Reference and Information Services Section

IFLA DIGITAL REFERENCE GUIDELINES

INTRODUCTION

"The terms "virtual reference," "digital reference," "e-reference,"
"Internet information services," "live reference" and "real-time
reference" are used interchangeably to describe reference services
that utilize computer technology in some way..."
Virtual Reference Canada

I. Purpose:

The purpose of these guidelines is to promote digital reference best
practices on an international basis. The online environment is
uniquely suited to consortial models of work and to the
development of shared resources. Libraries in different countries
may have different traditions of public service, which both affect
their current reference practices and their patrons' expectations.
But it is also important to recognize that new technologies will
enable librarians to redefine the scope of their public services.
These guidelines attempt to create some common standards from
diverse traditions in the hope that this will allow the worldwide
community of librarians to freely explore the possibilities.
Some issues raised in these guidelines may ultimately warrant
additional consideration and expansion-issues such as the
management of change: how does the administrator of a digital
reference project mitigate the impact of new models of work on an
institution's staff, schedule, and clients? Additional work might also
be done to determine the exact funding requirements for these
efforts in a variety of different communities, with respect to
staffing, resource acquisition, and equipment.
*"...The unique nature of digital reference introduces a new realm of
issues and challenges. The need for guidelines and standards
becomes even more important as consortium-wide digital reference
services continue to evolve..."*
Vera Fullerton, IFLA Digital Reference Standards Project, 12/2002.

II. History

IFLA's Discussion Group on Reference first met in 1998. It was created to address the effects of new technology on reference work and on user expectations. In 2002, acknowledging the importance of these issues as well as the group's growing audience, IFLA created the official Standing Committee on Reference Work. These guidelines grew out of reference workshops and meetings held over the course of several years.

III. Scope

This document addresses the needs of library administrators as well as practicing librarians:
Section 1: The Administration of Digital Reference Services, was written with the responsibilities of program administrators in mind.
Section 2: The Practice of Digital Reference, provides guidance for the practitioner of digital reference, and articulates standards of practice to facilitate collaborative work.
Defining a user base: Before establishing a digital reference service, it is important to clarify one's target clientele. Consider how the use of the technology may effect and/or expand an institution's user base. Physical location is of less importance when an institution has an online presence. In addition to the Library's traditional users, new and different types of users may choose to take advantage of online services.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES

Examine existing institutional procedures and policies before establishing new services. Determine how these might be affected by a transition to or addition of a digital environment. It may be necessary to revisit long-held service policies, clarify and adapt them for this new environment.

1.1 Reference Policy

- Clarify goals for this new reference service.
- Identify an overseer or oversight group responsible for creating best practices, defining acceptable behavior, and articulating a code of conduct and the consequences of violating these.
- Draft applicable guidelines by integrating existing policies and procedures with these goals, making sure they are consistent with the overall mission of the institution.
- Consider how often a review of these policies should take place, describe procedure and designate responsibility.

- Provide for compliance with copyright and all other applicable legal restrictions.
- Determine who can use the service. Define and target primary clientele. If you serve everyone regardless of age, race, gender, sexual preference, religion, social status, economic status or disability, say so. If there are persons excluded (e.g. clients from outside of a particular community) -- enforcement should be uniform.
- Determine whether there are types of questions the institution will or will not answer. For example:*"We will answer factual and ready-reference questions. We will not answer questions asking for medical or legal advice. Questions from our primary clientele are given priority over others..."*
- Develop policy for client misbehavior. Persons using the service should do so in a manner consistent with its purposes and functions.

1.2 Planning

The scope of the service provided should be based on realistic planning and the available financial resources, as well as on the perceived needs of the community served.

- Create a working group of administrators and practitioners within the institution to explore available service options and establish service priorities.
- Develop concrete goals-a vision--how will this service serve the needs of the community? How might this service develop over time?
- Draft an initial action proposal.
- Evaluate available software and services.
- Determine the likeliest sources of funding.
- Solicit client feedback.
- Determine whether other institutions (locally, regionally, etc.) might be interested in pooling resources to develop a cooperative service.
- Re-evaluate initial action plan based on findings from steps 1.2.4-1.2.7.
- Present action plan and secure managerial support.

[See: Revision of IFLA's Guidelines for Public Libraries: Funding: http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s8/proj/gpl.htm] [To Be Discussed]

1.3 Staffing

- Select participating staff upon the basis of initial interest (this is key), ability, availability, computer skills, and

interpersonal communication skills. Clearly define their specific responsibilities and assignments.].

  - ○ Consider how many full time librarians are required, as well as how many technicians, if any, to distribute questions, answer questions.
  - ○ Maintain enough staffing flexibility to incorporate staff members who express interest in participating after they have become accustomed to the idea. [Remember that the future of the project depends on encouraging interest rather than discouraging it].
  - ○ If a 24-hour-a-day service cannot be achieved or is not desired, schedule the staffing during the hours that best meet patrons' information needs and expectations. This is especially important if using chat reference tools.
  - ○ Examine and evaluate scheduling and librarian workload distribution on an on-going basis. Adjust whenever necessary and possible.
  - ○ Create a centralized schedule for primary participants as well as relief and/or backup participants.
- Determine who within the institution or consortium will provide the necessary technical support [an organized technical support group is vital to the success of a digital reference service.]
- Determine which staff member/s will oversee the observance of any limitations on use such as any contained in licensing agreements.
- Determine which staff member/s will be responsible for making sure that reference standards are maintained.
- Plan for the integration of the service into daily procedures and workflow. Standardize procedures so that when staff members take leave, no reference questions will be lost.

1.4 Training: The Basics:

- Determine who will train staff, and set aside time for staff training and orientation and professional development.

  Key skills a digital reference librarian should have include:

  - ○ Multi-tasking.
  - ○ Clear communication skills, especially in writing.
  - ○ Database and online searching skills.
  - ○ Interviewing skills - to compensate for lack of visual and auditory cues.
  - ○ Knowledge of reference resources.
  - ○ Familiarity with software package selected.

- Update training as necessary. Encourage and enable staff members to meet regularly to discuss their experiences and new developments in the field.

1.5 Interface Design:

The online reference desk should be designed to allow access to resources and expertise for the greatest number of people, regardless of language, technical capability & physical impediments. Please note: Although you are planning for an online service, do not overlook the physical and logistical details required to provide digital reference efficiently: providing staff with an appropriate workspace -- furnishings, hardware, software, paper resources, Internet access, web browsers and supporting email accounts- is as important to the service as what the clients see on their screens.
It is also important to set up your virtual workspace properly:

- Exemplify "user friendly" interface and easy navigation.
  - Establish standard structure and design, and apply it consistently throughout the site, so that a first-time user can figure out how to navigate the site after using one or two screens. Position the link to the service [the "Ask A Librarian" button] consistently on all institution web pages.
  - Use icons and images as much as possible to orient the user. Try not to fill the page with long blocks of text.
  - Identify the institution clearly, and provide a link to the library's home page.
  - Include a brief paragraph defining the scope of the institution's reference services and state how long users can expect to wait for a reply/response to their inquiries (e.g. "...all questions submitted to this service will be answered within 5 business days...").
  - Provide information to guide the user through the form. (I.e. The "Resources Consulted" field should contain at least one example showing the user that it's important to include vol. number, Page number and date, title and author information, etc...).
  - Common fields of information that you might consider adding to your web form include essential ones like "email address," and "Question Text," as well as optional fields such as: "Name," "Phone Number," "Education Level" [of desired answer], and "Reason for Research," etc…
  - Create fields for whatever information you feel you will need in order to provide the most effective service, but not so many fields as to be off-putting.

- ○ Provide Links to relevant internal and external online resources (reviewed and updated regularly)-Home Pages, Online Catalogs, Databases, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
- ○ Provide a link to details on institution's general reference/correspondence policy and service guidelines.
- ○ Identify and provide contact information for all means of communicating with library staff: via live chat service, email, web form, fax, postal mail, telephone, etc…
- Take the potential limitations of hardware and technical sophistication of end users into consideration when planning the site. Minimum hardware requirements for use of the service should be clearly stated.
- Incorporate policies and comply with laws that ensure that all users, including those with disabilities, are able to access the service.
- Clearly state who answers the questions and state what the service will not do.

  For example:
  Due to time constraints, and the volume of questions we receive we cannot:

  - ○ *Fax material to patrons.*
  - ○ *Create bibliographies.*
  - ○ *Conduct extensive research.*
  - ○ *Renew materials via this service...*
- Privacy Statement, disclaimer, etc… [Based on legal code of locality…]. For Example: The privacy policy for the British Library website: http://www.bl.uk/privacy.html
  The purpose of this statement is to inform users of this website what information is collected about them when they visit this site, how this information is used and if it is disclosed.
  In common with most websites, the British Library website automatically logs certain information about every request sent to it. This information is used for system administration and for producing usage statistics. Summary statistics are extracted from this data and some of these may be made publicly available, but these do not include information from which individuals could be identified. Relevant subsets of this data may be used as part of investigations of computer misuse involving this site (see also our guidelines on use)...
- Determine how long chat transcripts and questions will be archived, and who will have access to them. Determine whether it is necessary to maintain patron anonymity by

stripping away all personal information. Establish a
maintenance process and schedule.
- Provide a means for patrons to provide feedback-survey,
emails, etc…

1.6 Legal Issues

It is important for all librarians to familiarize themselves with the
current state of public information legislation in their region, and,
when it affects the scope of services offered, to share this
information with their patrons.

- Digital Reference and Freedom of Information/Local Culture.
- National Information Policies--What is the political landscape?
- Public Information Legislation.
- Related Legislation.
- Copyright.
- Privacy and confidentiality issues.
- Licensing Agreements.
- Consortial Relationships.

[See: Revision of IFLA Public Library Guidelines
http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s8/proj/gpl.htm]

1.7. Publicity and Promotion

- Identify key audiences.
- Develop project "identity" and logo/name with targeted
community in mind.
- Encourage word-of-mouth promotion among staff to long-
term patrons.
- Create strategic links from library web site, and/or the sites of
potential institutional partners.
- Contact local media - community newspaper, friends-of-the-
library newsletter, local radio station, local educators.
- Post announcements to professional and special-interest
listservs.

1.8 Evaluation

- Conduct user surveys of both patrons and staff. Monitor
concerns, problems, and questions from staff and patrons.
- Compile and evaluate statistics of service activity, as well as
possible technical or policy issues.
- Implement changes to services based upon statistical
analysis, and librarian and patron feedback.

1.9 Collaboration

Online tools enable libraries to share their resources with other similar or complementary institutions. This allows them to offer their patrons a greater range of services and expertise.
But collaborative work is not without its challenges. Collaborators must:

- Establish a common vision of the services the new entity will provide.
- Develop common guidelines for practice and procedures.
- Build trust between partners - establish accountability.
- Think through the issues that may constrain the delivery of
- shared resources, e.g.: copyright law, licensing agreements, liability, national information policies, etc…

THE PRACTICE OF DIGITAL REFERENCE

2.1 General Guidelines

Digital reference services must meet the same standards as traditional reference services. Participants should:

- Be committed to providing the most effective assistance.
- Show professional courtesy and respect when answering questions.
- Uphold the principles of intellectual freedom.
- Acknowledge receipt of patron question. Provide patrons with responses as quickly as possible. Letters and other forms of communication should be answered promptly and courteously (IFLA PL Website)
- Create and adhere to stated response turnaround policy.
- Comply with contractual licensing agreements, for both electronic and print materials, as well as specific restrictions of use, and any copyright laws governing the materials in question.
- Practice good search strategies.
- (See RUSA document: Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals. Section 4.0 Searching. RASD Ad Hoc Committee on Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services. Approved by the RASD Board of Directors, January 1996
- Respond to 100% of questions that are assigned, if only to say, *"I'm sorry I don't know, but you can try…"*

2.2 Content Guidelines

- Digital reference service should be informative; Promote information literacy by providing patrons with information on how you found an answer to their question.
- Maintain objectivity and do not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction.
- Use a neutral questioning interview technique to determine *"the real question,"* and once this is determined, provide users with accurate answers, appropriate in length, level, and completeness to the need. Include notification that the question may be forwarded to consortial partners, if this is the case.
- For questions requiring more in-depth answers, assistance may be provided if appropriate. Search time should be limited to the amount of time that supervisor recommends.
- A well-structured written response has a heading, body and closure.
    - **Heading:** Greet patron, include a generic notice of thanks for using the service, refer directly to subject of patron's inquiry: Example:*"Information on_____may be found_____,"*
    To find out more about_____, we would recommend_____"
    - **Body:** Cite sources fully, and in a consistent citation style. Describe all materials (if any) sent under separate cover or attached. Explain how the relevant information was found, its placement with regard to the suggested resource, if this is not immediately evident.
    - **Signature:** A signature should be a part of every closure. The librarian signature may contain librarian name or initials, title, institution and any contact information, as is prescribed by supervisor. Examples: "We hope the information we've provided will assist you with your research"; *"I hope you find this information helpful";*
    "We hope this answers your question. If you have further questions, please contact us again and we will be glad to provide additional assistance…"
- Avoid using jargon, acronyms, or Internet abbreviations (such as: BTW, IMHO).
- Write all responses clearly and relate them to the level of the inquiry (as much as possible).
- Offer accurate responses--check facts and know (evaluate) sources.
- Check spelling in written responses, and validate URLS.
- Select and cite only from authoritative resources:

- Evaluation criteria for paper-based resources: Author, Date of Publication, Edition or Revision, Publisher, Title, Intended Audience, Coverage, Writing Style.
- Evaluation criteria for reviews, Accuracy, Authority, Currency, Objectivity.
- Evaluation criteria for web resources: Author, Content, Domain Name, Date of Last Revision, Objectivity, Authority, and Accuracy.
- Always cite sources of information completely, whether web page, reference book, database, or other. Use a consistent citation style institution-wide, if possible.
- The librarian should add value to information either through analysis, description, keywords, pathways, or rewording.
- The librarian should do his or her best to locate and recommend at least one resource for every question.

2.3 Chat Guidelines

- Ideally, chat with a patron should be initiated as soon as the patron enters the chat queue.
- Chat queries should be responded to in the order that they are received.
- Librarians serving chat patrons should identify themselves immediately upon initiation of conversation. [Covered in 2.3.8.]
- Be aware of other patrons waiting. (Research from various chat projects has indicated an average session may be expected to be about 15 minutes long. Librarians may use their own judgment in this area).
- As you search, periodically reassure the patron that they have not been disconnected.
- Bookmark URLs used frequently.
- Use spelling, grammar and capitalization appropriately- "chat speak" is generally more conversational than formally written prose.
- Develop generalized institutional scripts to help librarians save time, and provide consistent service within an institution. The service administrator should approve institutional scripts.
    - Encourage individual staff members to develop scripts as needed to:
        - Receive questions that require similar responses on topics not handled by others.
        - Handle subject specialties that merit personalized scripts.
        - Make the same reference to another institution, association, resource or web site.

- Establish a consistent form of greeting or closure that is different from the institutional or group script.
  - If the session cannot be closed in a reasonable amount of time and/or there is another patron in the queue, offer to email a response, providing a time estimate, e.g. "I will continue to search for an answer and I will send you an email within X hours or minutes"; "Is this enough to get you started?" "May I send you an answer via email?"
  - Work with more than one patron at a time, if appropriate. If you feel comfortable, you may also pick up the second patron (it is recommended that you use a separate browser). E.g. "I am currently working with another patron. I will return to this chat session as soon as I can." "Will you please hold for five minutes?"

2.4 Guidelines for Chat Sessions

- Clarify the information need. Allow the patron to fully explain his/her information need before responding.
- Use open-ended questioning techniques to encourage the patron to expand on the request, e.g. "Please tell me more about your topic." or "What additional information can you give me?" or "How much information do you need?"
- Use questions to refine the search query. E.g. "What have you already found?" or "What type of information do you need (books, articles, etc.)?" or "Do you need current or historical information?"
- Break up long responses into a few blocks (e.g. 30 words per block)-this avoids long pauses and the client can begin reading your response while you are completing it.
- Explain your search process to the patron and describe what you are finding whenever possible. Remember that the patron cannot see you. Let the patron know what you are looking for and where you are looking.
- If you are going to be checking printed sources or taking a bit of time with the question, either provide patron w/ resource to look at, or offer them the option of follow-up via email.
- Use complete citations.
- If an inquiry needs to be referred to another librarian, give the patron detailed information about who to ask, how to contact them and what to ask for.
- "Inappropriate behavior": When patron behavior is inappropriate (as determined by institutional guidelines),

send a scripted warning message or terminate the call. Repeat offenders should be reported.

- Type like you talk, in a conversational manner.
- Use the client's name and ask them questions when appropriate.
- Avoid yes/no responses. Yes/no's can be interpreted as cold and unfriendly, just as in face-to-face reference.
- Clarify confusing terminology and avoid excessive jargon. Use terminology that is understandable to the patron.

RESOURCES

Resources Used to Create Draft:
IFLA Public Library Guidelines (Revised)
http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s8/proj/gpl.htm [Accessed 01/12/2006].
Library of Congress. **QuestionPoint Users Group Guidelines** (DRAFT)
Lipow, Anne G. **The Virtual Reference Librarian's Handbook**. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2003.
QuestionPoint Member Guidelines:
http://www.questionpoint.org/policies/memberguidelines.html
[Accessed 01/12/2006]
Reference and User Services Association [RUSA], American Library Association.
Procedures for Developing Guidelines: [Accessed 01/12/2006]
Reference Guidelines: [Accessed 01/12/2006]
Sloan, Bernie, ed. Digital Reference Services: Bibliography. Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/ [Accessed 01/12/2006]
Virtual Reference Desk:
Facets of Quality for Digital Reference:
Version 4 - October 2000:http://www.vrd.org/facets-10-00.shtml
[Accessed 01/12/2006]
Version 5 - June 2003]: http://www.vrd.org/facets-06-03.shtml
[Accessed 01/12/2006]
Guidelines for Information Specialists of K-12 Digital Reference Services
Created by Abby S. Kasowitz (1998)
http://www.vrd.org/training/guide.shtml [Accessed 01/12/2006]

ترجمه فارسی این راهنما را می توانید از طریق آدرس های زیر بدست آورید.

http://aqlibrary.org/index.php?module=TWArticles&file=index&func=view_pubarticles&did=52&pid=10
http://journals.ut.ac.ir/page/article-frame.html?articleId=271327