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Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers 2023

Melissa Del Castillo
Florida International University

Rebecca Graff

Kate Cordes

Rebecca Crawford

Liz Kocevar-Weidinger

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Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers 2023

Introduction to the 2023 Guidelines

In 2021, the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA) formed a task force to review and revise these guidelines to reflect changing aspects of reference work. This included an in-depth look at the RUSA Reference Toolkit, consisting of the Definition of Reference, the Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers, and the Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians. After review, the task force has decided to implement changes to the Toolkit, including:

- Removal of the in person and virtual reference categories
  - One significant change of reference work is the move to more robust virtual reference offerings, both in terms of extent and the modes in which interactions occur. As a result, the distinction between in person and virtual reference has diminished.
- Incorporation of equity, diversity, inclusion, and access (EDIA) principles and behaviors, including a new section on inclusion
  - RUSA affirms that "Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are fundamental values of the association and its members." The addition of EDIA principles and behaviors demonstrates RUSA's ongoing commitment to fostering a culture of consideration.
- Adding an evaluation section that reflects a response to a culture of increasing misinformation and disinformation.

Preface

These guidelines are intended for library workers in reference and information services, in all types of libraries, who answer informational questions or conduct reference interviews. The goal of these guidelines is to support excellent, user-centered service. Some guidelines might not prove applicable in all contexts. Where that is the case, the goal should be to adapt these guidelines as appropriate to your environment.

Library workers:

- Enter relationships with users that include communication, trust-building, mutual understanding, and intellectual empathy.
- Engage in reference interactions that offer collaborative learning experiences that require excellent interpersonal skills.
- Ascertain the user's information need, including the context, as appropriate, before addressing it.
- Assist users in seeking and using information, including developing information literacy skills.

Reference interactions include a power dynamic between the library worker and the user. People may feel intimidated, confused, or overwhelmed asking for help. To diminish the impact of this power dynamic and empower users, library workers need to build relationships by cultivating trust. Library workers can create an opportunity for those partaking of our services to see themselves as part of the process. The user's experience during the interaction influences their satisfaction with the results. Rather than simply being transactional, library workers can support and enable meaningful, co-created interactions.

Library workers who interact with the public will inevitably have challenging encounters with users. Please see Appendix C: Selected Resources, for materials on how to handle such situations.

1   Inclusion

A welcoming and inclusive environment sets the stage for successful reference interactions.

To be inclusive, the library worker:

1.1   Advocates for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility in reference services.

1.2   Ensures that the designated service point is accessible to everyone and reports any perceived obstacles to the appropriate staff.

1.3   Increases access to reference services by offering a variety of modalities, including [remote reference](#), and encourages use of all reference services modes via the library's website, signage, and other media.

1.4   Engages with people on their own terms and without assumptions.

1.5   Reflects on their own implicit biases and how they might play a role in reference interactions.

1.6   Displays cultural humility and a supportive demeanor.

1.7   Demonstrates an understanding of cultural, generational, and other differences in communication styles, such as tone of voice, eye contact, and facial expressions. These may have different meanings in different contexts.

1.8   Uses the person's preferred communication style and strategies (e.g., verbal, written, sign language, [Augmentative and Assistive Communication (AAC)](#) technologies, etc.) possibly through technological features that promote accessible and multilingual access to technology.

1.9   Offers [assistive technology (AT)](#) and provides help with AT in mind.

2   Approachability

The library worker's first step in initiating a reference interaction is to ensure the person feels comfortable asking questions. First impressions set the tone for the entire communication process, causing the person to decide whether they're in a safe place to share ideas.

To be approachable, the library worker:

2.1   Can easily be identified as a staff member.

2.2   Maintains visibility and encourages the person to interact with them.

2.3   Monitors the service to determine if people are waiting for assistance and acknowledges them in a timely manner.

2.4   Directs their full attention to the person by putting aside all other activities and initiating eye contact, using welcoming [body language](#), or offering a greeting.

2.5   Requests help from colleagues, if demand is heavy.

2.6   Avoids jargon and clarifies confusing terminology.

3   Engagement

For a variety of reasons, library users seldom start and end interactions with the same inquiry. People may ask: what they think a library worker can answer; what they're comfortable sharing with a stranger; or, what they are able to communicate at that moment. In a successful reference interview, the library worker demonstrates a high degree of nonjudgmental interest to help the person explore the topic, refine the question, or express what they want to learn.

To engage with people, the library worker:

3.1   Encourages everyone to ask questions freely.

3.2   Focuses attention on the person, communicating directly with them or in the manner with which they are comfortable.

3.3   Listens as the person fully states their information need and their interest in the topic.

3.4   Employs a system of open and closed questions to identify the person's information need and service priorities.

3.5   Practices active listening techniques to clarify the informational objectives of the person's inquiry, restating the question and asking for confirmation to ensure an accurate interpretation.

3.6   Signals understanding through verbal or non-verbal means, such as affirmative acknowledgement of statements, nodding, or inserting emojis.

3.7   Maintains communication with the person to convey interest, and provides assurance that a response is forthcoming.

3.8   Avoids expressing judgment, especially for controversial or sensitive topics.

3.9   Follows best practices for virtual reference, which can require different interactive skills than face-to-face reference.

4   Searching

Without an effective search, the desired information may be difficult to find.

As an effective searcher, the library worker:

4.1   Asks the person what search strategies they have tried already.

4.2   Invites the person to contribute their ideas throughout the reference interaction.

4.3   Uses open-ended questions to encourage the person to refine or expand on their request or present additional information throughout the search process.

4.4   Offers individuals the option of performing the search themselves, while receiving guidance from the library worker or observing the library worker carry out the search.

4.5   Shares the search screen or resources used during the interaction.

4.6   Explains choices about sources selected, search terms used, etc. throughout the interaction.

4.7   Checks to what extent the search results meet the person's needs, revising search strategies as appropriate.

4.8   Gets the individual started on the initial steps of their research and offers more assistance as needed.

4.9   Attempts to conduct the search within the person's allotted time frame, while managing expectations about what library workers can accomplish.

5   Evaluation

People may need support in determining if the information identified is optimal, appropriate, or trustworthy. Library workers should employ point-of-use instruction and encourage people to evaluate information.

As an information mediator, the library worker:

5.1   Assists the person in determining the appropriateness of information with regard to accuracy, authority, bias, coverage, credibility, currency, relevance, reliability, scope of information, etc.

5.2   Identifies other evaluation criteria or techniques, such as lateral reading or cross-referencing, as needed.

5.3   Works with the person to review results and identify different or additional resources, if desired.

5.4   Helps the person determine if the search results are in a language, format, or a level of literacy that is appropriate.

6   Closure

The goal of our services is to meet the person's reference or information needs.

Prior to concluding an interaction, the library worker:

6.1   Confirms with the person that their current information need has been met.

6.2   Encourages the person to reach out again with further questions, ensuring they are aware of all available contact options.

6.3   Refers individuals to additional resources, such as subject librarians, specialized libraries, or community resources, as needed.

6.4   Manage expectations about service provision based on library policies.

6.5   Explains when a question is beyond scope and capacity of the organization and assists in identifying the appropriate institution or external resource.

Appendix A - Key Terms and Concepts

Active Listening: Taking an intentionally interactive role during a conversation by carefully focusing, asking clarifying questions, ascertaining mutual understanding, and providing feedback.

Assistive Technology: Devices to help people, particularly those with disabilities or the elderly, function more effectively.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC): Ways that people communicate other than speaking aloud.

Body Language: The expressions, gestures, movements, and mannerisms by which one communicates with others.

Cultural Humility: Respecting differences in other people's cultural backgrounds by acknowledging your own ignorance.

Implicit Bias: Unconscious or unintentional attitudes, behaviors, or actions that are prejudiced in favor or against one person or group as compared to another.

Information Literacy: The Association of College and Research Libraries defines information literacy as "the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning."

Intellectual Empathy: Imagining yourself in the place of another person, to try to understand how you would feel in their position.

Open and Closed Questions: Open-ended questions allow people to elaborate on what they want to find, using their own words. Closed-ended questions prompt respondents to choose from limited possibilities, often yes or no.

Reference: RUSA defines reference as providing assistance by using expertise in response to an information need.

Remote Reference: Any reference interaction that does not take place in-person, including chat, phone, texting, and video.

Reference Interview: A structured conversation to ascertain and respond to a library user's information need.

Remote Reference: Includes all forms of reference not performed in-person, including mail, phone, and virtual reference.

Virtual Reference: Reference service initiated electronically. Communication channels include chat, videoconferencing, Voice over IP, and e-mail.

Appendix B - Example Questions and Prompts

Library workers may use the sample questions and prompts listed below to elicit positive, inclusive user interactions. This list is by no means comprehensive; it includes a crowd-sourced sampling of examples. We diminished the distinction between in-person and remote reference services throughout the Guidelines, given the significant overlap in these service modalities. However, there are still many differences among phone, video, and face-to-face interactions. These examples call attention to where library workers might need to act in specific ways when engaging in these modes.

1   Inclusion

- Are there any assistive technologies that I could use to improve our interaction?
- Can I make our communication more accommodating to your needs?
- Do you have any learning preferences that will improve our interaction?
- I'm here to help, ask me anything!
- It might be easier to follow if we switch from chat to screensharing by video. Would that be ok with you?
- You do not need to turn on your video camera for our video interaction.

2   Approachability

- Are you finding what you need?

- Great question!

- Hello, how may I assist you today?

- How is your search going?

- I appreciate your patience, I'll be with you as soon as I can.

- May I help you find something?.

- Let me look into that for you

- Please interrupt me. I am here to help.

3   Engagement

- Can you be more specific?

- Can you tell me where you have been looking?

- Could you please tell me a little more about what you are looking for?

- Give me a moment, I'll be right back with you.

- How much time do you have to work on this with me?

- I'd like to ask you a few questions, so that I can determine what to recommend.

- If I understand you correctly, you're looking for X.

- If the chat is idle, you can ask "Are you still there?"

- If you've already looked for information, share where you looked and what you found.

- Searching is seldom "one and done." Usually, it takes a few tries.

- That's an interesting topic!

- How are you feeling about these results?

- Would you like to look for information together?

4   Searching

- Are we finding what you're looking for?

- Are you looking for particular types of sources, such as books, websites, etc.?

- Based on these results, do you think we need to revise our search terms? Should we narrow or broaden this topic?
- How much information do you need?
- Once you have entered your search terms, you can limit to source type, date range, peer reviewed, narrow to specific subjects, etc.
- What do you think about our current search? What would you change?
- What words would you expect to find in your results?
- When you find a relevant source, note the keywords and subjects that were used to inform future searches.
- Would you like to take notes or pictures of our search, so you can replicate it later?

5 Evaluation

- Are there sources you would like to evaluate together?
- Do you need the information to be more current?
- Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?
- Does the point of view appear objective?
- Has the information been peer-reviewed or edited?
- Have you stopped, investigated the source, found better coverage, and traced the content back to the original context? (SIFT method)
- I'm going to refer you to someone who may respond to your question more thoroughly.
- Is the information supported by evidence?
- Would you like me to share how I would evaluate these results?
- What are the author's qualifications to write on the topic?
- Which of these results look most pertinent to you?

6 Closure

- Are you ready to continue on your own for now? Please ask again if you have more questions.

- Do you have everything you need at this point, or is there something else I can help you with?

- Has your question been answered fully?

- May I assist you with anything else today?

- Thank you for using our chat service! Good luck and I hope you have a great day.

- We don't have access to that resource in this library, but I'm going to give you the address and contact information for a nearby library that does.

- We don't have access to that resource, yet we can probably get that for you through Interlibrary Loan.

- Would you like me to email you a list of the resources we've discussed? Do you want a copy of this transcript?

- Would you mind sharing your contact information for a follow-up?

Appendix C - Selected Resources

Bombaro, C. (2020). *Diversity, equity, and inclusion in action: Planning, leadership, and programming*. Chicago: ALA Editions.

Daul-Elhindi, C. A. & Owens T. (2019). Reference 360: A holistic approach to reference instruction. Criss Library Faculty Publications. 44.

Higgins, M., & Stark, R. K. (2020). Mitigating implicit bias in reference service and literature searching. Diversity, equity, and inclusion in action: Planning, leadership, and programming, 59-72.

Hurley, D. A., Kostelecky, S.R. & Townsend, L. 2019. Cultural humility in libraries. *Reference Services Review 47* (4): 544-555. doi:10.1108/RSR-06-2019-0042.

Katz, L. S. (2013). *Helping the difficult library patron: New approaches to examining and resolving a long-standing and ongoing problem*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

McManus, A. (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.

Ross, C. S., Nilsen, K., & Radford, M.L. (2019). *Conducting the reference interview : A how-to-do-it manual for librarians*. Third edition. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, an imprint of the American Library Association.

Rubin, R. J.. (2011). *Defusing the angry patron : A how-to-do-it manual for librarians* Second ed. How-To-Do-It Manuals, Number 177. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers.

Appendix D - Document History

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

Revised by the Management of User Services Sections (MOUSS) Management of Reference Committee; approved by the RUSA Board of Directors, June 2004.

Revised by the Reference Services Section (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 Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers Task Force, 2021-2023: Rebecca Graff (chair), Kate Cordes, Rebecca Crawford, Melissa Del Castillo, Liz Kocevar-Weidinger. Approved by the RUSA Board, _____, 2023.

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 interactions.

• 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 nonverbal 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 changing aspects of reference work, and looking at the RUSA Reference Toolkit, consisting of the Definition of Reference, the Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers, and the Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians, holistically. 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. Another major change is the choice to incorporate equity, diversity, inclusion, and access (EDIA) 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". This revision demonstrates RUSA's ongoing commitment to fostering a culture of consideration. In addition, we added an Evaluation section, reflecting a response to a culture of increasing misinformation and disinformation.