

Ask a Librarian Handbook

University of California, Irvine Libraries

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I. Ask a Librarian Service Statement of Purpose

“Ask a Librarian is a quality reference service that provides information and educates the user at their point of need.”

II. Ask a Librarian EMAIL

A. General Rules and Etiquette

1. Answer the questions in the order in which they arrived.
2. Try to provide not only the answer but also the path to the answer; Walk the user through the search.
3. Always cite resources (e.g., URLs, call numbers). Include the complete URL preceded by http://...
4. When responding to faculty or staff questions, it can be helpful to explain how to find the information, but try to provide the specific answers to questions.
5. Answer with a positive, friendly, empathetic tone.
6. Define concepts when necessary. Avoid jargon.

B. Composing your answers

1. For in-depth assistance, suggest some starting points and refer them to the Reference Desk, Research Consultation Service or subject specialist as

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appropriate. Use the template “Visit the Library – Reference Consultation Service (RCS).”

Use the [ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education](http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#ildef) (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#ildef>) as your guide to provide instruction as well as answers. Not every answer will require you to address each standard. The object is to instruct the user while keeping these IL standards in mind. If you can help the students reach these IL goals, we are achieving our educational mission. See Appendix A for examples of answers that address these standards:

C. Closing

1. Read what you wrote before you send your answer. (edit in Word)
2. Let the caller know who they can contact for more information whether it's the Ask a Librarian service or another library service desk (e.g., “Let us know if you have additional questions” or “You may want to stop by the Langson Library Reference Desk (1st floor) for in-person help from a librarian” or “Let me know if you have follow-up questions.”)
3. When necessary, let them know what additional information would help us in a follow-up message.

D. Shifts

1. There are 2 EMAIL shifts each day. Generally they are 9 a.m. – 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. – 5 p.m. Monday through Friday excluding holidays. They may be split between a library assistant (LA) and a librarian.
2. LAs will be responsible for answering EMAIL questions left in the inbox by the previous librarian as well as any questions received during the LA's shift. If the LA receives a question during her/his shift that they feel would be better answered by a librarian:
 - a) S/he may leave the question in the inbox for the p.m. Ask EMAIL shift or ask the a.m. librarian to answer the question.
 - b) The librarian may leave all directional, holdings and “getting started” research questions for the LA. Ideally, the Librarian and LA will communicate with one another at the shift change in order to work out who will answer which questions.
 - c) Except as noted above, all questions should be completed by the end of your shift. If you are unable to answer every question in the Inbox, you must contact the librarian/library assistant who follows you and make arrangements to either extend your shift, or have them answer

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the question(s). Do not leave questions for others that were actually your responsibility to answer.

d) All questions must be answered within 24 hours Monday through Friday. Questions received after 5 p.m. on Friday, must be answered by 5 p.m. of the following Monday (excluding holidays and the Winter Administrative Recess).

3. Shift Substitutions

a) If you know in advance that you will be unavailable for an Ask shift (on vacation, conferences, etc.) you are responsible to arrange for a replacement. Change the desk AND Ask a Librarian schedules to reflect the shift change.

b) If illness or emergency prevents you from making your assigned shift, contact the Ask a Librarian scheduler for the appropriate department (LL = Jessica Brobst, x48706 SL = Belen Aguilar, x46970). If you are unable to contact either person, contact your departmental supervisor or anyone else who can pass a message along.

E. Service Guidelines

1. Non-affiliated users

a) If the question pertains to resources or services of the UCI Libraries or the UCI campus, try to answer completely. This includes questions concerning the nature of our collections, ownership of a particular item(s), or whether UCI would be an appropriate location for someone to conduct research on a particular topic.

b) EMAIL In-Depth Reference questions

(1) Reply using the template "Non-UCI In-Depth Reference Request." Occasionally it may be appropriate for a service provider to provide the answer to a general reference question especially when the information is readily available and does not require in-depth research. However,

(2) Do not email full-text articles from restricted resources.

(3) You may send excerpts of full-text articles from restricted resources if necessary (cite your sources).

2. Referrals

a) When appropriate, you may forward a question to another library staff member, such as a subject librarian, Access supervisor, etc., by completing the "Referrals to Specialists" section. Include a brief message

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about why you forwarded the request.

- b) Do not forward a question to another library staff member without verifying that person is available to answer the question promptly.
- c) Ideally, the patron should not be required to make a second contact. You should tell the patron that they will be contacted shortly by the person to which you are referring the question.
- d) If the person to whom you are referring will not be available for an extended period of time (vacation, out ill, etc.) and there is no other appropriate person, give the patron the option of contacting the library staff member once they return.
- e) When responding to the user, include the name and contact information (email, phone, URL, etc.) of the staff member to whom you are referring the question in case the patron wants to make a follow-up contact.
 - (1) Contact information should only be given out for Public Services staff.
 - (2) Do NOT give out Technical Service personnel contact information to patrons.
- f) In general, subject bibliographers want to be notified of research questions from UCI graduate students and faculty. Other subject-area questions do not need to be referred to a bibliographer unless there is some extraordinary reason.
- g) To answer requests to purchase materials (collection development) respond to the patron with the Collection Development referral template response and forward the message to the appropriate bibliographer for her/his information.
- h) DO NOT forward questions outside the UCI Libraries. We want to ensure, to the extent possible, the privacy and confidentiality of the patron and his/her question. If you determine that the patron needs to be referred to a person/department outside of the UCI Libraries, provide the patron with the contact information (name, phone and email) for that person/department, but do not forward the actual question outside the library.

E-Resources Error Reports: When patrons use Ask EMAIL to report a problem with access to one of the Libraries' electronic resources, you may need to report the problem to the Technical Services Department staff. Do NOT give patrons the Technical Services staff names or personal contact information. Please use the E-Resource Error Report form (http://erer.lib.uci.edu/data_ereport.php) on the Technical Services web page.

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3. Comments/Complaints/Suggestions.
 - a) It is important that you acknowledge the patron's comment/complaint.
 - b) Use the "Complaints/Comments" template response. Complete the "Referrals to Specialist" section and send these to the appropriate Library department head.
 - (1) For complaints specifically about Reference they should be sent to the Head of Reference for the specific Library who will share them with The AUL for Public Services and the Reference staff involved.

For general complaints (adapted from the PS Comment Card procedures at : <http://ps.lib.uci.edu/ccardprocedures.html>):

- (a) Forward the complaint to the Public Services Administrative Assistant (kjhill@uci.edu), who will review the comment and forward it to the appropriate person for a response within 5 working days.
 - (b) If the comment includes an email address, a response will be sent (including the text of the original question) and a copy sent to the Public Services Administrative Assistant (kjhill@uci.edu), who will input the comment and response into the Comment Card database.
4. Sending Attachments.
 - a) In certain circumstances it may be necessary to send an attachment to the patron. Generally, if the patron is located remotely or is having some technological problems with online resource access, PINs, etc., please consider sending them the document they are unable to access it on their own.
 - b) Do so sparingly and use your judgment as to when it is necessary.
 - c) Do not send restricted-access materials to non-affiliated patrons.
 - d) Only one document can be sent per question. In the rare occasion that more than one needs to be sent, inform the patron that you will be sending additional documents via email (from your own UCI email account).

F.Ask a Librarian EMAIL Statistical Category Definitions

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G. These categories are based on the UC Irvine Libraries Public Services Statistics Definitions (<http://ps.lib.uci.edu/stats/documentation/refstats/definitions.htm>).

1. REFERENCE: Answers to questions involving the knowledge, use, recommendations, interpretation or instruction in the use of one or more information sources, e.g. "Where can I find statistics on the numbers of police cars by state?" "How do I find primary resources about HUAC?"

2. Basically answers that provide any level of instruction beyond simple directions should be classified as "Reference." There will always be the question/answer that does not fit neatly into the categories below. Use your best judgment.

3. HOLDINGS: Holdings questions involving ONLY checking a catalog/database to locate a particular source for which the user has author, title, etc. information. Any instruction on how to perform the search, information about the database, etc., bumps this up to the Reference category.

4. DIRECTIONAL: Answers to questions involving the logistical use of the library, e.g. directions to the library, library hours, location of restrooms, email address for a librarian, questions that are forwarded to another person/department WITHOUT any additional information or instruction. In practice, very few answers end up being purely directional.

5. OTHER: Every question that falls into this category does not need to be answered and can be "Filed with no response" using the button provided. BE SURE to check the circle next to "Other:" AND the box next to one of the options below.

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- a) Bounced: Messages that come back to the system because the email originally given by the patron is incorrect, doesn't exist, or has some other problem.
- b) Nonsense/Spam: We rarely receive spam due to the fact that a form has to be filled out. We occasionally receive rude or nonsense messages from someone with too much time on their hands.
- c) Test: This is most often used when troubleshooting the system, or during training.
- d) Thank you: We regularly receive thank you messages. It is not necessary to respond.

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III. Ask a UC Librarian (LIVE)

A. General Rules and Etiquette

1. The main difference between answering question via email or chat is the time factor. Since there is a live person waiting at the other “end” for your answer you may feel a fair amount of pressure to answer immediately. Be careful not to let this cause you to overlook some important aspect of the patron’s question.
2. Keep the patron engaged in the conversation.
3. Check in with them regularly (e.g., “Let me check...”, “I am still checking...”, “Not there...let me check another place...”)
4. Try to break up long messages (e.g., “First you will do this...”, “Next type the search terms...”)
5. Be approachable and courteous.
 - a) Use the patron’s name when addressing him/her.
 - b) Use brief statements and confirmations (e.g., “Any questions?” or “Is this OK?”)
 - c) Be polite, show interest, and “listen.”
 - d) Answer with a positive, friendly, empathetic tone (e.g., Use ASCII smiley faces and friendly statements).
6. Some sessions can become quite lengthy. Use your judgment as to when it is time to either refer the patron to an offline source (e.g., a subject specialist, local reference desk, etc.).

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- B. Opening a call
 - 1. Open the call promptly (within 1 minute).
 - 2. Send a prompt and warm welcoming message. There is a “Welcome” script provided for your use.
 - 3. Multiple callers
 - a) Open as many calls as you feel you can handle. In general, you should avoid opening more than 3 simultaneous calls.
 - b) Acknowledge the new caller with one of the “call back” templates in case you can’t answer the question immediately.
 - c) If necessary, use IM to call for help from another service provider.

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- C. During the Call
1. The reference interview
 - a) Unlike EMAIL reference, it IS possible to conduct a reference interview with a patron using this service.
 2. When first answering a call, determine the information need (e.g., Brief directional or holdings question?, In-depth subject question?)
 - a) Ideally, you should provide some information quickly and follow-up with an open-ended question.
 - b) If necessary, ask questions to clarify the information need. Ask open-ended questions at the beginning and closed-ended questions to clarify or confirm (e.g., “What are you hoping to find”, “Do you mean...?”, “Are you looking for...”, “Tell me more about ...”)
 3. Make sure to ask follow-up questions as you go (e.g., “Do you understand what we did?”, “Is this the kind of information you wanted?”)
 4. Notify them of your progress. Explain what you are doing and where you are looking especially if the search is taking a long time.
 5. It might be helpful to ask the purpose of their inquiry. Be careful. It may be better to ask “What can you tell me about your situation?” or “What kind of assignment are you completing?”
 6. When you are dealing with an in-depth subject question, restate the question in your own words.
 7. Try to provide not only the answer but also the path to the answer; Walk the user through the search.
 8. Always cite resources (e.g., URLs, call numbers). Include the complete URL preceded by http://. When a full URL is sent to the patron through the QuestionPoint service, the patrons left window will change to that web page.
 9. Define concepts when necessary. Avoid jargon.

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D. Closing

1. Always ask if the information you found was helpful or if it answers their question.
2. Always ask if they have any additional questions.
3. Thank them for using the Ask a Librarian service and encourage them to use the service in the future. There are scripts provided for this.

E. Service Location

1. You may monitor your Ask a UC Librarian session on any computer with IE 5.0 or higher and a high speed internet connection. However, currently the policy is not to provide service from the Reference Desk or from your home. We recommend that you monitor your Ask a UC Librarian shifts from your office.
2. Do not leave your workstation unattended during your Ask a UC Librarian shift. If you need to look up a print resource in order to answer the question, feel free to call the reference desk and ask for assistance. In rare cases when you must leave your station, please:
 - a) Ask a colleague to watch your workstation.
 - b) Ask a colleague (using the phone or IM) to monitor the LIVE session.

F. Shift Substitutions

1. If you know in advance that you will be unavailable for an Ask a UC Librarian shift (on vacation, conferences, etc.) you are responsible to arrange for a replacement. Change the desk AND Ask a Librarian schedules to reflect the shift change.
2. If illness or emergency prevents you from making your assigned shift, contact the Ask a Librarian scheduler for the appropriate department (LL = Jessica Brobst, x48706 SL = Belen Aguilar, x46970). If you are unable to contact either person, contact your departmental supervisor or anyone else who can pass a message along.

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G. Referrals

1. For UCI Patrons

a) As noted above, sometimes it may be appropriate, or necessary to refer a patron to another librarian, another office on campus, or a non-UCI agency, library, etc., give the relevant contact information to the “caller” (email, phone, URL, etc.).

b) When feasible, make sure the person to whom you are referring is available (not on vacation, etc.).

2. For Patrons from other campuses

a) For referrals to patrons at other UC’s give both the public personal contact information and a general reference desk phone number so that the patron can follow up.

b) It may be helpful to let the patron know that you are NOT from their campus and are not familiar with the schedules for individual staff.

H. Follow-up by email

1. It is possible during some Ask LIVE transactions that you will need to follow-up with your patron by email. It is important to inform the patron during the initial session that you will be emailing her/him with additional information. Whenever possible follow-up with the patron within 24 hours. The follow-up might happen when:

a) You need to do more extensive research to answer the question completely.

b) You need to send a file to the patron (e.g. PDF).

I. Resolution Codes

Access – use for questions involving access to electronic resources, questions regarding the library catalog, circulation and directional issues. (Question Point codes: Access, Catalog, Circulation, Directional)

Reference – use for questions which involve assisting the caller with locating subject information. ([QuestionPoint?](#) codes: Instructional, Ready Reference, Reference, Research)

Other – use for all other possible descriptions ([QuestionPoint?](#) codes: Genealogy, Homework, Inappropriate, Law, Medical, etc)

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Question Point cannot customize their base list of codes, so each librarian will need to remember (or keep a cheat sheet) with the three UC chat approved codes.

Note: Although Test is a valid Description code, use the Resolution code Practice instead.

From: <http://kenfuruta.info/wiki/index.php?Procedures>

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IV. APPENDIX – ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education

Use the [ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education](http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#ildef) (<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.cfm#ildef>) as your guide to provide instruction as well as answers. Not every answer will require you to address each standard. The object is to instruct the user while keeping these IL standards in mind. If you can help the students reach these IL goals, we are achieving our educational mission. We have included examples of answers that address these standards:

“The information literate student:

- 1) determines the extent of information needed.”
 - a) Explain the publication cycle for journals, books, stats and its impact on the type and currency of the information it contains.
 - b) Describe why to choose particular sources such as a journal vs. a magazine or a book vs. an article.
- 2) is able to access needed information effectively and efficiently.”
 - a) Recommend the appropriate databases or resources for the information required.
 - b) Describe database characteristics such as subject specialized vs. general.
 - c) Explain how the library Web site is organized and where they can find access to the appropriate resources such as the subject guides or full-text journal articles.
 - d) Give sample search strategies and suggest they use (and describe where to find) search help.
 - e) Describe the most efficient path to the resources you suggest.
- 3) evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.”
 - a) Remind them of Web site elements to evaluate for authority, reliability, etc.
 - b) Explain why a particular Web site is reliable, e.g., “This site is compiled by the National Library of Medicine...”
 - c) Remind them to read the abstract to determine relevancy.
 - d) Define the resource type and its significance in relation to the reliability of its content.
 - e) Explain how they can find author’s qualifications.
- 4) individually or as a member of a group, uses information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose.”
 - a) This is difficult to apply in EMAIL.
- 5) understands many of the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information and accesses and uses information ethically and legally.
 - a) Explain the cost of electronic resources; the fact that they are subscription-based, etc.
 - b) Explain the importance of the citation and its use in bibliographies, works cited pages.
 - c) Set a good example by citing all of your resources.

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