

Answers at Your Fingertips

Live Internet Reference for Teachers, Students, Parents, and Library Media Specialists

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While the following scenario is fiction, it could be (and often is) a reality for California school districts.

Susie Jones, a fifth-grade teacher, plans to take her class to her district computer lab so that they can learn to do Internet research for their reports on the solar system. Several evenings before the field trip, she Googles “solar system” and “planet” and locates many sites with pictures and information about the solar system, but finds far fewer on planets.

Susie remembers one of her colleagues mentioning AskNow, California’s live-chat reference service, so she types “AskNow” into her search box. Within minutes of logging in to <www.asknow.org>, she is chatting with a librarian. Together, they try various search terms and assess links in “Librarians Index to the Internet,” her school library’s subscription databases and OPAC.

Satisfied with her results, Susie retrieves the transcript from her e-mail when the session is over. Using the transcript of the session and the resources she located earlier, she creates a word processed lesson plan and pathfinder that she e-mails to the school library media specialist (SLMS) Bob Davis.

The next day Bob modifies the pathfinder to include links to report writing, Web site evaluation tools, and additional library media resources. He logs on to AskNow to further clarify how his students can use AskNow most effectively. Then he creates a link to the local public library’s page containing the AskNow link, adding some tips for using the service to the pathfinder Web page he has completed. Finally, he alerts Suzie, the fifth-grade teacher, that the page is ready for use and suggests ways to continue their collaboration by scheduling her class into the library media center and to prepare them for this unit.

An ideal scenario? Yes, but a reality, too, for many SLMSs in California. California’s AskNow is

a project of the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System <www.mcls.org>, supported by Federal ISTA funding and administered by the California State Library. AskNow librarians answer questions for anyone who lives or works in California, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. AskNow is a collaboration of public, academic, and school libraries whose librarians have teamed up to provide online service via live chat to help Californians use their library’s suite of databases, the library catalog, and the Internet. For particularly thorny questions or inquiries requiring extensive knowledge of resources for art, business, medicine, law, and local history, the AskNow librarian will refer the question to researchers (see figure 1) or subject-expert librarians. In addition, students can get free Live Homework Help from online tutors from 1–8 P.M. every day in English, and 1–8 P.M. Saturday through Thursday in Spanish.

Library Media Specialists: Preparing Students for Live Chat Services

All of the virtual reference services have struggled with what we call the “class bomb.” These include surprise whole-class visits for virtual service, no advance troubleshooting of school filters and database licensing, or poorly prepared (or unprepared) students who cannot form clear and concise research questions. The SLMS can add value to his or her own work, develop opportunities for later collaboration, and help a class and teacher get the most from a virtual reference service by preplanning their visit based on an understanding of how live chat services work.

QandANJ’s “Site Visit” link on its main page <www.qandanj.org/schools.htm> asks teachers, SLMSs, or home schooling coordinators to submit a form to alert them to group use so that they can schedule extra librarians to handle the load. In preparation, the contact

visit
KQ on the
WEB

A full-text, hyperlinked
version of this article is
available on the KQWeb at
www.ala.org/aasl/kqweb

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California’s live online
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person should refer the teachers and students to the subject links at the bottom of the page.

Rob Beattie, SLMS at the Benjamin Franklin Intermediate School in Daly City, California, has incorporated AskNow into his library instruction for many class assignments. Prior to a virtual reference assignment, he suggests that school librarians:

- Encourage their students to provide information about their assignment at the beginning of the interview. Students should look at the pathfinder on the school library's Web site and be familiar with the information in their textbooks before logging onto the service. Students should have a clear idea of what they are looking for and should be prepared to tell the librarian where else they have looked and what they need that isn't on the library's Web page, in their textbooks, and in other books they've consulted. They should be expected to compare what they receive from the librarian with what they already have.
- Provide ongoing instruction in how to ask good questions. Students must refine their question so that the virtual reference dialog will help them fill in what they don't understand.
- Train students in patience and good manners. They need to know that the live online reference session with a librarian will be slower than independent Web searches.
- Control the number of students who access AskNow simultaneously. For example, you can distribute three index cards with the URL and the library e-mail address, with the understanding that only those students with cards sign in at the same time.

During busy times even three students can overwhelm a service. Teach students to expect that the online librarian may offer to send a response in an e-mail. (Beattie has the e-mail sent to him at the school library and then he prints them for the students.)

Many AskNow libraries have a special link or AskNow entry point on their kids', teens', or homework pages. Direct them there so that they may receive age-appropriate assistance.

Figure 1

Sample E-mail Response from an AskNow Librarian to a Student

Kevin, a high school student, posed this question to AskNow:

Where can i [sic] find books or websites on a question: To what extent and in what ways did nationalist tensions in the Balkans between 1870 and 1914 contribute to the outbreak of the First World War?

Because the on duty AskNow librarians were extremely busy at the moment, they clarified the request and offered to email Kevin more information. When he got home from school and checked his e-mail, he found this answer from an AskNow librarian:

Dear Kevin,

Here is an online resource on your topic:

- Historyteacher.net <<http://www.historyteacher.net/>> by Ms. Susan M. Pojer of Horace Greeley High School <<http://www.ccsd.ws/hg/HGweb/gweb5/home.php>> Chappaqua NY
- A.P. History Topics & Web Links Page <<http://www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/EHAP=TOpics&WebLinksPage.htm>>
- World War I <<http://www.historyteacher.net/APEuroCourse/WebLinks/WebLinks-WorldWar1.htm>>
- Web Links—Ninth item "The Balkan causes of World War I"—Lecture by Stephen W. Soward <<http://www.lib.msu.edu/sowards/balkan/lect15.htm>>

This is a list of book titles available on your topic at the Alameda County Library:

- Assassination in Sarajevo: the trigger for World War I / Stewart Ross c2001
- Causes and consequences of World War I / Stewart Ross c1998
- Emma Goldman / David Waldstreicher c1990
- The origins and legacies of World War I [by] D. F. Fleming 1968
- The origins of World War One 1970
- The origins of World War I / Stewart Ross 1989
- Remembrance / Theresa Breslin 2002
- World War I: the rest of the story and how it affects you today, 1870 to 1935 / by Richard J. Maybu c2002
- World War I: a concise military history of "the war to end all wars" and the road to the war

I have also sent you 2 documents by e-mail on this topic. Hopefully this will provide enough information for you. Please feel free to contact us again.

Sincerely,

Ed G., Reference Librarian

Ray VanDiest, librarian for the Shasta Union High School District in Redding, California, answers questions online on Tuesdays from 11 A.M.–noon. In return for his one hour of service, the students using the district Web site have a librarian on tap 24/7. VanDiest is particularly focused on having both students and teachers learn to discern authoritative information, detect intellectual dishonesty, and know how to find answers. VanDiest includes AskNow in his information literacy workshops for teachers. As a benefit of participating in AskNow, VanDiest has access to AskNow's meeting or conference feature, where he can teach several teachers online simultaneously.

Eileen Harden and Mary Ann Fornataro are experienced online educators who staff

Florida's Ask-a-Librarian service. As distance educators in Florida's Virtual School, a statewide, Internet-based public school with a rigorous online curriculum for middle and high school students, they are proficient at live chat and pushing Web pages. According to Diana Sachs, trainer and coordinator for Florida's Ask-a-Librarian service, online students embrace their service.

Collaborating with Your Public Librarian

Librarians such as Holly Sammons of the Onondaga County Public Library in Syracuse, New York, and Carol Yuke of the Contra Costa County Library in Pleasant Hill, California, are among the many public librarians who have

demonstrated their online reference services to school librarians, teachers, and teen advisory boards. If your state has live chat reference service, call your local public library's reference department and ask if the librarians staff the service. Then invite them to a faculty meeting, your school library media center, or a PTA meeting to demonstrate the service.

Before her presentation to a middle school, public librarian Sammons asked for advice on the DIG-REF electronic discussion list for virtual reference librarians. These are some of the tips for school librarians that she got from demonstrators who have worked with teachers and SLMSs. Before the demonstration, the school librarian should:

- Check that a fast Internet connection is available and that the school's firewalls, filters, and pop-up blockers are configured to allow the service. Invite the demonstrator to arrive early to test the equipment. Be prepared to provide directions and an escort if the person is not familiar with the campus.
- Set up and troubleshoot an Internet-connected computer with a projector so that the students, teachers, and parents will be able to watch the demonstration.
- Brief the demonstrator on current curriculum-related topics to the demonstrator in advance.
- Have a student volunteer develop a question (rather than key words like "typhoon" or "plant life Africa.") to type in as a model for other students.
- Remind the students that they will be communicating with a person, not a machine.
- Remind the virtual librarians of the time, date, and topic of your presentation.
- Check your database contracts to see if the demonstrator can push a range of resources, including journal articles, encyclopedia entries, books, and Web sites.

AskNow Project Training

All virtual references like California's AskNow, New Jersey's QandANJ, Maryland's AskUsNow,

and Florida's Ask-a-Librarian welcome SLMSs to join their virtual staffing. To learn the software and reference skills in a chat environment, you need a minimum of four to eight hours training and practice. You will learn to log onto the software, send chat, push Web pages, and research articles in databases, sending them in accordance with the libraries' and projects' vendor agreements. School librarians report that they enjoy contributing to this community service, improving their own reference skills, and seeing the benefits to their students and teachers. ●

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Selected Resources

California

AskNow, <www.asknow.org>. California's AskNow is a live online interactive reference service, available 24/7.

24/7 Reference, <www.247ref.org>. Take the flash demo tour on the home page to see how a sample session works.

Shasta Union High School District, Ray VanDeist, <<http://library.suhsd.net>>

Benjamin Franklin Intermediate School Library and Resource Center, Rob Beattie, <www.jsd.k12.ca.us/bf/bflibrary/index.htm>

Florida

Ask-a-Librarian—Florida's Virtual Reference Service <www.askalibrarian.org>

Ask a Librarian—Florida's Virtual Reference Information page, <http://info.askalibrarian.org>

Florida Virtual School, <www.flvs.net>

Maryland

AskUsNow, <www.askusnow.info/about>

Baltimore County Public Schools Librarians Information Network for Essential Curriculum (LINE) Parent Resources, <www.bcps.org/offices/lis/resources/parentres.html>. Link on resource page for 24/7 live chat help through Maryland's AskUsNow, plus resources for parents.

New Jersey

QandANJ, <www.qandanj.org>; link for class visits, <www.qandanj.org/schools.htm>

Bergen County Technical Schools, Hackensack N.J., <www.bergen.org/Reference/web_edu.htm>. Links to Library of Congress' QuestionPoint on its page of resources.

Washington

Statewide Virtual Reference Project, Buff Hirko, Project Coordinator, <www.secstate.wa.gov/library/libraries/projects/virtualRef>

Kent School District link to chat service, <www.kent.k12.wa.us/parents>. Connects to a link to the King County Library live chat page.

King County Ask a Librarian, <www.kcls.org/aall/pickerpage.cfm>

AP History Site

Historyteacher.net, Susan M. Pojer, Horace Greeley High School, <www.historyteacher.net>