

Free online help a hit with Floridians

- ‘Ask a Librarian’ combines Web convenience with library expertise to form potent research tool for people of all ages

“Where do I begin researching my family tree?”

“I pulled information from the Web for my homework, but how do I know if it’s reliable?”

“How many different types of snakes are there in Florida’s Everglades?”

“Where can I find accurate demographics for Broward County online?”

Not so long ago, questions such as these required a trip to the library for their answers—answers that likely required expert help from a librarian. That was then, this is now. Today, thanks to an exciting new online reference service, “Ask a Librarian”, that library expertise is just a click away. And best of all, the service is free to everyone in Florida.

“Ask a Librarian is still a bit of a hidden gem among the glut of information on the Web today, but it’s catching on quickly as more communities around the state hear about it,” said Vince Mariner, Ask a Librarian’s Statewide Coordinator. “This service puts a librarian’s help at the fingertips of anyone who has a question, regardless of age or geographic location. Whether you’re in grade school or a senior citizen, a computer novice or a pro, Ask a Librarian can meet your needs.

“Some people come to the Web site with specific questions they need answered, while others just simply don’t know where to begin looking for information on the Web. Either way, they’ve come to the right place and to the information professionals who can find their answers and help them untangle the Web. There’s no need to leave your home or office to ask your question, just go to the service’s Web site and a librarian is there to help,” he said.

Among Ask a Librarian’s most appealing features – and one that helps distinguish it from many other reference Web sites – is that there is no fee to access or use the online service. Ask a Librarian is a grant funded service designed to extend the traditional reach of libraries—to make expert reference service available to everyone in Florida. Just as a local library operates as a free community resource, so too does Ask a Librarian.

So give me the details ... how does Ask a Librarian work?

In order to handle the thousands of questions Ask a Librarian receives each month, the service relies upon the collective expertise of librarians representing over 80 public, academic and special libraries throughout Florida. Those librarians work together to offer live chat reference service Sunday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., and on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. During periods when the live chat reference service is not available, or at any other time, individuals can conveniently e-mail their questions to Ask a Librarian.

From the Web, just go to www.askalibrarian.org and follow the simple instructions for entering your question. If visiting during a time when the live chat service is available, you can text chat directly with the librarian handling your question. Ask a Librarian uses unique software that allows you to follow along on the Web with the librarian so you can see how and where the librarian is locating the information. The chat session is totally interactive and there is no special software to download—it’s all handled by the Ask a Librarian Web site.

“At the end you can even print off a transcript of the entire session in case you need to refer to it again,” added Mariner. “It’s a fascinating way to receive assistance and learn lifelong research skills at the same time.”

Libraries or schools interested in participating in the Ask a Librarian service can contact Vince Mariner at vmariner@cclaflorida.org.