



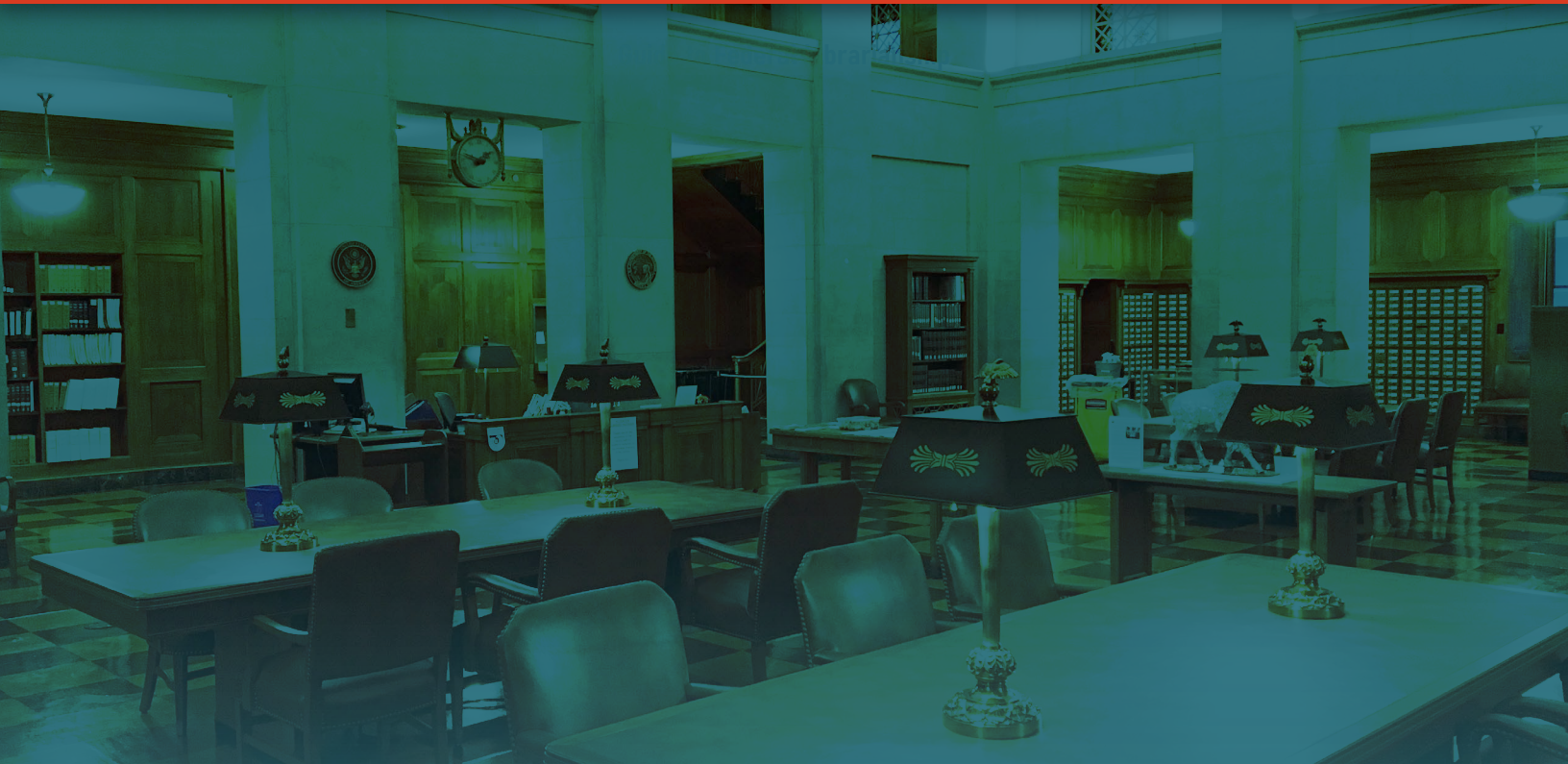
# Guide to Federal Librarianship



## 2

## Reference Services





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Pictured above: The U.S. Department of the Interior Library includes materials on topics such as Native American culture and history, American history, national parks, geology, nature, wildlife management, water management, and public lands management.

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## 2. Reference Services

This chapter discusses tips and best practices for providing reference services.

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Whether your library serves the public or focuses on internal clients, you will field a wide array of requests including general information, reference, research, and interlibrary loan.

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### *Reference Requests*

For general information requests, librarians may create lists of frequently asked questions (FAQs) to answer “how-to” questions related to a specific library or collection. Consider posting FAQs on your agency’s website or intranet so users can find answers immediately. Answers to reference questions often require consulting several resources. With the focus and mission of the organization in mind, develop bibliographies or web-based subject guides to help users through research topics and give them efficient access to reference sources. Larger research requests require a reference interview to clarify the scope of what information the user needs. For complex requests, multiple interactions may be required to ascertain the information needs of the user. Responses to research projects could be in the form of a report of findings or a custom bibliography for further research.

At times, a question may be too technical or beyond the organization’s scope. Other times, the person making the request may be outside the authorized user community. In these instances, an internal list or database of subject matter experts, libraries, or online resources will save the requester and the library time and offer the requester options for locating the needed information.

When there are no materials in the collection on a specific topic, other federal libraries and information centers may have the resources required in their collections. The scope of subjects covered by federal collections is both vast and continually developing. For a selection of the print and electronic publications available in the federal community, refer to the library collections listed in [FEDLINK’s Federal Library Directory](#).

For those new to reference services, the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) of the American Library Association (ALA) offers general tips for responding to inquiries in their [“Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers.”](#)

### *Barriers and Information Access*

There are various reasons why librarians in the federal system may have trouble accessing the information needed to serve their customers. A key barrier may be funding, as commercial databases with unique and valuable content can be quite expensive. Federal library employees may not know where or how to access information or may find access blocked due to security protocols.

To overcome these barriers, you may reach out to other federal libraries and nonprofit organizations. [FEDLINK's Federal Library Directory](#) provides nearly 1,400 library contacts. Many agency libraries have public websites including information on collections, contact information, online catalogs, or even an "Ask a Librarian" service. Local electronic mail lists and networks are another avenue for getting assistance from colleagues. While public libraries may be good resources, subscription database usage agreements may limit commercial and/or government use. Check with your local library to see if any exemptions may apply.



"Finding answers since 1831," U.S. Department of Justice Library

### *Privacy and Security Concerns*

Before reaching outside the agency for assistance with information requests, always ask the requester first.

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Be sure to follow any agency protocols regarding the collection of personally identifiable information, and be familiar with the [Privacy Act](#), 5 U.S.C. § 552a, which establishes fair information practices that governs the collection, maintenance, use, and dissemination of information about individuals that is maintained in systems of records by federal agencies.

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Whether your library is for agency users only or a federal library open to the public, do not provide any classified or sensitive information. Seek permission from a supervisor or agency public affairs officer before complying with an outside request for this type of information.

Take care when transmitting information that is not publicly available. Be familiar with the [Freedom of Information Act](#) (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, which provides the public the right to request access to records from any federal agency unless it falls under one of nine exemptions which protect interests such as personal privacy, national security, and law enforcement. Keep information on FOIA contacts for the agency handy to refer requesters to the appropriate offices.

You may have to assist with photo identification, registration, physical scanning, etc. To protect your collection, your library may have restrictions on what the patron can bring into or take out of the library, especially in archives or rare book rooms. Some agencies prohibit employees from identifying an affiliation with a particular agency on public sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn. The use of .gov or .mil email addresses may also be restricted.

## Serving the Public

Some federal libraries are open to the public, either without restriction or by appointment only. Some offer a public reading room (for example, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Library of Congress) and on-site or virtual research assistance.

Federal libraries may want to refer routine questions to public or academic libraries or to more appropriate agencies. Prioritize questions about unique resources available in your collections.

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For more information on citizen access to government information and services, read about the [FOIA](#) and [E-Gov Acts](#).

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# WHAT IS THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT?

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requires Federal agencies to make specific records available on their websites and gives the public the right to request agency records. Federal courts, Congress, and many offices within the White House are not subject to FOIA.



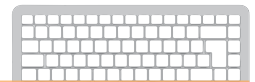
## WHO FILES FOIA REQUESTS?

Anyone can file a FOIA request. Some people who use FOIA are journalists, historians, genealogists, researchers, students, corporations, and nonprofit organizations.



## WHY WOULD I FILE A FOIA REQUEST?

The purpose of FOIA is to help the public better understand the government's actions. The law is also frequently used to learn more about family history, or to request copies of records people need for immigration-related processes or to apply for certain government benefits.



## HOW DO I FILE A FOIA REQUEST?

Most agencies require that FOIA requests be made in writing. To find out how to submit a FOIA request to a particular agency, visit [FOIA.gov](#).



## WHEN WILL I RECEIVE A RESPONSE TO MY FOIA REQUEST?

The law provides agencies 20 working days to respond to your request. However, responses can take a significantly longer time—especially if the agency has lots of records that might be responsive to your request or if it has to search several offices for responsive records. Before you file a FOIA request, be sure to look on the agency's website to see if the information you need is already public.



## WHAT WILL AGENCIES RELEASE UNDER FOIA?

Agencies are required to release records that are responsive to your request unless they include information that is protected under the law. FOIA includes nine exemptions that allow agencies to withhold categories of records, including some law enforcement records, national security information, and some geological or geophysical information.



## *Virtual Reference*

The fact that many libraries have branches and customers all over the world means that reference librarians in the government may have to work a variety of schedules to meet patron needs. Additionally, due to the nature of some agency work, such as defense, homeland security, and law enforcement, some librarians may work weekends and nights at times to support the mission. For example, Senate librarians are available when Congress is in session, no matter how late; some Department of Defense librarians act as “back-up” support during military exercises. Since the federal government encourages telework, both the librarian and the user may be working from somewhere other than their primary location.

For these reasons and others, most federal libraries provide some kind of “virtual reference” service to their patrons.

### **What Is Virtual Reference?**

According to RUSA, “Virtual reference is reference service initiated electronically, often in real-time, where patrons employ computers or other Internet technology to communicate with reference staff, without being physically present.” Communication methods used in virtual reference include chat, videoconferencing, Voice over Internet Protocol, co-browsing, email, texting, and instant messaging.

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*While libraries often use online sources to provide virtual reference, use of electronic sources in seeking answers is not of itself virtual reference.*

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RUSA also provides guidelines for implementing and maintaining virtual reference services.

### **Virtual Reference Systems and Features**

With online services and technologies developing rapidly, there are any number of platforms, software, chat, and online services libraries may use to offer virtual reference. Formats can range from virtual bookshelves and online bibliographies to chat boxes and software solutions. When a library’s reference staff receives virtual inquiries, they often track and answer reference questions through email, phone, web form, and walk in customers.

Automated systems can collect, organize, and/or compile FAQs into a knowledge base for future use and produce statistical reports on the number and topic of questions answered for a given period. Some libraries prefer to collect this information manually and produce ad hoc reports. Many collaborative software tools can track and create searchable guides or resources. Some agencies use knowledge bases to keep track of FAQs or infrequent queries so that information can be easily retrieved. All of these approaches can be very useful in helping a library streamline its operations and quantify its value to a parent agency whether library staff are on-site or off-site.

## *Interlibrary Loan*

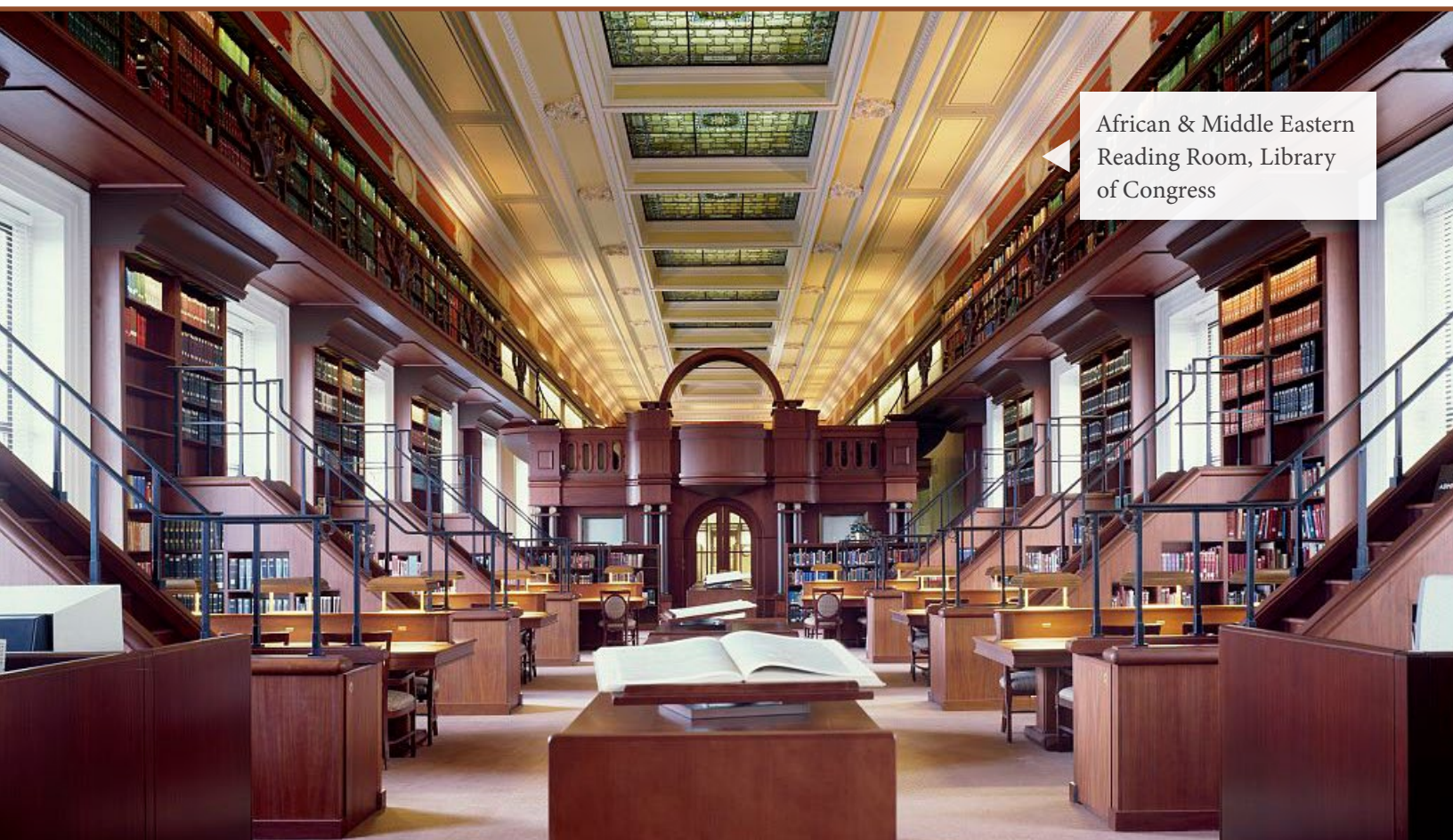
As defined by the [Interlibrary Loan Code for the United States](#), prepared by the Interlibrary Loan Committee of ALA's Reference and User Services Association, "Interlibrary loan is the process by which a library requests material from, or supplies material to, another library.... The purpose of interlibrary loan as defined by this code is to obtain, upon request of a library user, material not available in the user's local library." Most federal libraries do not loan directly to the public but do loan to other libraries. Many libraries lend only items unique to their collection and/or unavailable at a public library. Some non-federal libraries may charge to lend to government libraries while government libraries generally do not charge for interlibrary loans.

As a starting point, some holding information is available in OCLC's [WorldCat](#) but for more complete holding information, you may need an OCLC subscription. Lending libraries use a variety of subscription services for requests including OCLC WorldShare, DOCLINE, and Tipasa. For general requests, some libraries use the [American Library Association's interlibrary loan request form](#). Each library has unique interlibrary loan requirements; always consult with the lending library in advance.

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Do not lend any items that are sensitive or classified in nature.

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African & Middle Eastern  
Reading Room, Library  
of Congress