



The Reference Interview: A Common-Sense Review

Note: Techniques that help people with learning disabilities and other disabilities can also improve library service for all of the people in a community.

Greet

- Look welcoming and animated.
- Appear interested in the person and what he or she needs.
- Greet people warmly and directly.

Remember that you can't see a learning disability and that it might be in one area of perception or expression or a combination of areas. Here and throughout the entire process, speak clearly and not too quickly, and make eye contact. Because self-esteem is an accompanying problem, be sure to treat both the person and the question seriously and respectfully.

Probe

- Restate request.
- Ask open questions to get more information.

Speak clearly and not too quickly. Be prepared to restate questions often and in different ways. Refer to something written when possible or write key points in bulleted form if there seems to be a problem. Engage as many senses as possible.

Verify

- Restate specific question by paraphrasing
- Ask if some sources have been checked and what was found

If you haven't moved out to the materials, now is a good time to do it. Include a variety of formats. Try to choose at least one item that has a high proportion of pictures and diagrams and relatively little text. Include some items with sound and/or motion. Check discreetly for preferences in format, paying attention to non-verbal clues as well as actual statements. Ask if the person wants a quick, simple overview or something more in depth, if that's appropriate. If there's a pathfinder or other written material relating to the verified question, offer it. Offer an audio version in addition to print, if there is one.

Open-Ended Questions for Reference Interviews

Open-ended questions cannot be answered by yes or no. They begin with "who," "what," "where," "why" and "when."

Circle three or four of the questions below that you feel most comfortable with and make them part of every reference interview you conduct.

1. What kind of information on _____ are you looking for?
2. What is it you want to know about _____?
3. What would you like to know about this topic?
4. What do you mean by _____?
5. Would you tell me more about....
6. What else can you tell me that might help us locate materials?
7. Could you tell me what you're working on?
8. I'd be interested in knowing....
9. Would you explain...?
10. Is there something specific about _____ that you are looking for?
11. Would you explain that to me in more detail?
12. I'm not certain I understand.... Can you give me an example?
13. I'm not familiar with _____.
14. What examples can you give me?
15. What do you already know about _____?
16. Do you know some key concepts, terms or vocabulary for this topic?
17. Where have you checked for information so far?
18. What would you like to know about _____?
19. When you say _____, what do you mean?
20. Can you describe the kind of information you would like to find?
21. If I could find the perfect book to help you, what would that book have in it? Or, what would the title be?
22. Where did you hear or read about _____?
23. I'm not familiar with that person. What is he/she known for?
24. How will you use the information? That will help me with our search.
25. I'd like to help you find the best possible information. Can you tell me more about your subject?

Neutral Questions for Reference Interviews

To Assess the Situation

It would help me with our search if you could tell me:

1. what you are working on
2. how the need for this information came up
3. what you are trying to do in this situation
4. what happened that got you stopped

To Assess the Gap in Information

1. What would you like to know about X?
2. What do you need to know about X?
3. What are you trying to understand?

To Assess the Uses for the Information

1. If you could have exactly the help you wanted, what would it be?
2. How will this help you? What will it help you to do?
3. It would help if you told me how you are planning to use this information.
4. I think I can help you faster, and certainly better, if you could tell me...