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## **Here's our 2nd revision!**

If you would like to share something in the meantime, contact the committee chair, Rebecca Graff at [rebecca.eve.graff@gmail.com](mailto:rebecca.eve.graff@gmail.com).

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# **Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers 2022**

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## **Preface**

These guidelines are intended for reference and information services providers in all types of libraries. However, some aspects might not prove suitable to all service contexts. Where that is the case, the goal should be to adopt and adapt these guidelines as appropriate to your library.

As conduits between users and information, library workers engage in relationships with users that include communication, trust-building, mutual understanding, and intellectual empathy.

Consequently, library workers engage in reference interactions that are collaborative learning experiences that require excellent communication skills. The library worker must understand the

user's information need and the context of the need before addressing it. Keeping in mind that varying library types reflect different degrees to which this is appropriate, as we assist users in seeking and using information we have the ability to empower users to become better information consumers.

Reference interactions, by their nature, include a power dynamic between the library worker and the user. The library user demonstrates vulnerability when asking questions. To diminish the impact of this power dynamic and empower users, library workers need to build trust and a spirit of learning together with the library user. Instead of deficit-model thinking about our users, we need to acknowledge and act on our user's strengths. All users can learn. Users who ask for assistance want to learn. The library user is the expert in what they want to know, and the library worker is expert in finding information. Rather than being transactional, library workers can make user interactions transformational. We have the opportunity and responsibility to improve and transform our user's learning experiences.

Library workers should be aware of service considerations while interacting with users in a virtual space. Commonly referred to as the "digital divide," there can be a gap between demographics and communities that have access to modern information and communications technology and those without this access. Every individual that uses virtual reference may not have equitable access to appropriate technology and/or broadband. There may be further obstacles that users face with the quality, reliability, and currentness of these technologies when navigating a digital environment. The user's experience with employed technology should be evaluated by the library worker and accommodations made when providing assistance. Library workers should also recognize that communication cues in virtual interactions can be impaired. This lack of visual prompts can lead to misunderstandings, confusion, or loss of rapport. Clear and effective communication, clarification affordances, and emotional awareness can resolve issues in the absence of facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice.

## **1 Inclusion**

A welcoming environment, both physical and virtual, sets the stage for successful reference interactions. Give consideration into making a space intentionally inclusive. It is the responsibility of library workers to create environments that strive to make all users welcome. Similarly, the library worker should adapt to the user's needs as much as possible within the constraints of their library's environment. Reference assistance should be available through a variety of technologies at a user's point of need. Facilities and Technologies should be [ADA](#) and [WCAG 2.1 compliant](#). Library workers using these technologies should endeavor to make themselves familiar with accessibility features.

The intentional goal of inclusion is to be less asymmetrical in power structures and focus on how to be more reciprocal and balanced when designing and providing services. Our constituents should feel comfortable asking for reference assistance and have genuine feelings of belonging in our libraries and institutions. This sense of belonging is what can reinforce the power and value of diversity. Our objective is to create a hospitable place for diverse people and views where individuals can be their authentic selves. By creating a reciprocal/relational dynamic between those providing reference and those seeking assistance in reference, we can create a space for those using our services to see themselves as part of the process, not outside of it. Library workers in frontline positions never know who they might encounter or what their users could want; they should be prepared to work without prejudice and want to foster feelings of belonging, security, support, engagement, acceptance, inclusion, and individual identity.

To be inclusive, the library worker:

- 1.1 Avoids both overt prejudice and microaggressions (ex. Use the person's pronouns).
- 1.2 Advocates for awareness of inclusion, diversity, equity, integrity, respect, decency, dignity, and accessibility in reference services.
- 1.3 Changes attitudes and behaviors that prove deleterious to providing excellent service.
- 1.4 Creates an environment, both physical and virtual, that reduces barriers to reference.
- 1.5 Cultivates self-awareness to counteract implicit bias, both positive and negative.
- 1.6 Demonstrates openness to ideas in opposition to one's own.
- 1.7 Develops a disposition of acceptance toward others and promotes a sense of belonging to all.
- 1.8 Ensures equity of access to resources.
- 1.9 Increases access to reference services through virtual reference, eliminating the need to be physically in a library.
- 1.10 Identifies how intersectionality has shaped value systems and counteracts negative beliefs.
- 1.11 Protects the prerogative of individuals to pursue their research interests without judgment.
- 1.12 Recognizes and respects diversity and difference.
- 1.13 Treats each person as an individual, rather than a representative of a group.

## 2 Visibility | Approachability

In order to have successful reference interactions, it is essential that the library worker is visible and approachable. Whether acting in an in-person or virtual role, the library worker's first step in initiating the reference transaction is to make the user feel comfortable in a situation that can be perceived as intimidating, confusing, or overwhelming. The library worker's demeanor and initial response in any reference situation sets the tone for the entire communication process, and influences the depth and level of interaction.

To be approachable, the library worker:

- 2.1 Is to be found in a highly visible physical or virtual location (e.g. the library, outreach locations, or the library website). Proper signage or notification that indicates the location, hours, and availability of in-person and virtual assistance is available and accessible.
- 2.2 Is poised and ready to engage users. The library worker stops all other activities when a user arrives and focuses their attention on the user's needs.
- 2.3 Acknowledges users by making initial eye contact, employing open body language, or offering a friendly greeting to initiate conversation.
- 2.4 Acknowledges others who may be waiting for service.
- 2.5 Employs a system of question triage to identify questions and service priorities.
- 2.6 Establishes an approachable presence by being easily identifiable in person and online, in compliance with institutional and professional norms and policies.
- 2.7 Ensures that the designated service point is accessible to all users and reports any perceived obstacles to the appropriate staff or department.
- 2.8 Remains visible to users as much as possible.
- 2.9 Encourages users needing or wanting help to ask for assistance.
- 2.10 Uses cues, verbal or nonverbal, or proactive chat to determine which users might want help, and offers assistance with questions such as:
  - "Are you finding what you need?"
  - "Can I help you with anything?"
  - "How is your search going?"

- 2.11 Gets the user started on the initial steps of their research. Offers to provide more assistance, as needed.
- 2.12 Checks back on the user's progress and lets users know how to receive additional assistance.
- 2.13 Monitors the designated service point to determine if users are waiting for assistance.
- 2.14 Gets help from other staff members if demand is heavy.
- 2.15 Provides prominent, jargon-free, accessible pointers to all forms of reference services via the library's website, signage, and other media used to connect users with reference services.
- 2.16 Sets clear expectations about responses to inquiries through transparent communication of policies surrounding reference services, including virtual reference.
- 2.17 Ensures that consultation booking portals and calendars are up-to-date and provides clear instructions for requesting consultations, whether in person or virtual.

### **3 Interest**

A successful library worker demonstrates a high degree of objective, nonjudgmental interest in the reference transaction. While not every query will be of interest to the staff member, the library worker should embrace each user's information needs and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Library workers who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of users will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users.

To demonstrate interest, the library worker:

- 3.1 Acknowledges user questions in a timely manner.
- 3.2 Focuses complete attention on the user and their information need, communicating directly with them.
- 3.3 Sympathizes with the user, learning their perspective and interest in the topic.
- 3.4 Employs emotional intelligence to help the user feel comfortable asking questions.
- 3.5 Shows awareness of cultural, generational, and neurodivergent variations in communication styles.
- 3.6 Demonstrates that building positive relationships is our goal.
- 3.7 Focuses on the user when speaking and listening, facing them as appropriate.

- 3.8 Maintains or re-establishes eye contact with the user throughout the transaction, unless the person appears uncomfortable with making eye contact.
- 3.9 Signals an understanding of the user's needs through verbal and non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head, offering brief explanations, or asking follow-up questions to better understand the user's query.
- 3.10 Maintains contact with the user to convey interest and provide assurance that the query is still viable and a response is forthcoming.
- 3.11 Signals an understanding of the user's need through verbal or non-verbal means, such as affirmative acknowledgement of statements, active listening techniques, or emojis.
- 3.12 Encourages additional communication.

## **4 Listening | Inquiring**

The reference interview process is crucial to the success of the interaction. The library worker should identify the user's information needs in a manner that puts the user at ease. Effective listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction.

As a good communicator, the library worker:

- 4.1 Employs a receptive, cordial, and supportive manner.
- 4.2 Greets the user in a friendly manner and puts them at ease to establish an active rapport, as appropriate.
- 4.3 Uses a tone of voice and/or written language appropriate to the user and the nature of the transaction.
- 4.4 Allows the user to fully state their information need in their own words before responding.
- 4.5 Clarifies the informational goals or objectives of the user's research, as appropriate.
- 4.6 Rephrases the question or request; asks for confirmation to ensure an accurate interpretation.
- 4.7 Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids jargon.
- 4.8 Uses open-ended questions to encourage the user to expand on the request or present additional information. Some examples of open-ended questions include:
  - "Please tell me more about your topic."
  - "What additional information can you give me?"
  - "How much information do you need?"

- 4.9 Uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the search query. Some examples of clarifying questions include:
- “What have you already found?”
  - “Where have you already looked?”
  - “What type of source do you need?”
  - “Do you need a book or an article?”
  - “Do you need current or historical information?”
- 4.10 Maintains objectivity; does not interject value judgments about the subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction.
- 4.11 Uses current technology during the reference interview to gather as much information as necessary to serve the user’s need without compromising user privacy.
- 4.12 Understands that virtual reference can require different interactive skills than face-to-face reference; follows best practices for virtual reference.

## 5 Searching

The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect. Without an effective search, the desired information is unlikely to be found, and users may become discouraged. Many aspects of searching that lead to worthwhile results are dependent on the behavior of the library worker. Before helping someone, the library worker needs to learn what the user wants to find by listening to and querying the user. The constructivist learning practice of engaging prior knowledge, starting where they are, plays a positive role in assisting users.

As an effective searcher, the library worker:

- 5.1 Finds out what the user has already tried, and encourages the user to contribute their ideas.
- 5.2 Constructs a competent and complete search strategy. The library worker:
- Selects search terms that are most relevant to the information desired. It is particularly important to be sensitive to cultural, ethnic, gender, and racial synonyms.
  - Verifies spelling and other possible factual errors in the original query.
  - Identifies appropriate sources that contain information likely to be relevant to the user's query.

- 5.3 Verifies that the search strategy meets the user's information need, and offers to explain choices about sources, search terms, etc., rather than simply providing print-outs, citations, or URLs.
- 5.4 Works with the user to evaluate results, revise search terms, and identify other sources for subsequent searches.
- 5.5 Focuses on the stated information need of the user, rather than redirecting them to something preferred by the library worker.
- 5.6 Encourages critical thinking, and includes a combination of reflection and practice.
- 5.7 Works with the user to refine a question when too little or too much information is identified.
- 5.8 Attempts to conduct the search within the user's allotted time frame, while managing expectations about what library staff can accomplish with regard to assistance and time commitments
- 5.9 If the library worker cannot provide help for every facet of the inquiry, focus on what can be done instead of what cannot be done.
- 5.10 Articulates and reviews the search process so that users can follow along and replicate the process on their own.
- 5.11 Offers the user the choice of observing the library worker or performing the search themselves, while receiving guidance from the library worker.
- 5.12 Switches from chat to a video interaction, as appropriate, to better instruct the user.
- 5.13 Explains how to access sources, as appropriate.
- 5.14 Recognizes when to refer users for additional help. This may mean a referral to a subject librarian, specialized library, or community resource.
- 5.15 Asks the user if additional or different information is needed after results are found.

## **6 Closure & Follow-up**

The goal of reference interactions is to meet user information needs using the expertise of library workers and available resources, thus empowering users to navigate their own future information needs, as appropriate. Before concluding the exchange, library workers are responsible for confirming with the user that their current need has been addressed satisfactorily. This work involves welcoming the user to reach out again and ensuring that the user is equipped with the tools and resources necessary to obtain further assistance.



Prior to concluding a reference interaction, the library worker:

6.1 Asks the user if their questions have been answered to their satisfaction.

6.1.1. If the user has further information needs, the library worker should continue the conversation or arrange communication via available reference pathways (e.g. email, chat, consultation appointment, etc.)

6.1.2 Consults with librarians or experts when additional skills or knowledge is needed.

6.1.3 Refers the user to other sources or institutions, as appropriate.

6.2 Offers the user a summary of the transaction in written form via their preferred method and in a timely manner. This summary may include:

- Information on resources and library services relevant to the user's information need.
- Search strategies and results.
- Staff contacts or referrals and information on external resources and institutions.

6.3 Encourages the user to reach out again if they have further questions, ensuring they are aware of additional available reference pathways (e-mail, chat, phone, etc.).

6.4 Takes care not to end the reference interaction prematurely. waits to make sure the patron is not about to ask another question.

6.5 Respects user privacy and maintains confidentiality during and after the reference interaction; ensures that identifiable reference transcripts are not shared with anyone outside your organization.

6.6 Occasionally roves through the reference or public areas offering assistance.

6.7 When assisting users who are blind or users with low vision, close the conversation verbally if leaving the service point area.

## Recent Publications:

Accardi, Maria T. 2017. *The Feminist Reference Desk: Concepts, Critiques, and Conversations*. Sacramento: Library Juice Press

Adler, Kate, Ian Beilin, and Eamon Tewell. 2018. *Reference librarianship and justice*.

- American Library Association. 2006. "[Access to Digital Resources and Services: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights](#)."
- Bombaro, Christine. 2020. *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Action: Planning, Leadership, and Programming*. Chicago: ALA Editions.
- Daul-Elhindi, Carol A. and Tammi Owens. 2019. "[Reference 360: A Holistic Approach to Reference Instruction](#)." Criss Library Faculty Publications. 44.
- Drabinski. (2019). [What is critical about critical librarianship?](#) *Art Libraries Journal*, 44(2), 49–57. <https://doi10.1017/alj.2019.3>
- Hurley, David A., Sarah R. Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend. 2019. "[Cultural Humility in Libraries](#)." *Reference Services Review* 47 (4): 544-555. doi:10.1108/RSR-06-2019-0042.
- LaBossiere, Tarica Paige, Endia Steenken, Beau. 2019. "[Keeping Up with... Implicit Bias](#)." Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).
- McManus, Alesia. 2017. "[Thoughts on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Reference and User Services](#)." *Reference and User Services Quarterly; Reference & User Services Quarterly* 56 (4): 226-227.
- Stewart, Brenton, Boryung Ju, and Kaetrena Davis Kendrick. 2019. "[Racial Climate and Inclusiveness in Academic Libraries: Perceptions of Welcomeness among Black College Students](#)." *The Library Quarterly (Chicago)* 89 (1): 16-33. doi:10.1086/700661.
- Tolley, Rebecca. 2020. *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services*. Chicago, ALA Editions.

## Appendix 1 - Document History

Originally prepared by the RASD Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services; approved by the RASD Board of Directors, January 1996.

Revised by MOUSS Management of Reference Committee; approved by the RUSA Board of Directors, June 2004.

Revised by the RSS Management of Reference Committee, 2011: William H. Weare, Jr. (chair), Roberta J. Astroff, Dr. Bryan Mark Carson, Sally Dockter, Holly L. McCullough, Alesia M. McManus, Emilie R. Smart, Eamon C. Tewell, Johannah Mills White, and Janice A. Wilson. Approved by RUSA Board, May 28, 2013.

Revised by the RUSA Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers Task Force, 2021-2022: Rebecca Graff (chair), Kate Cordes, Rebecca Crawford, Melissa Del Castillo, Vanessa Garofalo, Liz Kocevar-Weidinger, Cynthia Johnson (ex-officio). Approved by the RUSA Board, \_\_\_\_\_, 202?.

In 1992, the President of the Reference and Adult Services Division created an Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services. The committee was charged with the creation of specific guidelines to aid librarians and information professionals during the reference process. Noting the complexity of interaction during the reference process, the authors of the original Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers observed “the positive or negative behavior of the library worker (as observed by the user) becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure.” The intent of the Guidelines was to identify and recommend observable behavioral attributes that could be correlated with positive user perceptions of reference performance. The committee identified several areas in which behavioral attributes could be directly observed, including visibility/approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching, and follow-up activities. These guidelines have been widely used to assist in the training, development, and/or evaluation of library workers who provide information services directly to library users.

The face of Reference Services has changed significantly since the original RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance were first published in 1996, and continues to evolve. Although the Ad Hoc Committee that designed the Guidelines recognized the need for future adaptations to deal with issues related to virtual users, the original Guidelines dealt primarily with face-to-face interactions between reference staff and library users. When the Guidelines were revised in 2004, e-mail and

online chat services were in various stages of development and implementation and have since become widely employed services in all types of libraries.

In 2009, the RUSA Standards and Guidelines Committee requested that the Management of Reference Committee undertake this new revision. The previous revision of the Guidelines reflects the understanding that while in-person and virtual reference interviews share some points in common, each also has its own unique characteristics that need to be addressed separately in the formation of standard guidelines. The goal of the Committee in undertaking this second revision has been to anticipate developments in reference services using a broad approach, and yet maintain enough specificity to be useful.

This revision retains the structure and categories of the 2004 revision of the Guidelines. The five main areas—Visibility/Approachability, Interest, Listening/Inquiring, Searching, and Follow Up—remain the same. When these Guidelines were revised in 2004, three distinct categories were added to each section of the document (where appropriate):

- General--Guidelines that can be applied in any type of reference interaction, including both in person and virtual transactions.
- In Person: Guidelines that make the most sense in a face-to-face context.
- Virtual: Guidelines that are specific to reference encounters where traditional visual and non-verbal cues may not exist.

These Guidelines are geared to serving adult users. The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) has adopted "[Core Professional Values for the Teen Services Profession](#)."

In 2021, the Reference & User Services Association formed a task force to review and revise these guidelines, reflecting two changing aspects of reference work. One significant change is the move to more robust virtual reference offerings, both in terms of the extent to which virtual reference takes place, as well as the modes in which interactions occur. As a result, the distinction between in person and virtual reference has been diminished; thus, we are removing these categories from the document. The other major change is the choice to incorporate IDEA principles and behaviors throughout the document, including a new section on inclusion. We affirm, "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are fundamental values of the association and its members" ([ALA Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)). This revision demonstrates RUSA's ongoing commitment to fostering a culture of consideration.