THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW

Definition: a collaborative effort in which the user seeks to understand and explain his information need, and the library staff member seeks to understand the user's question and find and communicate the answer.

I would modify the end of the definition to this: and the library staff member seeks to understand the user’s question, identify the resources that have the answer, and, together with the user, find the information needed. There will be different levels of responsibility for the discovery of the answer between the staff member and the user depending on a variety of factors. These include the immediate and long-term information goals of the user, likelihood of future need for the resource, user interest, the complexity of the information, and the depth of the information need. In an academic library setting, the point on the ‘doing / teaching’ spectrum may be nearly always closer to the teaching end than it would be in a public setting.

Steps

1. Initial contact
2. Question negotiation
3. Search
4. Evaluation and communication of answer
5. Follow-up

Patron Misconceptions, or Why the Interview is Necessary

1. My question is stupid.
2. The librarian does not really want to help me.
3. I should know how to find this myself.
4. I don't really know what I need, but the librarian will.

Principles of Interviewing in the Reference Setting

A. Initial contact
   1. Be approachable, smile.
   2. Exhibit helpfulness.
   3. Concentrate on the patron; eliminate distractions.
   4. Show interest in the patron's information need.
   5. Treat all patrons as equally important.
   6. Note non-verbal cues.

B. Question negotiation
   1. Encourage patron to reveal more about the question.
   2. Use open-ended questions. Keep the conversation going.
   3. Concentrate only on the question.
   4. Don't interrupt.
   5. Restate or paraphrase the question.
   6. Don't jump to conclusions.
   7. Adapt your style to the patron. Find a vocabulary in common.
   8. Learn the approximate ‘size’ of the answer needed.
9. Use the cues and clues embedded within the question.

C. Search

1. Identify possible sources. Explain, briefly, some of the factors for selection.
2. Explore the resource.
3. Summarize progress.
4. Demonstrate use of sources in simple, clear language.

D. Communication and evaluation of answer

1. Give source where answer was found.
2. Make sure scope and level of information is correct.
3. Communicate information in a clear and concise manner.

E. Follow-up

1. Make sure patron is satisfied with answer.
2. Encourage patron to return, if necessary.
3. Seek closure when the user is ready.

SKILLS TO PRACTICE

1. Friendly manner.
2. Objectivity.
3. Poise.
4. Active listening.
5. Empathy.
6. Calm tone of voice.
7. Plain speaking.
8. Directing the conversation.
9. Concentration.
10. Eye contact.

QUALITIES TO CULTIVATE*

1. Sense of humor
2. Dedication and commitment
3. Genuine liking for people
4. Good memory
5. Imagination and creativity
6. Patience and persistence
7. Energy and stamina
8. Ability to shift gears
9. Curiosity

*Adapted from The Reference Interview as a Creative Art, by Elaine and Edward Jennerich (Littleton, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1987).


