Six Words

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SIX WORDS THAT GET YOU STUFF

Nicolette Warisse Sosulski

Librarians are tainted.

Now, what I mean is that we are no longer able to think like regular members of the population when it comes to searching. We have come, more and more—over years on desk—to think like the indexer or taxonomist of a database, OPAC, or website. We do not realize the extent of this transformation—we just get more and more successful at finding things, not realizing how we find them changes or how we, incrementally, discover strategies that work. We are oblivious to these strategies we use until we have an aha moment and realize they are not obvious to anybody else. Although information science has made great strides in natural language searching programs, successful information literacy instruction still involves teaching laymen to think like indexers. However, we may not realize just how much our own thought processes have morphed and how different they are from those of our patrons.

I discovered that I use one of six words in a vast majority of my research search strings. As I realized this right before a search class I was teaching a few years ago (then there were only five words), I incorporated it into the class. Over time, I have learned that this tactic, fruit of more than 22,000 hours of reference—mostly from my Sunday Night Paper Panic students in chat—is helpful to others, even to fellow professionals. My patrons come in with statements like "I need to do a report about money and grades and how one helps the other so that poor people do worse in school" and I distill that down to a three-to-six-word query that, more often than not, includes one of these six powerful words. I have come to see that teaching these words—and using these words to construct pared-down search strings—ups search success rates. And so I give you "Six Words That Get You Stuff." They are (drum roll, please):

Impact—shows effect

Research questions:

- "I need to know about money and school and how poor people do not do as well in school maybe and why."
- "So is there data to support that you might be more likely to have a heart attack if you drink too much coffee?"
- "I am trying to prove that video games do not mess up teenagers."

Search string examples:

- Impact Poverty Educational Achievement
- Impact Caffeine Heart Rate
- Impact Video Games Mental Health Teens

Statistics—how many or how much

Research questions:

- "Has average rainfall increased over the years in Seattle?"
- "So how many people really eat nothing but drive-thru?"

Search string examples:

- Statistics Rainfall Seattle 2016
- Statistics Fast Food Consumption United States

Demographics—what are they like there?

Research questions:

- "I might be moving to Florida but I do not want to end up in one of those old people cities where everybody is ancient—I am only fifty-seven."
- "Will I be the only Muslim in Steilacom, Washington?"

Search string examples:

- Demographics Age Hallandale, Florida
- Demographics Religion Steilacom, Washington
- Demographics Religion Southwest Washington

Timeline—shows discrete developments or time points

Research questions:

- "I have to go home for Thanksgiving and I know it is all going to be politics and I am not sure what happened in Benghazi."
- "I am supposed to trace the key battles of the Civil War."
- "I am writing a report on Italian Renaissance paintings and I need five big ones."

Search string examples:

- Timeline Benghazi
- Timeline Battles Civil War
- Timeline Paintings Italian Renaissance

History—like "Timeline" but yields narrative rather than discrete developments

Research questions will be very similar to those for "Timeline" but "History" is better for underlying root cause and influence, concepts that cannot be so easily bullet-pointed.

However, the researcher has to be ready to read paragraphs instead of scanning bullet points.

Search string examples:

- History Conflict Balkans
- History Feminist Literature

Outcomes—what results were found, especially in health/medical, social work, and education settings, and whether an initiative actually have the effect it was intended to

Research questions:

- "I have to come up with an analysis of what works to stop bullying in schools."
- "I have a research project on if celibacy campaigns really reduce teen pregnancies."
- "I need to know if HIV programs in schools make people uses safer practices."

Search string examples

- Outcomes Antibullying Campaigns
- Outcomes Celibacy Initiatives
- Outcomes HIV Awareness Education

This distilled, noun-dominated query style, combined with these six powerful words, in a search field which is either open or designated as all text, keyword, or abstract (#subjectfieldisevil), produces search results in which germane, usable articles appear in the first or second pages of the result set. Of course, added facets of publication date, source publication, and/or website or domain can further specify your search and give you a more customized result set. My patrons have informed me that this search strategy works for them, and it has transformed anxious search neophytes into competent basic researchers. If any of you know words seven, eight, and nine, I urge you to comment, or to contact me at librista@gmail.com.

RESTATING THE NOT ALWAYS OBVIOUS

Dave Tyckoson

Librarians are excellent searchers. We have the ability to construct complex search strategies, identify controlled vocabulary subject headings and keywords, and identify which databases or websites are most likely to provide us with material, and identify and evaluate the results. Very few other people or professions have skills that match ours. This is why many people come to a librarian when they have a tough question—because they know that we can find what they want.

However, to find what someone is looking for we need to know what it is that they want. A sophisticated search

on the wrong question will not bring up the right answer. Unfortunately, many librarians fail to help users because they fail to identify the specific question that the user has in their mind. A good reference interview leads to a good search.

Of course, if users asked for what they really wanted, this would not be a problem. But most users do not ask specific questions, but start with something much more general. It is up to the librarian to respond and to identify the real question that underlies the initial one. This is the heart of the reference interview—and something that we do every day when helping our users. By succeeding at the reference interview, we succeed at reference.

Imagine the following reference transaction happening in your library. The conversation goes like this:

Librarian: Hi there. How can I help you today?

User: I need some sources for my paper.

Librarian: I can certainly help with that. What is your paper about?

User: Global warming.

Librarian: We have lots of information on global warming—what in particular are you looking for?

User: How global warming is affecting Canada. I hear that global warming is having the biggest impact on the coldest places.

Librarian: Sure! I can help you find that.

The next step in the process is the point of success or failure. The librarian has already welcomed the user and asked two good open ended questions. The librarian has identified that the user is working on the impact of global warming on Canada. Using Nicolette's six words technique, the librarian can start by searching for something like:

Impact global warming Canada

Putting that phrase into a web search engine identifies a lot of what look like very useful sources that are right on target for this topic, including within the first ten one called Impacts of climate change—canada.ca, a site produced by the Canadian government. With this the student will be able to write a great paper, the librarian can mark the transaction in the statistics, and move on to help the next user.

Well, maybe not. In this example, the user sits with that list of millions of sites and still does not find something useful. Yes, those are good sources on global warming in Canada. But no, they do not help this user. After a while the user selects a couple of sources and puts them in the paper, but they are still not really what that user wanted.

There is another step in the reference interview that would have confirmed or denied that this is what the user wanted. Let's go back to our sample reference interview and add that extra step, starting where we left off:

Librarian: Sure! I can help you find that.

Librarian. So you want to find out how global warming is affecting Canada—is that it?

User: Yes—and especially how it is affecting the Polar Bears. From what I have read, they seem to be suffering a lot from the effects of global warming.

Librarian: OK—so you want to know how global warming is affecting the Polar Bears in Canada. I am pretty sure we can find information on that. Is that right?

User: Yes. And I did find this one article on my own, but I need some more sources like it. (shows the librarian "Will Polar Bears Die Out Because of Climate Change?")

Librarian: That looks really good—and I see it is from *Nature*, which is a great source for anything in the sciences. Let's see what else we can find.

At this point the librarian enters another version of the same topic as in the earlier version of the search:

Impact global warming Canada polar bears

Looking at the first screen of results, the conversation continues:

User: Wow—those look great!

Librarian: Yes, there seems to be a lot here. Some are from organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and Polar Bears International, several are from the Toronto newspaper, and there's even one from NASA. Do you think these are helpful?

User: Definitely—you are best! Thanks so much.

Librarian: Well, if you need more information on this, come back again.

User: I sure will. I have an Econ paper due in two weeks, so I will be back to find sources for that one when I start working on it.

What the librarian did differently was to restate the question for the user. In fact, the librarian restated the question twice as more information was learned. And it is that

restatement that helped the user frame the question and confirm what was needed. Restating the question brought out additional information that was critical to the search

This is a step that many librarians omit—and one that can completely make or break the success of any reference transaction. Reread our sample search. By restating the question the first time, the user was encouraged to add to the initial version. The information added was critical—and really was the main focus of the information need. But it was not what the user asked for, so it was difficult for the librarian to find out just with usual questioning techniques.

Restatement is a technique that usually helps. It is just another way for us to ask a question, but it is different enough from open or closed questioning that users tend to provide different information when we restate their query. From my own experience, it is a technique that works. Yes, it takes more time and makes the reference interview longer. But the added time spent in the interview—in this example, maybe thirty seconds—saves lots of time at the other end of the process.

I like to measure reference success with Joan Durrance's tried-yet-true Willingness to Return method. Will the user return in the first part of this sample search? Maybe or maybe not. It depends on what the user needs in the future and how desperate the user is to find it. Will the user return in the second half of the example? Yes—the user has already told the librarian that they are coming back. This is part of the power of restating the user's question.

Do try this at your library. It works in face-to-face and remote reference. Combined with Nicolette's six words, it will make you a librarian that your users turn to when they need help the most.