

OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Virtual Reference from the User's Perspective



To prepare for your “Secret Patron” activity:

First, read the [Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals](#), developed by RUSA. Pay particular attention to how these guidelines apply in the chat environment.

Second, read the message on the reference interview by Susan Barb (next page). Think about the elements of a chat reference interview that are different from face-to-face reference.

Third, think about the Secret Patron scenario assigned to you or that you have written. How would this patron interact with the librarian?

Fourth, visit three virtual reference sites. Use the Virtual Reference Transaction Checklist to evaluate your experience as a patron.



Here are some thoughts from Susan Barb, staff trainer for the 24/7 Reference Consortium, on the importance of the reference interview. This was posted to the DigRef list on January 28, 2002.

In training librarians to do virtual reference, I often find that librarians seeing a question typed out, as opposed to hearing it from a patron, seem to assume that the question is well thought out and does not need a reference interview. Many just jump right to searching for an answer without conducting more than a very minimal reference interview when they first begin virtual reference. I believe that is related to the fact that we all tend to believe things in print are true.

In addition, because we do not have visual or auditory cues, we must ask questions about personal characteristics that might influence our patron's information need that we have been trained not to ask in face-to-face reference. If you can see that a person is a senior citizen, male or female, etc., these are points of reference that impact our information retrieval (whether or not they should is another matter).

Librarians also have to stay more focused on the actual transaction. Many of us have years of desk experience and are used to being able to handle several patrons in a very expeditious manner, in part because we know our buildings and our collections so well. This is no longer true when your collection is the Web, so we need to frequently check with our patrons and be patient about receiving responses. If we become distracted or try to do more than a couple of searches, we risk missing the patron's communication, since it must be read by us to be received, rather than heard.

There are other differences, of course, and there are many similarities, some of which also get ignored in doing virtual reference, but these were the ones that come up repeatedly when I am training virtual librarians.

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