Contents

Preface vii
Acknowledgments xiii

1 Why Bother with a Reference Interview? 1
  1.1 What Is a (Reference) Interview? 1
  1.2 Service Orientation of Libraries 4
  1.3 Beyond 55 Percent 10
  1.4 Why Didn’t You Say So in the First Place? 16
    1.4.1 The Ill-formed Query 19
    1.4.2 Mental Models 22
  1.5 The Helpful Answer: Two Ways of Thinking about Information 25
    1.5.1 Information as a Commodity 26
    1.5.2 Questions in Contexts 27
  1.6 Reference as an Art of Translation 29
  1.7 There Are No Bad Guy Users 30
  1.8 Annotated References 32
    1.8.1 Principles of Interviewing 32
    1.8.2 Bibliographic Guides to the Reference Interview 32
    1.8.3 When Is a Reference Interview Necessary? 33
    1.8.4 Measures of Information Service Effectiveness 33
    1.8.5 The Ill-formed Query and Users’ Mental Models 35
    1.8.6 Useful Conceptual Frameworks for Thinking about Information, Mental Models, Etc. 36

2 Setting the Stage for the Reference Interview: The First Thirty Seconds 39
  2.1 Being Approachable 39
  2.2 The Library as a Physical Space 43
  2.3 Establishing Contact 47
  2.4 Skills for the First Thirty Seconds 48
    2.4.1 The Microtraining Approach 48
    2.4.2 Nonverbal Attending Skills 50
    2.4.3 Acknowledgment 55
Conducting the Reference Interview

2.4.4 Minimal Encouragers 57
2.4.5 Listening 58
2.5 Approachability in Virtual Spaces 60
2.6 Annotated References 63
   2.6.1 General 63
   2.6.2 Microtraining 64
   2.6.3 Nonverbal Behavior: General 64
   2.6.4 Listening 66
   2.6.5 Initial Contacts and Nonverbal Behavior in the Library Context 66

3 Finding Out What They Really Want to Know 69
   3.1 Some Common Problems 69
      3.1.1 “Without Speaking She Began to Type” 71
      3.1.2 Bypassing the Reference Interview 72
      3.1.3 Taking a System-based Perspective 75
      3.1.4 The Unmonitored Referral 76
      3.1.5 Negative Closure: How to Make Users Go Away 79
   3.2 Skills for Negotiating the Question 85
      3.2.1 Open and Closed Questions 86
      3.2.2 Avoiding Premature Diagnosis 93
      3.2.3 Sense-making Questions 94
      3.2.4 Reflecting Content: Paraphrasing and Summarizing 102
      3.2.5 Closure 104
   3.3 Annotated References 105
      3.3.1 Problems in the Reference Interview 105
      3.3.2 Works of Relevance to the Reference Interview in General 106
      3.3.3 Questioning Skills 108
      3.3.4 Reflecting Content and Feeling 109

4 Beyond Negative Closure 111
   4.1 Skills for Working Together 111
      4.1.1 Inclusion: Telling People What You Are Doing 112
      4.1.2 Library Use Instruction 116
      4.1.3 Follow-up Questions 120
   4.2 Integrating Reference Interview Skills 122
      4.2.1 Tips for Practicing 124
   4.3 Annotated References 125

5 Special Contexts for the Reference Interview 127
   5.1 Introduction to Special Contexts 127
   5.2 The Telephone Reference Interview 127
      5.2.1 Interview Skills for the Telephone 129
      5.2.2 Voicemail 136
      5.2.3 Who Gets Priority? 137
7 The Readers’ Advisory Interview 235
7.1 Introduction to the Readers’ Advisory Interview 235
7.2 Setting the Stage for Readers’ Advisory Service 239
7.3 Conducting the Interview 241
7.4 Annotated References 248
  7.4.1 Evaluation of the Readers’ Advisory Transaction 248
  7.4.2 Indirect RA Services 249
  7.4.3 Readers’ Advisory and Reading 249
  7.4.4 Readers’ Advisory Interview 251
  7.4.5 Guides and Tools for Readers’ Advisers 252

8 Establishing Policy and Training for the Reference Interview 255
8.1 The Library Context 255
8.2 Institutional Policy and the Reference Interview 256
  8.2.1 Typical Policies 256
  8.2.2 What Should Be in the Reference Service Policy? 257
8.3 Training Staff in Reference Interview Skills 260
  8.3.1 Independent Learning 262
  8.3.2 Group Learning 262
  8.3.3 Training for Virtual Reference 267
  8.3.4 Evaluation of Training 268
  8.3.5 Resistance to Training—and Some Answers 268
8.4 Annotated References 270
  8.4.1 Policies and Guidelines for Reference Staff 270
  8.4.2 Additional Readings on Reference Policy 270
  8.4.3 Additional Readings on Training 271

Index 273
About the Authors 289
We wrote *Conducting the Reference Interview: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*, Second Edition, for the many librarians, educators, and students who have asked us, “Where can we read about skills for the reference interview?” or “I have to develop a training package for my staff/my course, and I need any help I can get.” Although knowing the sources and how to navigate information systems is crucially important, this book is *not* about reference sources or about where to look for information. It is about understanding the user’s information needs to the extent that the librarian knows quite specifically what to look for.

Whether the transaction occurs face-to-face or virtually, the process of finding out what the user really wants is the bedrock of successful reference service upon which everything else depends. The most comprehensive understanding of the sources is wasted if the information intermediary is looking for the wrong thing. The need to understand what the user really wants to know remains the same, whether the reference transaction is face-to-face, over the telephone, or online.

This book brings together in one convenient place the results of two decades of research on the reference interview conducted by Patricia Dewdney, Catherine Ross, and Kirsti Nilsen, co-authors of the first edition, and Marie L. Radford, who brings to the second edition her expertise on communication theory, interpersonal communication, and virtual reference (VR). Our goal in this latest edition is to translate research findings about the reference transaction into practical guidelines and exercises that can be used by professionals who work in information settings. The second edition offers a wholly updated chapter on virtual reference, together with updates and additions throughout the book that acknowledge changes in the reference and research landscape over the past seven years. The constant theme that unites everything we say is the crucial importance of taking a user-centered rather than a system-centered approach to thinking about reference service. In this second edition, we consolidate research findings—our own and that of others—from many different books, articles, and other sources.

Since the publication of the first edition of *Conducting the Reference Interview* (2002), some things haven’t changed. Reference librarians still need to understand how to find out, quickly and efficiently, what users really want to know. And because the basics of human communication
remain the same, we have retained the microskills training approach, developed by Allen Ivey and adapted for the library context in *Communicating Professionally: A How-To-Do-It Manual*, Second Edition, by Ross and Dewdney (Neal-Schuman, 1998). However, developments in technology have changed the context in which the reference transaction happens. Libraries have been early adopters of technologies that have turned reference into a multichannel activity where librarians are connecting with users both face-to-face (FtF) and through telephone, e-mail, text messaging, and chat. But as Joe Janes has said, “It’s all reference.” In this second edition, we have given expanded scope to VR to reflect current practice in libraries.

The seed for the first edition of *Conducting the Reference Interview: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians* was a workshop that Patricia Dewdney and Catherine Ross developed to teach the skills required for effective reference interviews. Over the years, Dewdney and Ross presented this workshop to thousands of information professionals in Canada and the United States. They called the workshop “How to Find Out What People Really Want to Know,” although privately they thought of it as “Why Didn’t You Say So in the First Place?” Anyone who has ever worked in any kind of information setting will instantly recognize the problem—“everything you have on travel” turns out to be a request for information about how to get a visa for travel to Russia. A person asking for “information on allergies” turns out to want specific information about side effects for a particular antihistamine.

This second edition is the fruit of a happy intersection of two research programs: the Library Visit Study, conducted by Pat Dewdney, Catherine Ross, and Kirsti Nilsen at The University of Western Ontario, and the Seeking Synchronicity study conducted by Marie L. Radford at Rutgers University and Lynn Silipigni Connaway from OCLC. All of us involved in the two editions of *Conducting the Reference Interview* have taught reference courses in graduate professional programs. This educational setting has allowed us to recruit students as participants in our various research programs on the reference transaction as it happens in the field. In the Library Visit Study, for example, we asked MLIS students to go to a library of their choice, ask a question that matters to them personally, and write a step-by-step account of what happened. They also evaluated the experience, describing what they found helpful and not helpful about the service provided. Successive classes of students over some fifteen years have provided accounts of about 250 face-to-face reference transactions, 150 VR transactions, and 500 readers’ advisory transactions.

To complement this material based on users’ perceptions, we have drawn extensively on the verbatim transcripts of 332 reference interviews that Patricia Dewdney tape-recorded in public libraries. We also have analyzed the data from the Mental Models study, in which Patricia Dewdney and Gillian Michell observed reference transactions in three different public library settings and afterward interviewed the librarians and thirty-three users about their perceptions of the transactions. With these rich sources, we are able to illustrate particular aspects of the reference interview—the physical environment of the library, communication accidents, ill-formed
queries, appropriate use of specific skills such as open questions, what happens when appropriate skills are not used, etc.—with specific examples drawn from real reference transactions and real statements from users.

But what about the reference interview in the virtual environment? Is it the same or a whole different animal? Speculation abounds, but it is useful to have empirical data of real reference transactions in virtual settings. Phase 3 of the Library Visit Study provided 150 detailed descriptions of what happened when users posed a question virtually, either through e-mail or chat. Another rich source of data was Radford and Connaway’s (2005–10) IMLS-funded Seeking Synchronicity project (2005–2008) that included a large number of phone and online surveys of virtual reference services (VRS) librarians, VRS users, and VRS non-users. They also analyzed an international sample of over 750 verbatim transcripts of chat reference, 434 of which were found to have evidence of query clarification. This corpus of transcripts and survey results has allowed us to analyze types of questions asked, communication behavior of users and librarians, and barriers and facilitators of chat reference. The Library Visit Study accounts provide rich-grained evidence about the users’ experiences. Empirical data from these various complementary research projects have provided sources from which we have drawn real examples as the basis for the thirty-six cases included in this book.

In this second edition, we have added many more examples, especially new examples of chat reference. We hope you find it useful to see the points we make about communication in the reference interview illustrated with real examples taken from the field. Although the challenge of finding out what the user really wants to know is the same in public, academic, governmental, and other special libraries, we have tended to illustrate our discussion with straightforward examples drawn from public libraries, so that a specialized subject background is not needed to understand the context of the user’s question.

Because we believe in the integration of theory and praxis, and are convinced that a useful book on reference must be informed by relevant theory and research while also being purposefully practical, this book had its genesis in both the teaching environment of workshop and classroom and in our research. The reference workshop, though rooted in a sense-making theory of information and based on current research in reference, was essentially practical in emphasis. Through a combination of methods, including small lectures, modeling, group exercises, role-plays, and discussion, the workshop explored communication problems occurring between library users and library staff and presented some skills for coping with these problems. Workshop participants over the years shared with us their experiences of reference interviews gone right and wrong, and we fed this material back into the workshops.

**Organization**

In Chapter 1, “Why Bother with a Reference Interview?,” we describe the theoretical foundations for this book and review perspectives on the need
for conducting a reference interview. We argue that taking questions at “face value” does not work because the initial question rarely reflects three essential aspects of the user's information need as defined in Brenda Dervin’s sense-making theory—the situation (how the need arose), the gap (what is missing in the user’s understanding), and the uses to which the user hopes to put the information. Chapter 1 also introduces mental models theory (with previously unpublished examples) to explain why users do not always present their questions clearly and completely. If librarians want to provide helpful answers beyond “the 55 percent rule,” they must hone their communication skills to perform “the art of translation.”

In the next three chapters we use Allen Ivey’s microtraining approach to identify those communication skills most helpful in the reference interview. We illustrate these with examples, both positive and negative, from our own research and training programs. Chapter 2, “Setting the Stage for the Reference Interview,” covers the basic skills needed for the crucial first seconds of contact—nonverbal, listening, and verbal skills that establish a positive communication climate.

Chapter 3, “Finding Out What They Really Want to Know,” begins with some common problems observed in reference interviews, such as negative closure and unmonitored referrals, and then sets out the major skills for the reference interview—asking open and sense-making questions, avoiding premature diagnosis, paraphrasing, summarizing, and achieving closure. Chapter 4, “Beyond Negative Closure,” includes skills useful for later stages of the interview—inclusion, one-to-one library use instruction, and essential follow-up techniques. We also give tried-and-true tips for practicing and integrating skills into everyday behavior.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 cover a variety of special contexts in which librarians must adapt these skills for particular purposes and user groups. Chapter 5, “Special Contexts for the Reference Interview,” includes telephone reference service, voicemail, and handling imposed queries (when one user presents a question on behalf of another). Sections are devoted to working with children and young adults, with so-called problematic people, and with adults who have special language-related needs. This chapter also brings together the many communication problems arising from medical and legal reference questions, as well as those arising in collaborative reference. Chapter 6, “The Reference Encounter in Virtual Environments,” has been almost entirely rewritten since the first edition to take into account the rapid expansion of mediated forms of reference in libraries. Here we deal with the principles of communicating effectively in the VR interview, specifically reference conducted through e-mail, instant messaging, chat, and emerging initiatives such as Short Message Service (SMS) and reference in Second Life. The readers’ advisory interview, covered previously in a chapter section, has been expanded to become Chapter 7. Finally, in Chapter 8, “Establishing Policy and Training for the Reference Interview,” we consider the broader institutional context—library policies and training programs designed to help librarians improve information service through more effective reference interviews.

At the end of each chapter, we provide reference lists of sources cited in the chapter as well as annotations for references that can also be used
as suggestions for further reading. This way, helpful sources appear at point of use for the reader, rather than in one long bibliography at the end. We know that some readers may want to read the book sequentially, while others may want to focus on specific applications, such as the reference interview with children or readers’ advisory or new developments in chat environments. Therefore, we have written each section so that it is largely self-contained, with references, as necessary, to other places in the book where a particular skill or concept is further explained. You can dive into the book at any point and read backward or forward, following your specific interests.

**Applications**

We have written this book to provide a single accessible source that draws together the scattered findings of research and praxis and translates them into practical guidelines and exercises that can be used for training and for individual learning. Over the past two decades, research programs have filled in a lot of gaps in our understanding of the reference interview—what works and what doesn’t, what can go wrong despite the best intentions of the librarian, and what explains puzzling user behavior (why do users ask for “everything on refrigeration” when they want to know how to repair a refrigerator?). Our goal here is to integrate the most valuable work done by ourselves and others on the reference transaction.

Materials presented here have been adapted and developed from numerous studies of human communication, especially sense-making and microtraining. *Sense-making* is an approach developed by Brenda Dervin at the University of Ohio that focuses our attention on how people use information to make sense of their lives. Instead of assuming that information is a commodity that is valuable in itself, sense-making directs us to ask, “How will this information help this particular individual deal with a particular situation in the context of his or her own life?” *Microtraining* was developed by Allen E. Ivey as an effective way to teach interview skills to counselors and is based on the idea that complex communication behaviors can be broken down into constituent parts that can be taught, one at a time. We have modified these innovative models to focus on the strategies and skills most useful for the reference interview.

The pages that follow combine our most useful training materials for the reference interview with a map to the most useful research—all set within a framework for thinking about information service. This book is based on the idea that people learn best when they are actively engaged. Each chapter therefore combines explanatory text with modeling, many examples drawn from actual reference interviews, exercises that provide opportunities for practice, and annotated references that provide recommendations for further reading. We have designed this extensively updated edition of *Conducting the Reference Interview* to be useful both to individual learners and to trainers and supervisors who want support materials for staff training on the reference interview.