

Something Old, Something New:  
Enhancing and Expanding RA services

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## Faulty Assumptions of the Traditional RA Model

1. Readers will approach librarians with readers' advisory questions.
2. The library employee approached with a readers' advisory question will be the right person.
3. Enough information is obtained in a typical readers' advisory interview to provide good service.
4. Quality readers' advisory service is possible, given the time constraints of library encounters.
5. Resources needed by readers' advisors can be easily used in face-to-face discussions.
6. Face-to-face readers' advisory encounters are documented sufficiently to support follow up.

## Why develop a form-based reading suggestion service?

- **Too few patrons coming to ask for help choosing books**
  - ☞ They think it's a trivial question
  - ☞ They don't know that the library offers this service
  - ☞ They are too busy for an extended discussion of reading
  - ☞ They are unsure about how to ask
  - ☞ They are afraid of being judged on their reading tastes
  
- **Librarians do not get enough practice at doing readers' advisory work**
  - ☞ Tendency to fall back on the same three or four books that you know usually work
  
- **It is a way to get staff doing readers' advisory work in a less threatening atmosphere**
  - ☞ The face-to-face interaction can be hard at first, and this service gives some breathing room for the librarian and the reader
  
- **Reinforces that readers' advisory work is not a ready reference process**
  - ☞ It takes time to do properly
  - ☞ Your library needs to place a value on RA work
  
- **It documents the readers' advisory process in a way that the face-to-face interactions cannot be tracked**
  - ☞ This is useful both in working with readers and in justifying the value of RA service
  
- **Readers love it**
  - ☞ It reinforces the value of the library to the community of readers

## **The Benefits of Form-Based Readers' Advisory Service**

- ❖ Re-establishes the library as a willing and able source of reading guidance.
- ❖ Creates a sustainable connection between library staff and the library's readers.
- ❖ Allows patrons to seek reading advice in a manner that feels safer than face-to-face interaction.
- ❖ Provides physical objects with which RA service can be promoted to patrons.
- ❖ Gives patrons the vocabulary to make their reading choices coherent.
- ❖ Melds technology with service successfully.
- ❖ Allows routing of RA inquiries to most appropriate staff members regardless of desk schedules or work departments.
- ❖ Provides the time and information to successfully respond to RA questions.
- ❖ Enhances circulation of the collection, particularly older items and less-known writers.
- ❖ Aids in collection development by highlighting what patrons are reading and drawing attention to high-quality titles that are missing.
- ❖ Documents RA results for purposes of following up with patrons and creating data that can be studied or used for statistics.
- ❖ Results in happy readers!

## Implementing Form-based Readers Advisory

- Assembling and training an RA team
  - Spreads the work around
  - Allows participation of all library staff, not just public service staff
  - Allows consultation among staff on more complex questions
  - What to look for in team members
    - Willingness to put aside personal bias and suggest books that fit readers
    - Knowledge of the style of many authors and interest in acquainting oneself with more
    - Understanding of the differences between genres
    - Familiarity with the print and digital tools available for researching books and authors
    - Skill in writing annotations that reflect the appeal factors of a book
    - Good communication skills and a desire to talk about books
  
- Designing a form
  - Be complete
  - Avoid open-ended questions when possible
  - Avoid jargon
  - Set a non-judgmental tone
  - Form components
    - Contact information for the reader
    - Description of the service and its mechanics
    - Reading history, both likes and dislikes
    - Genre preferences
  - Reading Preference scales (Tone, Style, Mood, Language)
  - Character and Setting interests
  - Peeves and Pleasures
  - Areas of emphasis

## Delivering the form to readers

- Paper forms in the library near displays and new books areas
- Web-based form using a cgi script to route to team
  
- Receiving completed forms and routing them to advisors
  - Getting the form to the right person
  - Fitting it into the workload
  
- Responding to the forms
  - Determine the response time you will give and how many items you will put on each list
  - Compose responses based on a standardized template
  - Summarize the form and see if there are any categories that emerge
  - Use print and online RA tools to locate potential readalikes
  - Provide a mix of suggestions, including both older and newer titles and obvious suggestions as well as ones that stretch the reader
  - Annotate the suggestion, with an emphasis on the appeal factors (why this book is a good match)
  - Deliver the form to the reader in their preferred format (via email, in paper form, etc.)
  
- Documenting the transaction and following up.
  - Keep copies of the forms and responses, either electronically or in paper format (important for follow-up interactions)
  - Keep an electronic file of the annotations that you use so that you can adapt them to use for other responses, rather than writing completely new annotations each time
  - Keep track of the reader that you work with, their demographics and contact information
    - Allows you to contact them with other RA-related information
    - Provides you with statistics on your reading community that can help you shape programs and services

# Summary of "Looking for a Good Book" Survey Results

## Methodology

- 78 users of the program were surveyed—All who 1) had used service to date; 2) had at least one month to read some of their suggestions; and 3) whose recorded email addresses did not produce bounce messages
- Survey was 12 questions long
- Survey was conducted via email
- 45% response rate

## Demographics of "Looking for a Good Book" Respondents

- 341 females, 62 males (85% female)
- 245 Caucasian, 10 African-American, 4 Asian-American, 3 Latino-American, 150 no response
- Under 20: 58, 20-29: 89, 30-39: 60, 40-49: 40, 50-59: 44, 60-69: 38, Over 70: 22, no response 54; Average Age: 38.5; Youngest 10, Oldest 87
- Since making both versions available, our electronic form has been used by 310 patrons, our paper form by 100
- Genres marked as "high interest": Recent Titles: 70, Mysteries: 58, Historical: 50, Classics: 42, Thrillers: 40, Series Fiction: 30, Fantasy: 28, Biographies: 24, Romance: 24, Nonfiction: 22, Literary Fiction: 22, Science Fiction: 21, Young Adult: 19, Audiobooks: 16, Horror: 12, Inspirational: 8, Western: 3
- Genres marked as "no interest": Western: 87, Science Fiction: 70, Horror: 68, Young Adult: 63, Fantasy: 58, Audiobooks: 56, Romance: 49, Thriller: 39, Biography: 34, Nonfiction: 30, Inspirational: 29, Mystery: 18, Series Fiction: 16, Historical: 16, Literary Fiction: 9, Recent Titles: 2
- On a scale of 5 in answer to question how much do you read in comparison to others, average response was 4.3
- Average respondent reported reading 7.4 books per month

## Some Results

- 35 of 36 would recommend service to a friend
- 33 of 34 would use again themselves (The holdout wouldn't use again because "he got more suggestions than he could ever finish the first time")
- When asked if they agreed with the statement that all public libraries should offer a similar service, average response was 4.8 on scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)
- Overall satisfaction with service was 4.79 on a scale of 1 to 5
- 31 of 36 respondents had tried some of their suggested books, with an average of 4.4 books tried per reader. Their average satisfaction with recommended titles was 4.39 on a scale of 1 to 5.
- When asked how difficult they found filling out the form on a scale of 1 (difficult) to 5 (easy), average response was 4.63

- ☞ When asked how satisfied they were with the response time to their form on a scale of 1 (slower than expected) to 5 (faster than expected), average response was 4.09.

## Interpretation and Some Lessons Learned

- ☞ A form-based readers' advisory service is popular with patrons, particularly dedicated readers
- ☞ An electronic form and response is particularly popular—this indicates that many patrons may not feel entirely comfortable with face-to-face readers' advisory interactions
- ☞ They will read the books suggested to them
- ☞ They will return and use the service again—plans for how to handle repeat customers should be made
- ☞ Patrons of all ages and reading interests will use the service
- ☞ Expectations for how long a response will take should be made clear
- ☞ The number of customers for such a service can be controlled to some degree by the ways in which the form is made available and advertised
- ☞ A team response to readers' advisory questions is preferable to solo work, but the service could be provided in either way

## Sample Comments

- ☞ "The survey was long, but it was not necessary to have an opinion on all topics. The questions made me think about my own reading preferences in ways that I had not previously done. It was well worth the time and made the excellent recommendations that I received possible. I have recommended this service to many, many people."
- ☞ "It's a wonderful service! I wish my library back home had the same program!"
- ☞ "Can you tell I really loved this service? While I like to go to friends for reading ideas, it is great to get them also from professionals such as yourselves. I love books I can sink my teeth into, especially classics. However, many of my friends read science fiction, which doesn't interest me, or the Oprah Book of the Month-type book. I am frequently at a loss to find books that will enable me to expand my literary horizons. Your suggestions have shown me several new roads to explore. Thanks so much!"
- ☞ "I think advising people on book choices is critical to a library's mission. Otherwise, they might just as well be a Books-A-Million or B&N. I go to the library because if I can't find what I need, there is someone who will recommend an alternative if my original choice is not available."
- ☞ "For a final comment I would like to say that I loved the personalized feel of it, I thought it was great that I was treated as an individual patron. When I received the response, it wasn't generic."
- ☞ "I really enjoyed the suggestions and learned something about myself and my interests by seeing the categories my books fell into. A friend with wide reading interests could not have done better!"
- ☞ "It seems like an easy and effective way for librarians to communicate with their patrons. By using the preferences of the reads, the librarians are in the best position to make suggestions."
- ☞ "Librarians rule!"

## Book Discussion Kits

- Packaged sets of 8-12 titles and discussion resources aimed at reading groups
- The kits should circulate long enough to give a group the chance to get it and distribute to members and then discuss (we circulate the kits for 8 weeks)
- How to get the books
  - Use weeded copies of titles from your system
  - Repackage titles from library book discussion groups
  - Seek out grants from your Friends group
  - Seek out grants from community foundations
- Promoting the collection
  - Come up with a catchy name for the collection
    - Gab Bags
    - Book Discussions to Go
    - Book Clubs to Go
    - Toolboxes
  - Catalog the titles in your ILS, and make sure to have a series note so that someone can search for all the titles in this collection
  - Create a list of the titles in the collection with a brief annotation and make it available to book clubs both in print and electronic form
  - Display all the sets in a visible spot in the library
  - When a user at the desk mentions that they need a title for a book discussion make sure that you ask them if they are familiar with the discussion kit collection
- Our experience
  - 105 titles in the Gab Bags collection
  - Circulated 774 times since the inception of the program in 2003
  - The program has allowed us to make contact with area book groups
  - Lots of positive comments from local reading groups

# Displays, Booklists, & Bookmarks in Readers' Advisory

(Adapted from **When Passive is Active**, by Neil Hollands and Melissa Simpson  
Williamsburg Regional Library)

## 10 Reasons to Put Time and Energy into Displays

1. Engage and advise readers who won't approach a librarian.
2. Draw the attention of regular and new patrons alike.
3. Give your library some personality.
4. Simplify the task of finding a good book.
5. Raise circulation.
6. Emphasize books that may be hiding in your collection.
7. Draw connections beyond the Dewey system.
8. Show readers and community groups that you care about their interests.
9. Educate readers and staff about genres, themes, and authors.
10. Connect programming with the collection.

## Need Inspiration for Display Ideas?

1. Steal from other libraries and bookstores!
2. Take a walk through your collection
  - What's great but underused?
  - What items are hiding from their likely audience?
  - What do you want to show off?
3. Open the local newspaper
  - Look at local events
  - What local organizations are active?
4. How is your community reflected in the library?
  - Who's using your community rooms?
  - Who's in your local organization directory?
  - What groups are partners for your library?
5. Start with a design concept, a display prop, or a clever title
  - Visit the dollar store
  - Play with puns
6. Work from a booklist
  - Booklists created in your library
  - Booklists from other sources
    - Waterboro Library list of lists <http://www.waterborolibrary.org/bklista.htm>
    - Fiction\_L Booklists <http://www.webrary.org/rs/FLbklistmenu.html>
7. Look at reference books
  - Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable
  - Books of quotations
8. Browse subject headings for inspiration
  - Barnes and Noble Subject Headings  
<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/subjects/subjects.asp?z=y>
  - Powell's Books <http://www.powells.com/psection/psection.html>
  - Dewey or Library of Congress Subject Headings

9. Study the zeitgeist
  - bestseller lists
  - publishing trends
  - societal trends
  - controversial topics and news items
10. Know what time it is
  - Seasons, holidays, what people do at this time of year
  - Chase's Calendar of Events
  - 440 International Those Were the Days <http://www.440.com/twtd/today.html>
  - Scope Systems Any Day in History <http://www.scopesys.com/anyday>

## 10 Benefits of Book Lists and Bookmarks

1. Engage and advise readers who won't approach a librarian.
2. Help staff members answer questions.
3. Simplify the task of finding a good book.
4. Educate readers about genres, themes, and authors.
5. Provide alternatives to long hold lists and readalikes for popular authors.
6. Make your library a source of treasured possessions.
7. Emphasize collections that are underused.
8. Draw connections beyond the Dewey system.
9. Show readers or community groups that you care about their interests.
10. Create re-usable content for displays, the web site, or events.

## Do You Have Booklists to Support Readers of...?

- Mainstream fiction—male readers
- Mainstream fiction—female readers
- Classics
- Science Fiction
- Fantasy
- Romance (with subgenres broken out)
- Mysteries (with subgenres broken out)
- Thrillers (with subgenres broken out)
- Action
- Historical Fiction
- Horror
- Humor
- Gentle Reads
- Inspirational Fiction
- African-American writers
- Other large ethnic groups in your service area
- Readalikes for popular authors
- Biographies
- Historical Nonfiction
- True Adventure and Crime
- Other Popular Narrative Nonfiction
- Local or State authors
- British and Irish authors
- World authors
- Anything else that is widely read or requested in your service area

# Writing Annotations for Booklists

## Briefly describe the plot

Ideally, one or two sentences.

## Add appeal factors

- Themes
- Settings (time period as well as geographical)
- Character development
- Language, plot pacing.
- Which author or of what type of book did this remind you?
- Is this typical (or not) of the author's other works?

Here are examples of annotations with different appeal factors added:

J. M. Coetzee

*The Life and Times of Michael K.*

Coetzee is a Nobel Laureate who is a must-read for anyone who loves language and insightful writing. *The Life and Times of Michael K.* is the story of an impoverished, handicapped man who tries to take his mother back to her birthplace in the midst of a civil war, and the doctor who tries to understand this odd man. Coetzee's language is precise and polished, and his ability to tell a moving story is unparalleled.

Barbara Pym

*Excellent Women*

Similar in tone, if not setting, to Jane Austen. Set in 1950s England, this classic comedy of manners is sharply observed by spinster Mildred Lathbury, who tends to become involved in other people's affairs.

Suzanne Brockmann

*Gone Too Far*

Fast-paced, romantic suspense with lots of sexual tension between the appealing lead characters. Sam, a Navy SEAL and Alyssa, an FBI agent, team up to search for Sam's estranged wife and their daughter, who may have been kidnapped by terrorists. Possible read-alikes include J.D. Robb or Linda Howard.

## Other useful information

- If this is part of a series, where does this book fit in?
- Call number
- Number of pages

## Basic writing guidelines

- Use short, simple sentences.
- Use accessible vocabulary.
- Be consistent with format.
- Remember basic grammar and spelling rules.
- Full sentences -- not required
- Don't forget to proofread.

## Keep it current

- Watch dated references. How long will people consider *The DaVinci Code* the read-alike they're looking for? If you say this has book is on the bestseller list what do you do when it drops off?
- Make sure you still have the book and that it's in condition to be checked out.

## Don't forget nonfiction readers

### Why do nonfiction readers' advisory

- Attract new readers to use your RA services (especially male readers)
- Anywhere from one third to one half of the circulation at most public libraries is NF materials. We should not be ignoring the reading needs of this segment of the community of readers.
- Use NF readers' advisory to move parts of the collection that otherwise might not be as likely to circulate.
- NF readers are as important to the library as fiction readers.
- People read nonfiction for pleasure.
- Nonfiction has genres just like fiction does.
- Historically, readers' advisory services were primarily nonfiction-based (the ladder of reading concept).
- Everything that we know about fiction readers' advisory can be applied to nonfiction RA work
- Many readers do not make a distinction between fiction and nonfiction reading.

Our goal should be ultimately to be readers' advisors, not fiction or nonfiction readers' advisors. The reading interests of the entire community of readers should be our focus.

## Marketing Readers' Advisory Services

- Don't treat readers' advisory questions as secondary (no cringing)
- Signage – does your library mention reading in its signage at the information/reference desk
- Turn reference queries (“Can I get on the list for this book?”) into readers' advisory queries
- Seek out readers in the stacks to offer assistance
- Hand sell your readers' advisory tools – reading lists, RA book
- Keep the tools accessible to readers
- Keep your reading lists available both in print and online
- Use the library newsletter to promote readers' advisory services and programs
- Put reading lists out in the stacks where they are near the appropriate books
- Use displays to circulate materials that readers otherwise might not know you have (mix fiction and nonfiction items together on displays)
- Develop quick readalike lists for materials with high hold lists so staff can give them to readers when they place them on the holds list
- Consider offering form-based readers' advisory service

## Library 2.0 and Readers' Advisory

The whole 2.0 movement is about interactivity and communication, which is what RA has always been about. Here are some ideas that you might want to explore.

- Book review and programming blogs
  - Ann Arbor District Library (<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/books>)
  - Blogging for a Good Book (Williamsburg Regional Library, <http://bfgb.wordpress.com>)
  - h20boro lib blog (Waterboro Public Library, <http://www.waterborolibrary.org/blog.htm>)
- Wikis
  - Iowa librarians' RA wiki (<http://iread.pbwiki.com/>)
  - RUSA CODES Readers' Advisory Committee wiki ([http://wikis.ala.org/rusa/readersadvisory/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://wikis.ala.org/rusa/readersadvisory/index.php/Main_Page))
- RA theory and practice
  - Readers' Advisory (<http://readers-advisory.blogspot.com/>)
  - RUSA/CODES RA committee wiki ([http://wikis.ala.org/rusa/readersadvisory/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://wikis.ala.org/rusa/readersadvisory/index.php/Main_Page))

# Readers' Advisory Bibliography

## Basic Practice:

Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, Lynne McKechnie, and Paulette Rothbauer. *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals About Reading, Libraries, and Community*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2005.

Saricks, Joyce G. *Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2001.

Saricks, Joyce G. *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Chicago: American Library Association, 2005.

Shearer, Kenneth D. and Robert Burgin, eds. *The Readers' Advisor's Companion*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2001.

## General Fiction:

Herald, Diana Tixier. *Genreflecting: A Guide to Popular Reading Interests*. 6th ed. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2005.

Jacob, Merle and Hope Apple. *To Be Continued: An Annotated Guide to Sequels*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 2000.

Pearl, Nancy. *Book Lust*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2003.

Pearl, Nancy and Martha Knappe and Chris Higashi. *Now Read This: A Guide to Mainstream Fiction, 1978-1998*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

Pearl, Nancy. *Now Read This II: A Guide to Mainstream Fiction, 1990-2001*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2002.

## Historical Fiction:

Burt, Daniel S. *What Historical Novel Do I Read Next?* 2 vols. Detroit, MI: Gale Group, 1997.

Hooper, Brad. *Read On...Historical Fiction*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006.

Johnson, Sarah L. *Historical Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2005.

## Horror:

Fonseca, Anthony J. and June Michele Pulliam. *Hooked on Horror: A Guide to Reading Interests in Horror Fiction*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2000.

Pulliam, June Michele and Anthony J. Fonseca. *Read On...Horror Fiction*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2006.

## Inspirational:

Aue, Pamela Willwerth and Henry Carrigan. *What Inspirational Literature Do I Read Next?* Detroit: Gale Group, 2000.

Mort, John. *Christian Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2002.

### **Mystery:**

Heising, Willetta L. *Detecting Men: A Reader's Guide and Checklist for Mystery Series Written by Men*. Dearborn, MI: Purple Moon Press, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Detecting Women: A Reader's Guide and Checklist for Mystery Series Written by Women*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Dearborn, MI: Purple Moon Press, 2000.

Niebuhr, Gary Warren. *Make Mine a Mystery*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003.

### **Nonfiction:**

Burgin, Robert, ed. *Nonfiction Reader's Advisory*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2004.

### **Romance:**

Bouricius, Ann. *The Romance Readers' Advisory: The Librarian's Guide to Love in the Stacks*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2000.

Ramsdell, Kristin. *Romance Fiction: A Guide to the Genre*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

### **Science Fiction and Fantasy:**

Barron, Neil, ed. *What Fantastic Fiction Do I Read Next?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Detroit: Gale Group, 1999.

Herald, Diana Tixier. *Fluent In Fantasy: A Guide to Reading Interests*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

Herald, Diana Tixier and Bonnie Kunzel. *Strictly Science Fiction*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2002.

Hollands, Neil. *Read On...Fantasy Fiction*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007.

### **Westerns:**

Barton, Wayne. *What Western Do I Read Next?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Detroit: Gale Group, 1999.

### **Articles:**

To keep up with current writing on the theory and practice of readers' advisory, be sure to check out the Readers' Advisory column in *Reference and User Services Quarterly*. In particular, see:

Hollands, Neil. "Improving the Model for Interactive Readers' Advisory Service." *RUSQ* 45-3 (Spring 2006).

Stover, Kaite Mediatore. "Working Without a Net: Readers' Advisory in the Small Public Library." *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 45.2 (Winter 2005): 122-125.

You should also keep an eye on the regular columns in *Booklist*, as well as articles in *Public Libraries* and *Library Journal*.

## Databases/Websites:

Adult Reading Round Table (ARRT)

(<http://www.arrtreads.org>) (*RA and genre fiction information*)

All Readers

(<http://www.allreaders.com>) (*book suggestions*)

Columbus Metropolitan Library

(<http://www.cml.lib.oh.us/greatreads/search.cfm>) (*author readalikes*)

Fantastic Fiction

(<http://www.fantasticfiction.co.uk>) (*genre fiction bibliographies in sequence*)

Fiction\_L

(<http://www.webrary.org/RS/FLmenu.html>) (*reader's advisory mailing list archives*)

Hennepin County Library

(<http://www.hclib.org/pub/reader2reader/iyl/>) (*genre focused book lists*)

Locus

(<http://www.locusmag.com>) (*science fiction*)

Matt's Script Archive

(<http://www.scriptarchive.com>) (*source for FormMail, the html-to-email freeware*)

Mostly Fiction

(<http://www.waterborolib.org/bklista.htm>) (*reading lists*)

NoveList

(<http://novelst3.epnet.com/novel/default.asp>) (*subscription fiction database*)

Readers Robot

(<http://www.tnrilib.bc.ca/rr.html>) (*appeal factors and synopses*)

Romantic Times

(<http://www.romantictimes.com>) (*romance*)

Stop, You're Killing Me

(<http://www.stopyourekillingme.com>) (*mystery resources*)

What Do I Read Next?

(<http://galenet.galegroup.com>) (*available through Infopowering the Commonwealth*)

WhichBook

(<http://www.whichbook.net>) (*book suggestions*)

Williamsburg Regional Library Bookweb

(<http://www.wrl.org/bookweb>)