

UNL Libraries Reference Effort Assessment Data (READ) Scale

February 2009 – April 2009

From the beginning of February through the end of April, librarians and staff used the READ Scale to assess the effort going into answering reference questions via our main reference service points: Love Reference Desk, telephone questions that come in via 2-2848, Ask a Question email, chat and instant messaging (IM). The READ Scale is a six point scale beginning with 1 (such as directional questions) up to 6 (such as questions related to graduate level research). According to the data collected:

- The majority of our questions were received via patrons who visited us in person (82%) followed by: phone (9%), chat (4%), email (3%) and im (2%). (chart 1)
- We recorded a general time of day for receipt of each question. In general, questions at all levels tended to peak in the afternoon. Questions at the level of 4-6 were received fairly steadily across the day. (chart 2)
- When we look at the methods through which questions were received in relation to the level of question, some interesting patterns emerge: Although phone questions were just 9% of all questions received they amounted to 18% of the level 5-6 questions and 12% of level 4-5 questions. Likewise for our other technologies: email 10% level 5-6, 5% level 3-4 (3% of questions); chat 8% of both level 5-6 and level 3-4 (4% of questions), and IM 5% level 5-6, 3% level 3-4 (2% of questions). Although we think of these technologies as designated for our easier questions, our patrons may not be thinking the same or using them as such. We continue to receive 59% of our most challenging questions in person. (charts 3-5)

Comments from reference staff who used the scale:

Positives:

- Provides better evidence of reference work and need for reference presence
- Quick, didn't take long to enter data once one was in the habit
- Data is easily transferrable for the ARL statistics

Negative:

- It is sometimes hard to distinguish between the scale levels
- There is likely some measure of variation or differences in opinion in defining skill level
- We continue to wrestle with time as part of the scale definitions; for example, just because someone took 20 minutes to figure out an answer, it doesn't necessarily mean the transaction should be rated at higher level, it could just mean the staffer is new, inexperienced or unfamiliar with the subject.

Changes Recommended by reference staff:

- Reduce number of options in scale -- so there is more of a distinction between options
- Consider gathering user status information on patrons such as grad, undergrad, community user, faculty, staff, etc.

Future potential use of the scale:

- **Library-wide application:** This study was not completed library-wide. To be more representative and to compile data that could feed into staffing and training decisions, we should conduct the study library-wide. Many of our higher level questions are routed to our librarians or go directly to the librarians, by passing our main service points. Referrals may well be counted as questions in the 2-4 range depending on how much work the receiving staff member put into the question before making a referral. Therefore the study numbers here likely under estimate the higher level questions the library is receiving. It would be interesting to see if higher level questions are received by librarians via technologies and in-person visits in similar percentages to those received at our service points. We may also be able to eliminate the notation on whether a question was referred if we conduct the study library-wide.
- **Replace tick marks for data sampling:** Use as a replacement for tick marks when collecting sample data to report to ARL.

Chart I

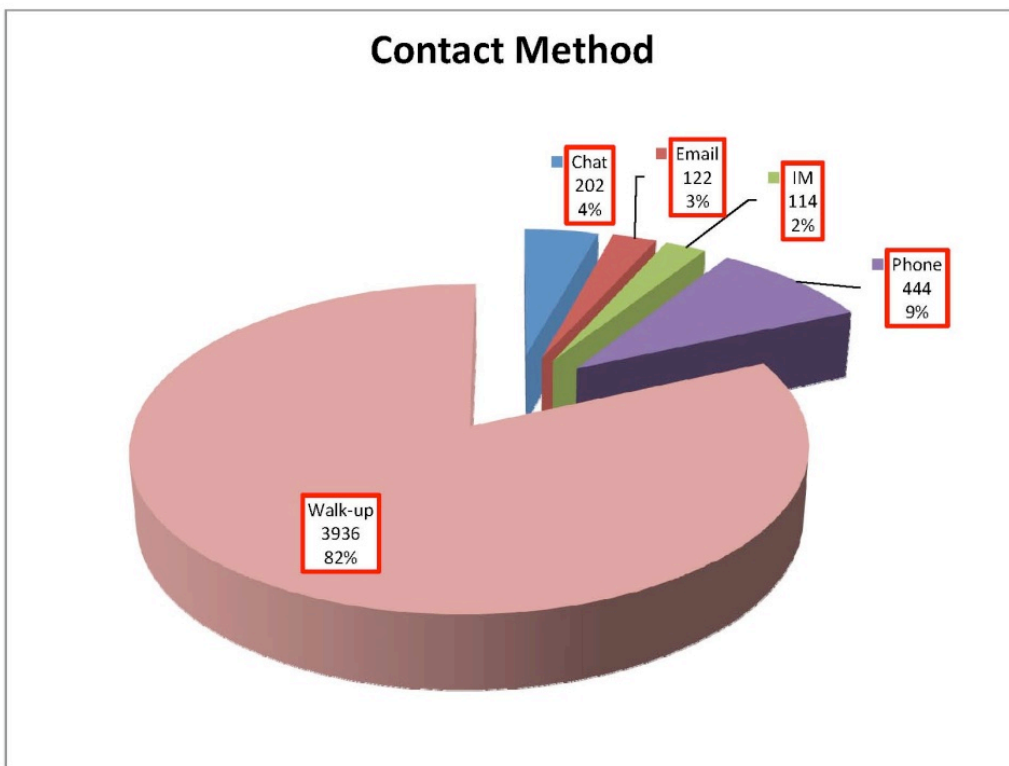


Chart 2

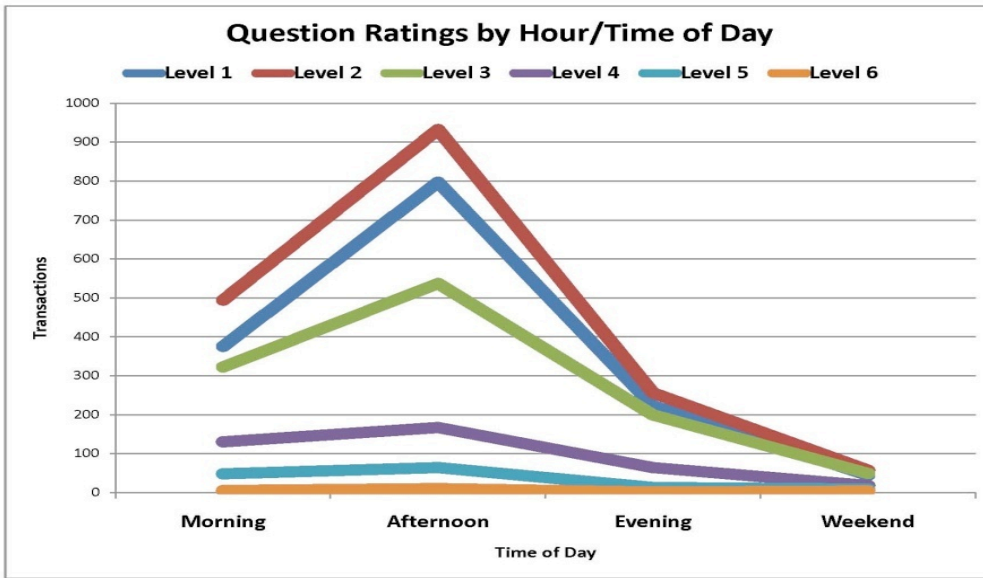


Chart 3

Levels 5-6 (difficult questions)

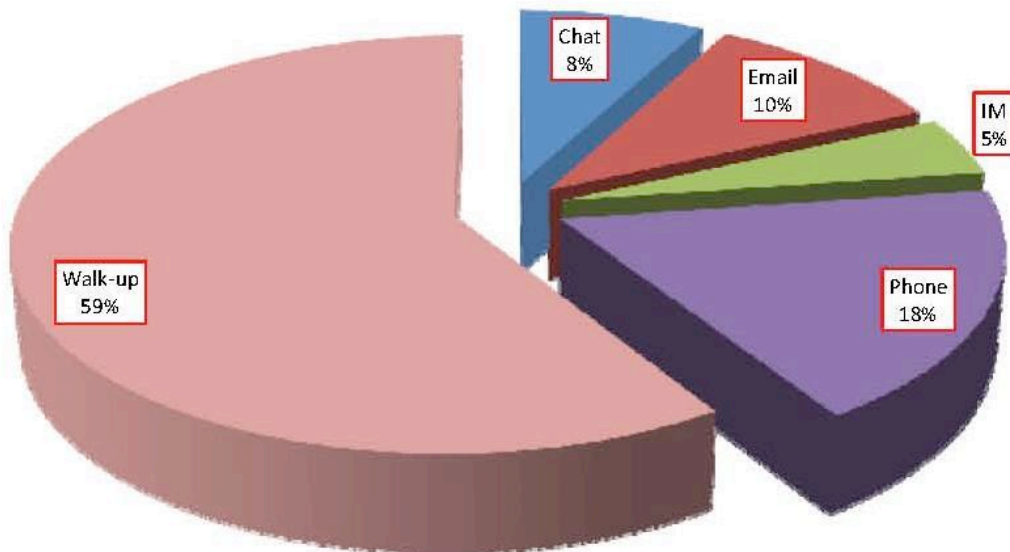


Chart 4

Levels 3-4

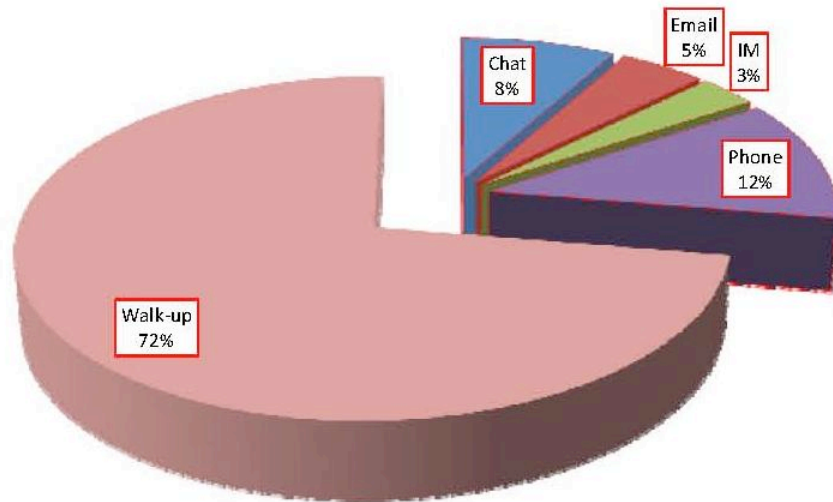


Chart 5

Levels 1-2 (easy questions)

