The library literature is full of books and articles that talk about how to deal with the public. It is easy to be polite and work with a pleasant, easy-going library user, not so easy with the so-called problem patron. Problem patrons who are rude, arrogant or just generally difficult can try even the most congenial library worker. While it is to be hoped that your experiences with problem patrons are few and far between, it is important to be prepared.

The next few pages provide practical suggestions and information that should help you deal with problem patrons in the most positive, effective way possible. Ask student assistants who have been working in your department for a while about their interactions with library users as well as with other staff members. They will share their experiences, both good and bad. People often come to the library needing last minute help. For years librarians have told students, "don't wait until the last minute to do your research," but this situation will always exist. Therefore the user is already in a nervous state. We have all had people come to the Information Desk, looking disgusted, saying, "I've been looking for this for 2 weeks!", which makes us wonder why they didn't ask for help sooner.

There are a lot of factors that can turn a basically nice person into a problem patron. There are also people who aren't very nice anyway and seem to delight in being demanding, especially with a student assistant, who, they feel, is obligated to do anything for them to get what they want, when they want it.
Some of the scenarios and responses below may help you. The situations are grouped as follows:

- When We Are Pressed for Time
- When The Patron Is Pressuring You To Bend The Rules, To Make An Exception
- When The Patron Expects/Demands Service We Cannot Or Do Not Have Time To Give
- When The Patron Is Negative About Another Service In The Library
- When A Patron's Question, Appearance Or Manner Irritates Us
- When We Feel We Have Done All We Can For A Patron
- When The Patron's Accent Or Speech Is Hard To Understand
- When We Are Dealing With An Angry Patron Who Uses Abusive, Hurtful, Inappropriate Language

If you currently don't work in a public service area, these techniques are still important. Many of the situations apply beyond your library employment.

### WHEN WE ARE PRESSED FOR TIME

**WE TEND TO:**

Say only part of what we normally would say if we had more time:
- Sorry it's closing time. Translation: The library is more important than you.
- My needs take precedence over yours.

Be defensive; blame patron:
- You should have come sooner.
- Didn't you hear the announcements? Translation: I don't have time for you.

Appear indifferent to the patron’s problem.
Close options:
- I can't answer that right now; there are too many people to be waited on. Translation: I don't have time for you.
Show the anger we feel:
♀ Can’t you read the sign?  Translation: Can’t you read the sign, stupid?

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Start by saying:
♀ What I can do for you is...

Explain the time problem in terms of the patron’s needs:
♀ Your question is more complex than you might think.
♀ Your question deserves more time than I have right now.
♀ We can do more justice to your question tomorrow.

Give the patron the option to get started:
♀ I can get you started...begin with those green books over there. They are hard to use, so if you do not find what you need in them, please ask for more assistance.

Suggest alternatives:
♀ We’re closing right now; we will open tomorrow at 7:45 am.

Be explicit about what little we can do now, or have done, and give an idea of what we’d be willing to do when we have more time:
♀ I can look up one citation for you now; will that help?
♀ I’ll be glad to hold this material for you until tomorrow morning.

WHEN THE PATRON IS PRESSURING YOU TO BEND THE RULES, TO MAKE AN EXCEPTION

WE TEND TO:

Appear arbitrary and rigid by repeating the rule:
♀ Sorry, a rule’s a rule.  We simply do not lend reference books.

Dig in our heels with anger at the patron:
I don't care if you're the Queen of England; you have to show a proper ID card, just like everyone else.

Become defensive:
- We're very understaffed...

Make the patron feel foolish/wrong:
- You've got to be kidding.
- You want it WHEN?

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Buy time; do not respond immediately; remain silent for several seconds; take a deep breath.

When re-explaining, add new information rather than repeat what the patron did not accept/understand the first time.

Acknowledge that the patron's request is an understandable one:
- I know you must be disappointed, having come all this way and expecting to take out the reference book, but...
- Your request is perfectly reasonable, but we must see a proper ID to enable follow-up if something goes wrong.

Enlist the patron's sympathy to your difficult situation:
- If I let you take this book out, how would I respond to the next person who wants an exception made?
- How would you be feeling now if I had yielded ten minutes ago to the person who wanted to take the same book home?

Explain the reason for the policy, in terms of the benefit to the patron.

Appeal to the patron's sense of cooperation which, after all, is the underlying principle of libraries and why they work.

Recognize early signs that the patron will not accept "no" as an answer and refer to someone else before the patron complains to a higher authority:
I am not authorized to make the exception you would like. If you can wait a moment, I will get my supervisor. (Make no promises)

It seems we’re at an impasse; perhaps my supervisor can help you.

[These responses have the added advantage of involving others in the solution to the problem. Also, explaining the problem to someone else in the presence of the patron makes it impossible for the patron to embellish the truth later.]

WHEN THE PATRON EXPECTS/ DEMANDS SERVICE
WE CANNOT OR DO NOT HAVE TIME TO GIVE

WE TEND TO:

Feel inadequate

Want to take a stab at an answer when we know it’s the wrong thing to do.

Give a closed response:

We don’t answer that sort of question.

Become defensive.

Drop other work and resentfully comply with the patron’s requests.

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Show a willingness to help without making promises:

Let me see what we can do.

Explain what we can do:

I see you’re in a bind. I can do part of this later.
Remember that "to refer" is to be helpful:
☞ The Reference Librarian is away from the desk right now. If you would write down your question with your name and number where you can be reached, I’ll be sure that someone will get back to you. [Be sure you do the appropriate follow-up.]

Review salient conditions:
☞ Let me be sure I understand what you need.
☞ When is the latest possible time you will need this information? [how urgent is the request]

Show the patron the benefit of seeking an alternative:
☞ I would not want to mislead you with partial information.

Help the patron to be self-sufficient. The patron may be demanding because he or she may not know where to turn:
☞ Let me get you started by showing you how to use this resource. Please come back if you have any questions.
☞ The Reference Librarian will be able to get your started. [Direct patron to Information Desk.]

Make the patron aware of the complexity of the request:
☞ This may take more time than you’ve allowed yourself.

WHEN THE PATRON IS NEGATIVE ABOUT ANOTHER SERVICE IN THE LIBRARY, or WHEN THE PATRON PRESSURES US TO COMPLY WITH THE REQUEST BY SAYING THAT ANOTHER LIBRARY STAFF MEMBER SAID TO COME TO US:

WE TEND TO:

Join in the negativism about the service to defend ourselves, or to make ourselves look good:
They told you I could do such and such for you? They don’t know what they are talking about!

You were treated badly at the other desk? How terrible. Let me help you.

Deny the patron’s experience:
- I don’t know anyone who could have told you that.
- No one could have said that.

Feel resentful/angry at our co-worker for causing problems.

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Support the colleague/other unit and concentrate on the request:
- They must have had something else in mind that I don’t understand. If you have time, I can give them a call.
- I’m sure they didn’t mean to be rude. How may I help you?

Refrain from commenting on the other service/colleague, concentrating only on the patron’s need of the moment:
- Is there something you need that I can help you with?
- Let’s see if I understand correctly what it is you want...

Do not respond immediately, buy time**.

**TIPS FOR BUYING TIME:

- Don’t respond immediately.
- Remain silent for several seconds. (Silently count slowly to five.)
- Take a deep breath.
- Lay down your pencil.
- Say "Hmmm" (keeps the ball in the patron’s court a while longer).
- If you need more time, excuse yourself "for just one moment...while I locate the policy..."
- If you must say something, use throw-away, time-stalling words: "I haven’t dealt with this situation before."
If you must say something more substantive, make it instant sympathy for the patron's feelings (frustration, hurt, anger) without agreeing with the patron's description of the situation: "Sorry you are having so much trouble."

WHEN A PATRON'S QUESTION, APPEARANCE OR MANNER IRRITATES US

WE TEND TO:

Brush them off curtly.

Give the impression we think their question is frivolous:
- Why would anyone want to do research on that?
- You've got to be kidding.

Give the impression we want to get rid of them:
- It is time for me to leave; someone else is going to have to take care of you.

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Keep in mind that our personal feelings about the patron or the patron's request are irrelevant.

Start patron off on something AWAY from you:
- Let me start you off using this resource.

Avoid showing judgment with a neutral statement:
- That's a bit specialized.

Avoid engaging in dialogue. Use closed sentences; give instructions rather than ask questions:
- I think the Reference Librarian will be able to answer that better than I.
WHEN WE FEEL WE HAVE DONE ALL WE CAN FOR A PATRON AND HE/SHE HAS NOT BEEN SUFFICIENTLY HELPED (when we are at what seems to be a dead end)

WE TEND TO:

Feel apologetic that our collection is inadequate.

Feel that we ourselves are inadequate.

Make the patron feel stupid, or foolish for coming to the wrong place.

Convey the sentiment, "That's it buddy."

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Think of an alternative beyond the resources at hand; beyond the resources of the library.

If true, admit to not being an expert in the field:

This is not my specialty.

I'm not an expert, but maybe the Information Desk would be a better source to ask.

Explain the limitations of the materials that are available:

We don't have the resources here to fully answer your question. Another option you might try is to go through Interlibrary Loan or check at the Information Desk to see what other libraries have the materials that you need.
WHEN THE PATRON'S ACCENT OR SPEECH IS HARD TO UNDERSTAND

WE TEND TO:

Simply ask the patron to repeat what was said.

Act on what we think (hope) was meant without being sure in order to complete the transaction.

Become impatient with the patron.

Feel embarrassed at having others view the interchange.

WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:

Be direct about our inability to understand. The patron may be well aware of the problem and generally appreciates the chance to be understood better:

I didn't understand what you said; could you say that again a bit slower?

Avoid asking patron simply to repeat; e.g., suggest how, as above, "a bit slower," or ask that request be written down.

Give your understanding of what the patron said:

Am I understanding you correctly? Are you saying that you would like...

Reduce the pressure caused by a growing line of patrons:

Can you wait for a moment while I get another staff member to help you?

Ask questions that can be answered "yes" or "no":

I can't tell whether you are saying 'chicken feed' or 'chicken feet'; are you saying feet with 't'?

Are you asking to renew the book in your hand?

Are you asking if we have other books on the same subject as the book in your hand?
Enlist the help of someone else:

- I am having trouble understanding a particular word this patron is saying; perhaps you can help...?

Try alternative ways of communicating, such as writing or spelling:

- Please write down what you are saying.
- Let me write down what I think you are saying.

Pave the way to referring the patron elsewhere by calling ahead or accompanying the patron.

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<tr>
<th>WHEN WE ARE DEALING WITH AN ANGRY PATRON WHO USES ABUSIVE, HURTFUL, INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE</th>
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<tr>
<td>WE TEND TO:</td>
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<td>Take it personally.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Also be abusive toward the patron, thus escalating the situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Angrily refuse to give further service.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accept the abuse because, after all, &quot;the patron is always right.&quot;</td>
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| WE SHOULD INSTEAD STRIVE TO:                  |
| Achieve emotional distance. Remain calm and courteous. Say to yourself: It's OK for the patron to hold an opinion different from mine. |
| It is important to realize that the offensive language is not being personally directed toward you. Rather, it is the patron's way of expressing frustration at not getting what he or she wants. Service is not being adequately provided for whatever reason and many people feel that there is no other alternative but to be nasty in order to get what they want. |
Two outlets are better than one. Refer the patron to someone else. Often the person on the "front-line" serves the function of a verbal punching bag that the patron uses to let off steam.

In this case, a second staff member who tells the patron exactly the same thing as you have already said, is heard with a more accepting ear.

Discontinue further dialogue, respectfully explaining why:
- Your offensive language (impatience, rudeness) is keeping me from properly assisting you.
- I'm here to help, but I cannot do that if you continue in this manner. Would you like to come back later when you have collected yourself?

Recognize when you are at an impasse and refer the patron to someone else:
- Perhaps someone else could better assist you; let me get my supervisor.

Explain the situation to your supervisor within earshot of the patron:
- I am having a bit of a problem with a patron. He/she is being abusive towards me because I am not able to provide what he/she wants.

If a patron continues to be abusive, is extremely annoying or becomes threatening, get your supervisor. If the situation is out of control, do not hesitate to contact Campus Police.

[The majority of information included in this section on Problem Patrons has been adapted from Cleveland State University Library manual, portions from Public Service Under Pressure: Improving the Response; a handbook of themes (Anne Lipow, UC-Berkeley)]