SDSL's Cornerstone Newsletter

South Dakota State Library's e-newsletter

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Tips for a Successful Technology Reference Interview

From the desk of Cheyenne Chontos, Library Technology Coordinator

Most librarians didn't enter the field expecting to be their community's technology expert, but that's often the situation we find ourselves in. We get technology questions ranging from email to social media to e-readers and devices. This can feel overwhelming, especially if you didn't expect so much of your job to be dictated by 1s and 0s. If you've ever felt a little lost when helping patrons with their technology questions, here are a few tips to keep in mind for future technology reference interviews.

Use Your Reference Skills
Technology reference questions are fundamentally like any other reference question. Keep those basic reference interview skills in mind: approachability, active listening, summary, and follow up. Approachability can be welcoming a patron into the library, having open and friendly body language, and making yourself available in the library (so, no hiding in the back to avoid those tech questions!). Practicing active listening means asking relevant and open-ended questions when appropriate. Part of active listening is also summarizing or repeating back the information that you have gathered from your patron. An example start to a summary statement would be, "Let me make sure I understand what you need. What I'm hearing is…" Lastly, make sure that you follow up with your patrons after you have assisted them. Did they find the answers they were looking for? If not, how can you point them in the correct direction moving forward?

Keep Learning
Let's say you're approached with a question that has you stumped. This might feel like your worst nightmare, but I have some magic words to help you out if you ever find yourself in this situation: "I don't know... yet." Okay, they're not magic, but they are helpful. No one can know everything all at once, and it's okay to admit that you're not sure about something. However, that doesn't mean you can't learn! Be honest with your patrons that you're going to look up or seek out an answer, and then follow up with them. You can always ask other staff members or your State Library's Library Technology Coordinator for help if you need it.

Also, take time to practice different technology. This might mean spending a few minutes each week on your library's e-reader or checking out how this whole TikTok thing works. Having just a little bit of experience with a variety of technology and apps can make you feel a whole lot more confident when answering tech questions in the future.

Have Fun
The ever-changing world of technology can feel daunting, but it should also be exciting! New changes mean new opportunities for you and your patrons. Challenge yourself to branch out and explore technology when you can. Make technology fun for your patrons as well. This might mean hosting a technology "petting zoo," where patrons can try out the library's technology in a low-stakes, fun way. Making technology fun for your patrons can also just mean bringing a good attitude and a smile to your technology reference interview. Technology can open new worlds for your patrons and for your library – and that is pretty exciting.

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 800 Governors Drive, Pierre, SD,…   library@state.sd.us
 6057733131   library.sd.gov

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