

# Ask Auraria!

## Auraria Library's Chat Reference Service

Reference/Instruction/Government Documents meeting, 28 July 2008 / by Karen Sobel

### Questions?

**Tech problems: ask Nina**  
**Everything else: ask Karen**

### A common question:

Q: When one patron is typing a question, do other patrons see it on their screens?

A: No. They see an empty chat box that they can use.

### Setting up, logging on, and answering:

- Before your first IM session, you'll need to have Pidgin installed on your computer. Pidgin is the program you will use to answer questions.
- After installing Pidgin, Nina has to add you to the "queue" of providers. Once this is done, you're ready to go!
- When you begin a chat reference shift, turn Pidgin on. You will be logged on automatically.
- When a patron sends a question, a box pops on your screen. Type your responses into the lower section of the box. If you get more than one question at a time, you will see two tabs in your Pidgin chat box. You can do as many simultaneous chats as you want. If another librarian does take one of the questions, that tab will turn grey. Pidgin will not let you type a response to that question.

### Etiquette for logging on and off:

- Logging on: I usually say something like "hi! how can I help you?" I don't state my name. It's important to sound like a real human being—students will frequently ask if you're a robot. :) This will often be students' first interaction with a reference librarian, so be welcoming.
- Logging off: Ask the student if you've completely answered his or her question. Make it clear that he or she is welcome to contact you again for more help.
- If you're logging off early in a conversation due to a busy reference desk, let the student know that it's busy. If you think you'll be back in just a moment, say that. Otherwise, try offering to email information later in the day, or suggest contacting the chat service again later.

### Searching with students:

You'll have to make judgment calls on whether to ask students to search databases with you from the start, or search on your own and share successful strategies. Often I'll ask the student to "wait just a sec while I look at a database," and do a quick search. If it looks like the search will be successful, then we do the search together.

### Sending links:

- You can send links to students. Just copy and paste them into the chat box. Students do this when IMing socially, so many will be familiar with the necessary skills. So far, inexperienced or older patrons have been successful using links as well.
- Links to catalog records, journal articles, and database searches have been working well. If you're working with a database, ask the student if he or she is off campus. If so, ask him or her to log in.
- Most importantly, whenever you send a link, ask the student if he or she can see the material!!

### Unruly patrons:

- Fortunately, unruly patrons are uncommon on most chat reference services affiliated with an academic institution. Typically "Do you have a question related to a class?" gets rid of pranksters and time wasters. Occasionally you'll run into a student who just wants to have a conversation. Don't encourage this. Ever. Let them know that you're working, but if they have a reference question later, they're welcome to ask.
- In the case of a very rude or persistent time waster, say something like "This conversation is inappropriate. I am ending it now." Save the IM and close the window. If the person comes back to waste your time again, just close the window. Let me know of any serious violations.

More information online:

“7 Things You Should Know about Instant Messaging,” by EDUCAUSE  
<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7008.pdf>

“Learning How to Use Instant Messaging Software,” from Baylor University Libraries (focuses on using IM for reference) [http://www3.baylor.edu/~Ellen\\_M\\_Hampton/IMtraining/](http://www3.baylor.edu/~Ellen_M_Hampton/IMtraining/)

Popular instant messaging expressions:

- **BRB** - be right back
- **LOL** - laughing out loud (in reponse to something funny)
- **HTH** - hope that helps
- **FWIW** - for what it's worth
- **IMO** - in my opinion
- **BTW** - by the way
- **4** = for, **2** = to/too, **R** = are, **U** = you, **UR** = you are/you're/your
- **TX** - thanks!

Patience:

- Almost all chat reference patrons are very patient. Most of them are multitasking—while you're looking for answers, they're writing their paper, listening to music, and so on.
- If you're searching on your own, give them updates once a minute or so. “still looking...” is okay.
- Occasionally a student will tell you they have to leave for class. I usually tell them to come back later. This is a good reason to save transcripts!

Canned responses:

There is no way to save common responses (“thank you for contacting Auraria Library!”) with our software. However, some people type up a list of responses as a Word document, and leave this open during chat reference shifts. They can copy and paste these responses as needed.

One last handy feature:

We can make each other “buddies,” and use Pidgin to communicate within the library. Ask Karen if you're interested.

Capitalization and punctuation:

- Most IM users don't use capital letters at the beginnings of sentences or proper nouns. But don't worry if you'd prefer to capitalize—it's not a big deal.
- Good punctuation helps keep your intended meaning, though!

SPAM:

Yes, you can get spam through instant messages, and yes, they can contain viruses. Typically, if a student's computer is infected with a virus that causes spam, they won't know it. Their computer will start sending IMs automatically. Most of the spam IMs you get will say something like “Do you want to see my pictures of...” or “Please check out my Facebook page.” Just close the message and you'll be fine. If you receive repeated spam messages within a short period of time, let Nina or Karen know.

Why save (“log”) reference questions?

- Sometimes a patron will refer to a question he or she recently asked. You can pull up the transcript of that question and save a lot of time.
- Transcripts are very useful for training reference staff for both chat and face-to-face reference work.