Delaware’s Virtual Reference Service



Ask a Librarian Delaware is a free 24/7 virtual reference service available to all Delaware residents. Delaware libraries provide this service through a LSTA grant sponsored by the Delaware Division of Libraries, and as part of a national reference cooperative supported by OCLC. Using OCLC's QuestionPoint software, a web-based chat program that allows librarians and patrons to chat in real time, Delaware librarians answer reference questions from patrons from Delaware and other participating libraries.

Ask a Librarian Delaware (as it is today) was officially launched in January 2011. By the end of the year, there were 38 active chat librarians who accepted a total of 1922 chat sessions. These librarians represent 15 libraries/ library systems, including both public libraries and academic libraries.

Each chat librarian commits to providing at least one hour of global service a week on behalf of the library they represent as part of their regular staff duties (global coverage includes Delaware customers/students as well as those outside Delaware).

Virtual reference providers for Ask a Librarian Delaware are required to have recent experience with library reference services, be adept at using a keyboard/mouse and comfortable in the online environment (searching for information), and are librarians and library staff who would normally provide reference help in their library.

Patrons initiate a chat session by clicking on the Ask a Librarian link on their library's website or through DDL’s links (such as at [http://lib.de.us/askalibrarian)](http://lib.de.us/askalibrarian%29) and entering their question into the chat form. Although the form asks for the user's email address, which allows librarians to follow up after the chat if needed or email a transcript of the chat to the patron, patrons are not required to enter an email address or user name. Patrons always have the ability to remain anonymous using the service.

The question is then sent into the chat queue.  Here it will be “picked up” by a librarian in Delaware or, when Delaware librarians are not available, by a librarian outside Delaware. Librarians use the chat software to conduct a reference interview and answer the patron's question. Virtual reference librarians handle the same types of reference questions as physical librarians, ranging from questions about library cards to more complicated research questions. Non-local chat librarians have access to the policies of a patron’s library, but they can send the question to the patron’s library for follow-up if they are not able to answer the question.

All chat librarians are expected to follow the American Library Association Reference Users Services Association’s guidelines when answering a question and transcripts are reviewed for quality.  Best practices include creating a welcoming atmosphere on chat.  This means that they should be approachable, demonstrate interest in the patron's question, practice reference interview techniques, and demonstrate effective searching techniques while communicating in a virtual environment (on chat, email, texting, etc.). RUSA’s guidelines for virtual reference services is found at:

<http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/virtrefguidelines>

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