

The Reference Experience at The New York Public Library

This paper examines the effectiveness of four different approaches to the reference interview experience within The New York Public Library system. I asked the same general reference question using each of the four following methods of interaction with a reference librarian: in-person, over the telephone, via email and via an online chat. The in-person interview took place at the branch of the New York Public Library located on 58th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues in Manhattan. Although I was told the name of the librarian helping me over the telephone and via chat, neither one disclosed the branch where she worked. The email response I received contained no identifying information. I summarize below my experiences seeking out reference materials using each of the four formats mentioned above and then assess each experience, focusing on the quality of the interaction between the librarian and myself, both in terms of the usefulness of the recommended research materials and in terms of the communication skills employed by the librarian. I then suggest ways to improve the reference experience of a New York Public Library patron who chooses to conduct a reference interview using any of the four methods.

Research Question and Process

I asked reference librarians to help me learn about the trial of Oscar Wilde. My research need, which I posed in the same general terms to each librarian with whom I worked, was to understand why Oscar Wilde was put on trial, what the result of the trial was and why, and what happened to Oscar Wilde after the trial was over. I visited The New York Public Library branch on East 58th Street in Manhattan first, and had an NYPL online chat the same day as the in-person visit. I received the response to my email request for reference help the day after my

library visit and online chat, and I conducted my telephone research interview a few days after receiving the email. I describe each of these library interactions below in the order in which they took place.

In-Person Interview

I visited the 58th Street branch of The New York Public Library during a weekday lunch hour. The library was crowded. There is no separate research desk at this library. Instead, there is a semi-circular desk at the front of the main floor of the library with four stations where librarians sit, answer questions and help with other library services. I waited on line for a few minutes and then went to speak with the first available librarian. After she said “hi,” I told her that I was hoping she could help me with a research question. Her response was: “Well, I can try.” After she listened to my research question, she asked whether I had done any research or looked online at the resources available in the library. I answered that I had not. She did not repeat my question back to me to make sure she understood it, nor did she conduct a reference interview. She sat down at her computer terminal and started typing. She said that there was a great book on point but that it was in-use in the library by a scholar and I could not use it for a month. She did not tell me the name of the book. She suggested two other books, *Oscar Wilde’s Last Stand* by Philip Hoare, available at the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center and *Three Times Tried*, published anonymously in 1910 and available at the Steven A. Schwarzman Building. She also recommended that I search online via the library’s website for scholarly journal articles, but she did not offer to help with that search. She did not show me her computer screen, so I asked her what search terms she had used, and she told me she had used “trial” and “Wilde” but she did not mention in which databases she had conducted her search. I had the impression that she felt rushed and nervous and was eager for the reference interview to be over.

She did not suggest that I return to her for additional help if the materials she recommended were not useful.

Online Chat

I accessed the online chat via the NYPL.org website. In order to access the chat feature, I had to look through the subject tabs underneath the website's header until I found "Ask NYPL" under the "Using the Library" tab and the "Services" sub-heading. On the right side of the page is an "Ask NYPL" hyperlink option. When I clicked on it, a chat box opened immediately. I wrote a very general description of my research subject, and a librarian signed on to help me within ten seconds. She identified herself by name and asked me to describe my question in more detail. When I did, she gave me a quick answer summarizing the outcome of the trial and then started searching for relevant materials. She first sent a link to an article from The History Channel's website summarizing the trial. Then, after she confirmed that I had an NYPL library card, she directed me to two research databases the library has available to patrons on his website, one on literature and one on biographies. When I asked for more help, she provided some tips on how to conduct the research search and narrow down my results. She then offered to do the search and provided a link to a file of the performance of the trial itself. The full chat transcript is attached to this paper as Appendix A.

Email

I found a link to email The New York Public Library on the same page where I found the link to access an online chat. I sent an email with my reference question on September 24th. Although I received an immediate acknowledgement of my request, I did not receive a substantive response until September 30th. The response provided a link to all 14 books in the library catalog on Oscar Wilde's trial, many of which are in-library use only. There was also a

link to a list of all 30 books within the library catalog about Oscar Wilde which contain discussions of his trial and which circulate. The email closed by recommending that I search academic research papers using my college or university library, although I had not identified myself as a college or graduate student, and suggested relevant search terms and databases. The email is attached to this paper as Appendix B.

Telephone Interview

I called The New York Public Library's "Quick Answers" phone number, which I located on the same page as the chat link and the email link, on October 2nd. I was on hold for two minutes, and then a librarian came on the line with a friendly greeting and asked how she could help. After I described my research question, she said "I see. OK, let me check one thing first. Hold on." Her first search returned the in-use book that the librarian I had met in person had found. This time, the librarian provided the full name and ISBN number of the book (*The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* by Merlin Holland) so that I could try to find it elsewhere. In addition to that book, she recommended *Oscar Wilde's Last Stand* and *Three Times Tried*, the same two books that the librarian I met in-person recommended. She also recommended *Law Makers, Law Breakers: Uncommon Trials* by Robert Aitken, available at the Library of Science, Industry and Business. She read me the complete synopsis of each book she recommended to confirm that I felt it would be useful. She suggested that I access JSTOR from any library branch and search for scholarly articles that I could download to a flash drive for free. Finally, she suggested that I visit the 3rd floor of the Mid-Manhattan Library and look at the Oscar Wilde books available there. She apologized for suggesting books that were in different branches. We were on the phone for 15 minutes, and she ended the call by saying "All the best to you with your research."

Evaluation

Ross, Nilsen & Radford (2009) note that reference interviews “have common structural features and go through similar stages: establishing contact with the user, finding out the user’s needs and confirming that the answer provided is actually what was needed.” (Ross, Nilsen & Radford, 4). In a superficial sense, all the research interviews went through those three stages. But the degree to which each interview performed these tasks varied greatly from librarian to librarian and format to format. Cassell & Hiremath (2013) list five factors from the RUSA Guidelines to use in evaluating the performance of reference librarians: approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching and follow-up. These factors are repeated and expanded upon on page 26-27.

In thinking about the factors described above for a successful research interview and reflecting on my experiences, I feel that my telephone interview was the most positive experience of the four research interviews that I conducted. My wait time was relatively short, the librarian was friendly, and she made me feel as though she really wanted to help me find relevant materials. My telephone librarian seemed very focused and interested in my research assignment. Her commitment and engagement was clear from her tone of voice and the time she took to look carefully through various resources. I felt as though she would have stayed on the phone with me for as long as I wished. She kept trying different searches to locate sources, and she made sure that I knew exactly how to find each book and how to locate other articles using the library’s databases. She did not paraphrase my question or conduct a research interview. Nevertheless, I felt that it was a very positive experience that yielded helpful research materials.

The research method that provided me with what I was most looking for, which was a list of books and other reference resources, was the email I received on September 30th. The email provided me with lists of every book within the library catalog that might help me with my

research and also told me how to conduct a search for scholarly articles. Its tone was warm, personal and friendly. However, it took six days for the email to arrive, which I feel is an inexcusably long time. It also presumed that I was a college or graduate student with access to academic journals, without asking for confirmation of that fact. It is hard to assess how interested the librarian who answered my email was in my research, but the tone of the email was engaged and friendly. Had the response arrived in a timely manner, this would also have indicated a high degree of interest. I do not know whether email is an appropriate format for testing whether a librarian is listening and inquiring, but had the initial email response been made quickly, there may have been an opportunity for further email exchanges which would have permitted the librarian to make inquiries and discover more about the context of my search.

The online chat was effective, but at times I felt as though the librarian was in a rush. She became more helpful as the chat went on and she offered to perform the search she had recommended to me to see how effective it was. Thus, although she was approachable, I did not initially feel that she was very interested in my research request. As noted in Ross, Nilsen & Radford, “[i]n the first thirty seconds, you won’t have a chance to say much, but you are still conveying strong messages to the user of one kind or another.” (Ross, Nilsen & Radford, 48) As I asked for more guidance, the librarian appeared to become more invested in the search. In addition to providing helpful research tips, she was the only librarian who located a performance of the trial itself. But ultimately she seemed satisfied to provide one or two relevant materials without providing additional help. By contrast, I felt that the librarian on the telephone wanted to provide me with as much relevant material as she could.

I found the in-person reference interview to be the least effective and the least pleasant. The librarian was obviously in a rush. Although she was initially approachable, she appeared

anxious about having to conduct a reference interview, which made me feel less confident in her abilities or her results. I did not feel that she was interested in my search, and although she listened to me, she made no real inquiries. Her searching was cursory at best. The librarian seemed annoyed to wait while I wrote down the names and locations of the few books she recommended and did not offer encouragement or more help if I needed it. I left the interview feeling as though she were relieved to be rid of me, whereas I finished the telephone interview feeling as though the librarian would have remained on the phone with me for longer if I had asked for additional help.

Suggestions for Improvement

I was surprised by how difficult it was to find the “chat” feature on the NYLP.org website, and I would recommend moving it to the home page for easy access. I would also recommend that all the links to contact reference librarians be clear on the home page, rather than forcing the user to search through several subject headings to find out where to get help. This would aid in the approachability of reference interviews for users of the NYPL email, phone and chat reference interviews.

The librarian I worked with via the online chat was pleasant, but she could have conveyed her willingness to continue to help me. Instead I sensed that she was eager to finish the conversation. The chat librarian could have been more thorough by conducting the search that she recommended I do, and locating specific research materials within The New York Public Library, as the other librarians did.

I do not know why it took The NYPL librarian who responded to my email so long to do so. This may be due to a lack of resources within the New York Public Library system, but if it can be remedied, it should be. I appreciated the extent of the resources provided in the response,

but if I had had the opportunity to engage in a follow-up, I feel that the interview would have been more satisfying.

The in-person interview could be improved in many ways. The librarian should be more welcoming and warm, encouraging me to explain my research needs more fully, sharing her search methods with me and making me feel as though we were working as a team to try to solve my research goals. Even if she is nervous about her research skills, she should take care to convey confidence and optimism.

I note that none of the librarians offered follow-up. For each of the electronic interview methods, there could be a standard sentence included at the end of the correspondence suggesting that the patron either send a follow-up email or return to the ASK NYPL chat for further assistance. Similarly, the librarian on the telephone should have suggested that I call back if I needed more help. Because none of the resources that the in-person librarian suggested were located in the 58th Street branch, she did not suggest that I visit her again, but she should at least have suggested that I contact the library for further research needs.

Citing Marie Radford's *The Reference Encounter* (1999), Ross, Nilsen & Radford note that "users almost always attributed the success or failure of a reference transaction to relational factors." (Ross, Nilsen & Radford, 11) My experience in conducting reference interviews in-person, on the telephone, via email and via chat confirms this assertion. I liked the librarian on the telephone the most: she was approachable, friendly, supportive and enthusiastic. It was easy to speak with her, and I felt comfortable asking follow-up questions. Although I liked the tone of the email I received, I was put off by how long it took to arrive, and I did not feel comfortable asking for additional help. My chat librarian was friendly but a little distant, and I was never sure whether she was willing to stay online with me or whether she was hoping that we would be

finished with the interview quickly. Finally, the librarian I met with at the 58th Street branch was timid, appeared uninterested, rushed me through the research interview and made me feel uncomfortable. Although I would like to take the librarian who conducted the reference interview on the telephone out for a cup of coffee to thank her for the time, I'd prefer not to see the librarian at the 58th Street branch again for some time. It is not a coincidence that the librarian who provided me with the least helpful research materials is also the librarian who was the least engaged in my research needs.

References

Cassell, K. A., & Hiremath, U. (2013). *Reference and information services: An introduction*.

Ross, C. S., Nilsen, K., & Radford, M. L. (2009). *Conducting the reference interview: A how-to-do-it manual for librarians*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers Inc.

Appendix A

Transcript of Online Chat

Hello Library Patron,

Your chat transcript with a librarian at New York Public Library - ASK NYPL

Date: 11:58 2014/09/29

Question ID: 9877548

Qwidget: Hi, I have a question about Oscar Wilde and what happened to him.

[Librarian 11:58:43]: Librarian 'Lana' has joined the session.

[Librarian 11:59:06]: Hello, what is your question about Oscar Wilde?

[Library Patron 11:59:54]: I know that he was on trial in England and that the trial did not go well, and I think the trial had something to do with his being gay, but I want to learn more about why he was on trial and what the verdict from the trial was.

[Library Patron 11:59:59]: Can you help?

[Librarian 12:00:39]: Sure, yes he was imprisoned for a while following charges of sodomy, let me get you a resource that explains this further.

[Library Patron 12:00:51]: Thanks!

[Librarian 12:02:55]: Here is an article about it from the History Channel website <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/oscar-wilde-is-sent-to-prison-for-indecency>

[Librarian 12:03:26]: Do you have an active NYPL card? I can recommend databases that you can access with your library card number, for further research...

[Library Patron 12:03:40]: Yes I do. That would be great!

[Librarian 12:04:57]: Literature Resource Center <http://www.nypl.org/collections/articles-databases/literature-resource-center> on that page click "Connect to database" enter your library card number (without any of the spaces in the number)

[Librarian 12:05:05]: And then look up Oscar Wilde

[Librarian 12:05:33]: Biography in Context <http://www.nypl.org/collections/articles-databases/biography-resource-center> another good one for this research

[Librarian 12:05:42]: Is there anything further I can assist you with?

[Library Patron 12:05:51]: That's pretty easy! Is there a way to narrow it down from there?

[Librarian 12:06:28]: When you do a search on either database,

you'll see options on the left of the screen to narrow down the source the info is from, the dates etc

[Library Patron 12:06:58]: OK, so if I choose the dates around the trial, that will work?

[Librarian 12:08:24]: Are you looking for accounts of the trial when it was happening, like newspaper coverage...or resources that explain the trial, what the reaction was, the outcome etc?

[Librarian 12:08:37]: If you're looking for the latter the dates don't have to be from during the trial

[Library Patron 12:08:44]: Yes, the latter

[Library Patron 12:11:14]: Just trying to figure out how to avoid the stuff about his plays and focus on the stuff about the trial

[Librarian 12:11:16]: Would you like to provide an email address to receive a transcript of this chat...also, you can include the word trial in your searches. In either database go to "advanced search

[Librarian 12:11:42]: then in the do a search for oscar wilde in the first keyword search field and trial in the second keyword search field

[Library Patron 12:11:50]: That is a good suggestion, thank you!

[Library Patron 12:12:12]: and yes, I'd like to be able to look at this chat for the research. My email address

is cynthia.haiken@yahoo.com

[Librarian 12:12:26]: Let me try that search and see what I can find that fits what you need

[Library Patron 12:12:37]: That would be super!

[Librarian 12:22:08]: Schulz, David. "Redressing Oscar: performance and the trials of Oscar Wilde." TDR [Cambridge, Mass.] 40.2 (1996): 37+. Literature Resource Center. Web. 29 Sept.

2014. <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA18384994&v=2.1&u=nyp1&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w&asid=c42ffce469da83c6d3bad4ea568b7c04>

[Library Patron 12:23:19]: That looks good!

[Librarian 12:27:01]: Best of luck with your research.

[Librarian 12:27:09]: Thank you for using Ask NYPL.

[Librarian 12:27:10]: Librarian ended chat session.

To review your previous transcripts or questions, logon to:

http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.home.BuildPage?&show=patron_authorize

Please take a moment to fill out a survey

at:<http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.ask.PatronSurveyForm?&language=1&type=chat&qid=9877548>

Thank you for using ASK NYPL!

After you've received our answer to your question, please help us better serve you by filling out our brief survey.

NYPL needs support from individuals like you to help keep services

free and readily available. If you found this free resource helpful today, please consider making a donation: <http://bit.ly/RiE6VX>
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Thank you for using ASK NYPL.

Appendix B

Email Exchange (Answer First, Question Underneath)

##- Please reply above this line. Anything below this line will not be sent in your reply. We do not accept attachments via this reply method -##

Hello Cindy Haiken

Hello, Cindy:

Yes, the New York Public Library ("NYPL") does hold 14 books that directly address the trial of Oscar Wilde for homosexual conduct in Great Britain in the 19th Century. Some of these works are held by the research (non-lending/"Use in Library) libraries of the NYPL although some may be available at a library nearer to you or via interlibrary loan:

<http://catalog.nypl.org/search/X?SEARCH=%28Oscar%20Wilde%20trial%29&searchscope=1>

And here are 30 of the better known circulating (take out) biographies of Oscar Wilde. And - any biography - that you can obtain at or through your College or local public libraries - will discuss his trial - which is one of the things (aside from his interesting literary works and famous jests) that is most well known of Wilde. Some of these books should definitely be available to you from an accessible library:

<http://catalog.nypl.org/search/X?SEARCH=%28Oscar%20Wilde%20%29%20and%20%28biography%29&searchscope=97&l=eng&m=a>

Cindy: I would also - go to your College or University library and public library (or ask them where you can access these databases) and you will find academic research papers in these library databases - that are much more highly regarded and better research resources as they come from published academic journals - and they will be more specific than books in their focus on these keywords: "Oscar Wilde" "Trial" "Death" "Oscar Wilder Prosecution" "Oscar Wilde Trial" and "Homosexuality Great Britain 19th Century trials or laws" These are the best databases for Oscar Wilde and his trial:

Academic Search Premiere from EBSCOHost

ProQuest Research Library

Literature Research Center from Gale

Cindy: Good luck with your research!

The NYPL

Please take a moment to fill out a survey

at: <http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.ask.PatronSurveyForm?&language=1&type=ask&qid=9864777>

Question History:

Patron: This is a research question: I am writing a paper on Oscar Wilde, specifically on his trial, which I have heard mentioned many times but never actually seen described so that I can understand what precisely the trial was about and what the outcome was. Can you recommend some good books or other sources to help me? Thank you!

Librarian 1: Hello, Cindy:

Yes, the New York Public Library ("NYPL") does hold 14 books that directly address the trial of Oscar Wilde for homosexual conduct in Great Britain in the 19th Century. Some of these works are held by the research (non-lending/"Use in Library) libraries of the NYPL although some may be available at a library nearer to you or via interlibrary loan:

<http://catalog.nypl.org/search/X?SEARCH=%28Oscar%20Wilde%20trial%29&searchscope=1> <http://catalog.nypl.org/search/X?SEARCH=%28Oscar%20Wilde%20trial%29&searchscope=1>

And here are 30 of the better known circulating (take out) biographies of Oscar Wilde. And - any biography - that you can obtain at or through your College or local public libraries - will discuss his trial - which is one of the things (aside from his interesting literary works and famous jests) that is most well known of Wilde. Some of this books should definitely be available to you from an accessible library:

<http://catalog.nypl.org/search/X?SEARCH=%28Oscar%20Wilde%20%29%20and%20%28biography%29&searchscope=97&l=eng&m=a> <http://catalog.nypl.org/search/X?SEARCH=%28Oscar%20Wilde%20%29%20and%20%28biography%29&searchscope=97&l=eng&m=a>

Cindy: I would also - go to your College or University library and public library (or ask them where you can access these databases) and you will find academic research papers in these library databases - that are much more highly regarded and better research resources as they come from published academic journals - and they will be more specific than books in their focus on these keywords: "Oscar Wilde" "Trial" "Death" "Oscar Wilder Prosecution" "Oscar Wilde Trial" and "Homosexuality Great Britain 19th Century trials or laws" These are the best databases for Oscar Wilde and his trial:

Academic Search Premiere from EBSCOHost

ProQuest Research Library

Literature Research Center from Gale

Cindy: Good luck with your research!

The NYPL

To check the status or the history of your library question(s), go to:
<http://www.questionpoint.org/crs/servlet/org.oclc.ask.PatronDirect?&language=1&email=cynthia.haiken@yahoo.com&qid=9864777>

Thank you for using ASK NYPL!

After you've received our answer to your question, please help us better serve you by filling out our brief survey.

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Thank you for using ASK NYPL.