The Reference Interview
Connecting in Person and in Cyberspace

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The Reference Interview through Time and Space
Kathleen Kluegel

“Good afternoon, this is a reference librarian. May I help you?” Variations on this greeting have been uttered by librarians for over a century as the first step in the reference interview. And over that century, thousands upon thousands of people have been able to find the information they need with the assistance of the reference librarian, children’s services librarian, reader’s advisory librarian, or other user services librarian.

During that century, the modes of access to an information professional have increased in number and diverged into many communication channels. The amount of information available has multiplied thousands-fold. But when one looks at the fundamentals, some basic questions arise. The profession must ask itself what has changed in the interaction beyond the communication media. Are the patrons who are asking questions in 2002 different in kind or character from the ones who were asking questions in 1952? Have the goals of the reference interview changed since 1932? Is the reference interview still necessary?

For some reference librarians, doing reference work without a properly conducted interview would be similar to trying to drink tea without a cup. One imagines that it might be possible but feels no desire to put the notion to a test. For other reference librarians, reference on the fly—that is, responding to the question as posed—is as natural as Rollerblading; a skill that one spends some time learning but which then allows you to be faster and more responsive.

In the pieces that follow, Catherine Sheldrick Ross, dean of the faculty of information and media studies at the University of Western Ontario and Jana Ronan, interactive reference coordinator, RefeXpress, at the University of Florida address the topic “The Reference Interview: Connecting in Person and in Cyberspace.” These authors look at the role of the reference interview in the more traditional reference encounter and in the virtual realms of Web-based reference services.

In their reaction pieces, Kathleen Kern, reference librarian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and David Tyckson, head of reference, California State University at Fresno, share their perspectives on the reference interview in the context of the Ross and Ronan pieces.

The 2002 RUSA President’s Program Committee—Kathleen Kluegel, Richenda Wilkinson, Gary Cornwell, Judith Smith, and Carol Tobin, RUSA president—invite readers to explore these issues with the authors.

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Kathleen Kluegel is English Librarian and Associate Professor of Library Administration at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She was also Chair of the 2002 RUSA President’s Program Committee. Catherine Sheldrick Ross is Professor and Dean, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, The University of Western Ontario. Jana Ronan is Interactive Reference Coordinator, RefeXpress, at the University of Florida. Kathleen Kern is Reference Librarian at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. David Tyckson is Head of Reference at California State University at Fresno.
The Reference Interview: Why It Needs to Be Used in Every (Well, Almost Every) Reference Transaction

Catherine Sheldrick Ross

I have been thinking about the reference interview a lot recently. I’ve had to. I’ve been proofreading a book that my coauthors—Patricia Downey and Kirsti Nilsen—and I have just finished called Conducting the Reference Interview. And yes, we do think the reference interview is important.

But one thing I’ve noticed is that when I tell people—ordinary people, that is, and not librarians—about this book, they say, “The reference interview? What’s that?” “Well,” I say, “it’s when somebody needs some information for something they are trying to do in their life. But they’re not sure where to find it. So they ask a library professional for help.” “Oh, that,” they say. But they don’t really get it.

That’s because the work that librarians do in the reference interview is invisible work. Two researchers—anthropologist Bonnie Nardi and librarian Vicki O’Day—teamed up to write a very interesting book called Information Ecologies. In this book, they describe librarians as a keystone species—one of the species in an ecology whose loss leads to the extinction of other species in the ecosystem.

Nardi and O’Day say, “We believe that the diverse services available in the library are still important and useful, and we believe that the increase in online information presents more opportunities to leverage the skills of professional librarians than ever before. Through our fieldwork in libraries, we have identified librarians as a keystone species.” They argue that the work of librarians is not well understood (or appreciated) because so much of it is invisible work. One of the most valuable and unrecognized services that they identified is “to help clients understand their own needs—a kind of information therapy.”

What are they talking about, of course, is the reference interview, a creative, problem-solving process that is collaborative. Few library users, even experienced ones, have ever heard of the reference interview or know that they are being interviewed. A well-conducted reference interview usually is a very short exchange. The librarian may start with an acknowledgment (“Health information, un-huh.”) followed by a one or two strategic open questions (“What particular aspect of health information are you interested in?” or “What would you like to find out?”). And of course a lot of hard listening.

But through the questions they answer during this brief process, people are able to clarify in their own minds what their question really is. This narrowing and clarifying process is most evident in situations such as school assignments where the user often has no idea of how much is available in a particular area. The librarian’s questions help the user narrow a topic (e.g., plant adaptations) to a manageable topic for a science project (e.g., the carnivorous diet of the pitcher plant as an adaptation to life in an acidic bog).

A good reference interview is a collaboration. User and librarian are equal partners in the search, with different areas of expertise. The user is the expert in the question itself and knows how the question arose, what necessary information is missing in her understanding of the topic, and how the information will be used. The staff member is the expert on the library system and the organization and retrieval of information. Both need to work together.

At the end of the process, the library professional and user, by working together, have achieved a new understanding that neither could have arrived at individually. However the process may seem so effortless and natural that the user may not recognize the skill and knowledge that is involved.

But Is a Reference Interview Really Needed?

If you look at the library literature, you see that some respected authorities claim that a reference interview is needed only sometimes or only under certain circumstances—and definitely not for directional queries or for ready-reference questions. They will tell you that most users know what they want and their questions are pretty straightforward. Patrick Wilson recommends following the face value rule. Take the user’s initial question at face value—if the user asks for the wrong thing (for example if she asks, “Where is your health section?” when she really meant “Can you give me the contact information for a local support group for breast cancer-survivors?”) that’s the user’s problem. They should do more background work on how to ask questions in libraries before they start.

The drawback to following the face value rule is that the user doesn’t get good service. While it is true that some users are able to ask an initial question that explains exactly what they are looking for, we know from a study conducted by Downey and Michell that about 40 percent of users do not—especially those who are unfamiliar with how libraries work. For these novice users especially, the reference interview is a crucial tool, but for all users it enhances the likelihood of receiving a helpful answer. In short, it is important to give every user the chance to elaborate on the query—if it turns to have been unnecessary, then no harm done.

Research increasingly has drawn attention to the complex nature of human interaction and the importance of communication. One very important contribution to this area has been Marie Radford’s The Reference Encounter, which focuses on the relational dimension of interpersonal communication. The relational dimensions of the reference transaction are the feelings of the participants and their attitudes toward one another and toward the reference encounter itself. Radford discovered that librarians, especially when discussing successful transactions, were apt to talk about issues of content such as the amount or
quality of information available on particular topics. In contrast, users almost always attributed the success or failure of a reference transaction to relational factors—they said the librarian was "nice and helpful and pleasant" or "went out of her way" or contrariwise was "not very patient" or was "really sour."  

From reading the work of researchers like Pat Dewdney, Mary Jo Lynch, and Marie Radford, who have done field research on what actually happens at the reference desk and from my own research on the reference transaction, I am willing to make a bold claim: a reference interview (the asking of one or more questions intended to discover the user's information needs) must be conducted in every transaction. Users should be offered the invitation to expand or clarify. To the objection that librarians are too busy, I argue that some additional seconds spent in finding out the user's real information need saves time in the long run. Less time is spent: (1) by library staff looking for the wrong thing, (2) within the library system processing book transfers and interlibrary loans for the wrong materials, and (3) by e-reference staff in typing out answers that direct users to the wrong electronic sources.

I am convinced that the institutions that will survive into the twenty-first century and beyond are those that serve their clients and give them the help they need. If libraries don't provide helpful information services, users will turn to other, more service-oriented, service-providers.

- almost anybody who asks what seem to be obvious questions about how the new system works.

- For this assignment, students did three things:
  - produced a detailed step-by-step account of exactly what happened in the reference transaction;
  - reflected on their experience by summarizing which aspects of their experience they had found helpful and which aspects they had found unhelpful; and
  - filled out a questionnaire evaluating their experience as a user of reference service.

We have reported the findings from the library visit study over the years in our articles "Flying a Light Aircraft," "Negative Closure," and "Has the Internet Changed Anything in Reference?"  

Here are a few highlights of what we found. Many of the students who reported their experiences as users returned to class with admiring stories of a reference librarian's bravura performance, expertly juggling a number of questions at once. Class members talked about librarians who not only helped them find just the right sources and information but also included them in the search, so that next time they as library users would have the skills to do it themselves. But there were still 35 percent of library users who would not declare themselves willing to return to the particular staff member who had helped them.

In unsuccessful transactions, common criticisms were that the librarian "didn't listen," "just assumed I wanted X and cut me off," "didn't seem interested/didn't smile/didn't look at me," "looked exasperated by my question," "referred me right away to another library when I was sure that the answer was right there, if only I could find it," or "put me off by saying, 'I suppose you've already done the obvious and consulted the Urdu-English dictionary.'"

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The Library Visit

The material that I will be reporting next comes from an ongoing research study that examines the reference transaction from the users' perspective. In the early 1990s, Patricia Dewdney and I developed the library visit study out of what was, in the first instance, a teaching exercise designed to help beginning reference students understand what it feels like to be a library user.

As an assignment in the basic reference course of the MLIS program at The University of Western Ontario, students were asked to think of a question that matters to them personally and to ask it in a library of their choice. We use this assignment because we want beginning librarians to have a vivid sense of the experience of being a user. And we want them to remember this experience later as professionals when they encountered the so-called bad-guy user—you know the ones I mean:

- members of the public who seem to be asking silly questions;
- people who don't use information resources intended for them;
- professors and students who don't want to learn about indexes appropriate to their fields;
- students who don't want to bother about information unless it can be found on the Internet; and

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Four Common Problems

The Without-Speaking-She-Began-to-Type Maneuver

In about one quarter of the library visit transactions, users reported that as soon as they asked their initial question, the staff member silently started to perform some mysterious activity, without asking any questions or providing any explanations. Most often, the silent activity was typing key words from the user's initial question into a catalog search statement. After encountering so many observations in the library visit accounts along the lines of, "She didn't speak to me after I asked my question but just started punching the keys" or "He turned to the computer without explaining to me what he was doing," we began to think of this response as the without-speaking-she-began-to-type maneuver.

Quite possibly the staff member was being very efficient in executing a search strategy. But the user doesn't
know that and isn’t learning anything about the search process. And of course the staff member has started searching before doing anything to clarify the real question.

In public libraries especially, the following scenario was a common occurrence, as reported by users in the library visit study. The user asked an initial question: e.g., Do you have information about best scuba diving spots/information about optical character recognition/books on Richard Wagner. Then, without asking any questions or providing any explanation, the staff member searched the catalog by typing the key words of the user’s initial statement: scuba diving/optical character recognition/Richard Wagner. Unfortunately this routine response prevents the staff member from thinking of other sources, often more appropriate, such as encyclopedia entries, periodical articles, vertical file materials, or Web pages.

The staff member who was asked for information on optical character recognition was unsuccessful at finding anything in the online catalog through a key word search and blamed the topic itself. The user provided this account:

I stood there for several minutes while she searched. I could not see the screen and she did not ask me any questions. The silence grew a little awkward as I watched her mutter and purse her lips as her searches seemed to render negative results. Finally she said, “This may be too technical.”

Bypassing the Reference Interview

Reference interviews are conducted only half the time, a figure that has scarcely varied over twenty-five years of reported research. As we’ve just seen, instead of conducting a reference interview, the staff member often latches on to a key word in the user’s initial query and uses it as a search term in the catalog. Far from saving time, this practice often wastes time.

In the library visit study, a user who had asked for books about Richard Wagner returned to say that none of the books on Wagner contained the desired information. At that point, the librarian discovered belatedly that the user needed a plot synopsis for all of Wagner operas and recommended an opera guide. The librarian admonished, “You could have saved a lot of time if you had just asked for that initially”—a good example of blaming the bad-guy user.

Taking a System-Based Perspective

Even when the library staff member does conduct an interview, a common problem is that too many of the librarian’s questions relate to the library system, not to the context of the user’s information need. My colleague Patricia Dewdney conducted a field study in which she tape-recorded 330 reference interviews in three different public libraries. In the Dewdney transcripts, librarians asked a lot of questions such as, “Did you check the catalog?” “Have you used this index before?” “What were the indexing elements?” “Did you come up with some call numbers?” “Have you checked the 282s?” and “I suppose you’ve checked our circulating collection?” Sometimes these system-based questions were all that they asked.

Why is it a bad idea to take a system perspective? Well, library professionals obviously feel comfortable talking about the system, which is their home ground where they are the experts. They are the ones who know all the acronyms, understand the difference between a bibliography and biography or a keyword and an assigned subject heading, and are very fluent in the specialized vocabulary of information systems. However for many users entering a library is like going into a foreign country, where a foreign language is spoken. So rather than asking users to use the librarian’s language and fit their questions into our systems, we should ask them questions that allow them to describe their information need in their own terms and in their native language.

The Unmonitored Referral

One surprising finding in the library visit study was how often users reported unmonitored referrals. An unmonitored referral is our term for the situation when the reference librarian gives the user a call number or refers the user to a source within the library but does not follow up or check to make sure that the source is not only found but also actually answers the question. The unmonitored referral routine too often follows immediately after the without-speaking-she-began-to-type maneuver described earlier.

In general, the pattern for the unmonitored referral goes something like this. The user starts the reference encounter by asking for information on some topic. Often without conducting a reference interview, the staff member does a catalog search using terms from the user’s initial question, gives the user a call number, points to some shelves, and recommends browsing, saying something along the lines of: “I suggest you just browse the shelf around the call numbers I have given you.” Sometimes the librarian points the user in the right direction but not always.

For example, one user asked for information on cellulitis, which is a skin infection, and was given a call number for a book on unwanted fat. “I found the book (not quite in its right place). It was called Cellulite: Defeat It Through Diet and Exercise.” In another case, a public library user who wanted information on endangered species was told, “Well, they seem to run from 591 to 599” and was given a slip of paper with “591–599” written on it.

An academic library user who wanted the names of five U.S. corporations that had closed their corporate libraries was advised to “try Lexis/Nexis.” When the user asked in what she called her ignorant undergraduate tone, “Lexis/Nexis?” the staff member said, “That’s one of the databases” and departed. The implication is that a list of
call numbers or a URL or the name of the database is all the help to be expected and that users are on their own to sink or swim. That is, instead of providing an answer, the librarian provides a slip of paper and some call numbers. Usually no authors' names or titles are provided, which makes finding the actual book tricky for novices.

We found that in the library visit study, the unmonitored referral was reported in somewhat more than one third of the accounts. When we looked to see what happens after an unmonitored referral, it turns out that some users are able to succeed on their own. But too often they do not and are left feeling dissatisfied. Or they start all over again with a second librarian.

Negative Closure:
Or How to Make Users Go Away

We know, of course, what elements lead to reference success—encouraging, nonverbal communication; a proper reference interview; instruction of the user in using library sources; the use of the follow-up question. So why don’t we see these elements in every transaction? In the article “Negative Closure,” Pat Dewdney and I argue that in part because fewer staff are facing longer lineups of users, a real problem for the system is simply how to process users and get them out of the system one way or another. Of course it’s best to send the user away with a helpful answer.

Highly rated librarians faced with a challenging question show no inclination to give up but instead say things like, “OK, let’s not get discouraged. There are other places we can check.” But less-highly rated librarians too often gave the impression that their goal is to get rid of users. Users made comments such as, “I think she hoped I would be satisfied and leave.” or “I felt she would be glad if I went and found [the materials] for myself.” or “He made it clear that he didn’t want to be bothered with me when I came back to say that the first suggestion hadn’t worked.”

Here are some strategies, apart from providing a helpful answer, for getting rid of the user that we identified in the library visit accounts. We call these strategies negative closure:

- The librarian provides an unmonitored referral.
- The librarian immediately refers the user somewhere else—preferably far away—like another floor within the library itself or to another agency altogether. When asked for information on the relationship between homicide rates and capital punishment, the librarian immediately said, “That would be on the third floor.” The librarian on the third floor said, “Have you tried the criminology library at University X [in another city]?”
- The librarian implies that the user should have done something else first before asking for reference help. In this connection, “Have you checked the catalogue?” or “Have you checked the computer?” were often the first question that the user was asked. Such questions feed into users’ anxiety about asking for help, for as one user wondered, “Was it irresponsible of me to seek assistance without first having done any searching myself?” Another said, “I felt he was rebuking me for asking for help rather than looking for the information myself.”
- The librarian tries to get the user to accept more easily found information instead of the information actually asked for. A user who wanted information on how to make paper was told, “We don’t have too much on paper-making, I think you’ll find more in recycling books” and was given call numbers that led to books on recycling paper and using a blue box.
- The librarian warns the user to expect defeat because the topic is too hard, obscure, large, elusive, or otherwise unpromising. Asked for information on how carnival glass is made, one staff member typed in “carnival” and got sixty entries dealing with carnivals and fairs. She typed in “glass,” found glass manufacturing, and said repressively, “This is quite large.” A user who wanted something on the history of libraries was told by a staff member, presumably not a librarian, “Well I am not very familiar with library science, but I don’t think we have much here on that subject.” This strategy blames the anticipated failure to get an answer on the intractable nature of the question itself rather than on ineffective search skills.
- The librarian signals nonverbally that the transaction is over by tone of voice, by turning away, or by starting another activity. Users said variously: “I knew from the tone of her voice that this was her final offering”; “She was obviously finished with me at this point because she turned away and began shuffling through some papers.”
- The librarian claims that the information is not in the library, is unavailable, or else doesn’t exist at all. When a user presented the initial question, “I need some information on archaeology,” the immediate response was that there was “not much material available at the library on this subject.” In another case, when the user asked for help in finding the names of some fiction writers from Newfoundland, the librarian “registered that this was a very difficult question” and then, without consulting anything, said “that she didn’t think there were any.”
- The librarian tells the user he’s going away to track down a document but then never returns. One user reported that after the librarian said, “I’ll go and see what I can find,” she waited for forty-five minutes but “never saw the man again, neither at the desk nor with the promised document.” Another said, “I waited at the shelf for a while, but she did not come back.” In a variant of this tactic, another staff member advised the user to go home and wait for a call with the requested information, but no one ever called back. Joan Durrance has described this phenomenon as the disappearing librarian.

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There are, of course, well-understood solutions to these problems that I have identified. We all know about the importance of: actually conducting an interview; asking open questions; using inclusion, which is telling the user what you are doing; and asking a follow-up question such as: “If this isn’t what you need, make sure you come back and we’ll try something else.” I’m not going talk about this now, but will end by focusing on what I think is bedrock in the process of providing good service: the willingness to try to understand the user’s perspective. Marie Radford’s study, by the way, demonstrated that librarians often experience a particular reference transaction very differently from the way in which the user experiences it.

Taking a User’s Perspective

One study that helps a lot in understanding the user is a research study conducted by Patricia Dewdney and Gillian Michell called “Mental Models of Information Systems.” This research demonstrates how the users’ initial questions are influenced by their mental model of how libraries work. Dewdney and Michell observed and recorded reference transactions in public libraries, conducted in-depth personal interviews with thirty-three adult public library users who had asked for help from a librarian, and later interviewed these same librarians. Among other questions, both the user and the librarian were asked how hard they thought the question would be at the outset and how hard it actually turned out to be. Here are some of their findings:

Users depend on librarians to help them find the information they need. Even frequent library users do not have a very accurate or complete understanding of how library resources are organized and how to use them. Despite a general willingness to help themselves, they rely heavily on professional librarians to help them cope with this complexity, which is increasing with new information technology.

Complex information needs are presented in small libraries as well as large ones. Even in small branch libraries, people ask difficult reference questions that require staff assistance. It is important for staff to be able to make effective referrals and be knowledgeable about resources in other locations.

Users’ questions appear to be easily answered but often they are difficult. Apparently simple requests, like “Can I look at the city directory?” often mask complex information needs that require a range of resources and often a referral. Neither librarians nor users could initially predict how difficult a question might be to answer. Users in general thought their questions were easier than they in fact turned out to be. Furthermore, users who thought questions had been easy to answer gave the presence of the librarian as the explanation: users thought their questions were easy for the librarians because of the librarians’ skills, knowledge, helpfulness, understanding, and technological abilities.

Nearly half of these questions could not have been answered without the librarian’s help. About 40 percent of these questions probably would not have been answered completely without the help of a professional librarian. One reason is that users often have unreasonable expectations of electronic information systems, e.g., that entering a company name into the public access catalogue will result in information about that company. Even when users are knowledgeable about the library system, unexpected barriers may intervene, such as material that is missing or mis-shelved. If the user’s own strategy does not work, the user may not be able to get an answer unless the librarian is available to suggest alternative strategies.

Users depend heavily on librarians not only to find the information they need but also to find out how to use the system. Users spoke of “learning one new thing each time I come to the library,” usually through instruction by the librarian.

The data repeatedly showed that the librarian is the key to the information seeking process for users. The solution to current stresses on library systems is not to reduce the human element but to make it stronger, more efficient, and more effective. The most important resource of a public or academic library may be the staff who link people with collections, virtual or otherwise. Their findings have implications for the concept of the do-it-yourself, virtual library. One wonders first how many questions go unanswered when users do not come to library staff for help and secondly how many more will go unanswered if remote access becomes the norm. In an era of electronic resources, the role of library as intermediaries between users and information has not diminished—it may actually be even more crucial.

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3. Ibid., 85.
7. Ibid., 76, 80.
The Reference Interview Online

Jana Ronan

One of the biggest challenges in providing reference services in real-time is learning to communicate effectively with remote users and to translate the interpersonal skills used at the physical reference desk into the virtual environment. Library literature abounds with articles and studies on the reference interview in a face-to-face setting, via telephone and e-mail, yet there not been much published concerning working with users online in real-time.

I would like to briefly introduce chat communication norms associated with online communities, then provide you with some suggestions for effective online reference interviewing based on the “RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals.”

At the traditional reference desk, librarians strive to understand a user's need by listening to the spoken question, as well as through attention to what is not verbalized. Seasoned librarians, like psychologists, carefully observe the questioner’s behavior, tone of the user's voice, age, facial expressions, and attitude to establish context. Librarians also use nonverbal communication to project approachability, put patrons at ease, and even in answering questions.

Text-based chat is very different. Chat is an "austere mode of communication," where "there are no changes in voice, no facial expressions, no body language and little if no visual or spatial environment as a context of meaning," according to psychologist John Suler. There is little information about the user beyond the question and the name displayed on the computer screen. Many of the communication techniques that we have codified for use at the physical reference desk simply do not work when online. Because "language does not express the full play of our interpersonal exchanges," chatters "cannot rely upon the conventional systems of interaction if they are to make sense to one another." Even the most skilled reference librarians struggle to answer questions that normally do not pose any difficulty for them in face-to-face encounters because of the newly imposed limitations of communicating solely by the written word.

There are definite conventions for communication and online behavior within chat culture. Librarians can draw upon these in modeling their own online behaviors and techniques for reference interviewing. Some general observations about the characteristics of communication and behavior in text-based chat and instant messaging spaces include:

- Lack of nonverbal cues, such as body language or gestures
- Lack of voice intonation or accents
- Use of emoticons and descriptions of gestures
- Language more like spoken than written
- Fast pace
- Importance of typing skills
- Writing and spelling skills highlighted
- Active involvement of users
- Fluid identity
- Reduced inhibitions

"Most online communities have codes of conduct defining appropriate behavior that have been built up over many years of interacting together." These may be written or unwritten. Many are modeled upon the same social expectations that guide face-to-face interactions. After all, "people do not enter chat rooms as a blank sheet of paper. Rather they take with them internalized social rules for interacting with others as well as experiences in defining face-to-face situations that are used to approximate the nature of chat room situations." One convention that is not immediately obvious is to talk in short sentences or a couple of words at a time. Abbreviations are also used to speed up the pace of the conversation. Popular abbreviations include BTW for "by the way," BRB for "be right back," and LOL for "laughing out loud." Many chat users use misspelling as a type of shorthand or to indicate slang, as in "ok," or the shorter "k" for "okay." Another example is "kewl" to indicate a distinctive pronunciation for the word, "cool." In real-time spaces where three or more users are chatting, the pace of the conversation is fast and it is hard to read long missives. Users' postings are constantly rolling off the screen as new responses come from the other participants. Even in one-on-one situations, communiqués are best kept brief. This is because it's hard to read comments longer than two lines, and because the recipient experiences dead time while long messages are being composed.

In a face-to-face situation, tone of voice and nonverbal cues signal when the speaker is winding down and the next person can interject; it's rude to start to talk before the person that is speaking is done. In chat, it's hard to tell when someone is finished commenting, so exchanges are not limited by this rule. This is in large part in response to the nature of the software. "In most chat systems, including internet relay chat (IRC), multiple-user dialogues (MUDs), instant messaging, Web-based chat, courseware and call center software, transmission of your comments is not operating in a true two-way synchronous mode where you can watch character by character what is being keyed in by your friend at the other end. Rather, there is 'dead time' on