

Reading Public Library Reference Policy

Reviewed and Approved 12/16/2024

Mission of the Reference Department

It is the mission of the Reading Public Library Reference Department to effectively meet the needs of the community by bringing the Library's resources and potential users together through a variety of services. Reference service will be provided at all times that the Library is open. The Reference desk will be staffed at all times by professionally trained individuals who will provide quality service.

Objectives of the Reference Department

- To provide personal assistance without discrimination to Library users seeking information.
- To select, acquire, and organize sources of information to meet the needs of the Library user.
- To identify and promote the information needs of potential users in the community.
- To cooperate with other libraries of the Berks County Public Libraries System, community agencies, and organizations in their efforts to serve the community.
- To ensure that Library users receive a consistent level of service.

Purpose of the Reference Guidelines

- To describe the services and resources that are offered at the Reference Department.
- To set standards and guidelines that ensure continuity in service.
- To provide guidance for those working in the Reference Department.

Reference Staff

Reference staff members, whether professional or paraprofessional, serve as the link between resources and the patron. As such, it is important that each staff member be:

- Knowledgeable about library materials and services, open and approachable
- Friendly but professional.
- Able to communicate effectively with people.
- Discreet
- Able to exercise good judgment both in the interpretation of policy and in the handling of exceptional situations.

New staff members will receive orientation to the department, to the Library as a whole and to the relationship with the Berks County Public Library System. On-going training is necessary in order to provide the highest level of service.

Library Users

Library users may seek information in person, by telephone, by fax, by mail, or electronically. Reference service is available to all persons served by the Library without discrimination. The needs of each library user are taken seriously and treated with the utmost respect.

General Guidelines for Desk Service Priorities

Service to the public receives priority over any other duties. Library users should be made aware that the primary purpose of a reference librarian is to assist them.

In-person requests for service receive priority over telephone requests, but all calls will be answered promptly and asked to hold or be called back. All reference questions are to be treated confidentially.

If it becomes necessary to leave the desk for any length of time, another staff member should be informed.

Although the Library's primary responsibility is to patrons within the community, there should be no discrimination against other patrons for basic reference services.

Reporting Problems

If a staff member has a problem dealing with a patron, the supervisor should be called immediately.

Incomplete Reference Transactions

Although every effort is made to complete questions immediately, some can remain at the end of a shift or day. Unfinished questions will be turned over to incoming staff if the patron is in immediate need of the requested information. The patron will be called back within 24 hours even if the answer is not available. Staff members are encouraged to consult with colleagues if they need assistance with a puzzling or difficult question.

Referrals to Other Agencies and Other Libraries

Referrals to other agencies may be made when appropriate. Patrons should be advised that they may contact the Library for further assistance if they are not successful in obtaining help from the agency. At no time may staff refer the patron to individual practitioners--physicians, attorneys, mental health professionals, etc. If the staff member feels that it is appropriate to refer the patron to another library, it is required that the staff member verify that the material needed is actually there. If it is necessary to refer a patron to a corporate, university, or other special library, the staff member should make prior arrangements with the other library before sending a patron to that library.

Sources

To give the most accurate and authoritative answers possible, staff members must avoid personal opinion, philosophy, or evaluations; rather they should rely upon information based on accurate printed or online sources or learned from a reliable authority. The opinion of the staff members, even when requested, should not be given as fact. The source of an answer should always be cited.

Instruction and Orientation Services

Instruction and orientation services in library use are an integral part of library service and may range from basic instruction on how to use the computer catalog or reference tools to more formal assistance such as tours designed to increase the patron's knowledge of the Library's material and services.

Time Limits

No two reference questions are alike; therefore, no specific time limits can be placed on an actual question. The amount of time devoted to a question is at the discretion of the reference staff member.

Specific Reference Desk Service Guidelines

A reference transaction is defined as an information contact which involves the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources by a member of the Library staff. It includes direct and instructional services. Direct service provides the patron with the information requested, while instructional service is designed to teach the patron independent use of library resources. Reference service, whether direct or instructional, provides accurate and prompt information to the public.

In-Person Reference

Reference staff members should assist patrons at every level of the reference transaction, if the patron so desires. This may require accompanying the patron to the computer catalog to explain its use, or physically locating the materials for the patron. In the event that the staff member is unable to accompany the patron, it is

important to remind the patron to return to the reference desk if the materials cannot be located.

Telephone Reference

Telephone reference should be used for short factual information questions which do not require extensive reading on the part of staff members. If the answer to a telephone question seems too involved to relate easily over the telephone, this should be explained to the patron. The patron should be informed that the information can be photocopied and faxed, mailed or emailed to the patron or the patron can be encouraged to come in to the Library. Patrons may be limited to 3 telephone questions per day.

Staff members will answer the telephone with the department name; i.e. "Reference." If caller must wait, they should be given the option to remain on hold or to have their call returned. If the patron prefers to be called back, the staff member should obtain the patron's phone number and call back as soon as possible. For calls from out of state, the caller should be asked to call back at a prearranged time.

Fax, Mail, Electronic Mail Requests

It is the Library's practice to respond to all reasonable reference inquiries received electronically or by mail. These requests are defined as short, factual informational questions which do not require extensive reading or research on the part of staff members. If the question becomes too involved or time-consuming, the staff member should explain the limitations on such service and suggest the patron visit the library for further assistance. The patron may request the response to the question be made by fax, mail, electronic mail or telephone. The nature of the question may determine the form of response.

Out-of-County Questions

Requests are taken from people outside of Berks County by telephone, fax, or electronic mail. The patron is asked to put his or her request in writing, although research may begin before the written request is received. A small fee is charged for each reel of newspaper microfilm that is searched; a small fee is charged for research in the print resources of the Pennsylvania Room. The fees include up to 5 photocopied pages and postage, and are charged even if the information is not found.

Children's Reference Service

Children who come to the adult reference desk for help will be shown the same courtesy and respect as adults, and their questions will be answered with the same thoroughness and striving for accuracy as adult questions which may include referring children to the Children's or Teen Department for additional assistance.

School Assignments

Questions regarding school assignments will be treated as any other request for reference assistance. For definitions of types of reference queries, see this section generally. Every effort should be made to satisfactorily answer a student's questions and provide the sources of information and the instruction needed to use those resources. If every effort has been made by the reference staff member and the student to locate information without results, the student will be given a form of explanation to return to the teacher.

Contest Questions

Staff members should not interpret contest rules. Contest questions will be guided by the same definitions and time limits as any other type of reference question.

Consumer Evaluations

The staff should help patrons locate objective consumer product information by showing them how to consult the indexes to *Consumer Reports* and related magazines, buying guides, and/or general indexes which may lead

to product evaluations in other periodicals. The staff does not offer personal opinions recommending one product over another.

Book, Antique and Art Appraisals

Patrons may be referred to appropriate reference sources or to consultants or experts. Staff members should never give a personal appraisal regarding the value of a patron's possession.

Genealogical Questions

Staff members should provide general assistance in genealogical research, guidance in locating items in the collection, and help in obtaining resources through Interlibrary loan. Questions requiring lengthy research are referred to local researchers who work for a fee. The names of these researchers are provided to the Library by local historical or genealogy institutions. *Private fee-based work is not to be undertaken by Library employees.*

Compilations and Extensive Research

Requests for and/or completion of lengthy research is not considered a traditional role of the public reference librarian. Research and reference differ in terms of time required, sources employed, and ease of determination of such strategies; research is the more involved of the two. Patrons needing extensive compilations (bibliographies, lists, statistics, etc.) or research should be directed to the appropriate resources and offered as much assistance as staff time allows.

Medical, Legal and Tax Questions

The Library does not provide advice in the areas of medicine, law, and taxes. If legal information can be found in printed sources, it is provided. However, complicated legal searches should not be undertaken nor should personal interpretations of legal matters be offered. Concerning medical information, brief definitions and descriptions from authoritative published sources may be provided. These sources should be quoted verbatim with no personal interpretation. The patron should be informed of the source from which the information is taken. Under no circumstances should a staff member offer advice in medical, legal or tax areas, regardless of how commonplace the knowledge seems to be. If more information is required, the patron should be encouraged to examine the Library's collection or be referred to another source.

Loan of Reference Materials

Reference books and other materials not normally circulated may be checked out overnight (following reference policy guidelines and at the discretion of the reference librarian on duty). Items with circulating copies (even if they are earlier editions) will be excluded from this policy, since copies are available to library patrons. At the discretion of the librarian and using the Reference Special Loan Form, reference items may be checked out 15 minutes before closing time and are due back within 30 minutes of next day's opening. The librarian must verify that the patron has a valid library card in his/her possession and is registered in Polaris.

Examples of reference items that may never be circulated include:

- Ready-reference materials
- Book or periodical indexes
- Frequently used materials
- Multi-Volume sets (or parts of sets)
- PA Room materials

Orientation Tours

Library orientation tours, bibliographic instruction, and on-line demonstrations are offered by the Reference Department to all adult groups. Student groups may contact the Youth Services department for tours,

instruction, and demonstrations.

Bibliographic Services

It is the responsibility of the Reference Department to prepare printed in-house bibliographies and/or bibliographic guides for subject areas of time-proven or current interest which should assist patrons with their informational needs as well as promote library material.

Policy History

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