

Ask A Montana Librarian Collaborative Reference Service & Participation Agreement

Collaborative reference is the practice of having a group of libraries answer online reference questions through chat and email. In the Montana collaborative reference service, each library staffs the service for one hour per week answering and referring questions as appropriate.

Before Joining

Your administrators should be aware of the staffing, start-up, and maintenance costs involved in providing and marketing collaborative reference service, and should be prepared to commit to long-term provision of resources. Ideally all levels of your management should be committed to supporting collaborative reference before your library signs on to the service. If there is disagreement about this service, a sufficient core of your staff and administration should be committed to the project. In addition to commitment from your library administration, your library's public services staff should have an awareness of the collaborative reference service's goals and basic operations.

When you and your library undertake collaborative reference as part of this cooperative, the integration of the service into the rest of your library's reference services should be considered. This service should be accorded the same status and quality goals as your regular reference service. It is not an ad hoc service, nor should it be considered temporary. This service should be considered when making collection development decisions and especially in licensing electronic resources.

Responsibilities for Participation

Your library should designate at least one staff member to be involved in the administration of collaborative reference both at your library and in a larger cooperative group. This staff member should attend at least two cooperative meetings a year, and when the staff member cannot attend, a proxy should be appointed who has permission to speak for you and vote on your behalf.

Your library will be expected to participate in surveys and requests for responses that are broadcast through the cooperative's listserv. It is expected that the staff member designated to be involved in the cooperative will receive the cooperative's emails and communicate the cooperative's aims, questions, and concerns to your library's staff and administration in a clear and timely manner.

Your library should commit to regular training and staff development for staff members involved in providing collaborative reference. This includes not only training put on by the cooperative but also opportunities that arise that will enhance staff members' reference skills and abilities.

Responsibilities for Service

As a cooperative, we strive to provide the highest possible quality of reference [and] service. This means that your library needs to staff the virtual desk during your assigned time, and answer any chat or email queries promptly, appropriately, thoroughly, and professionally. All queries and patron information, including transcripts, are to be treated as private, and copyright restrictions are to be observed.

The link to the service should be clearly displayed on your library's website. Making the service accessible and visible to users is a simple and effective way of marketing, and every library needs to participate by not only providing service but attracting users as well.

Understand that this is a statewide service. Although your library's collections and services may be restricted to affiliated users, when your library joins this cooperative it is obligated to provide service to everyone. This does not mean that your collections and services must be open to everyone, only that when your librarians are staffing the service, they must respond to questions from all users, regardless of library affiliation.

The level of service provided is announced on the patron entry point to the service. All librarians should abide by that level of service and understand how to determine what is within the service's parameters and what is not, and how to respond in those cases.

Memo of Understanding

I, _____, representative of
_____ library located at:
_____ am
committed to paying _____ (fill in the 1st year amount
on the spread sheet) to cover training and software charges for the Ask A Montana
Librarian Collaborative Reference Project. This amount is to cover initial start-up
charges, training and miscellaneous expenses until June 30, 20__.

I also agree that my library, _____,
will abide by this Service and Participation Agreement. If we do not, we may be subject
to suspension of our privileges in this project.

Signed _____

Based on "Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services." Prepared by the
MARS Digital Reference Guidelines Ad Hoc Committee, Reference and User Services Association, 2004.
Approved by the RUSA Board of Directors June 2004.