

Reference Referral Policy

Audience

This document details how to make referrals at all levels of reference experience and training, from undergraduate Student Assistants through Subject Specialists. Individual guidelines below indicate which of the following groups the directions are intended for:

- SAs (Student Assistants, with little to no reference training)
- GAs (Graduate Assistants, with a core level of reference methodology training, and possibly some specific subject specialty training)
- Non-SS (Non-Subject Specialists in the subject of the questions received; includes staff and faculty who may have subject specialties in other areas)
- SS (Designate Subject Specialists in the topic area of the question received)

Definition

A referral occurs when one reference person consults with another to help answer a patron's question. Referrals can happen in all formats of reference (in person, chat, email, telephone, etc.). Referrals include:

- One reference person sending a question/patron to another for additional help and expertise, and ceasing their own work on the question;
- Multiple reference personnel passing a question back and forth, with each contributing based on their expertise/knowledge of different aspects of the question

A referral is a collegial way to meet a patron's information needs most effectively. Our patrons ask a variety of interdisciplinary questions, and the University of Illinois library system has a wealth of subject expertise to help our users. A referral does not represent a failure on the part of an individual to adequately answer a question, but is rather another tool in the quest to best answer each question received.

When to refer

The most important aspect of reference referral is that questions be answered accurately and by the person most knowledgeable in the subject area.

Referrals should normally occur when the initial reference person answering the question

- Has identified the user as a faculty member or graduate student with a specific non-trivial information need
 - or
- Feels that additional specialized assistance would benefit the patron.

Criteria to consider:

- What are my unit's policies on answering this type of question?
- Can I answer this question using widely available reference sources?
- Could a subject specialist answer the question more efficiently? (Will this question take longer than 10-15 minutes for me to find the answer?)
- Will the patron be better served by a subject specialist for the discipline of this question?
 - Do I know the advanced research resources for this discipline?
 - Is the patron working on a long or detailed project (e.g. 10+ page paper; undergraduate thesis; independent study, etc.)?
 - Is the patron working on a highly specialized topic, or one that requires detailed knowledge of discipline-specific language?
 - Does the question involve special formats or specific collections (e.g. films, music recordings and scores, rare books, archives, patents, statistics, etc.)?
 - Is the patron expressing a collection need?
- Is there a subject specialist available within the time frame required by the patron to have the question answered?
- Is this question about a specific journal that may have been canceled? (This is particularly important for collection development and liaison purposes.)

Library reference services should always notify patrons that there is also a subject specialist (or specialists) available who can provide more in-depth research assistance for their topic, should they desire.

Whom to refer to

- Subject or Functional Specialist(s) for a question (e.g. History Librarian, or Data Services Specialist);
- Unit libraries, where questions for a discipline or handled by multiple specialists;
- There are often multiple individuals who can help answer a question; check the staff directory <https://www.library.illinois.edu/geninfo/unit-directory/> ;
- If a subject specialist isn't available, there may be other individuals working in their physical unit or division who may be able to assist.
- The collection fund manager list provides additional suggestions: <https://www.library.illinois.edu/collections/statements/subjectdirectory/>

How to refer

Always check with another subject specialist/unit before sending them a patron. Many units post the office hours of the librarians who are available by phone or chat. It is important to make sure that the other unit has the materials and/or staff available to answer the patron's question.

1. If a subject specialist is available, describe the question and the work you have done so far to the subject specialist;
 - Ask to see if/when the subject specialist is available to meet with the patron, and the preferred contact method (in person, phone, email, etc.)
 - Give the patron the contact information (Name and Email required) for the subject specialist, as determined above
2. If a subject specialist is not immediately available:
 - Give the patron the contact information for the person you want to refer them to, including preferred method of contact.
 - Always identify yourself to the subject/functional specialist when you are referring your question! This includes your full name and/or email address.

Receiving Referrals

Acknowledgement

- Once a referral is accepted, a librarian should reply directly to the patron with an acknowledgement within 24 hours, and confirm to the referring librarian that they have received the question and are working on it.

Answering the Question and Further Referrals

- If the receiving librarian is unable to provide an actual answer within one business day, they should provide a date by which the patron can expect an answer.
- If the receiving library must forward the patron's question to yet another library or person, they must notify the patron that they are being referred, to whom, and why.
- If the library cannot find or does not have what the patron needs, *respond to the patron anyway*: Tell the patron that the question was investigated, list the sources and locations that were searched, say if this information might be in another library and/or a better library to contact (give them the WorldCat OCLC number if possible), or if it is unlikely to exist at all.