



Effective Reference

Reference Interview Skills
for Public Library Staff

An Infopeople Workshop
Spring 2008
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Reference Interview Skills for Public Library Staff Spring 2008 - This workbook has been created by Mary Ross and provided through the Infopeople Project [infopeople.org], supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian. Any use of this material should credit the author and funding source.

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Learning Objectives

As a result of this workshop, you will be able to:



1. Identify the behaviors that welcome the patron and set the tone for a successful reference interaction.
2. Demonstrate ways to clarify the patron's real information need, using a combination of open, closed and "sense-making" questions.
3. Describe methods to keep the patron informed and involved in the progress of the search for information.
4. Effectively handle reference transactions involving medical or legal questions, when a patron may be asking for advice rather than information.
5. Make effective referrals, minimizing the patron's need to repeat the question.
6. Ensure positive closure for a reference transaction, verifying patron satisfaction and encouraging the patron to use the service again.

"User and staff members are equal partners in the search, with different areas of expertise. The user is the expert in the question itself...the staff member is the expert on the...organization and retrieval of information."

(Ross, Nilsen and Dewdney, *Conducting the Reference Interview*)

Things to think about...

What are BEST practices in reference services?

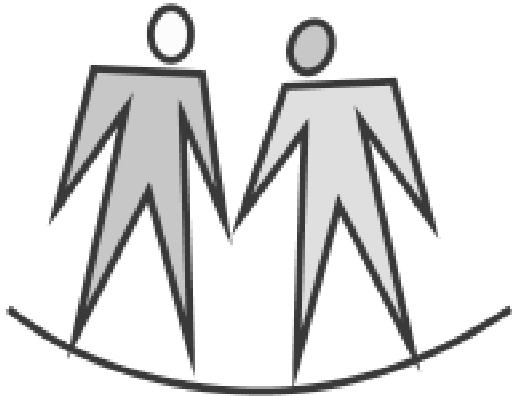
What are WORST practices in reference services?

BEST practices that I already use are:

WORST practices that I can slip into are:

BEST practices that I want to develop are:





"Because users with information needs are often hesitant to ask for help, a lot of potential reference interviews never happen. Being approachable is the first step in giving good customer service."

Ross, Nilsen and Dewdney
Conducting the Reference Interview.

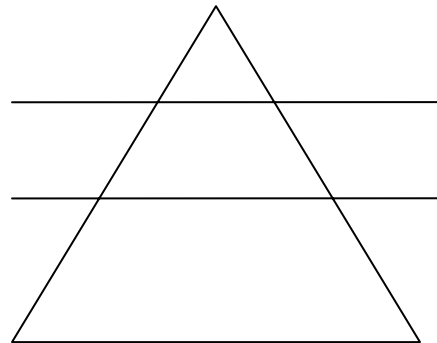
Approachability—Setting the Tone

"Am I in the right place?" "Is this the right person to ask?" "Does this person want to help me?" These may be the thoughts that go through the patron's mind as he or she approaches the reference services provider. The beginning stage of the reference interview sets the tone for what will follow.

In any face-to-face communication, there are three elements.*

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Communication
looks like an iceberg.



* Based on research by Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Mehrabian for more information.

The "Ill-Formed" Query

Why don't patrons just ask for what they really want? Why do they ask for one thing when they really want something else?

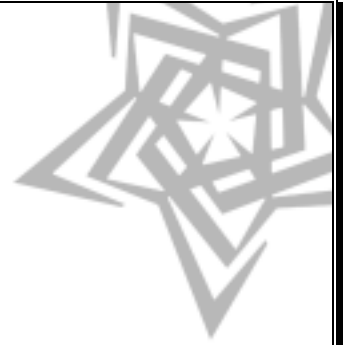
Think about an experience you had when a patron asked an initial question that was very general or misleading about the information that he or she really wanted.

What was the initial question?

What was the real information need?

Why do you think this patron didn't ask for what he or she really needed or wanted?





Here's what the research* shows about "ill-formed queries"—

- Patrons think that they are expected to find everything themselves.
- Patrons may avoid self-disclosure on a sensitive topic.
- They may be just beginning with their information search and don't really know what they want.
- Or, they know what they want but they can't express it in "system" terms. They don't know what kind of information you need in order to help them.
- Patrons think that libraries are organized by broad subjects so they ask for a broader subject than necessary.
- Patrons don't know in which formats information exists. They may think that all topics can be found on the Web.
- They think they are being helpful by suggesting a source.

** Based on research done by Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Patricia Dewdney and Kirsti Nilsen.*

Clarifying the Question

How do we know that a patron has asked for what he or she really wants?

The initial question often needs to be clarified and “contextualized.” What is really needed? How will the information be used? How much information? In what format? Are there time constraints? What does the patron already know about this topic?

As reference service providers, we ask questions to clarify and contextualize the patron’s information need.

The form in which you ask these questions determines the answer you are likely to receive.

As we role play these examples, think about how the patron is likely to respond to the staff member’s clarifying question?

Patron: “I am looking for information on plants.”

Staff: “What kind of information? Do you want indoor plants or gardening?”

Patron: _____

[The patron is planning a hike in a few days for a youth group and would like to check out four or five guides to identifying wildflowers, trees and other native plants to share with the group.]

Patron: "Do you have books on computers?"

Staff: "Do you want books on hardware or software?"

Patron: _____

[The patron is thinking about buying a used laptop on eBay and wants to know what features to look for in a laptop, as well as something about Windows Vista.]

Patron: "Can you help me find some guides to refrigerators?"

Staff: "Would you like the Consumer Reports?"

Patron: _____

[The patron is interested in selling her almost-new refrigerator and wants to find out what it may be worth.]

In all these examples, the reference provider's clarifying questions are closed, they ask the patron to choose from the options provided.

Let's look at the difference between **closed questions** and **open questions**, the kinds of responses they draw out, and when it is appropriate to use each type.

Closed Questions

Ask for a _____ or _____
response.

May restrict the patron's response to _____

Work best when:

1.

2.

3.

4.

"A common problem in the reference interview is asking a perfectly good open question and then spoiling it by rushing in with the answer instead of waiting for the user to reply."

Ross, Nilsen and Dewdney
Conducting the Reference Interview.

Open Questions

Allow the patron to respond in _____

_____.

Begin with _____ , _____ , _____ ,

_____ , and _____ .

When using open questions, you:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Work best when _____

_____ .

According to reference research, open questions are used in _____ percent of reference transactions.

(Based on research by Mary Jo Lynch.)

Some open questions that I feel comfortable using are:



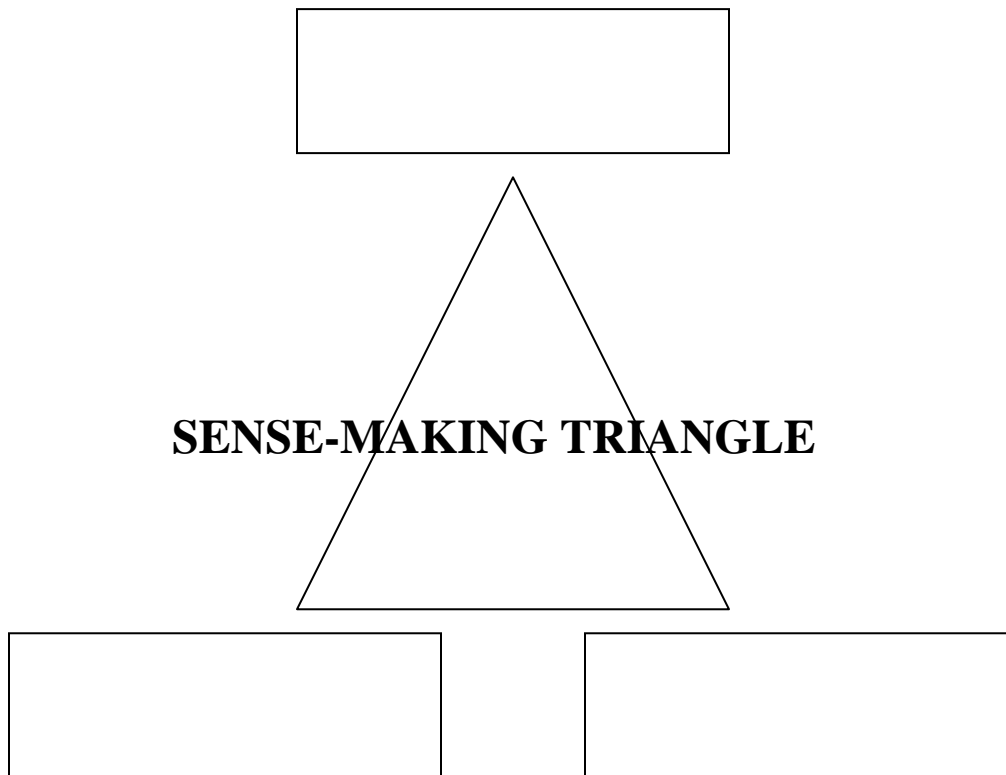
Partners in Reference

Sense-Making Questions

Open questions are effective at clarifying the patron's information need. What about "contextualizing" the information need?

To give the most effective reference service may require the reference provider to encourage the patron to talk about the context for the question. A good way to do that is to ask "sense-making" questions.

This strategy is based on Brenda Dervin's research on the human side of information. Her sense-making theory explains that there are three significant dimensions to information seeking, or how people make sense of the world in which they live.



Let's look at possible patron responses to **closed, open, and sense-making questions**.

1.

PATRON: Excuse me, can you tell me where to find information on travel?

STAFF: Would you like a travel guide? Do you have a specific destination?

PATRON: Yes, New York City.

STAFF: Travel guides are in the 900s. Here's the call number for a guide book on New York City.

2.

PATRON: Excuse me, can you tell me where to find information on travel?

STAFF: What travel information do you need?

PATRON: Travel in New York City. I'm going there next month.

STAFF: [Walks to shelves with patron] Here is the newest Fodor's Guide.

3.

PATRON: Excuse me, can you tell me where to find information on travel?

STAFF: We have travel information in different parts of the library. If you could tell me what information would be most useful to you, I can help you find what you're looking for.

PATRON: I'm going to New York City. I want to read about the plays for next month so I can order tickets in advance.

STAFF: OK, you want to find out what will be playing in theaters in New York. You'll need really current information for that, so the Web would be a good place to look. I can show you a theater Web site that should help you.

Sense-Making Questions

Begin with _____ , _____ , _____ ,
_____ , _____ , but not _____ .

When using sense-making questions, you determine the...

Sense-making questions work best when...

Sense-making questions that I feel comfortable using are:

Asking WHY without Saying “WHY”

Reference service providers are sometimes reluctant to ask sense-making questions because they think there is potential for embarrassing the patron. The context for the question may be personal (divorce, serious illness, legal difficulties, family problems, etc.). Whose embarrassment are we really concerned about—ours or the patron's?

What happens if we use a “hands-off” approach and don't contextualize the question? Will the patron find the best information for his or her need?

When asking sense-making questions:

1.

2.

3.

4.

Five Pieces of "Evidence"

As reference service providers, we may need to gather five pieces of "evidence" to clarify and contextualize the information need.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Our tools are OPEN, CLOSED and SENSE-MAKING questions.

Don't be afraid of silence! Allow time for the patron to think about what to say. Don't interrupt or try to speed things up by finishing a sentence for the patron.



Activity—Gathering the “Five Pieces of Evidence”

Work in groups of three or four. Decide who will be the patron, the reference provider, and the observer(s).

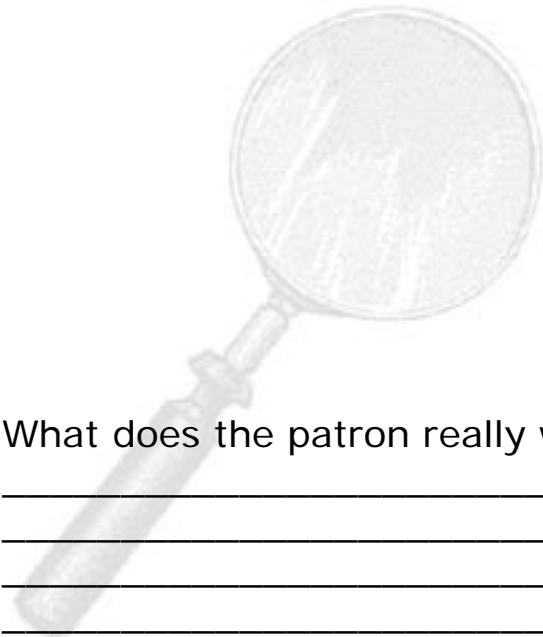
The patron receives and role plays the scenario. The reference provider and the observer should not see the scenario. The reference provider will do a practice reference interview. The goal for the reference provider is to accurately determine the context for the question by gathering the “five pieces of evidence.”

The observer uses the checklist on the next page to record the evidence gathered and the types of questions asked during the practice reference interview.

At the end of the practice interview, all three look at the scenario and answer these questions.

Did the reference provider successfully gather all five pieces of evidence?

Which of the reference provider’s questioning techniques were most effective? Least effective?



Reference Checklist

In this reference interaction,
I heard:

- Open questions
- Closed questions
- Sense-making questions

What does the patron really want to know?

How will the information be used? What prompted the question?

In what format is the information needed? Is reading ability a factor? Language proficiency?

What does the patron already know about this topic?

When does the patron need this information?

Putting the Puzzle Together

Work in groups of three or four. Decide who will be the patron, the reference provider, and the observer(s).

The patron receives the unassembled puzzle shapes. The reference provider receives the assembled puzzle. The patron may not see the assembled puzzle until the end. The goal for the reference provider is to talk the patron through successfully assembling the puzzle.

Patron and reference provider sit back-to-back. The observer stands next to them so he/she can see the interaction. The observer is the rule-minder and time-keeper, but is otherwise silent.

There are three stages to the activity:

- **First**, only the reference provider speaks, telling the patron how to assemble the puzzle. (One minute)
- **Second**, still back-to-back, the patron can ask questions and the reference provider answers. (One minute)
- **Third**, the reference provider can stand, look over the shoulder of the patron and talk him through the assembly process. (However long it takes)

What made it hard for the patron to assemble the puzzle?

Which of the reference provider's communication techniques were most effective?

How is this activity like helping a patron understand the way your library works?

Instruction

Many of us think of library instruction as classes on how to use library resources and materials. Instruction also happens at the point of need, one-on-one, between a reference service provider and individual patron. In the broadest sense, every reference interaction is instructive—the patron learns that the library is the right place to come with an information need and that staff members are there to help with that need.

One-on-one instruction is more effective when you:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Responding to Medical and Legal Questions

For a reference service provider, medical and legal questions pose some special challenges. Is the question sensitive or emotional for the patron? How do we protect patron privacy? How can we make it clear that we provide information resources, not legal or medical advice?

ALA's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) and other library associations provide guidelines for responding to health and legal questions. In addition to these guidelines:

- Use open and sense-making questions that leave the patron in control of how much personal information to disclose. A good phrase to use is "If you can tell me what kind of information would be most useful to you, I can help you better."
- Be careful when clarifying the patron's question. "You were arrested?" is not something to broadcast to other patrons nearby.
- Put the patron at ease without comparing medical symptoms or legal problems, yours or those of others. The comparisons may not be similar at all.
- Be sure that you can explain what you can provide in a way that makes sense to the patron.

More about Legal Questions

Due to ethical and legal implications surrounding the unauthorized practice of the law, library staff should not recommend that any patron contact a particular attorney; explain legal procedure, court rules or jurisdiction; or interpret the text of a statute, legal opinion, or administrative regulation.



We can:

- Guide patrons to online or print collections of statutes from various jurisdictions.
- Locate information about an attorney.
- Provide a copy of a legal code when the patron provides a specific citation.
- Refer patrons to county or state law libraries, or to another library specializing in legal resources.
- Refer patrons to helpful Web sites such as LawHelpCalifornia.org.
- Refer patrons to legal assistance organizations.

We cannot:

- Advise patrons on the correct legal form to use in a certain situation or on how to fill out a legal form.
- Locate the section of a legal code that pertains to a particular situation.
- Explain what a statute or regulation means.

More about Health and Medical Questions

Public libraries support consumers in researching health conditions and in assessing treatments, and in identifying a health care practitioner or hospital. Our services are not a substitute for a visit to a qualified health care practitioner.



We can:

- Offer patrons a variety of resources for their review.
- Provide a definition from medical dictionaries.
- Provide information on a particular medication from reliable and current sources.
- Provide a description of a medical condition specified by the patron.
- Provide reliable and current resources which describe a "standard treatment" for a particular condition.
- Identify hospitals or other locations where a particular procedure is performed.
- Help patrons locate evaluative information on therapies, practitioners and health care facilities.
- Refer patrons to another library specializing in health and medical resources.

We cannot:

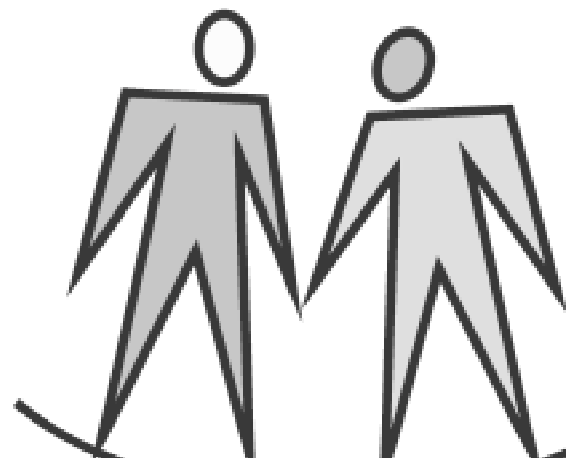
- Recommend a particular treatment, medication, practitioner, hospital, etc.
- Explain or interpret the information provided.
- Offer a diagnosis based on the patron's symptoms.

Let's apply the guidelines for responding to health and legal questions to some scenarios that you may face.

SCENARIO #1

Rae Ann, working at the reference desk, has been helping Meredith who is researching fibromyalgia. Rae Ann showed her several medical reference books, a Web site and a book on the subject, and then printed out an article from a medical journal containing an overview of the condition. After a few minutes, Meredith returns with the book and tells Rae Ann that what she reads in the book seems different than what is in the journal article. Meredith is frustrated about the medical care she has been receiving and about getting her doctor to explain fibromyalgia so that she can understand it. She wants Rae Ann to tell her if her symptoms match those in the book.

How should Rae Ann help Meredith?



SCENARIO #2

Linda has come into the library during her lunch break from work. She already seems stressed because of her limited amount of time. She tells the staff member Victor that she needs help in finding a Web page that she has heard about. The Web page turns out to be legal forms on child custody provided for California State courts. Victor helps Linda find the forms then leaves her to help another patron. Twenty minutes later, she comes back to the desk frustrated because she cannot print the forms. She has several form numbers written down but not all the numbers match up with the forms on the Web page. Linda asks Victor which form she should use and how she can print it. She has only ten minutes before she has to return to work.

What should Victor do to help Linda?

SCENARIO #3

Jade calls the library because she wants any information on laws applicable to a situation she has with a former roommate. Jade owns the house and had to ask the roommate to leave because she didn't pay the rent. The roommate moved out and left her belongings. Jade has not

heard from her roommate for over two weeks and wants to know what legal options she has for disposing of her roommate's belongings. A friend of a friend told her to look at the California Civil Code about what a landlord can do with a tenant's personal property if the tenant has left without paying rent. She wants George, the reference provider, to read the Civil Code section 1953 to her. George notices that there are other parts of the Civil Code that may be applicable.

How should George assist Jade?

What are other situations where library staff may be asked for advice or interpretation rather than resources?



Positive Closure

Closure in a reference interaction has been called the “art of the tactful ending.” There are several things you can do to help bring a successful end to a reference transaction.

To bring positive closure to a reference transaction, the reference provider...

1.

By saying...

2.

By saying...

3.

By saying...

“A librarian should be as unwilling to allow an inquirer to leave the library with his question unanswered as a shopkeeper is to have a customer go out of his store without making a purchase.”
Samuel Swett Green, 1876.

Referrals—Move the Question, Not the Patron

You may offer to refer a patron's question to another library or agency when:

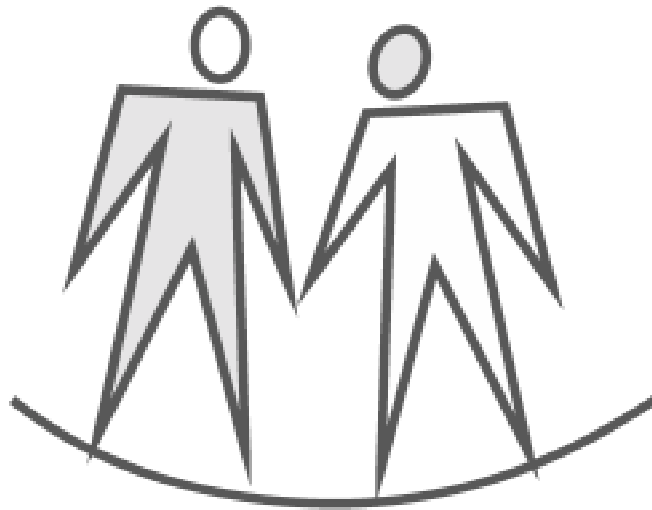
- The resources at your library are inadequate to fully answer the question.
- The expertise and resources available at another location will provide a better or faster response to the patron.

Here are some guiding principles for referral:

- Use a thorough reference interview to clarify the patron's information need and to document the sources already used.
- Minimize the patron's need to repeat the question to another information provider.
- Provide careful and complete documentation of the question, the work done prior to the referral, and the patron's preferred timeframe for receiving an answer.
- Respect the patron's confidentiality and do not retain personal information longer than necessary to provide service.
- When referring a question to another library or agency, check that the resources are available and appropriate.

Keep Patrons Informed!

- Explain why and where you are referring the question.
- Provide specific contact information so they may follow-up on the progress of the referral if they wish.
- Tell patrons when, how, and from whom they can expect a response.



"Users in general want to be accepted as active partners in the search and are most satisfied with their experience when library staff members take steps to involve them."

Ross, Nilsen and Dewdney
Conducting the Reference Interview.

Improve Your Reference Interview

Remember the self-assessment that you did at the beginning of the workshop? What were the best practices that you wanted to develop? Have any changed as a result of this workshop? What were the worst practices that you can slip into?

To improve your reference interview:

- Create an Action Plan that is your personal plan for improvement. Share it with your supervisor and get his/her support.
- Use the Checklist for Interview Skills to evaluate your reference interactions.
- Observe the reference service at your library through the patrons' eyes. What do you see that is welcoming to patrons, makes them feel comfortable with the process, and sets the tone for how the reference transaction will go forward?
- Be a "secret patron" when you visit another library. Asking a question as a patron gives you a chance to observe a reference interview from the patron's perspective.

"...For many users, entering a library is like going into a foreign country, where a foreign language is spoken. So rather than asking them to use the librarian's language and fit their questions into our systems, we should ask them questions that allow them to describe their information need in their own terms..."

Catherine S. Ross, "The Reference Interview," *RUSQ*, Fall 2003.

Action Plan for Improvement

Using these questions, create your personal action plan for improvement of your reference interview skills. Talk to your supervisor about how to include this action plan in your work plan.

1. As a result of this training, which specific reference interview skill(s) do you want to improve?
2. How will you build this skill? When will you start?
3. What resources or support will you need?
4. How will you know when you have mastered this skill?
5. Is there anything that will hinder you? What can you do about any obstacles?
6. How do you want your supervisor to recognize your mastery of this skill?

A CHECKLIST for INTERVIEW SKILLS

You can use this checklist for self-assessment or ask a co-worker or supervisor to observe you in a reference transaction and give you feedback.

Being Approachable—Making the patron feel welcome and comfortable with the transaction.

Some things to look and listen for: Smiling, looking up, open body language, comfortable eye contact, friendly greeting, pleasant tone of voice.

Showing Interest—Demonstrating interest in the patron's need.

Some things to look and listen for: Putting aside competing activities, maintains appropriate eye contact, uses short comments to encourage the patron to say more, an unhurried and patient approach.

Listening—Active listening skills are essential.

Some things to look and listen for: Encouraging, listens without interrupting, restates what patron says, confirms what was heard.

Asking Questions—Ensuring that the information need is understood.

Some things to look and listen for: open questions, sense-making questions, closed questions, clarifies understanding of question with patron.

Informing—Finding and explaining sources of information.

Some things to look and listen for: Tells patron about what he/she is doing, cites source to be used, goes with patron to resources, offers help in using a source, checks if answer is understood, avoids jargon.

Following up—Ensuring patron satisfaction.

Some things to look and listen for: Facilitates and monitors the referral process, encourages patron to return, "Does this answer your question?"

(This checklist is based on the RUSA "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals," available at www.ala.org/rusa.)

Additional Reading

Leslie Aguilar and Linda Stokes, *Multicultural Customer Service: Providing Outstanding Customer Service across Cultures*, McGraw-Hill, 1996.

Brenda Dervin and Patricia Dewdney. "Neutral Questioning: A New Approach to the Reference Interview." *RQ* (Summer 1986) pp. 506-513.

Guidelines for Providing Medical Information to Consumers, University of Connecticut Health Center, available at <http://library.uhc.edu/departm/hnet/guidelines.html>.

Mary Jo Lynch. "Reference Interviews in Public Libraries." *Library Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (April 1978) p, 119-142.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Patricia Dewdney, *Communicating Professionally*. Neal-Schuman, 1998. In particular, look at Chapter 6, "Using the Telephone and Voice Mail."

Catherine Sheldrick Ross, Kirsti Nilsen and Patricia Dewdney, *Conducting the Reference Interview*. Neal-Schuman, 2002.

Reference and User Services Association, American Library Association. *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Professionals*. Available at <http://www.ala.org/rusa/>.

Southern California Association of Law Libraries, *Locating the Law: A Handbook for Non-law Librarians*, 4th edition available at <http://www.aallnet.org/chapter/scall/locating.htm>.