

Reference Policy

This document sets forth a policy for the provision of reference services to the people of Albany County. The guidelines herein serve as a useful tool and are intended to help library staff provide consistent and quality reference service. While this policy attempts to cover most aspects of reference work, it does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment and should be viewed as a flexible document.

Mission and Philosophy

The mission of the Albany County Public Library is to build meaningful connections, inspire growth, cultivate curiosity, and enhance community. Providing professional reference help is vital to achieve that mission. Simply defined, reference service is the assistance given to someone seeking information. The primary goal of reference services is to provide accurate, timely, impartial and useful information, as well as to provide assistance and instruction in using ACPL collections, resources, and services.

ACPL staff members strive to meet the informational, educational, and recreational needs of all individuals and organizations seeking their help. They do so in a professional and impartial manner, regardless of the age, gender, race, need or background of those served.

General Guidelines

Service to the public receives the highest priority over all other duties, particularly while staffing the public service desks. Library staff members will seek to provide the best service possible, under the circumstances, by conducting a reference interview, consulting accurate and current sources, and completely fulfilling the patron's request. Furthermore, the confidentiality of each user is always respected.

Given the complexity of reference work no definitive time limits per question can be set; rather the amount of time per query is best left to the judgment of the librarian.

General Practices

- Reference questions will be responded to in the order received. In the cases of conflicts or time restraints, priority service will be given to in-person requests. Telephone, email, and web form requests will receive a response as promptly as possible. At busy times it may be necessary to give some basic help to the patron and get back to them for more assistance.
- Instructing patrons in the use of reference resources is an important role for library staff considering the rapid advancement of information technology. Therefore, whenever feasible, promoting information literacy and showing users how to search for information on their own is encouraged.
- The library staff seek to be proactive by anticipating patron needs and accompanying them to the shelves to find materials if desired. Self-directional services such as web pages, instructional brochures and signage will be made available to the public to help them.
- Given the complexity of reference work, there are no definitive time limits per interaction; the amount of time spent per query will be left to the judgment of ACPL staff.
- Most questions asked of the reference staff are of a ready-reference nature, but occasionally more complex and time-intensive requests are made. For extended research questions, patrons will be referred to the "Research Help" form available at www.acplwy.org. These questions will be referred to a member of the ACPL Reference Help team, who will then conduct a reference interview and work with the patron to identify appropriate resources.
- When a query is beyond the scope or expertise of library staff, referrals to other libraries, organizations, or authoritative sources may be necessary.
- If resources are not available in the ACPL collection, a patron may initiate an Interlibrary Loan (ILL) request; see "[Policy Regarding Borrowing Library Materials](#)" for more information.

Specific Practices

What follows is a list of common categories of reference questions and how they will be handled. These questions are often problematic for library staff and deserve special mention.

- **Medical, Legal, Tax, or Financial Information:** Library staff may only guide patrons to available materials and resources relating to medical, legal, tax, and consumer and personal finance information. Staff will neither evaluate nor interpret the information provided, nor offer opinions on the best course of action. Library staff will also not offer investment advice; answer tax questions or assist in tax form preparation; assist with completion of employment applications or personal financial paperwork; assist in the creation of any original intellectual work, web content, or creative project; or act as a surrogate for a professional in the above-mentioned fields. Staff will inform the patron that they do not have the qualifications or specialized knowledge to give authoritative or absolute answers and are free to advise that the patron should consult a professional.
- **Technology Help:** Library staff will, to the best of their ability and while taking staff time into account, help patrons use our technology and digital resources. However, staff are unable to type or enter information for patrons or offer extended one-on-one technology assistance. Those patrons who need more in-depth instruction are encouraged to schedule an appointment with library staff by using the “General Help Form” available at www.acplwy.org, or to consult instructional materials in the ACPL collection. While staff may offer suggestions for troubleshooting technology, they are not responsible for resolving issues with patrons’ personal devices.
- **Homework Help:** Library staff will assist patrons requesting information to complete school assignments. Assistance will focus on instruction in using ACPL’s materials and resources, rather than on supplying answers. Library staff are unable to anticipate the instructor’s purpose in assigning homework and will not interpret the instructor’s questions for students. Complicated or lengthy assignments may necessitate the use of online homework help resources provided at www.acplwy.org.

- **Genealogy/Microfilm Research:** ACPL staff provides a limited amount of searching for persons seeking family and local history information. Obituary and article searches are done as staff time permits. Staff can also offer limited instruction on using ACPL's genealogy databases and local history resources; patrons should access the "Reference Help" form at www.acplwy.org, to schedule an appointment for this service.
- **Statistical/ Mathematical Calculations:** Statistical facts will be provided, but figures requiring compilations or calculations will not be attempted. Mathematical formulas or measurement equivalents will be provided, but calculations based on these formulae will not be performed.
- **Translations:** ACPL staff does not translate full-text documents, but will provide translations of specific words or phrases as found in foreign-language dictionaries or via staff expertise.
- **Illegal activities:** Staff will not provide assistance with any activities that they know to be or suspect may be illegal.