Identifying Information Needs

Introduction

Before you can locate information, whether for yourself or a client, you need to be clear about what you really want.

We all use and need information every day, in various aspects of our lives: home, school, family, work, and leisure. Our sources include our own and other people’s knowledge and experience, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, the Internet, as well as particular sources - like books in libraries - which we deliberately seek out to answer a need we have identified.

We can therefore assume that when people approach a library with a question, they want help to satisfy a specific information need. It is useful to consider some aspects of the request, before we go into detail about how to meet it.

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

- respond to different forms of approach
- treat different types of clients professionally
- recognise different information needs
- identify different types of query.

The main topics in this section are:

1. Forms of approach
2. Types of client
3. Types of query

Forms of approach

Clients approach libraries in many different ways to satisfy their information needs.

Most library users have, until quite recently, visited library buildings - including public, school, university or college, and workplace libraries. Clients unable to attend libraries in person have used mobile or homebound services, or have relied on telephones and post to request and receive information.

Increasingly clients expect to access the library’s resources from a home or work computer. Even within the same building, many people prefer to look something up online or email a request rather than visit the library.
The subtopics in this section are:
1a. Telephone
1b. Email and post
1c. Face to face

### Telephone •1a

Clients who phone the library usually have a fairly specific request. Telephone queries include, for example,

- Is the library open on Sundays?
- Do you have a book called *Pigs in Heaven*?
- Can you tell me when Rachel Griffiths made her first feature film?

Some questions relate to the library’s operations, and can be answered without any investigation. Others can be resolved by checking the catalogue, or the circulation system.

However, some queries require a search using the library’s collection and/or electronic resources. If your library offers a reference service, with staff rostered to provide it, quite complex information needs can be met. These may include conducting a reference interview on the phone, and developing a search strategy with the client.

If, on the other hand, you are answering the phone in addition to other tasks, you may need to judge which questions to answer, and which to postpone, or refer to someone else. Your library should have a policy about when it is appropriate to find answers to phone enquiries, and when you can ask the client to ring back later, write, email, or come to the library.

### Email and post •1b

**Email**

Most office workers use email, educational institutions provide email access for staff and students, and a large number of Australian households have a connection to the Internet. Increasingly, enquiries that relate to work, or questions from people who have an Internet connection at home, are sent by email.

These enquiries cover the full range of reference queries, for example,

- Who was the editor of the *Tamworth gazette* in 1944?
- Does the National Crime Authority have a website?
Post

Enquiries that arrive by regular mail are almost always from people who do not have access to email.

The letters often contain family history questions, since people doing family history research are often older people working from home, who are less likely to have an Internet connection.

Face to face enquiries •1c

Clients who visit the library are likely to have more complex enquiries, often requiring an extensive interview and ongoing support to find the information they need.

The detailed reference interview is dealt with in the next section of the course.

Types of clients •2

Libraries deal with a wide range of clients. Different types of libraries offer their services to a different clientele, and so some libraries can expect their clients to have particular information needs.

People vary enormously in their appearance, behaviour, and the way they relate to others. We need to be aware of our preferences and prejudices, so that we do not discriminate against particular clients, or groups of clients, when we provide information service.

The subtopics in this section are:

2a. Public libraries
2b. Institutional libraries
2c. People like us
2d. How comfortable are you?
2e. Interacting with clients

Types of client - Public libraries •2a

Libraries aim to meet the information needs of all their potential clients. In public libraries, and to a lesser extent state and national libraries, these include

- children from preschoolers to adolescents
- people from non-English-speaking and non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds
- Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders
• students of all ages, attending an institution and studying at home
• adults in the workforce and wanting to enter or return to the workforce
• people with physical and/or intellectual disabilities
• retired people.

In addition, public, state and national libraries serve
• schools
• local and other government agencies
• commercial firms
• other organisations within their region
• other libraries.

**Types of client - Institutional libraries**

School, academic and special libraries meet the information needs of an organisation, including the individual needs of its members.

These libraries vary in the extent to which they meet individual needs. Some take a narrow view of work- or study-related information needs, whereas others aim to meet most if not all of their clients’ requirements.

School and academic library clients include
• students
• teaching staff
• administrative staff
• other non-academic staff
• universities - research staff, graduates
• schools - the parents of students.

Special libraries commonly focus on the work needs of their staff. Their clients include
• staff of the organisation
• colleagues outside the organisation with similar research or business interests.

**People like us**

People come in all shapes, sizes, temperaments, and styles. Since anyone may approach a library for information, we need
to examine our responses to a wide variety of enquirers. Usually we are most comfortable with those who resemble us in gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, temperament, and values.

Our attitudes to particular appearances and behaviours may be rooted in past experiences too deep to unravel here. However, it is important that we are aware of them, so that we can guard against giving preferential service to clients with whom we are more comfortable, and denying proper service to others.

How comfortable are you? •2d

Everyone warms more to some people and less to others. This applies to individuals, and often also to categories of people such as footballers, Africans, lesbians.

This is normal. However it is essential that we do not allow our personal feelings to affect the service we provide to clients. Being aware of our attitudes is the first step to ensuring that our client service is always courteous and helpful, and does not discriminate - consciously or unconsciously - against anyone.

Types of query •3

Clients ask different types of questions, which can be classified in various ways. We will deal with

- directional questions
- ready reference questions
- procedural or reader education questions
- information or research queries.

These are not rigid categories. The same question - e.g., ‘Where is the catalogue?’ may be a simple request for directions, a plea for assistance in using the particular tool, or a lead-in to an extensive research query.

One category of question may lead to another. For example, ‘Where are the microfiche readers?’ may take the client to the next step: ‘Can you show me how to use the microfiche?’

Nevertheless, it is useful to be aware of different types of queries, since this will help you to answer them appropriately.

The subtopics in this section are:

3a. Directional questions
3b. Ready reference questions
3c. Procedural questions
3d. Research questions
3e. Types of query

**Directional questions**

Some questions are very simple. For example, clients may just want to know

- Where are the toilets?
- Where is the children’s section?
- Do you have DVDs?
- Where do I go to join the library?

Answering these questions requires a knowledge of the physical layout of the library, as well as basic information about the library’s operations.

A simple answer is often all the client needs. It can be helpful to take the client to the relevant area, but that is not always appropriate or even possible.

However, some apparently simple questions are really the client’s way of asking for more assistance. For example,

- ‘Where is the catalogue?’ might reflect a client’s uncertainty about how to find the information they are looking for.
- ‘Where are the books on music?’ may disguise a detailed query about the influence of Haydn on Mozart’s development as a composer.

**Ready reference questions**

Often questions require factual information from one source. These are known as ready reference questions, and can generally be answered from one of the standard reference sources close at hand.

Standard ready reference sources used to be a set of books - e.g., dictionary, encyclopaedia, handbook, yearbook - shelved at or near the reference desk.

Now they include some basic websites, like the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which should be bookmarked for quick access.

**Procedural questions**

Clients often ask library staff how to do something, for example,
• How do I use the CD-ROM?
• How do I find the Chinese national anthem using this encyclopaedia on CD-ROM?

These questions may require you to show clients how to use a piece of equipment or a bibliographical tool.

They may also lead to more detailed assistance, including a reference interview. The detailed reference interview is dealt with in the next section of this course.

Teaching clients to use particular resources and pieces of equipment is covered in another section of this course.

It is important to establish what clients already know about using the equipment or resource, as well as exactly what they want to be able to do.

**Research questions**

These are complex questions, which cannot be answered from a single source. They always require exploration by the library staff member, to find out precisely

• what the client wants
• what the client already knows
• how much detail is required
• whether format is important
• any other relevant needs.

The reference interview is dealt with in the next section of the course.