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...gives a voice to the new generation of library and information professionals. If you have any suggestions or topics for this column, please contact the column coordinator, Kate Watson, [kwatson@usc.edu.au](mailto:kwatson@usc.edu.au).

# No such thing as a stupid question?

Working in a regional University Library, I spend most of my time staffing the information desk. I find this work thoroughly rewarding. However, as a new graduate I was surprised at the nature of some of the questions I get. I was expecting more complex reference queries, which I do get, but recently I've been monitoring and tallying some of the more entertaining queries as well. This keeps things just that little bit more interesting, and I would like to share my top five queries with you (in no particular order):

1. "Where are the books, I thought this was a library?" In response to this delicately articulated query, I want to reply: "Well, yes, this is 'a library', but I don't understand this term 'books'?" The entrance to the University of the Sunshine Coast Library is in the information commons, a vibrant space filled with computer workstations. I can appreciate that at first glance it does look like an attractive computer lab, but it is still frustrating when people assume that a library is only a building filled with books.
2. "Can you help me locate a book?" "Sure"... "Great! I don't know the title or anything, but it's yellow." How do you respond to that? If the patron asked for a green book, I would have probably sent them to the botany section, but yellow is harder to find. Without psychic abilities there isn't a lot you can do for someone who only knows the colour of the book. I know this is a classic library query and that across my career it is something that I'm sure to be asked more than once, but it's still a favourite. In this instance, with some further investigation and my expert reference interview skills, I discovered the general subject area, and we actually found the book.
3. "Can you do my assignment for me?" "No!" I honestly believe if they knew what I would come up with they would not even consider asking me to do their assignments. Poor grammar, too many commas, and chocolate stains on the paper don't exactly make for the best assignments. However, I am nothing if not thorough: I would probably answer their assignment question, and then move on to a topic I was actually interested in and wax lyrical for a considerable amount of time on that. One thing is

certain; they would not ask me to write their assignment a second time.

4. On the telephone: "Hello, University of the Sunshine Coast Library, this is Sarah, can I help you?" "Hello, is the Library open?" Well yes, it is, hence my answering the telephone. This is a favourite of mine and my colleagues; it never fails to make us laugh. I'm not sure if the problem is people's poor use of English, or an inability to rethink their question quickly enough when you answer the telephone, but I wish that they would sort it out before calling. An easy 'I was wondering what your opening hours are today/this week' or 'I was just calling to see if you were open' or 'Great, you are open! I'll see you there shortly' would suffice.
5. "Excuse me, do you work here?" When I am asked this while sitting at the information desk, wearing a business suit and a name tag identifying me as a staff member, clearly helping people and possibly working on a document, I feel like saying "No!". This is one of my biggest hurdles as a new graduate, to get recognition as a real flesh-and-blood librarian by the patrons. If I am asked this question while roving I am never flustered, but at the information desk I always think 'what else would I be doing here?' I make sure that I give these people just a little more assistance, so that next time they remember I *am* a librarian, with specialist skills and knowledge.

I realise that my favourite queries are reasonably standard questions for librarians, but they have each affected me and influenced the way I look at my job. No one of these is a single favourite, but it is always useful to reflect upon what information people need, because I am grateful they come and ask. I think that my query pattern identification is coming along nicely, and it is possible I will have to add some more query types onto our official stats sheets just to see how things go. ■

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pathways and possibilities

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