



Topics

What is readers' advisory?

Readers' advisory process

Knowing the collection

Passive readers' advisory

The impact of technology

Samples



Statement of purpose for Ontario's public libraries

The public library serves its community based on the belief that every individual has the right to equitable access to information.

The public library is committed to helping people find information appropriate to their needs.

The public library is concerned with the refreshment of people's spirit by providing books and other materials for relaxation and pleasure.

The public library promotes an open and democratic society by providing everyone with access to civilization's thoughts, ideas, actions and the expression of its creative imagination. The public library is the principal means whereby the record of civilization is made freely available to all.

The public library is a practical demonstration of our society's belief in the value of universal education as a continuing and lifelong process.

From: *One place to look: The Ontario Public Library Strategic Plan*. 1990, p. 13.

The public library has a significant role to play in any community. There is a role for the library in the individual's use of leisure time, whether it be to provide information or entertainment. To meet the needs of both adults and children who read for pleasure, a readers' advisory service is a valuable asset for the library.



Readers' advisory is the process of matching readers with books and books to readers. It is answering questions that have more to do with the patron's leisure reading than their informational needs. Readers' advisory deals with both fiction and non-fiction titles and a specific request may require both kinds of materials to meet a need.

The job of a readers' advisor is to **suggest** books, as opposed to **recommending** books. Patrons should be given what they want and what they are comfortable with, not what the library staff think they should have.

One of the most common questions to staff from patrons in libraries is "Do you have any more like...?" This question is especially important after the reader has "read out" an author, for example, all of Robert Ludlum's books or Jean Auel's books.

Other types of requests include:

- ❑ determining the name of a novel on which a certain film is based
- ❑ identifying the author who wrote books featuring a certain character
- ❑ determining the order of a series
- ❑ finding novels written about a certain time period or in a particular genre
- ❑ finding biographies about a certain kind of person

Many library staff members may have acted as "readers' advisors" for years without realizing it. The job of a readers' advisor involves assisting and advising readers in their choice of materials. Just as in reference service, all staff must remember that readers' advisory work involves ethical decisions.

Any requests which fit into a readers' advisory category should carry just as much weight as an informational or reference request. In most small libraries, questions of any type are answered from either the circulation desk or an information desk. Every request -- informational or readers' advisory, from an adult or child -- should be handled by the staff with equal respect and diligence.



People should never have to apologize for their reading interests. People read books for a variety of reasons -- for information, understanding, education, entertainment, introspection, hope, confidence, connectivity, escape, challenge and even for reassurance.

At the library, **children** of all ages can choose and read a book, or have it read to them, just for the fun of it. Mystery stories, science fiction tales, adventure stories or sometimes even audiotapes and CDs are available for borrowing. The library is also a great place to find information on every conceivable subject. In the beginning, the library can be overwhelming with different areas to explore and so much to choose from. Children, in particular, may need encouragement to feel comfortable in the library and readers' advisory also works with children.

With the advent of non-book materials, readers' advisory has become even more interesting. For example, the availability of "talking books" or "books on cassette" has added another dimension to this work. In addition to finding a "good read" for a patron, the library staff may also find a good story for the patron to listen to.

A readers' advisory service is one of the most interesting and demanding functions in a library. The reading interests of users are so diverse that no one staff member can hope to know the collection well enough to satisfy all requests for advice. Knowing enough about the reader's tastes and finding a title on the shelf that will be of interest to the user is a skill acquired over time.

READERS' ADVISORY PROCESS

Readers' advisory, whether for books or non-book materials, involves a process similar to a reference service with both an interview and search for material. The service draws on the library staff's background and awareness of current titles.

The readers' advisory interview

The interview should be an informal conversation between the advisor and the reader about books. The aim of the interview is to get readers to articulate what they want.



A readers' advisory interview is often less specific than a reference interview. Often the request begins with: "Can you give me something I would like?" or "Can you give me something similar to other titles I have already read?"

To help with the interview, many of the same communication skills required for conducting reference interviews are used. For instance, open questions such as "Is there a special book you are looking for?" or "May I suggest something to read" can be used. Restating the answers shows the reader that he/she has been heard.

The readers' advisor tries to get a general picture of the type of books the reader enjoys. In this way, the patron's interests can be matched to a particular type of fiction (a genre) or a thematic category. For instance, "Tell me about a book you really enjoyed" or "Have you read anything lately that you particularly disliked?"

If that line of questioning does not work, try describing the characteristics of books. For instance, "Do you like...

- ...foreign or local settings?"
- ...stories set in the past or present?"
- ...books with a fast-moving pace?"
- ...old-fashioned stories or contemporary?"
- ...scary stories?"
- ...sad or happy endings?"
- ...stories that inspire?"
- ...stories about people overcoming adversity?"

Another way to interview readers is to ask them to explain why they liked a particular book.

If possible, suggest three titles, giving the patron an overview of each one. Talk about what is best in the book, special features that might appeal to readers, or what others have said about it. Describing several titles reinforces the idea of readers' advisory.



Satisfaction

With a reference interview, it is easier to realize if the patrons is satisfied. If the answer to the question was located, usually the patron is satisfied. In this situation, there is no point in asking “Does this completely answer the question?” because the patron must read the book to know.

A successful reader's advisory interview is not a one-time occurrence. Readers should be encouraged to come in regularly to give their reactions to books and to ask for assistance. A good experience may also establish the idea of a special service in the minds of readers so they know that readers' advisory is a legitimate library activity.

KNOWING THE COLLECTION

The goal of the library staff is to recommend the best book for the patron at the right time. It is clear from the description of the readers' advisory interview that to be really good at providing readers' advisory service, the staff must be familiar with the library's collection, sensitive to the patron and knowledgeable of the community they serve. A good readers' advisor enjoys reading all types of materials.

When working with **young adults** and **children**, the library staff should understand the stages of reading development in general, and have some idea of reading interests. The library staff should be aware of the material in the library's collection for young adults, for children and in general.

But how does one get training in readers' advisory work? How does one person find out about all the books in the collection? While reading books is a good way to become familiar with the collection, there are several ways to find out about materials, including listening to the comments of patrons, other staff and using readers' advisory tools.

Reading books

Whenever possible, the best way to find out about a book is to read it. It is helpful to read outside of your own favourites. By reading books most frequently requested by patrons, it is easier to get a sense of the appeal of the popular authors. After reading one book, try to find similar works by other authors.



With each book, it is a useful exercise to think about why a book may appeal to certain readers and what elements in the book would affect a book's appeal. The following list is adapted from a very useful resource on readers' advisory called *Readers' advisory service in public libraries* by Joyce G. Saricks and Nancy Brown (Chicago: American Library Association, 1993).

Story ingredients

- What happens in the story?
- What kind of action occurs in the book?
- What is the theme?

The components of the story are the point of view, the amount of dialogue versus the number of descriptive passages, the author's treatment of subject, and the author's particular bias.

Setting

- When does the story take place? (past, present, future)
- Where does the story take place? (another planet, a village in India, downtown New York)

Setting does not necessarily mean a geographic location. Setting can also mean the ambiance or background of a book. For example, many people read Danielle Steel for the portrayal of rich and powerful people.

Pace

- Is the pace fast or slow? How long is it?

When speaking to the patron, it is important to find out if he/she wants a page turner or a book to enjoy slowly. Remember that readers are rarely consistent on pacing -- what they want one day may not be what they want the next day.

Characterization

- What is the main character like?
- What sorts of relationships take place between characters in this book?
- How well-developed are the other secondary characters?



Different patrons like different character development. For example, mysteries by Agatha Christie tend to dwell more on the forensic clues while mysteries by P.D. James use the characters to reveal many of the clues of motivation and opportunity.

Special features may be targeted. Some readers are interested in books with factual information on topics such as history. For instance, several novels focus on folklore and tradition of native communities including those by Michael Dorris (*A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*) and Louise Erdrich (*Love Medicine*, *The Beet Queen: a novel*, *Tracks: a novel* and *The Bingo Palace*). Tony Hillerman's mysteries (*Sacred Clowns*, *A Thief of Time* and *Coyote Waits*) have a similar focus.

When a book is finished and the book's primary appeal identified, think about what other titles are similar and what other authors write books like it. Some readers like to read both fiction and non-fiction titles on a similar theme. For instance, if someone has just read *The Joy Luck Club* or *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan, or *China Boy* or *Honor and Duty* by Gus Lee, he/she may also be interested in reading the biography called *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by Jung Chang set in 20th century mainland China.

Books with similar appeal can be grouped. Remember however, that just because two books are similar by virtue of belonging to the same genre does not mean that they have a similar appeal. Jackie Collins and Janette Oke both write romance, but there is no doubt that the type of romance they write is very different. Knowing these differences is important to providing quality readers' advisory service.

Watch for those specific characteristics which might limit a book's appeal to some readers. None of these characteristics should prevent a readers' advisor from suggesting a book. Elements that upset some readers will attract others. As readers' advisors, the staff need simply be aware of their presence.

Possible limiting characteristics of a book are:

- explicit sex
- unconventional writing or difficult styles
- advocacy of particular political or social positions
- graphic violence
- language (i.e., swearing)



Finding out about other books

While nothing can replace actual reading, individual staff members cannot read every item in all types of books.

Sources such as reviews, publisher's catalogues, booklists, and perhaps even pamphlets from other libraries, can help staff to become familiar with the existing materials and new titles. Those responsible for selecting new material may have had a chance to look at some of these sources and may already be familiar with the new titles arriving in the library.

New books should be examined as they come in. Without actually reading the book, some decisions can be made about the patron who might enjoy reading the book. By reading the jacket cover, the book can be placed in a genre or category and, if possible, its similarity to books by other authors noted.

Staff and other patrons as resources

By listening to other staff and to patrons talk about their reading interests, library staff have another source of information about material in the collection. Ask other staff members for recommendations and get a brief plot summary, description of the characters and similar authors. Most readers like to talk about their reading. Some of the information may be useful to another patron looking for a particular type of material.

Examining a book truck of material which has been returned, or actually re-shelving material, will show what authors and titles are popular.

Library staff may also develop their own indexes to assist in readers' advisory. Special index files may be developed for series and sequels, by name of detective, by locale, etc. Annotations may be included for individual titles.

Another suggestion is to be aware of what the community uses as a source for information about reading material. Patrons may request material that they have heard about on a radio or television talk show, or which was the basis for a movie or television mini-series.



Tools for readers' advisory

While readers' advisory tools are very important, they cannot be relied on exclusively, and are meant to be used only as guides. The titles they list may not always be appropriate for the collection and with hundreds of new books published every year they become dated quickly. Some tools which can assist in readers' advisory include:

Public library catalog, Children's catalog and Fiction catalog. N.Y: H.W. Wilson.

The ***Public Library catalog*** includes mainly non-fiction material arranged according to broad Dewey Decimal Classification numbers with author and title indexes. The ***Children's catalog*** includes both non-fiction and fiction titles. The ***Fiction catalog***, arranged alphabetically by the surname of the author, includes brief plot summaries and review excerpts.

Husband, Janet. ***Sequels: An annotated guide to novels in series.*** 2nd edition. Chicago: American Library Association, 1990.

The book puts series titles in order and gives a brief summary of each series. Only materials for adults or young adults are included.

Rosenberg, Betty and Diane Tixier Herald. ***Genreflecting: A guide to reading interests in genre fiction.*** 3rd ed. Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1991.

The authors analyze theme and types of genre fiction (western, thriller, romance, science fiction, fantasy, and horror). Lists of representative authors and titles for each sub-genre are provided and useful reference works are suggested.

Saricks, Joyce G. and Nancy Brown. ***Readers' advisory service in public libraries.*** Chicago: American Library Association, 1993.

The authors detail ways to determine the appeal of a book so that similar books can be found.

Barron, Neil, et al. ***What do I read next? A reader's guide to current genre fiction.*** Detroit: Gale Research, 1992.

This annual publication, which includes mass market material, describes each title under headings such as 'Story type'; 'Time period'; 'Locale'; 'Other books by the author; and 'Other books you might like'.

Olderr, Steven. ***Mystery Index: Subjects, settings and sleuths of the 10,000 titles.*** Chicago: American Library Association, 1987.

This publication includes books that may be in a public library collection. The items are indexed by title, subject and setting, and characters.

A list of French language readers' advisory tools can be found on the reverse side of this ***Sourcebook***. Tools for children's material are listed in the ***Sourcebook*** entitled ***Children's services***.



The best way to help a reader find the right book is through personal contact. There are a number of other techniques for calling people's attention to particular types of books. These techniques have been grouped together under the heading "passive readers' advisory". It would include labelling the spine of a book, shelving material in separate collection, providing booklists and displays.

Genre labels

Another way of helping patrons find books which they might enjoy is to label the spines. The labels are used to designate the genre or category of the book, for example, mystery, science fiction, biography.

The problem with marking the genre or category is that the task is not always easy. If a category is too broad, the section may become too large to fulfill its promotional purposes. If the category is too narrow, there may be complaints from patrons who feel that they keep missing titles that, according to them, should be there. If the staff is not knowledgeable about a particular genre or category, it may be difficult to assign labels, especially to titles written by the same author but which fall into different genres.

Shelf arrangement

In most public libraries, the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system is used to organize the collection. However, when it comes to fiction, the DDC classification numbers for fiction material are ignored and the material is arranged alphabetically by the surname of the author. In some libraries, the fiction collection has been subdivided into certain types of popular fiction. For instance, the subdivisions could be mysteries, romance, historical fiction, science fiction, fantasy, westerns, or short stories.

By dividing a collection in this way, access is made easier for users who are devoted to certain types of popular fiction. One disadvantage of this arrangement, however, is that authors who write general fiction, and mysteries or romances may be found in several places in the library.

In some libraries, certain popular topical categories of non-fiction have been moved into special display areas. The categories most often chosen for this type of special display are biography, and child care and parenting.



Booklists and bookmarks

Booklists are one way to highlight the collection and appeal to certain patrons. Prepared booklists can be found in a number of sources including professional library journals such as *Booklist* or *Unabashed Librarian*. Often these lists can be reproduced with permission or purchased in a reprint form. Booklists can be posted on the library bulletin board under a heading such as 'Best seller list'.

A good way to present short booklists is through bookmarks. Commercially-produced bookmarks are also available from a number of sources. For example, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation (formerly Culture and Communications) usually produces a bookmark listing the Trillium Book Award finalists.

Booklists and bookmarks can also be created in-house. They should, however, look as professional as possible. The name of the library should appear on any bookmarks or brochures which are produced by the library. A variety of samples of material produced in-house using desktop publishing software called PageMaker 4.0, a microcomputer and a laser printer appear at the back of this *Sourcebook*.

(Sample 1: Bookmark: Fiction)

(Sample 2: Bookmark: Non-fiction)

(Sample 3: Booklist)

Patrons will appreciate having lists which highlight locally-available titles. The subject can be as broad as "generational sagas" or as narrow as "Ontario writers". A good number of titles for a booklist is 12 to 15 titles. When annotations are provided, the reader has more clues about the plot of the book. Annotations should include the main characters, setting and the storyline of the book in one to two sentences.

One of the simplest techniques for calling a person's attention to books is to suggest another title which is similar to the title they requested. For example, "If you liked Agatha Christie, you will enjoy reading this book by Sue Grafton". While some people can remember the names of authors with a similar style, a written list can be helpful. These lists highlight a popular author and give the reader similar authors. Also patrons have something that they can use over several visits to the library as they work their way down the list of suggested titles.



Displays

Topical displays work very well in public libraries. An effective display of materials is another way to help people to find books, especially those who prefer to find books by browsing rather than asking the staff.

The subject should be broad enough that there is sufficient material in the collection to keep the display working. The material can be fiction or non-fiction. Common library displays include “books into movies”, “local history”, “home improvement/renovation”, “gardening”, and “crafts”. Often special holidays are used as display themes, for instance, St. Patrick’s Day or Remembrance Day. For St. Patrick’s Day display, for example, all of the material might be green in colour or all could be for or about Irish people.

Displays can also be used to highlight material for young adults and children -- either fiction or non-fiction materials.

A good way to promote **new** titles is to use them in a library display. In some libraries, the new book display is a fixture in the library, with the titles constantly changing, but the display signs always stays in the same place. Patrons know where to look for new titles.

The display does not have to be restricted to material in print format. If audio or videorecordings are part of the library’s collection, they can be added to the display.

Limitation

A word of caution: While library staff may view a topical display as the rotating promotion of material, the users often view it as an endorsement. It is important, therefore, to plan the display carefully, using intellectual freedom principles. When a topic may be controversial, displaying a broad spectrum of viewpoints is important. If patrons are allowed to borrow material from the display, a list of the material which had been included in the original display should be posted. That way, if all of the titles representing a certain viewpoint are in circulation, the display will not seem biased.



Location

Displays in libraries resemble, in many ways, retail merchandising. In a retail store, strategic spaces are used to focus client interest, to lead the client unassisted to materials of interest and to stimulate impulse choices. In a library, the strategic spaces would be the first 20 feet of visible space upon entering the library, the ends of the stacks, and any other high-traffic areas. The area on and around the circulation desk is another natural spot for a display of reading material. Patrons will be able to see material as soon as they enter the library, or as they are leaving the library they might spot another good title.

A bulletin board can be placed near the book display. As patrons are looking at the display, the information on the bulletin board is nearby and clearly visible. The bulletin board could display community events or library-related information and news.

Front covers usually sell a book, especially mass market paperback books. In a display of materials, as many books as possible should be placed facing out. The display area should also be kept well stocked. Patrons won't select books if there are too few or too many facing them all at once.

A display should not be left up too long. Unless the display is "recommended books" or "new books" in which the selection is always changing, a month is about the limit to maintain interest.

Book talks and discussion groups

Unlike an informal discussion with one patron about a particular book, a book talk is a formal presentation to a group. The aim is to get the participants to read the work or to find out how they liked a particular book they have already read. A book talk for an adult group usually involves a description of the author's background, the relationship between this book and any others by the author, any awards won, the basic plot, the setting and time period (if appropriate), the characters, what the critics thought of it, and what the presenter thought of it.

A book discussion programme is another way to help people find out about books. Such a programme could be led by the participants or led by the library staff. They usually involve reading and discussing a particular book or type of book but could also involve bringing in an expert on the subject to add to the discussion.



As services in libraries are automated, new technology has allowed the library to provide an enhanced readers' advisory service.

Enhanced catalogue records

Non-fiction materials have traditionally been assigned subject headings thereby allowing access to the information through the author, title and the subject of the book. A number of libraries in Ontario are working to improve access to their fiction collection by enhancing the entries in the library catalogue.

In the past, most library catalogues contained one author and one title card for a fiction title. Enriched bibliographic records can have subject headings or keywords which describe the genre, setting, character or topic of each fiction title. For instance,

- ❑ a sample topical heading could be "Women detectives--Fiction"
- ❑ sample characters "Jane Marple" and "Charlie Chan"
- ❑ sample settings could be "Toronto" and "Mars"

Enriched entries means, for example, that a patron could locate entries in the library catalogue for both a biography and a fictional account of the life of Elizabeth I. Patrons could locate entries for books about how to look after a dog as well as a fiction book about a dog.

The process of enriching records is cumbersome, and yet, each improvement helps the catalogue user to find reading material on or about a particular area of interest. It is also possible to indicate other features about a title, for example, whether a particular title has won an literary award or is a "most requested" book. Entries for the name of a fiction series also help to improve access to the material.

Customized lists

Lists of materials can be produced from an automated catalogue if it is equipped with a printer. While lists can be compiled using a card catalogue, it is time-consuming and sometimes inaccurate. Using the automated catalogue, all the titles held by the library by a patron's favourite author, for example, can be printed directly from the bibliographic database. The patron has an accurate list and can check off the titles as they are read or place reserves on the titles which have not yet been read.



Computer networks

Electronic mail, or E-mail, is now being used by readers as a forum for the review, discussion and recommendation of books. These types of discussions can be monitored using a microcomputer, modem and communication software, perhaps available through the library. E-mail is a good way to learn about books and can also be used to post local questions and answers.

In an increasing number of communities, computer networks called FreeNets are available. These community computer networks can be used like E-mail to learn about genres, discuss books and to post readers' advisory questions.

Library staff often engage in various passive readers' advisory activities such as booktalking, setting up displays and special events or creating special booklists. While all of these techniques do help readers find materials they like, they do not substitute for the direct, personal readers' advisory help from the staff.

Armed with information about the library's collection and other resources, the staff acting as reader's advisors can try to match the right books to the right person. This statement applies equally to **adults, young adults** and **children**. The focus of readers' advisory work should be personal reading recommendations given to individuals. For instance, in a small library or community branch, it is possible to ask "Hello Mrs. X, did you enjoy reading this -- I think you would also enjoy reading this other book?"

If personal suggestions about library materials prove successful, then library patrons may return for more. These recommendations will satisfy an interest and may gradually expand it. With some suggestions, for example, young readers may move from the Hardy Boys type of fiction to more sophisticated books in plot, theme and language. Introducing new ideas, subjects and books allows library patrons to discover fresh ideas, in particular books that they had not thought of.

The measure of success in readers' advisory is not that the reader walks away with a pile of books, but rather, that the reader perceives, based on the service received, that the library is a place where they can talk about books and obtain suggestions and resources for their reading needs. Readers' advisory is a useful service for library users -- and by advertising that this service is provided, other readers in the community may be attracted to the library.



Samples

1. Bookmark: Fiction titles
2. Bookmark: Non-fiction titles
3. Booklist