.<sup>1</sup>

The original Guidelines dealt primarily with face-to-face interactions between Reference staff and library users. Even at the time, however, the world of Reference was moving beyond the traditional Reference Desk. Email and online chat services have since become popular with both patrons and library staff, and are expanding in all types of libraries, from public to academic to school libraries and beyond. Although some of the statements in the original Guidelines can be applied to remote forms of reference, the lack of traditional visual and non-verbal cues produces a different type of library-patron interaction.

One constant that the shift away from in-person encounters has not lessened is the need for good communication skills. In all forms of reference services, the success of the transaction is measured not only by the information conveyed, but also by the positive or negative impact of the patron/staff interaction. The positive or negative behavior of the reference staff member (as observed by the patron) becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure. This connection has been born out in the work of researchers like Gers and Seward (1985), who found that "behaviors have a strong influence on performance"<sup>2</sup>, and Whitlatch (1990), who stated "Librarian courtesy, interest, and helpfulness are crucial in providing successful reference service. Libraries must select and retain staff who have these service orientations toward users."<sup>3</sup> Matthew Saxton (2002) put the Guidelines to a statistical test, and found that they did indeed correlate highly to a successful reference transaction.<sup>4</sup>

The original RUSA Ad Hoc Committee that designed the Guidelines recognized the need for future adaptation to deal with issues related to remote users, and in late 2001 the RUSA Standards and Guidelines Committee requested that the MOUSS Management of Reference Committee undertake this revision. The revised Guidelines reflect the understanding that while in-person and remote reference interviews share some points in common, each also has its own peculiar characteristics that need to be addressed separately in the formation of standard guidelines.

With this in mind, the original format has been rearranged to reflect the changes in our

profession. The 5 main areas (Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow Up) remain the same, but 3 distinct categories have been added (where appropriate) under each. They are:

**General** - Guidelines that can be applied in any type of reference interaction, including both in person and remote transactions.

**In Person** - Additional guidelines that are specific to face-to-face encounters, and make the most sense in this context.

**Remote** - Additional guidelines that are specific to reference encounters by telephone, email, chat, etc., where traditional visual and non-verbal cues do not exist.

Some of the original Guidelines have also been rewritten to make the service ideal they convey apply more generally. The goal of this document's revision has been to create a conceptual framework and service ethic with which reference professionals can consider all patron reference interactions, and help establish a service standard for their institution.

**Note:** The term librarian in this document applies to all who provide reference and informational services directly to library users.

## 1.0 Approachability

In order to have a successful reference transaction, patrons must be able to identify that a reference librarian is available to provide assistance and also must feel comfortable in going to that person for help. In remote environments, this also means placing contact information for chat, email, telephone, and other services in prominent locations, to make them obvious and welcoming to patrons. Approachability behaviors, such as the initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the librarian, will set the tone for the entire communication process, and will influence the depth and level of interaction between the staff and the patrons. At this stage in the process, the behaviors exhibited by the staff member should serve to welcome the patrons and to place them at ease. The librarian's role in the communications process is to make the patrons feel comfortable in a situation which may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming. To be approachable, the librarian:

### *General*

- 1.1 Establishes a "reference presence" wherever patrons look for it. This includes having Reference Services in a highly visible location and using proper signage (both in the library and on the library's website) to indicate the

location, hours, and availability of in-person and remote help or assistance.

- 1.2 Is poised and ready to engage approaching patrons. The librarian is aware of the need to stop all other activities when patrons approach and focus attention on the patrons' needs.
- 1.3 Acknowledges others waiting for service.
  - 1.3.1 Employs a system of question triage to identify what types of questions the patrons have when more than two patrons are waiting. Frequently asked questions, brief informational questions, directional questions, and referrals can be answered quickly, allowing more time to devote to in-depth reference questions.

*In Person*

- 1.4 Establishes initial eye contact with patrons, and acknowledges the presence of patrons through smiling and/or attentive and welcoming body language.
- 1.5 Acknowledges patrons through the use of a friendly greeting to initiate conversation, and/or by standing up, moving forward, or moving closer to them.
- 1.6 Remains visible to patrons as much as possible.
- 1.7 Roves through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible. Librarians should make themselves available to patrons by offering assistance at their point-of-need rather than waiting for patrons to come to the reference desk. To rove successfully, the librarian should:
  - 1.7.1 Be mobile. Get the patrons started on the initial steps of their search, then move on to other patrons.
  - 1.7.2 Address the patrons before addressing their computer screen. Patrons are more likely to confide in librarians and discuss their needs if they do not perceive the librarians as "policing" the area.
  - 1.7.3 Approach patrons and offer assistance with lines such as, "Are you finding what you need?" "Can I help you with anything?" or "How is your search going?"
  - 1.7.4 Check back on their progress after helping patrons start a search.

*Remote*

- 1.8 Should provide a visible link to Reference Services from the Library's website so that the reference service is approachable and easy to find.

**2.0 Interest**

A successful librarian must demonstrate a high degree of interest in the reference transaction. While not every query will contain stimulating intellectual challenges, the librarian should be interested in each patron's informational need and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Librarians who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of their patrons will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users. To demonstrate interest, the librarian:

*General*

- 2.1 Appears unhurried during the reference transaction.
- 2.2 Focuses attention on the patrons.

*In Person*

- 2.3 Faces patrons when speaking and listening.
- 2.4 Maintains or re-establishes eye contact with patrons throughout the transaction.
- 2.5 Signals an understanding of patrons' needs through verbal or non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head or brief comments or questions.

*Remote*

- 1.6 Maintains or re-establishes "word contact" with the patron in text-based environments by sending written or prepared prompts, etc., to convey interest in the patron's question.
- 2.7 Acknowledges user email questions in a timely manner.
- 2.8 States question-answering procedures and policies clearly in an accessible place on the Web. This should indicate question scope, types of answers provided, and expected turnaround time.

### 3.0 Listening/Inquiring

The reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process. The librarian must be effective in identifying the patron's information needs and must do so in a manner that keeps patrons at ease. Strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction. As a good communicator, the librarian:

#### *General*

- 3.1 Communicates in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner.
- 3.2 Uses a tone of voice and/or written language appropriate to the nature of the transaction.
- 3.3 Allows the patrons to state fully their information need in their own words before responding.
- 3.4 Rephrases the question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure that it is understood.
- 3.5 Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids excessive jargon.
- 3.6 Uses open-ended questioning techniques to encourage patrons to expand on the request or present additional information. Some examples of such questions include:
  - Please tell me more about your topic.
  - What additional information can you give me?
  - How much information do you need?
- 3.7 Uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the search query. Some examples of clarifying questions are:
  - What have you already found?
  - What type of information do you need (books, articles, etc.)?
  - Do you need current or historical information?
- 3.8 Maintains objectivity and does not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction.

*Remote*

- 3.9 Uses reference interviews or Web forms to gather as much information as possible without compromising user privacy.

**4.0 Searching**

The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect. Without an effective search, not only is the desired information unlikely to be found, but patrons may become discouraged as well. Yet many of the aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are still dependent on the behavior of the librarian. As an effective searcher, the librarian:

*General*

- 4.1 Constructs a competent and complete search strategy. This involves:
- Selecting search terms that are most related to the information desired.
  - Verifying spelling and other possible factual errors in the original query.
  - Identifying sources appropriate to the patron's need that have the highest probability of containing information relevant to the patron's query.
- 4.2 Finds out what patrons have already tried, and encourages patrons to contribute ideas.
- 4.3 Explains the search strategy and sequence to the patrons, as well as the sources to be used.
- 4.4 Attempts to conduct the search within the patrons' allotted time frame.
- 4.5 Accompanies the patrons in the search (at least in the initial stages of the search process).
- 4.6 Explains how to use sources when appropriate.
- 4.7 Works with the patrons to narrow or broaden the topic when too little or too much information is identified.
- 4.8 Asks the patrons if additional information is needed after an initial result is found.

- 4.9 Recognizes when to refer patrons to a more appropriate guide, database, library, librarian, or other resource.
- 4.10 Offers pointers, detailed search paths (including complete URLs), and names of resources used to find the answer, so that patrons can learn to answer similar questions on their own.

*Remote*

- 4.11 Uses appropriate technology (such as co-browsing, scanning, faxing, etc.) to help guide patrons through library resources, when possible.

**5.0 Follow-up**

The reference transaction does not end when the librarian leaves the patrons. The librarian is responsible for determining if the patrons are satisfied with the results of the search, and is also responsible for referring the patrons to other sources, even when those sources are not available in the local library. For successful follow-up, the librarian:

*General*

- 5.1 Asks patrons if their questions have been completely answered.
- 5.2 Encourages the patrons to return if they have further questions by making a statement such as "If you don't find what you are looking for, please come back and we'll try something else."
- 5.3 Consults other librarians when additional subject expertise is needed.
- 5.4 Makes patrons aware of other appropriate reference services (email, etc.).
- 5.5 Makes arrangements, when appropriate, with the patrons to research a question even after the reference transaction has been completed.
- 5.6 Refers the patrons to other sources or institutions when the query cannot be answered to the satisfaction of the patron.
- 5.7 Facilitates the process of referring patrons to another library or information agency through activities such as calling ahead, providing direction and instructions, and providing the library and the patrons with as much information as possible about the amount of information required, and sources already consulted.

5.8 Takes care not to end the reference interview prematurely.<sup>5</sup>

Remote

5.9 Suggests that the patrons visit or call the library when appropriate.

### **Endnotes**

1. For example, see:

Gatten, Jeffrey N., and Carolyn J. Radcliff. "Assessing Reference Behaviors with Unobtrusive Testing." In *Library Evaluation: A Casebook and Can-Do Guide* ed. Wallace, Danny P. and Connie Van Fleet. (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 2001), 105-115.

2. Gers, Ralph and Lillie J. Seward. "Improving Reference Performance: Results of a Statewide Study." *Library Journal*, November 1, 1985. 32-35.

3. Whitlatch, Jo Bell. "Reference Service Effectiveness." *RQ*, Winter 1990. 205-220.

4. Saxton, Matthew L. Evaluation of Reference Service in Public Libraries Using a Hierarchical Linear Model: Applying Multiple Regression Analysis to a Multi-Level Research. Ph.D. Dissertation, UCLA, 2000.

5. Ross, Catherine Sheldrick and Patricia Dewdney. "Negative Closure: Strategies and Counter-Strategies in the Reference Transaction." *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 38(2) 1998. 151-63.1

# CORE COMPETENCIES FOR VIRTUAL REFERENCE

*The following were identified by the Statewide VRS Training Committee as critical skills, abilities and aptitudes for staff providing virtual reference.*

1. Ability to derive professional satisfaction from virtual reference transactions.
2. Keyboarding proficiency.
3. Online communication skills and etiquette, for chat, e-mail, and other online communication.
4. Ability to conduct an effective reference transaction in online environments, including the creation and use of pre-scripted messages.
5. Internet searching skills, in particular the ability to choose the best starting points for online searches.
6. Ability to effectively search, and demonstrate searching of library databases. Knowledge of licensing restrictions connected with use of library databases.
7. Ability to assist online users in applying critical thinking skills in locating, using, and evaluating information.
8. Ability to effectively conduct a collaborative browsing session with a patron.
9. Evaluation of online reference transactions, and identification of improvement strategies.
10. Multi-tasking and managing multiple windows; effective use of Windows keyboard commands and shortcuts.
11. Technical troubleshooting skills and ability to explain technical problems to facilitate diagnosis and solution.
12. Ability to create and apply reference transaction policies in an online environment.
13. Commitment to continuous learning and motivation to improve skills in all areas of reference services.

## **INTERNET REFERENCE COMPETENCIES**

<b><i>I AM ABLE TO:</i></b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sort of</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Easily</b>
1. Quickly find authoritative online definitions for Internet terms such as TCP/IP.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Briefly explain what Usenet is.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Find and search Usenet newsgroups.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Explain how to download and install Acrobat Reader.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Identify and subscribe to an e-mail list (listserv) on a specific library-related topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Break a URL into its component parts and explain each one.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Determine the origin of a non-US Web site by identifying the country code in the URL.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Do a "who is" search to find out who registered a specific domain name.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Effectively search Web directories such as the Open Directory and Librarian's Index to the Internet (LII), using categories and sub-categories, and the advanced search features.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Distinguish between effective and ineffective keywords to use in a search engine, such as Google, and in a directory, such as LII.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Translate a reference question into a search engine query, using phrases, truncation, and implied Boolean (+, -).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Use menus to create a Boolean search query in a search engine like HotBot.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Create a complex search query in AltaVista, using Boolean operators, nested expressions, and domain field limiting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## **INTERNET REFERENCE COMPETENCIES**

<b><i>I AM ABLE TO:</i></b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sort of</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Easily</b>
14. Find a PowerPoint presentation on a Web site using a filetype search.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Explain “on the page” and “off the page” relevancy ranking.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. Define “Invisible Web” and explain the types of files not found by search engines.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. Name two directories of Invisible Web databases.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. Copy and paste text or graphics from a Web page into Word or PowerPoint files.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. Identify common file formats (.html, .txt, .pdf, .jpeg, .zip, .mp3, .mpeg).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. Quickly find the full text of Supreme Court decisions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. Quickly locate ready reference sources on the Web (e.g., online calendars, currency converters, etc.).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Show a parent how to find age-appropriate Web sites for elementary school assignments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. Locate and change Web browser preferences for start page, font size and background color.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. View the source code of a Web page, identifying the title field and image captions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. Show a library patron which California newspapers have online archives.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. Locate the lyrics and sound files for national anthems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## **INTERNET REFERENCE COMPETENCIES**

<b><i>I AM ABLE TO:</i></b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sort of</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Easily</b>
27. Find a photograph of someone who is in the news today.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. Quickly find high-quality reproductions of works by well-known artists.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
29. Choose the most effective starting point for a search (directory, search engine, guide site, searchable database).	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
30. Quickly and accurately locate official home pages for city, state, federal and foreign government agencies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
31. Locate statistical resources for Latin American countries.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
32. Define "webring" and show examples of several webrings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
33. Define "weblog" and find several library-related weblogs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
34. Evaluate Web sites for authority, reliability and currency.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
35. Identify two reliable online sources of information on search engines.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## INTERNET REFERENCE COMPETENCIES



### TEST YOUR INTERNET REFERENCE SKILLS

***Answer the following questions. Show the URL where you found the answer and the steps you took to find it.***

- 1) A student needs a chart showing the major Norse gods and goddesses and how they are related.**
  
- 2) A library patron wants to set his timer for a light on his garage to come on at sunset and go off at sunrise all through the year. He lives in Spokane.**
  
- 3) A community college student writing a report on Bob Dylan wants a complete discography, including recordings with other performers. Under what name did Dylan record to avoid contractual problems with Columbia Records?**
  
- 4) Can you help this patron with a trivia question? She wants to know when Stephanie became one of the top ten names for girls.**

## Windows MultiTasking Competencies

<b><i>I AM ABLE TO:</i></b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sort of</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Easily</b>
1. Use the Windows keyboard commands for Select All, Copy, and Paste.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Use ALT + TAB to move between open Windows.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Use the Windows logo key to get to the Start Menu, Windows desktop, and Windows Explorer.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Install and use the Google Toolbar.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Use the Ctrl and Shift keys to highlight multiple items in a drop-down menu.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Adjust monitor display resolution to maximize your "desktop real estate."	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Explore search engine results quickly by dragging and dropping links into a second browser window.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Use the keyboard shortcuts (Ctrl + F, Ctrl +N, Ctrl + H) for common browser functions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Move a Web page out of a frame by opening it in a new browser window.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Print specific pages or copy selected text in a PDF document.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Explain to a library user how to download and install Acrobat Reader.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Save a file from a Web page to the desktop.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Clear History files, Cache, and Temporary Internet Files.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Create folders in the Internet Explorer Links Toolbar and drag new links into the folders.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## **POLICY CONCERNING CONFIDENTIALITY OF PERSONALLY IDENTIFIABLE INFORMATION ABOUT LIBRARY USERS**

The ethical responsibilities of librarians, as well as statutes in most states and the District of Columbia, protect the privacy of library users. Confidentiality extends to “information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted,” and includes database search records, reference interviews, circulation records, interlibrary loan records and other personally identifiable uses of library materials, facilities, or services.

The First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech and of the press requires that the corresponding rights to hear what is spoken and read what is written be preserved, free from fear of government intrusion, intimidation, or reprisal. The American Library Association reaffirms its opposition to “any use of government prerogatives which lead to the intimidation of the individual or the citizenry from the exercise of free expression. . .[and] encourages resistance to such abuse of government power. . .” (ALA Policy 53.4). In seeking access or in the pursuit of information, confidentiality is the primary means of providing the privacy that will free the individual from fear of intimidation or retaliation.

Libraries are one of the great bulwarks of democracy. They are living embodiments of the First Amendment because their collections include voices of dissent as well as assent. Libraries are impartial resources providing information on all points of view, available to all persons regardless of age, race, religion, national origin, social or political views, economic status, or any other characteristic. The role of libraries as such a resource must not be compromised by an erosion of the privacy rights of library users.

The American Library Association regularly receives reports of visits by agents of federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies to libraries, where it is alleged they have asked for personally identifiable information about library users. These visits, whether under the rubric of simply informing libraries of agency concerns or for some other reason, reflect an insensitivity to the legal and ethical bases for confidentiality, and the role it plays in the preservation of First Amendment rights, rights also extended to foreign nationals while in the United States. The government’s interest in library use reflects a dangerous and fallacious equation of what a person reads with what that person believes or how that person is likely to behave. Such a presumption can and does threaten the freedom of access to information. It also is a threat to a crucial aspect of First Amendment rights: that freedom of speech and of the press include the freedom to hold, disseminate and receive unpopular, minority, “extreme,” or even “dangerous” ideas.

The American Library Association recognizes that, under limited circumstances, access to certain information might be restricted due to a legitimate “national security” concern. However, there has been no showing of a plausible probability that national security will be compromised by any use made of unclassified information available in libraries. Thus, the right of access to this information by individuals, including foreign nationals,

must be recognized as part of the librarian's legal and ethical responsibility to protect the confidentiality of the library user.

The American Library Association also recognizes that law enforcement agencies and officers may occasionally believe that library records contain information which would be helpful to the investigation of criminal activity. If there is a reasonable basis to believe such records are *necessary* to the progress of an investigation or prosecution, the American judicial system provides the mechanism for seeking release of such confidential records: the issuance of a court order, following a showing of *good cause* based on *specific facts*, by a court of competent jurisdiction.

Adopted July 2, 1991, by the ALA Council

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## **POLICY ON CONFIDENTIALITY OF LIBRARY RECORDS\***

The Council of the American Library Association strongly recommends that the responsible officers of each library, cooperative system, and consortium in the United States:

1. Formally adopt a policy which specifically recognizes its circulation records and other records identifying the names of library users to be confidential in nature.
2. Advise all librarians and library employees that such records shall not be made available to any agency of state, federal, or local government except pursuant to such process, order or subpoena as may be authorized under the authority of, and pursuant to, federal, state, or local law relating to civil, criminal, or administrative discovery procedures or legislative power.
3. Resist the issuance of enforcement of any such process, order, or subpoena until such time as a proper showing of good cause has been made in a court of competent jurisdiction.\*\*

\*Note: See also *ALA Policy Manual 54.16 – Code of Ethics*, point #3, “We protect each library user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received, and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.”

\*\*Note: Point 3, above, means that upon receipt of such process, order, or subpoena, the library's officers will consult with their legal counsel to determine if such process, order, or subpoena is in proper form and if there is a showing of good cause of its issuance; if the process, order, or subpoena is not in proper form or if good cause has not been shown, they will insist that such defects be cured.

Adopted January 20, 1971; revised July 4, 1975, July 2, 1986,  
by the ALA Council.