The Initial reference interview

Introduction

It is essential to determine client information needs before we consider ways to meet them. This section deals with the skills and knowledge you need to interview a client.

The reference interview is the discussion that takes place between the client and the library staff member. The staff member aims to discover what the client really wants, in order to ensure that their information need is satisfied.

When you have completed this section, you should be able to

• explain why the interview is necessary
• identify the information you need to obtain from the client
• demonstrate appropriate skills and behaviours in conducting the interview
• show awareness of relevant ethical and legal issues.

The main topics in this section are:

1. Be open and friendly
2. Even if you are busy helping someone else
3. You may need to set priorities
4. You may have a 'difficult' client
5. Ask what the client wants
6. Repeat or paraphrase the question
7. Use encouragers
8. Remember or take notes
9. Be aware of ethical and legal issues
10. Avoid a premature diagnosis
11. Find out what the client knows already

Be open and friendly

When a client approaches you, how welcoming are you? Do you:

• make eye contact if you can
• smile
• look ready to help
• try to be at the same level as your client
• greet the client, using their name if you know it
• use a welcoming tone of voice
• listen attentively to the first statement of request
• show interest in the enquiry?

Be open and friendly – verbal communication 1-2

Verbal communication is particularly important in the reference interview.

Greet the client

Greeting the client, by name if you know it, establishes that you have a genuine interest in the person as well as their information need. This will help to reassure the client that you are the right person to ask. It will also help you to focus on what the client really wants to know, rather than rushing ahead to think about resources before you have clearly identified the question.

Show interest

Many clients are anxious not to be a nuisance, and not to take up the ‘valuable time’ of the library staff. This can lead to unclear statements of their requests, and more time having to be spent sorting out the confusion. Showing real interest in the client’s enquiry will encourage him or her to explain it fully, and enable you to assist more quickly and effectively.

Be open and friendly – nonverbal communication 1-3

People communicate a lot of information without using words. In particular, our body language lets others know our attitude and our feelings.

Nonverbal messages are often more important than words in conveying meaning.

Facial expression and tone of voice

Your facial expression and tone of voice reflect your feelings, and should be consistent with your words. A smile will reinforce the greeting you offer a client. If, on the other hand, the client is worried or confused, your expression and tone of voice will reflect empathy with their concern.

Eye contact

In Western societies, eye contact shows that you are interested and ready to engage with the other person. In general, making eye contact (without staring) helps establish a good atmosphere. However, be aware that for some cultures, and for very shy people, eye contact may be difficult or inappropriate.

Be open and friendly – nonverbal communication 1-4

Your posture and proximity to your client are important aspects of nonverbal communication. They are part of your body language.

Posture
Use a relaxed posture. Leaning forward slightly conveys interest, whereas leaning back may signal lack of interest in what the client is saying. Holding your arms and hands open implies openness and availability. If you fold your arms, you may appear defensive or hostile. Clenched hands suggest aggression.

**Personal space**

Standing if the client stands, or sitting when he or she is seated, makes eye contact easier to maintain. It also allows the client to feel that you are on the same level. The distance at which different people find conversation comfortable varies. Be aware of this, and try to gauge from your client’s reaction if you are standing too close or too far away.

**Be open and friendly – nonverbal communication**

Your gestures, and consistency of body language with what you say are important aspects of nonverbal communication.

**Gestures**

Your gestures should match your words. For a library staff member to nod in apparent understanding of the client, and then say ‘I’m sorry I don’t understand’, is confusing. You also need to control whichever distracting mannerisms—drumming your fingers, tapping your pencil, playing with your hair—you happen to have. If you think you don’t have any, ask your family or friends what they are. At the same time, try to ignore whatever irritating habits your client displays.

**Inconsistency**

If your body language is not consistent with your words—for example, if you say ‘Can I help you?’ while looking down and sounding irritated—the client may not trust you. This could encourage the client to look elsewhere rather than accept your offer of help.

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**Even if busy**

**When you are busy helping someone else**

No-one likes to be ignored or to feel unimportant. Although you are busy helping someone else, you can always pause long enough to acknowledge other clients immediately. Tell the other clients what you are doing if it is not obvious, and offer to attend to their need as soon as possible.

The client waiting for help is the most important demand on your time, so be prepared to let other things wait, rather than the client. You should give the client a sense that you are genuinely concerned with their information need.

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**Set priorities**

**Setting priorities**
Whenever the library is busy, there may be a queue of clients waiting for help.

It is not sensible to spend fifteen or twenty minutes with your first client, and keep everyone else waiting, if there are people whose needs can be met very quickly.

You may ask a group of clients if anyone has a very quick question. For example, someone may want to know where the toilets are, or where they can get change for the photocopier. If you can answer some questions immediately, you can satisfy some of your clients, and reduce the stress of having many people waiting.

If one client requires more time than you can spare at that moment, you may need to ask the person to come back later. This is especially acceptable if you can do some investigation - or even some clear thinking - in the meantime.

However, the first person in a queue has priority, and you must offer some help. Most Australians accept the fairness of taking their turn. Use your common sense, and try not to feel too pressured.

If you send a client to the catalogue with a promise to check back in a few minutes, make sure you do. Jot it down if you think you may forget.

**Difficult client**

Most people are pleasant to deal with, especially if you are pleasant to them.

When clients are difficult, they may be

- upset by their treatment (or lack of it) in the library
- distressed by events or circumstances outside the library.

Handling a difficult client requires understanding and tact. Use the same verbal and nonverbal skills you have used in other interviews. In particular, focus on:

- active listening
- paraphrasing the client’s concern
- acknowledging the client’s feelings
- accepting that the anger is not directed against you personally.

Aim to work together with the client, and other staff members if needed, to solve the problem. Try to say what you can do, not what you cannot do. Provide the client with options, from which he or she can choose.

**Complaints**
Most complaints can be dealt with using the same interviewing skills. Clients usually want to be

- listened to
- taken seriously
- treated with respect.

You may be able to explain why a policy exists, or how it is applied. If this does not satisfy the client, refer him or her to your supervisor.

**Asking what the client wants •5-1**

You must find out what the client really needs. This is not always easy, since clients often don’t say exactly what they want.

So you need to ask questions. There are different ways of asking questions, and some are more effective in identifying what the client needs.

Begin by asking open questions, which cannot be answered by a simple yes or no. Open questions give the client an unlimited choice of answers, and encourage them to keep talking about the information they need.

Closed questions should be used after the client’s requirements are fairly clear. Use them to check that you have understood correctly, and to clarify details.

You should practise active listening, to ensure that you interpret correctly and fully what the client is trying to tell you.

**Asking what the client wants •5-2**

**What the client really wants**

When you have talked to the client, you should be able to answer the following questions.

**What is the question?**

Something prompted the client to seek some information, and ask for help to find it. Finding out what clients need is not always easy, and requires skilled interviewing techniques.

**Type and amount?**

The client may need information in a particular form. It might be easier to use in Italian or Vietnamese. Perhaps the reading level should be easy, or maybe the person is an expert and needs advanced material. Does the client need large print? A recording? Would one short article be enough, or do they need extensive information?

**Why is the material needed?**

This makes a big difference to the type of information that can be provided. Material for a university essay is different
from information for someone thinking about a career change, even if the question is the same. However, a client’s reasons are sometimes private, and you must respect this.

**Who is the client?**

Try to assess this by talking to the client. Is the person asking the legal question a lawyer? If so, you need different information than for a student doing an assignment. But do not jump to conclusions based on how the client looks or sounds. If a man asks about cooking, don’t assume he needs something basic. He may be a gourmet chef.

**How recent should the information be?**

Information may or may not need to be up-to-date. Statistical queries require precise dates. The need for current material will affect the resources you search. Recent information is found in newspapers and journal articles. Books rarely contain material less than one year old; the information in encyclopaedias is usually even older.

**When does the client need the information?**

One answer that doesn’t help is ‘as soon as possible’. A better way to put the question is ‘What is the last day on which you can use the information?’ The client may (or may not) have a definite deadline. If so, try to find out why. If you need to refer this question on, the reason for the deadline is crucial to the people working on it. Most people are more responsive to rush requests if they know the reason.

**Asking what the client wants**

**Where has the client already looked?**

This can save you time, but since you can probably use the library better than the client, you may want to double-check what they have done. Finding out where the client has already looked can provide clues for you, as well as ensuring that you don’t duplicate information the client already has.

**Where did the client hear of this?**

This can give you hints about places to search, and often makes a difference as to whether or not a question can be answered. If you are sending on a request for a book or article, for example, include where the client heard of it, giving as complete a citation as possible. Some libraries will not even accept an interlibrary loan request without verification of the source.

**Why don’t clients say exactly what they want?**

Clients are often polite and hesitant. They want to know they have the right person to ask, with whom they will feel comfortable.
So they may ask: ‘Can you help me?’
They may ask a real information question. For example,
‘Where are the books on New Zealand?’
‘Do you have any information on organic vegetables?’
‘Can you tell me how to use the Internet?’
Be careful! These sound straightforward, but the first question may simply be a way of opening the conversation, and may not describe the real information need. Check this with appropriate questions.
Some clients come to the desk with a very general question because they are trying to be helpful. They want to save you the effort of helping them, and think they can find the information they need if you just point to ‘the books on New Zealand’. They may not appreciate the complexity of your collection, and believe any book ‘on New Zealand’ will give them what they need. But even in ‘books on New Zealand’ it may be difficult to find the population. An almanac or encyclopaedia is more likely to provide this information quickly.

### Asking what the client wants •5e

#### Closed questions

The closed question is one of the two basic types of interview questions. The other type is the open question.

These questions require the client to answer yes or no, or choose between two options. Use them to clarify your understanding of the client’s need. For example,

- Is this for an assignment?
- Would a collection of Shakespeare’s plays give you what you need?
- Would you prefer the book or the audiocassettes?
- Is this the type of information you were after?

However, asking questions is useless unless we listen. Listening is the only way we can find out what clients need. We need to give them our full attention to pick up all their verbal and nonverbal clues.

### Asking what the client wants •5f

#### Open questions

The open question is one of the two basic types of interview questions. The other type is the closed question.

These questions are vital to encourage the client to tell you as much as possible about their information need. They cannot be answered yes or no. They invite the client to go into
further detail. These questions are usually asked at the beginning of a reference interview.

Examples of open questions are:

- What examples can you give me?
- Where did you hear about...?
- What specifically do you need to know about...?
- How much information do you need?

However, asking questions is useless unless we listen. Listening is the only way we can find out what clients need. We need to give them our full attention to pick up all their verbal and nonverbal clues.

**Asking what the client wants**

**Neutral questions**

Neutral questions enable you to correct any misleading impressions clients may give.

They:

- are open questions that invite the client to talk,
- allow clients to use their own words,
- cannot be answered by the client restating part of your question,
- do not contain any of the nouns already used by the client, and
- are free from assumptions.

A young woman asks: ‘How do I find out how to make a bow?’ You ask: ‘What exactly do you need?’

The client explains: ‘I want to shoot arrows at birds eating fruit in my garden.’

The neutral question ‘What exactly do you need?’ allowed her to specify the type of bow she meant. Just as well, since you thought she wanted to tie bows around parcels!

This technique will save you time, avoid misunderstanding clients, and allow you to discover their real needs quickly.

**Asking what the client wants**

**Active listening**

Active listening requires that you pay close attention to what the client is saying. Use verbal and nonverbal skills to convey your interest and concern, including eye contact, a calm tone of voice, and leaning slightly forward in a relaxed posture.

When you ask an open question to find out what the client needs, listen attentively to the reply. Use encouragers (Right, Uh-huh, etc), but do not interrupt or talk over the client.
Repeating key words, or paraphrasing the main points, shows that you understand what is being said. Summarising the query allows the client to confirm their real need, or correct anything you have not understood.

There is more about listening skills in the section on communicating with clients.

**Asking what the client wants**

**Angry clients**

Show empathy with the client by acknowledging their feelings: ‘It’s very frustrating that the book hasn’t been returned on time.’ This allows the client to sense that you care, and may help to diffuse some of the anger.

Paraphrase what the client is saying. This clarifies the real problem. ‘So you feel that the library should charge bigger fines when the material is returned late.’

You do not have to agree with the client. You are simply recognising the client’s feelings and opinions, and assuring him or her of your concern.

**Repeat or paraphrase the question**

**Restating the question**

- ensures that you heard correctly
- reassures the client that you will treat the question seriously
- allows the client to expand on what they really want.

**Verifying**

Verify your understanding of the client's request by paraphrasing or repeating their question before trying to answer it.

For example,

- ‘You are interested in a bow that shoots arrows?’ or
- ‘If you found information on making bows that shoot arrows, would that be everything you need?’

Both neutral and verifying questions help you to assist the client effectively and efficiently.

**Encouragers**

A simple yet surprisingly effective skill is to use ‘encouragers’. That is, you encourage the client to go on talking, so as to clarify their information need.

Encouraging gestures include smiling and nodding your head.
Verbal encouragers are short words and phrases that coax the client to tell you more about what they are looking for. They include

- Oh?
- So?
- Then?
- And?
- Go on.
- Right.
- Tell me more.
- Give me an example.
- Uh-huh.

**Remember or take notes**  

It is important to remember what the client has already told you. Asking for the same details a second time is irritating for the client, and suggests that you were not paying close attention.

Since you aim to build up a clear picture of the client’s information need, you need to remember all the relevant pieces of information. Unless you have a very good memory, or the request is a simple one, you will probably need to jot down the most important points of each enquiry.

Be sure you always have paper and a pen or pencil handy, so you can make notes as you go.

**Ethical issues**  

**Code of ethics**

Library staff follow a code of ethics which outlines that they should always:

- remain objective
- provide the right information
- avoid making judgments about the clients or their questions
- avoid censoring material which is controversial, or may offend a section of the community
- avoid interpreting the information
- avoid giving legal, medical or financial advice
- respect the confidentiality of each query
- provide equal service to all
- remember legal implications when supplying information.
Although you should aim to treat all library clients equally, some libraries specify levels of service provided to various types of clients. For example, research staff in an academic library are likely to receive more assistance than undergraduate students.


**Legal issues**

Several areas of legislation impact on the provision of information.

**Copyright**

Make sure you are not infringing the copyright laws by copying or downloading too much information. Be familiar with the legislation, and make clients aware of it.

**Duty of care**

As library staff can be held liable for the quality of the information they supply, be sure it is accurate, and its sources are identified.

**Censorship**

Many people argue that libraries should not include books on topics such as how to commit murder or make bombs. Nor should libraries allow users to search the Internet for pornography. Others argue that people should have the freedom to access whatever they want.

You need to be aware of the library profession’s position on censorship (http://www.alia.org.au/policies/professional.ethics.html), and your own library’s policies and practices in this area.

**Legal issues**

Privacy and confidentiality issues are always important.

**Freedom of information**

Most library staff agree that clients should have freedom of access to information. However sometimes you need to use common sense in answering a request. For example, if an enquirer asks for information on making a letter bomb, you should refer to your supervisor before supplying the information.

**Privacy and confidentiality**

You must not reveal details of an enquiry to another library client. This is particularly important in special libraries where researchers may be working on sensitive topics.
Library staff must be discreet and tactful when handling enquiries. It can be frustrating if a client is unwilling to tell you why they need the information. However they have the right to keep quiet about their reasons.

Be careful when conducting a reference interview that your conversation is not overheard by other clients.

**Avoid premature diagnosis**

Avoiding premature diagnosis is an important skill. You may be tempted to assume you know what a client wants, especially if he or she seems to be asking the same question as a previous client.

Such assumptions can catch you off guard, when the new client does not respond positively to the sources you suggest. You may have to go back to the original enquiry and start again, focusing on a different aspect of the question, or even a different question altogether.

Premature diagnosis also leads you to thinking about sources of information before you have fully identified the question. This pulls your thinking in two directions at once, and will reduce your effectiveness in both.

Although you will often be tempted to try to cut the process short, experience shows that the fastest and most satisfactory way to help a client is:

- establish the real information need, and
- think about where you will find the required information.

**Find out what the client knows already**

Clients may ask questions about which they have no pre-existing knowledge. But they also make enquiries about topics with which they are very familiar. If you use open questions to discover how much they already know about their area of enquiry, you may save yourself considerable time, and perhaps embarrassment.

They may have done some research before they came to you. It is useful to establish which sources they have already consulted, so that you don’t waste time covering the same ground again. However, remember that you are probably more expert in discovering information than they are, and you should certainly know your collection better. So it is sometimes worthwhile to retrace clients’ steps, if you feel confident that there is more information than they were able to find.