

The Art of the Reference Conversation

Better Practices to Enhance Communication with Library Patrons



Goals & Objectives

By the end of this training you will be able to:

- Become familiar with enhanced communication skills that facilitate a positive in-person (or virtual reference conversation).
- List the six most important factors which affect the reference conversation*.
- Demonstrate model behaviors for conducting a reference conversation.

*Reference conversation = Reference interview



Importance of Communication

Good communication with library patrons is critical for delivering excellent service.

Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is a vital skill in any profession, as it allows us to exchange ideas, share feedback, and build relationships.

Good nonverbal communication is essential for building trust and facilitate a smooth conversation with patrons. Examples of nonverbal communication to keep in mind during a Reference Conversation are: maintain eye contact, use open body language, and smile genuinely.



“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

~George Bernhard Shaw

Six Important Factors

To communicate effectively, we can remember the six important factors of a Reference Conversation:

1. Greeting
2. Asking & Clarifying
3. Active Listening
4. Searching Resources to Answer the Question
5. Following-up with the Patron
6. Closing

Greeting

- A greeting is a polite way to start a conversation and show respect to the other person. It can also set the tone and mood for the interaction. For example, we can say "Hello, what can I help you with today?"

Asking & Clarifying

- Ask open ended questions are questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. They encourage the other person to elaborate and share more information. For example, if a patron is asking about China, we can ask "Are you looking for information about the country or dinnerware?"

Active Listening

- Active listening is a way of showing interest and attention to what the other person is saying. It involves using verbal and non-verbal cues, such as nodding, paraphrasing, and summarizing. For example, we can say "I see, so you are saying that..." or "you are looking for information on...?"

Answering the Question

- Searching for information/Choosing Relevant Resources in order to answer the question. Searching for information is a way of clarifying and verifying what the other person is saying and using our library resources to find the information. For example, for students, we can ask what sources are needed (e.g., a book or database, etc.).

Following up

- Following up is a way of ensuring that the communication is complete and satisfactory. It involves making sure the patron receives the information they have requested and whether they have any other needs. For example, we can say "Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

Closing

- Closing serves to end the conversation in a positive and respectful manner. It involves thanking the other person and suggesting future contact. For example, we can say "Thanks for stopping in to the library today. We're always happy to help."

Ask & Clarify

- Restate request.
- Ask open-ended questions to get more information.
- Speak clearly and not too quickly.
- Be prepared to restate questions often and in different ways.

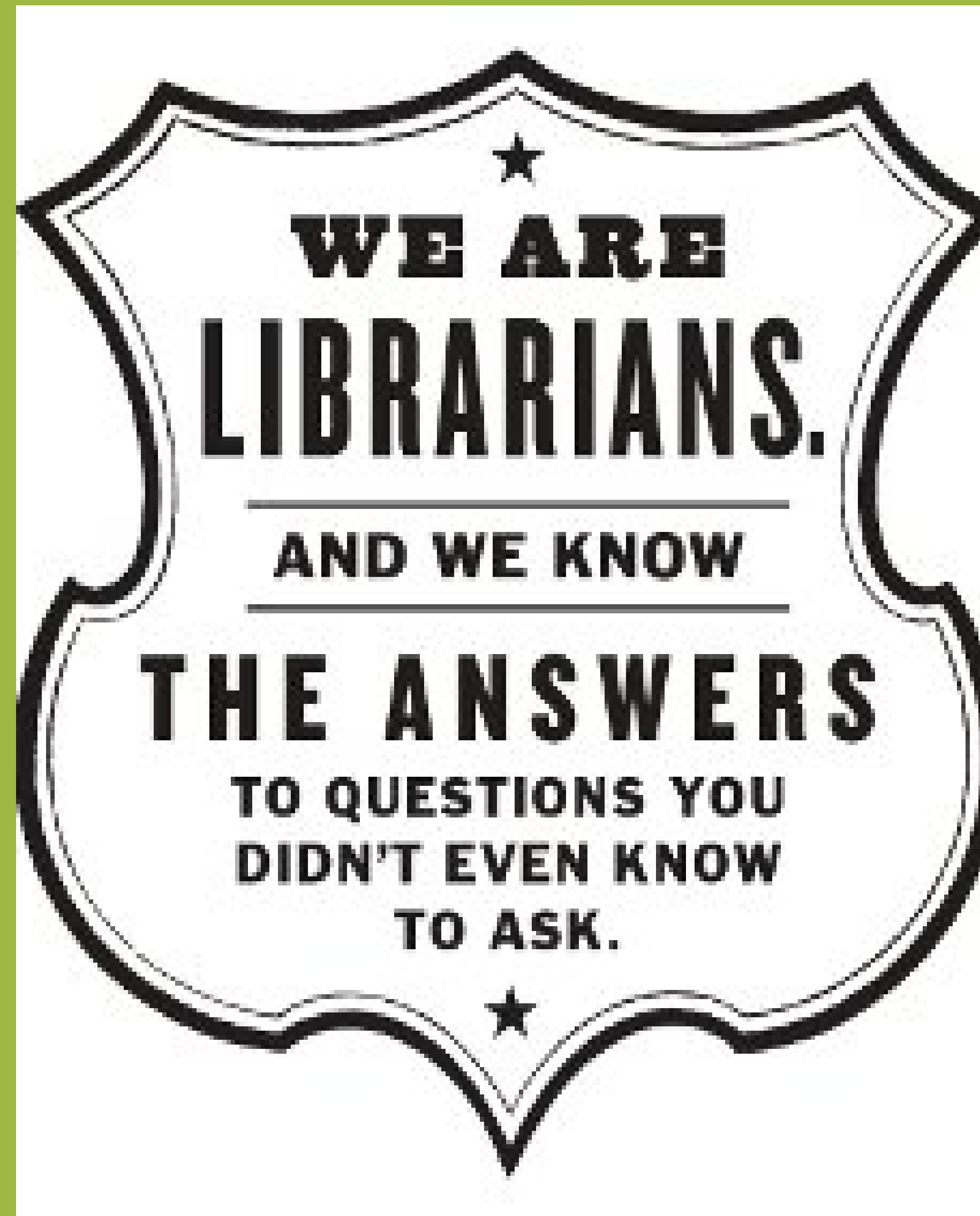


Active Listening

- Paraphrase the question: be prepared to restate question(s) often and in different ways.
- Summarize what you think the person is asking.



Answering the Question



- Use library resources.
- Show the patron the source of the answer.
- Giving the answer is okay...but use the “teaching to fish” method first.

Follow Up

- **Make sure the patron receives the information they have requested.**
- **Ask whether they have any other needs.**



Closing

- End the Reference Conversation on a positive note.
- Thank the patron and make sure they feel welcomed to ask for help anytime in the future.



By using these 6 key factors, we can improve our communication skills and provide excellent customer service to our library patrons.



Role Play - Practice





For other resources, please see the Ask a Librarian Delaware Staff Support site at: <https://aalstaff.lib.de.us>

[Definitions of Reference | Reference & User Services Association \(RUSA\) \(ala.org\)](#)

[Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers | Reference & User Services Association \(RUSA\) \(ala.org\)](#)



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THANK YOU!

This tutorial was developed by:

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May 2023