

Reference Policy

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I. Mission of the Reference Department

In support of the mission of the Cambridge Public Library, the goal of the Reference Department is to provide a welcoming environment for patrons to receive accurate and detailed answers to a wide range of questions. The Reference Department also provides instruction on how to best utilize the various technology and resources necessary to fulfill the informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs of our diverse community.

II. Resources

A. Reference Collection

The reference collection consists of print resources, e-resources, and an extensive periodical collection.

Reference books and other reference materials do not circulate. Some reference materials are kept at the Research or Q&A desks for reasons of security and convenience. Copies may be made of important materials. Resources found on databases may be printed, saved, and in many instances e-mailed. Additionally, many of the databases are available remotely with the use of a valid Cambridge Public Library card.

B. Periodical Collection

The Cambridge Public Library's periodical collection is designed by the reference staff (it is lowercase elsewhere) to reflect the reading interests of our diverse community. The Library subscribes to a wide range of magazines, journals, newsletters and newspapers, both domestic and international. In addition to circulating periodicals, a wide range of titles can be accessed "full-text" via databases which can also be used remotely with a valid Cambridge Public Library card. Patrons can request an article that is not available in the Cambridge Public Library's collection via Interlibrary Loan

III. Reference Staff

Reference staff is expected to treat all patrons and their information needs equally, and with respect, seriousness and sensitivity. It is the goal of the reference librarian to fulfill each patron's information needs in a timely, efficient manner with accurate and appropriate information. Competency in using digital, print and circulating reference materials while providing excellent service are an integral part of satisfying these goals.

Excellent service not only requires possession of excellent professional skills, but also friendliness, approachability and sincerity. Staff should smile and be warm and welcoming. Responding to patron needs is the primary responsibility of every member of the Reference Department. Patrons are less likely to approach the librarian if they appear to be disinterested or occupied. It is therefore imperative to be alert, look up from one's work often, and acknowledge every patron, even when assistance cannot be offered immediately.

Librarians need to be aware of patrons who may need assistance in the stacks or other areas of the Library. For example: patrons may be having difficulty using the computers, finding a particular call number, or locating bus schedules. Librarians should frequently walk around adult service areas and be proactive; offering assistance before being asked. Whenever assisting patrons in the location of materials, librarians are expected to accompany each person to the shelf location or computer where the material can be accessed.

The Reference Department is committed to providing reference service during all hours the library is open. The Research Desk and Q&A Desk will whenever possible be staffed by at least one professional librarian who is a graduate of an accredited Masters of Library Science program. Trained paraprofessionals play a vital role in assisting professional staff at services desks and in staffing the Information Commons.

In addition to being knowledgeable about the CPL's resources and services offered, both professionals and paraprofessionals are expected to know and understand library policies such that they can explain them effectively to the public. It is also important to know when it is appropriate to refer patrons to the department head or to Administration.

IV. Reference Services

A. Scope of Reference Service

Reference service consists of professional personal assistance provided to a patron in the pursuit of information. Reference librarians are responsible for providing these services to a patron in the library, over the telephone, by mail or online.

It is the philosophy of the Reference Department that there is an answer to every question. If the desired information is not available at the Library, every effort will be made to locate and refer the patron to a source, institution, or individual where the information can be found. Staff is encouraged to make phone calls or emails on the patron's behalf, when appropriate, and may request that other institutions send information to the library or to the patron if necessary.

B. Types of Service

1. Ready Reference

"Ready reference" describes requests for information that can be satisfied with quickly obtained (usually from a single source), factually based answers. Staff should always be prepared to provide the source from which answers were obtained (ex. The World Almanac Book of Facts, The American Heritage Dictionary, a database such as Business & Company Resource Center, IRS.gov).

This category of reference service is appropriate for telephone, email and other forms of virtual reference. Requests that require more extended research are best handled in person, by post, or email.

Examples of ready reference questions:

Can you give me the phone number for the Brookline Public Library?

Do you have bus schedules?

Where can I find your ancient Egypt books?

2. Telephone Reference

Patrons in the Library always take precedence over telephone calls. However, it is important that all calls be answered promptly. If a patron approaches a service desk and the librarian is on a telephone call, acknowledge the patron at the desk by making eye contact to indicate that you are aware that they are present. When the librarian is busy serving a patron in person and must answer the phone, the staff member should greet the caller, explain that another patron is being served, ask the caller to please hold and let them know you will be back on the line shortly. If it becomes apparent that the caller may have to wait longer than initially anticipated, thank them for their patience and ask if they would like continue to wait, or if they would prefer to call back.

Telephone reference should be limited to ready reference or other questions with brief, fact based answers. There may be times when it is appropriate to take the patron's name and phone number and call them back when the information is found. Call-backs are the

responsibility of whoever took the original call and should be completed in a timely manner. If the librarian has not completed the transaction and their shift is coming to an end they must give the question and any relevant accompanying information to their replacement to follow up on. Leaving questions at the desk for the next staffer with no explanation or information about what has been done to answer it to that point is unacceptable under any circumstances.

3. General Reference

Questions that require more than a five-minute search and may necessitate the use of a number of resources are best handled at the Research Desk. After interviewing the patron to ascertain precisely what information is desired, the librarian will guide and assist the patron in locating the information.

In general, the Library cannot provide in-depth research (patron requests requiring more than 20 minutes of independent work on part of the librarian). The goal and mission of public libraries is not consistent with the provision of personalized research services. Public librarians are committed, however, to empowering a patron in their use of the Library and directing him or her to pertinent external resources. When working together, the librarian can be an ongoing source of assistance and guidance to the patron.

Examples of general reference questions:

I want to find out about knee replacement surgery – what’s involved, what questions I should ask, what doctors are good, and most particularly, how can I avoid it?

I want to learn everything I can about Edward Elgar – his life and his music – everything!

4. Consultation

When a patron consults a librarian, the patron takes advantage of a wealth of research experience and general knowledge. The reference staff will attempt to the best of their abilities, to help a patron define and focus more complex projects, and to suggest alternative approaches. The librarian is mindful of the patron’s privacy, and careful not to request the disclosure of any information the patron may be uncomfortable providing.

The level of assistance will be based upon the patron’s needs and the time constraints of the staff.

The reference staff does not attempt to interpret information that requires expertise beyond the scope of a public librarian, such as that provided by medical diagnosis, legal documents, or the tax code. A patron will be directed to the information available within the Library or to another institution or agency when appropriate.

Examples of consultation services:

I’m writing a two-page paper on poverty and hunger. Do you have any information on that?

I have to do a presentation on a famous American woman.

5. Readers Advisory Service

Librarians can offer a wealth of recommended titles within a particular genre or suggest titles on a given topic. After interviewing the patron to determine the specifics of his or her interest, staff will draw on extensive knowledge garnered during years of selecting and recommending books, and will use reference materials and electronic resources to assist the patron in locating a title or titles which satisfy that interest. These conversations often result in accompanying the patron to the stacks. In the interest of assisting patrons in this way, librarians will also do their best to keep aware of current titles of popular interest or critical acclaim. In some instances, the patron may be referred to another staff member with special expertise in a particular area.

Example of reader's advisory services:

I'm interested in European history. Can you recommend a good book on the subject?

There was a novel on the radio a couple of months ago about a college professor who loses his job and becomes a house painter in Maine. I don't remember the author or title.

6. Request, Reserves, and Interlibrary Loan

The Research staff is happy to check the availability of specific item(s) in the library's collection. Staff should always offer to assist the patron in finding the requested item-(s).

The patron may also check on the availability of items by phone. If the item is available, staff will retrieve it (transferring a call to another desk if necessary) and hold it at the circulation desk for six days. If the item is checked out, or available only at a branch or at another Minuteman library, a request will be placed and the item will be sent to whichever Minuteman library the patron chooses.

Items not available in the Minuteman Library Network may be requested through the Virtual Catalog. If the item is not available through the Virtual Catalog, it may be requested through Interlibrary Loan (ILL). The ILL service provides access to the holdings of public and academic libraries throughout the country. In most cases, there is no cost to the patron. The Cambridge Public Library will pay up to a fixed amount in lending fees, per library patron per fiscal year. Materials requested through ILL usually take three to six weeks to arrive. Patrons may only have two outstanding ILL requests at any one time.

If the desired item is not owned by the Cambridge Public Library, patrons can request materials be purchased online via the "Suggest a Purchase" link from the Library's website. If the item is purchased, it will be held at the circulation desk and the patron will be notified. The library has a strong commitment to providing our patrons with the materials they want within our collection development parameters

Reserve and request services are available by phone and e-mail. Reserves may be placed on most network items remotely through the web based catalog.

7. Internet Access

The Cambridge Public Library was one of the first public libraries in the United States to provide free Internet access to the public.

Internet computers are provided in the Main Library Information Commons. They are available on a walk-up basis; they cannot be reserved beforehand.

All patrons who are Massachusetts residents must obtain a Minuteman Library card and present it to use a computer. Visitors with out-of-state identification may receive a visitor card at the circulation desk.

Patrons must sign up using the SAMS queuing computer, which will then assign them randomly to individual computers. A session is initially for one hour, extendable at the Main Library only for another hour if no one is waiting. Printing of the first 10 pages per day is free; additional pages are 15 cents each. Patrons may add cash credit to their accounts at the Information Commons desk. Color printing is not available.

8. Scanning

The exclusive purpose of the scanning stations is to provide patrons with a convenient way to scan a document into an electronic format and some basic software to manipulate images.

Our scanners are incorporated into the SAMS queuing system and included in the two hour limit SAMS allows per day.

Printing from the scanners will require a flashdrive. Flashdrives are available for purchase at the Information Commons desk at cost.

9. Library Orientation and Instruction

Formal library tours and bibliographic instruction may be appropriate for classes and other small groups. Organizations or individuals wishing to schedule a tour should be referred to the Associate Librarian for Adult Services at least a week in advance.

10. Referral

When a request for information cannot be answered or has been answered only partially, the patron may be referred to another source, and assisted in contacting that agency. Such assistance may take the form of providing a phone number, address or contact person. Whenever possible, staff should call, fax, or e-mail the other organization on behalf of the patron. Staff should avoid representing the patron in any situation involving medical, legal or financial matters.

C. Priorities of Service

The following priorities will be applied in determining precedence:

- 1st priority – requests made by a patron in person
- 2nd priority – requests made over the phone
- 3rd priority – requests received by e-mail or postal mail

With these priorities in mind, the staff attempts to seek ways to minimize the length of time a patron may wait. When the librarian becomes available, the patron can expect to have the librarian's complete attention and to receive effective help.

V. Confidentiality

A patron's privacy and confidentiality will be respected at all times. Reference staff should make an effort to speak as quietly as possible, so that others will not overhear the interaction between the librarian and the patron.

All information provided to the Library by the patron is kept confidential. The Cambridge Public Library endorses the American Library Association's policy on confidentiality.

December 2012