

Questions that Ask Us 24/7 Public Librarians are hesitant to answer

Math

Possible sites to help:

http://mathforum.org/math_help_landing.html

Unfamiliar or in-depth topics

For questions requiring more subject expertise than you have, it is okay to let the question go for a minute or more to see if another librarian with the required knowledge may pick up. If no one does, it can be a big help to the (often busy) backup librarians if you still try to pick up the question before the 120 second mark. Once you have the patron, you could explain to them that no one from their library is available. Then, you have a few options:

- Offer to code the question for follow-up
- Refer the question to a subject expert. Code as “follow-up by me,” then after your shift, go to My QuestionPoint (the main login home screen), and under “My Questions,” click on “new.” Click on the transcript, then click the dropdown “Refer to” and change to “subject matter expert.” On the next screen, select the appropriate subject area.

Circulation policy questions from other libraries: renewals, date due, fines, etc.

This information is almost always in the policy page. If not, you can try checking the library website itself.

Questions that are location/library specific that I’m not certain will be on the policy page.

Questions specific to NYPL because not familiar w/area or holdings/policies

Try checking the policy page and the library website just in case the information is there. If it is not, explain to the patron that no one from their library is available at the moment (this can be assumed if they haven’t picked up their own patron), then offer to refer the question for follow-up, or if they need a fast answer, look up the pertinent phone number for them. Sometimes this is all that can be done. While it is understandable that you may feel bad picking up the patron and then not giving them an answer, it’s better for them to get a response like this after 40 seconds, rather than after 2 minutes when it gets picked up by the backup librarians, who will just give them the same answer you would have.

UK Questions

See the webinar recording titled “Best Practices: UK Patrons “ at

<http://www.oclc.org/support/training/portfolios/discovery/questionpoint.en.html>

Also see the recommended links at <http://wiki.questionpoint.org/w/page/13839521/UK%20Sites>

Obscure questions. Sometimes, they ask a question that would be very difficult to find the answer to, such as, "What time does _____ start on the green downtown?" I tend not to click on those kinds of questions, because I'm not local and may only frustrate the patron if I have to dig, possibly futilely, for an answer.

Again, it's understandable that you don't want to frustrate the patron. However, waiting 40 seconds to get picked up, then find out the question can't be answered is still better than waiting 2 minutes (before the backup librarians pick up) only to find out the same thing. At some point, somebody will have to pick up the patron and let them know that the question can't be answered immediately, and then refer it to follow-up or offer a phone number. It would cause less frustration if this happens sooner, rather than later. The worst outcome would be if the patron never gets picked up at all and just leaves.

Questions that seem too involved for the time I have left for chat;

This is understandable. If you only have, for example, 5 minutes left in your shift, you are free to logout if you know that you will not be able to answer anything else that comes in before you must leave.

- **Students who ask you to basic answer their research assignment instead of looking for sources that may provide answers.**
- **Questions asking for help with interpreting/critiquing specific pieces of literature**

QuestionPoint's policy for dealing with students provides some guidance:

<http://wiki.questionpoint.org/w/page/13839422/247-Policies#452K12students>

You could also try to help the patron find critical articles on their topic, such as literary criticism if they are researching a book/story. Feel free to be firm with the patron if you have to. Explain that this is a research service, and you will help them to find resources, but not interpret. If they become rude, follow the procedures for rude patrons at <http://wiki.questionpoint.org/w/page/13839422/247-Policies#451Rudepatrons> . It can also be helpful to have some scripts for dealing with rude patrons, such as the examples at <http://www.askus247.org/info/examplescripts.pdf>

Questions with 6 or 7 homework questions in the same login

Some of the resources listed above with the previous item will apply to this one. If you can tell right away that they are asking homework questions, ensure from the start that you are providing resources rather than specific answers. After, say, the third question, explain that you have to help other patrons who are waiting and ask the patron to see how far they can get on their own before coming back. (This doesn't always work, and sometimes the patron comes right back, but it's worth a try.)

Questions that obviously call for opinion.

This is another situation where none of the other librarians will necessarily provide more help than you can. If the patron is genuinely seeking opinions (like a survey) you can give your opinion if you feel comfortable doing so. If you don't, you could suggest where the patron may be able to better conduct their survey – such as suggesting that they email friends/colleagues or post to a site like Facebook or Twitter.

Technical issues with Overdrive audio downloads.

In many cases, you can do some preliminary troubleshooting by checking the Overdrive help pages (there may be a link to these on the library's policy page, or if not, their Overdrive page itself should have these links). These links have information on how to download the necessary software, what devices are supported, and some troubleshooting. You could also try doing a Google search for the patron's problem (using quotation marks if you are looking up an error message), and sometimes may find an answer that way. Also see the PDF of "examples of tough questions handled"

Questions that require database access - someone needs journal articles, I can point them to the appropriate database from their library site, but can't get in to execute a search

See the video/PDF titled "Finding Articles Online" at <http://www.askus247.org/virtualref/index.html>

In many cases, it is not necessary for the chatting librarian to conduct a search simultaneously with the patron. Also, some libraries do provide a guest login for the chatting librarians to use for database access – this can be found in the policy page if the library has chosen to provide it.

Questions from patrons with librarians from their library or state that are online and not helping other patrons – i.e. the patron is from PA and there is a PA librarian online that is available to answer.

If you see this situation happening, note how many queues the other librarian is monitoring. In this example situation, the PA librarian may be monitoring a private queue for their own institution and may not be seeing any other PA patrons that come in. If the librarian is monitoring a large number of queues (high 30s/low 40s) feel free to let me know about them and I will pass the information along to QuestionPoint Quality Control.

Questions that Ask Us 24/7 Academic Librarians are hesitant to answer

- *questions that deal with campus information unrelated to the library*
- *When they're very library specific. Such as, "the website isn't letting me renew my books" or "is the library open today" or "what floor is the science books located".*
- *Questions that are specific to a particular library. For example, "can I renew my books" .*
- *eligibility for library use questions*
- *"I'm at x campus library and wondering if I can return my book to y campus library".*
- *Specific questions about campus/library policies (holiday hours, etc.)*
- *Those that are related to local settings not described in typical policy pages, such as "Where is the after hour drop box located?";*

All of these questions could possibly be answered on the library policy page. Almost all libraries would likely have hours and renewal procedures since those are pre-set policy page fields. Some libraries provide a link to their website's hours page, so that you can click that to always get the latest information, which often includes special holiday hours. By looking at the website you can sometimes find a map/directory of materials by subject. Information on who can use library resources/services would likely be found (or linked) in the "library card policies" field or the more general "library policies" field.

You can also try searching the library website. For example, with the patron asking about the drop-box, if the library's website is acmelibrary.edu, try this search in Google:

Questions about whether a database is working or not. When I do answer these questions, I usually end up giving them an appropriate phone number to call at their campus.

That is exactly the right thing to do – you can feel free to continue picking up questions like this and treating them the exact same way. If a guest login is provided in the library's policy page, you can also try logging in yourself to see if you also get an error.

Questions about library fines that are specific to an event.

Yes, this is a question that you will not be able to directly answer. However, if there is no one from that patron's library available, the best "answer" in this case is to pick up the patron, explain to them that no one from their library is available, and provide them with a phone number to call instead.

- ***login questions***
- ***Problems with logging on***

While you cannot directly access the accounts of other libraries' patrons, you can do some basic troubleshooting in chat. You will want to ask the patron:

- What are you trying to login to? (databases, account, etc.)
- Are you on-campus or off?
- What exactly is the message/error you are receiving?

You can then check the policy page – sometimes they provide guidance such as “the student login is the same as their campus email” or “to login to the databases, patrons can use their student ID” etc. Then confirm with the patron that they are using the correct login – sometimes they are just unaware of what they were supposed to be using.

If they are still having trouble, consult the policy page or website for someone to refer them to. Since passwords are not usually provided by email, giving them a phone number is usually better in this case than coding the chat for follow-up. Some policy pages may list a contact for computer/technical issues. Or the library website may list a computer help desk. As a last resort, provide them with the main library number or the number for the circulation desk.

- ***questions that deal with someone starting research on a paper and wanting database searching help all the way through to citation help and wanting it pronto***
- ***In-depth questions on topics I am completely unfamiliar with - e.g. chemistry and other hard sciences - especially from graduate schools.***
- ***Complex questions on topics I normally do not support in my own library***
- ***Economics, physics or math problems posed. The patron is not asking for resources, but an answer.***
- ***Graduate level chemistry or physics questions.***
- ***legal questions***

For questions requiring more subject expertise than you have, it is okay to let the question go for a minute or more to see if another librarian with the required knowledge may pick up. If no one does, it can be a big help to the (often busy) backup librarians if you still try to pick up the question before the 120 second mark. Once you have the patron, you could explain to them that no one from their library is available. Then, you have a few options:

- Offer to code the question for follow-up
- Look up the appropriate subject expert at the patron's own library and advise the patron to contact them directly, and provide their phone number or email.
- Refer the question to a subject expert. Code as “follow-up by me,” then after your shift, go to My QuestionPoint (the main login home screen), and under “My Questions,” click on “new.” Click on the transcript, then click the dropdown “Refer to” and change to “subject matter expert.” On the next screen, select the appropriate subject area.

- ***My research topic is X and I can't find anything that is what I need.***
- ***Questions where the patron just puts a very vague topic (I do take these, but I'm always a little wary because you never know what it'll turn into and it's hard to guide someone through narrowing a topic via chat).***
- ***open-ended questions***

A question like the first example will likely need to be narrowed down through a reference interview, as with questions that come in-person. You may need to clarify the topic, type of resources desired, any other requirements, etc.

With questions like these, it is possible that the patron is beginning their research and does not know where to start. They may not know how to access the databases or even be aware that they exist. Sometimes all you need to do is show them a database, suggest a database in that subject area, and if possible, suggest a few search terms. You can often do this without needing to login to the database yourself, although if the library provides a guest login, that can be helpful (or you can login to the database through your own library, if available, to verify that you are seeing what the patron sees).

- ***questions dealing with local statistics or local subjects,***
- ***other specific local questions that may not be covered in the library's policies page***

In cases like this, you can pick up the question (be sure to give a cursory look at the policy page just in case it has anything useful) and then offer to code the question for follow-up.

- ***Economics, physics or math problems posed. The patron is not asking for resources, but an answer.***
- ***I'm also hesitant to answer questions that almost sound like they're asking me an actual homework question like "What were some of the social impacts of World War II", as opposed to where do I find so and so information. I always do answer them but my experience has been that they continue to ask me more questions and it turns into "let the librarian find all the information while I sit back and relax". It used to happen a lot on the Ask Here PA chat line but it's been awhile since I've had one.***

Feel free to be firm with the patron if you have to. Explain that this is a research service, and you will help them to find resources, but not interpret or provide homework/term paper answers. If they become rude, follow the procedures for rude patrons at

<http://wiki.questionpoint.org/w/page/13839422/247-Policies#451Rudepatrons> . It can also be helpful to have some scripts for dealing with rude patrons, such as the examples at <http://www.askus247.org/info/examplescripts.pdf>

I hate to admit this but I dread seeing the career resources question from Bryant & Stratton students. Can the librarian perhaps put a link to these resources somewhere in the vicinity of the chat icon? It seems to me that if there is this high a number of students that can't find this information on the Bryant & Stratton VL site that the librarian should at least try to do something about it.

The high number of students asking this question is due to the fact that it is a requirement of Bryant & Stratton students – they are specifically told to use the chat to ask this question of a librarian, as a way of getting them familiar with the service.

When chatting with a Bryant & Stratton student, there is a script under "patron library" called "Career Exploration," which you can send to the patron. It provides information on how to access career information through the online library (and the text of this script is also in the library policy page).

Other resources that you can show the patron include:

- O*Net: <http://online.onetcenter.org/>
- Vocational Information Center: <http://www.khake.com>
- America's Career InfoNet: <http://www.acinet.org/acinet/>

Questions coming through the general portals for Ask Here PA and QandANJ are probably my least favorite to pick up. I have a difficult time using the general policy pages for Ask Here PA and QandANJ. I can't find information about the patrons' home library, to help them search their library catalog or access databases. Instead, I usually end up searching the Internet for answers. In addition, these portals seem to be often used for high school (?) class visits, and the students can be less than polite.

If the patron is looking for general information (rather than library policies) it can often be best to just use public websites to find the requested information. If the patron knows their local library, you can quickly bring up their policy page by going to the dropdown menu at the top of the policy page, which links to all libraries within the state group:

The screenshot shows the QuestionPoint interface. At the top left is the QuestionPoint logo and the word "Profile". To the right is a "Databases" button. Below this is a "Search Policies" section with a "Group Policy Page" and "Group Member Policies" tab. A dropdown menu is open, showing a list of libraries: "Ask Here PA Academic", "Albright Col. Gingrich Libr (PA-A)", "Ask Here PA Academic", "Bloomsburg Univ (PA-A)", "BUCKS CNTY COMM COL (PA-A)", "Cabrinu Col Libr (PA-A)", "Chestnut Hill Col (PA-A)", and "Delaware Cntv Comm Colleae (PA-A)". A "Submit" button is visible to the right of the dropdown. A red alert box at the bottom left reads: "Alerts: This patron has entered the service via www. questionpoint.org".

If patrons become rude, follow the procedures for rude patrons at <http://wiki.questionpoint.org/w/page/13839422/247-Policies#451Rudepatrons>. It can also be helpful to have some scripts for dealing with rude patrons, such as the examples at <http://www.askus247.org/info/examplescripts.pdf>

If the patron doesn't type up a question, I tend to not pick it up because I don't know what to expect at all.

This is understandable. However, it could be a big help to the (often busy) backup librarians if you could wait a bit to see if anyone else takes it, and if not, pick up the question before the 120 second mark.

Very frequently when I am in the chat monitor, questions come in and are grabbed by another librarian before I can even read the question. Most librarians are uncomfortable accepting a question blindly but sometimes it seems to be the only way to accept a question. It can feel like a competition to click on a question in the instant that it appears. Any delay results in someone else grabbing the question.

Yes, there are some shifts that have many librarians and therefore it can be difficult to pick up a question before someone else does. It's understandable and nobody will be blamed if they are not able to pick up many. It's actually a good thing if this happens, because it means that the patrons don't end up having to wait very long. The problem that sometimes happens (which this guide hopes to partly address) is the issue of patrons coming in and waiting 2 minutes or more because all of the librarians online at the time are hesitant to pick up the question.