Recognizing Reference Questions in a 21st Century Library

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ANNUAL REPORT
IMLS ~ Public Library Survey

Mr. Smartphone, in the pocket, with Google?

Library workers encounter hidden reference transactions every day.

▶ Helping someone find a new author to read

▶ Telling someone how to sign in to their account on the library website

▶ Sharing information about a book club with a new library cardholder

▶ Explaining how to stream a movie using library subscriptions

RIP

The Reference Transaction

What is a reference transaction?

IMLS Public Library Survey
(AKA: The Annual Report)

Definition:

► Reference Transactions are information consultations in which library staff recommend, interpret, evaluate, and/or use information resources to help others to meet particular information needs.

Help section, Public Library Survey

Reference and User Services Association (RUSA)

▶ "Reference is providing assistance by using expertise in response to an information need."

Definition of Reference (2021)

One-on-One Computer and Technology Instruction

If the instruction is patron-driven, it is a reference transaction. Patron-driven means the library staff is meeting an information need defined in the moment by the patron.

▶ How to download electronic materials using Libby

▶ How to search for new books or check their account using the website

▶ How to find death records on Ancestry.com

▶ How to use that newfangled eReader their kids gave them for Christmas

▶ How to limit search results in the OPAC to only show DVDs

▶ Troubleshooting issues a patron is having accessing the library's digital and online resources

Reader's Advisory

Reader's Advisory is always a reference transaction, and most library workers perform these tasks daily. What does that look like?

- ▶ Looking up other books an author has written
- ▶ Suggesting a book that is similar to other books the person likes
- ▶ Sharing a suggested reading list based on a patron's favorite genre or author

Just because it was easy, doesn't mean it doesn't count!

Reference transactions aren't defined by how long it took to answer them or if you had to look up the answer. Sometimes, you are the expert, and answering means you consult your knowledge of the topic. Other times, someone else is the expert, so you send the patron to them.

▶ I looked that up for someone else yesterday, so I already knew it.

▶ That only took 30 seconds.

▶ You should try the local history museum because their collection has more on that topic.

▶ I just spent five minutes telling someone about our new true crime club.

▶ I've read several books by that author. *The Best Book Ever Written* might be a good book to try if you aren't sure you'll like them.
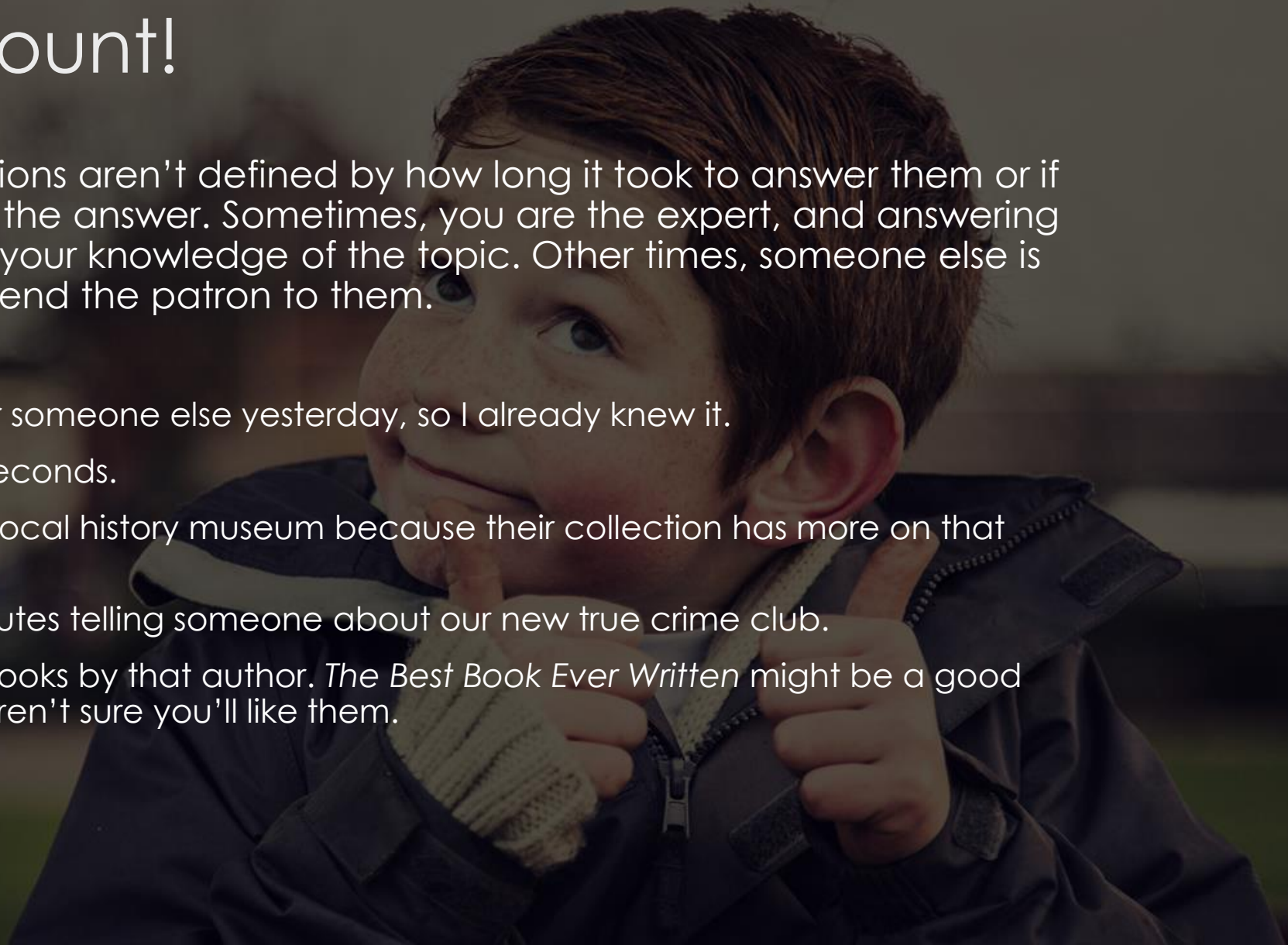
What isn't a reference transaction?

IMLS Public Library Survey

- Reference transactions do not include formal instruction or exchanges that provide assistance with locations, schedules, equipment, supplies, or policy statements.

Help section, PLS

Reference and User Services Association

▶ "Reference help is not workshops or other programming designed by library staff in anticipation of an information need."

Definition of Reference (2021)

Directional Questions

Some questions require no expertise to answer because the patron is asking for basic directions to a point in the library, inquiring about library schedules, or wanting assistance with equipment like the copier or microfilm reader*.

▶ Where are your study rooms?

▶ Have you seen Jane? She's not at her desk.

▶ Can you make this copy bigger?

▶ Do you have a fax machine?

▶ What day does the tutor meet with kids?

*Assistance, not instruction. There's a difference between "Do this for me," and "Teach me how to do this so I can do it myself next time."

Policy Questions

Many questions that front-line workers encounter are about the library's policies or procedures.

▶ How long can I have this video checked out?

▶ May I bring my emotional support animal into the library?

▶ Do you still charge late fees?

▶ Is my son old enough to participate in the Tween program?

Formal Instruction

If the instruction is library-driven, it is formal instruction, which is a program. You would report these interactions with your programming statistics. Some examples of formal instruction include:

► A series of classes on using the library's electronic resources

► Hosting a drop-in event the day after Christmas for the sole purpose of helping people learn how to use Libby with their new devices

► Doing an outreach event at the county jail to teach the residents how to create a resume

► Having a speaker come in to present about internet scam awareness

Reference Transaction or Not?

1. Which is the reference transaction?

A. I'm here for the Lunch and Learn series. Where is the meeting room?

B. I saw a poster for the Lunch and Learn series. What is that?

2. Which is the reference transaction?

A. I'm watching this show on Netflix and just found out it's based on a book series. Which of these do I read first?

B. I'm watching a show on Netflix and I just found out it's based on a book series. Where are your romance novels?

3. Which is the reference transaction?

A. I just got a tablet. How do I get books from the library on it?

B. This book is complete trash. Can I give it back to Libby early?

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