

Conducting the Reference Interview: How to Ask Better Questions to Make the Customer Happy



Tool Kit for a Reference Interview

1. Be Approachable

- Smile
- Give a friendly greeting
- Treat all customers as equally important
- Reduce physical barriers

2. Be Interested

- Maintain eye contact
- Make attentive comments in a comfortable, relaxed tone
- Eliminate distractions
- Note non-verbal clues

3. Listen

- Give customers a chance to tell you what they want without interrupting or jumping to conclusions
- Assess the **real** information need of the customer

4. Interview

- Restate or paraphrase the question
- Adapt your style to the patron. Find a vocabulary in common.
- Open ended questions are an effective way to give customers the freedom to express the information needs in their own words. Open ended questions can not be answered with yes or no.

5. Search

- Keep customer informed of progress
- Offer referrals
- This may be an opportunity to teach information literacy by searching with the customer

6. Answer

- Identify possible sources. Explain, briefly, some of the factors for selection.
- Cite the source
- Make sure scope and level of information is correct
- Check with the customer to be sure the information is understood
- Communicate information in a clear and concise manner

7. Follow-up

- Asking the customer if they have everything they need improves success rate and lets you know that you have found the information needed
- Make sure patron is satisfied with answer
- Encourage customer to return, if necessary

Examples of Open Ended Questions for Use in a Library

I'm not familiar with _____.

What else can you tell me about it?

What would you like to know about this topic?

What do you mean by _____?

Would you tell me more about _____?

What are you trying to do?

What do you already know about _____?

Would you explain that to me in more detail?

What do you already know about _____?

What are you trying to find out?

Can you give me an example?

Is there something specific about _____ that you are looking for?

Is it spelled any other way? Does it go by any other names?

Where have you checked for information so far?

Can you describe the kind of information you would like to find?

If I could find the perfect book to help you, what would the title be?

Where did you hear or read about _____?

I'm not familiar with that person. What is he/she known for?

Good for homework questions:

Can you tell me more about your report and what is required for it?

Want to learn more?

Forbes Article: "How to Ask More Powerful Questions" by Aaron Levy
<https://bit.ly/2QJQqQ7>

TEDtalk: "Why do we ask questions?" <https://bit.ly/2TFGk40>

Book: Conducting the Reference Interview, Third Edition <https://bit.ly/2XMmNFy>

Practice Questions

Where are your books on painting?

Possible topics the customer could be interested in are

- Painting as an art
 - Specific artists
 - Art history
 - Street art
- Painting the walls of a house
- Painting the outside of a house
- How to teach painting
- Finger painting with young children

Where are your books on makeup?

Possible topics the customer could be interested in are

- Theater makeup
- Drag queen makeup
- Special effects makeup for Halloween
- Makeup for teens
- How to talk about makeup
- Makeovers

Where are your classic books?

Possible topics the customer could be interested in are

- Classic children's books
- Classic books in another language
- The Cliff Notes version of a particular book
- Historical books
- Classic cars

Where are your maps?

Possible topics the customer could be interested in are

- Updated city maps
- Historical maps
- Land surveys
- Driving maps or a road atlas
- Hiking/camping maps
- A Lewis & Clark travel log
- Travel books
- A globe