OPEN, CLOSED, AND SENSE-MAKING QUESTIONS
EXAMPLES AND WHEN TO USE

A reference interview creates a partnership between you, as a reference provider, and library patrons seeking information. You work together towards a clearer understanding of what they want to know in order to link them to the resources needed.

You can clarify the real information need by asking a combination of open, closed, and sense-making questions. Each type of question has its place in an effective reference transaction.

Open Questions

Open questions are most effective at the beginning of the reference interview. They usually begin with WHAT, HOW, WHEN, WHO, WHERE, or a phrase that invites an open-ended response. Open questions allow patrons to respond using their own terms to clarify their information needs.

Examples:

- What kind of information on _____ are you looking for?

- What would you like to know about this topic?

- What do you mean by _____?

- Would you tell me more about _____?

- What else can you tell me that might help us locate the best materials?

- Can you tell me more about your report and what is required for it?

- Can you give me an example?

- Is there something specific about _____ that you are looking for?

- Would you explain that to me in more detail?

- I'm not familiar with _____. What else can you tell me about it?

- What do you already know about _____?

- Do you know some other terms for this topic?

- Where have you checked for information so far?

- When you say _____, what do you mean?

- Can you describe the kind of information you would like to find?

- If I could find the perfect book to help you, what would the title be?

- Where did you hear or read about _____?

- I'm not familiar with that person. What is he/she known for?

Sense-making Questions

To give the most effective reference service may require that you encourage the patron to talk about the context for the information need. You may need to know the situation that the patron is in, the gaps in his/her information, and what the patron wants to do when that gap is filled.

A sense-making question is a special type of open question that asks about situations, gaps, and uses for information. The strategy of sense-making questions grew out of Brenda Dervin's research on how people seek and use information.

Examples:

- It would help me if you can tell me what you are trying to do in this situation.

- In this situation, what information would be most helpful to you?

- What would you like to see happen in this situation?

- Where would you like to begin with this project? Where do you see yourself going with this project? Where did you get stuck in this project?

- How did this question first come up?

- I think I can help you faster, and certainly better if you could tell me how you want to use the information.

- How will this help you? What will it help you to do?

- If you could have exactly the help you wanted, what would it be?

Closed Questions

A closed question asks for a **Yes/No, This/That** response. Closed questions can be effective if there are clear options, if you need to verify that you understand the patron's information need, or to confirm that the need was met.

Examples:

- So you can use only two Internet sources for your report and the rest must be books or magazine articles . . . is that correct?

- Have you checked the catalog?

- Do you want that exact title or do you want something on that subject?

- Is this enough to get you started on your report? Please come back to the desk if you need more help.

- Is this the kind of information you were hoping to find?

- Did you find the information you were looking for in that book?