

The premise of this manual is that conducting an effective reference interview is the only way to consistently provide competent, user-centered reference service. Ross, Nilsen and Radford demonstrate that the interview need not be long or complex, but they argue that it is needed with every inquiry. Reference questions are often disguised as directional or technical questions and, by skipping the interview, the librarian may miss the chance to deliver what the user really needs to know.

This manual is informed by years of workshops led by Dewdney and Ross (Patricia Dewdney was an author on the first edition of *Conducting the Reference Interview*). The work is grounded in both research evidence and theory. Findings from *The Library Visit* study by Dewdney, Ross and Nilsen, the *Seeking Synchronicity* study by Radford, and the *Mental Models* study by Dewdney and Michell provide the core evidence, but the research cited is wide-ranging. The theoretical base is Dervin’s sense-making approach. The skills of the interview are packaged using Allen E. Ivey’s microtraining method of breaking down complex communications into teachable components.

The chapters are self-contained so that readers may focus on the areas most applicable to their work. Those reading cover-to-cover see the same skills presented in different contexts, effectively reinforcing microskills such as listening, using minimal encouragers, and asking open-ended questions while avoiding such pitfalls as premature diagnosis and negative closure. Special contexts covered are: the telephone, email and virtual environments; populations such as children, young adults and those with special language needs; and the areas of readers’ advisory, consumer health and legal information.

Almost every page includes a special feature. Twenty-six case studies provide transcripts of reference interviews, with the microskills labeled. Each case has probes to get the student to analyze what worked and what didn’t work in the transaction, and what could have been done better. There are sidebars with quick facts that are both useful and engaging. Further reading is provided for each chapter, grouped under the main themes of the chapter and lightly annotated. Exercises and practical tips abound. The writing is direct and unpretentious (a favourite subtitle: “Why didn’t they just say so in the first place?”).
Altogether, this is a solid formula for a training manual, but it may be a recipe for good, rather than great, reference work. Some sections of the book take a dim view of the skills of practicing library workers and emphasize negative examples. The book is not able to convey how rewarding reference work can be, such as the professional satisfaction that comes with discerning and meeting the needs of the information seeker, and that does the trainee a considerable disservice. In conjunction with an instructor who can temper the tone, however, this would be a suitable resource for an MLIS or library technician program, or as a training resource for reference staff in any library.

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