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Striving for Success: Practical Advice for Reference Graduate Assistants

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Striving for Success:
Practical Advice for Reference Graduate Assistants

1. Keep the Patron paramount in all that you do.
This simple tip is the most important point to remember during your assistantship!

2. Collaborate with your supervisor to develop clear goals, training program, and evaluation.
There are three basic parts of planning for a successful assistantship:
Goal-setting: Negotiate with your supervisor at the *very beginning* of your work to ensure that you have clear, reasonable goals--don't wait until mid-semester to clarify a vague expectation. As a new worker, you have the right to know your supervisor's exact expectations and have these expectations put on paper.
Training Program: Emphasize *progress* rather than *mastery*. For example, an overly-ambitious training program might seek to develop a searching mastery of all of the library's databases by the end of the semester. A more realistic training program would aim for an increased skill in searching key databases like Ebschohost, Infotrac, and Proquest.
Evaluation: Your supervisor will evaluate you on how well you accomplish your goals. Since you will likely work on the reference desk with multiple librarians, ask your supervisor to ensure that these librarians know your goals and participate in your final evaluation as well. Involving several librarians in an appraisal of your work will assure you a balanced, fair evaluation by minimizing personality and individual differences.

3. Shadow experienced librarians during reference transactions.
One of the best practices to follow when you are new to the reference desk is *to actively learn from more experienced librarians*. Observing librarians as they offer reference assistance provides an invaluable way to learn about serving patrons as well as the tools available to you.

4. Keep a journal of challenging reference questions.
Log unusual or challenging reference queries (as well as questions that you have about reference desk procedures) in your journal each week. A journal can also help prepare you for professional job interviews by reminding you of notable anecdotes that you can later recount to a search committee, such as a time when you defused a difficult patron or nailed the answer to a particularly hard reference question.

5. Coach your patrons along in their searches.
When helping patrons with a search, try to coach and let the patrons do the actual page-flipping or mouse-clicking. Simultaneously searching two computers (or two different volumes from the same series of reference books) with them is often the most effective way to train patrons. Explain each step of the research process as they work their way along, instead of giving multiple instructions at on time. Pump up patrons' searching confidence with cheers like "great idea" or "you are really getting the hang of this!" Point out the help screens and tip sheets.

6. Develop flowcharts for commonly asked questions.
Starting with a broad question that you might ask a patron, the flowcharts steer you to appropriate resources by grouping the resources according to the type of information they offer (biographies, criticism, book reviews, primary sources, secondary sources), the level of information needed (consumer, scholarly or reference), or by the time periods covered in each resource.

Further Reading:

- RUSA Guidelines http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/guidelinesbehavioral.htm

- Clark, A.S. and Peppie, H. (1969). "Use of graduate assistants: academic subject reference service." *RQ* 8(4): 240-241.

- Evard, C.F., Schumann, E.S., and Swift, J.M. (1974). "Graduate reference assistants at Brown University". In Lubans, J. Jr(Ed.), *Educating the Library User*, R. R. Bowker Company. New York, NY, pp. 368-375.

- Ohles, J. K. *Training Coordinator's Manual: A Handbook for Training Preprofessionals at the Reference Desk*, ERIC Document Reproduction Service, Arlington, VA (ED301221).

- Stephenson, N.K., St. Clair, L. (1996). "Extending the clan: graduate assistantships in the reference department." *Reference Services Review* 24(3), 29-36, 66.

- Woodard, B.S. (1989). "The effectiveness of an information desk staffed by graduate students and nonprofessionals." *College and Research Libraries* 50(4): 455-467.

7. Ask, listen, and consult student's assignments.

As we learned (sometimes the hard way), newcomers to reference often overlook a vital part of the reference transaction, the reference interview. The reference interview means asking a patron plenty of questions both before and during your search to discern what they need. Personalizing a basic set of questions—perhaps similar to the newspaper writers' list of who, what, where, when and why--that you regularly follow can keep your searches from going astray. However, the reference interviewing question that we recommend the most is: "Can I see your assignment?" This simple shortcut saves a great deal of time and frustration for both you and the student.

8. "Memorize" your library's classification system.

Perhaps the easiest way of learning to navigate the print reference collection is by memorizing the *broad* headings of the Library of Congress Classification System. In our experience, knowing the Library of Congress headings has proven much more effective than trying to remember the physical location of reference books on the shelves. By learning the standard classifications, you will also gain knowledge that you can apply across libraries, including the library where you will work following graduation.

9. Seek out patrons who look confused.

Many times, patrons do not know who to approach for questions or think librarians are too busy to help them. For this reason, the Reference and User Services Association suggests that librarians should "rove through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible." Try to make eye contact with patrons and look for nonverbal signs that might reveal confusion or bewilderment. Wear an identifying badge if your library offers one, and cue the other staff about your intentions as you leave the reference desk to rove.

10. Familiarize yourself with your library's key reference books.

A select few of the books at your library will answer most of the reference questions that you encounter. In consultation with experienced librarians, identify these key tools and write their titles on separate note cards along with the scope and searching tricks for each book.

11. Create a quick chart for databases listing their scope and search operators.

We also found it helpful to build a table comparing databases that can serve as a "quick guide" whenever you need to know the Boolean operators, truncation and wildcard symbols, limiters, and any other searching features for a database. Librarians may have already created tip sheets for each database, and most databases do offer help screens.

12. Develop a list of "magic" words (common cataloging descriptors) to use in searches.

Compiling a list of "magic words", or cataloging descriptors that can be used as keywords in searches, helped us conjure up the call numbers for these kinds of materials. Some of the most common descriptors found in catalogs include: **Sources, accounts, or memoirs** for primary sources in history, **Criticism** for literary criticism, **Ill.** for illustrations, **Speeches, orations, or addresses** for speeches.