This document is a brief introduction to the many activities that libraries and librarians across the country use to connect readers with books and authors. The quick guide is a distillation of the Directory of Readers’ Advisory Activities that includes more detailed descriptions of each activity, along with examples and additional information. Both documents are the work of the Panorama Project Readers’ Advisory Impact Committee—a volunteer group of over 40 librarians and industry professionals. Visit the Panorama Project website to learn more about the project and the ongoing work of the committee.

Introduction

Public libraries and librarians use many approaches to connect readers at all skill levels and ages with books and authors. They use story hours to teach preschoolers the six pre-reading skills needed to become successful readers; they take large print books to senior centers for elderly adults to enjoy; they host classes for adult new readers or students of English as a second language; they promote specific books and collections in library displays; they tweet about books; and they host author events—to name just a few of the activities that libraries and librarians undertake to connect readers with books and authors.

For decades public librarians have honed their skills in what is known in the library world as “Readers’ Advisory Service.” This means that they have studied and put into practice the myriad ways that libraries can help readers to find good books suited to them personally. Many users of libraries, and certainly those who don’t use libraries, may have never heard of Readers’ Advisory Service. Even if they’ve experienced it firsthand, they may not have recognized that the display they browsed through, the booklist they took home, or the book suggestion they received from the librarian was more than just a result of serendipity or luck.

Readers’ Advisory Service is an umbrella term for the many activities that librarians use to aid readers in finding books that they will enjoy reading. These activities may include everything from choosing the right books for the library’s collection, to making it easier for browsers to find good books, to taking books outside the library walls. It also, and maybe most importantly, means working directly with readers one-on-one to help narrow their choices so they can more easily find books that might suit their tastes and reading skills. Readers’ advisors do this by talking with readers about their tastes, and then using various resources and their knowledge of books to try to match readers to books that might fit them personally.

Many books, articles, presentations, classes, and training sessions over the decades have helped library staff members hone their skills in Readers’ Advisory Service, but the field is largely unknown to the outside world. This is not surprising, since there is no professional journal dedicated to the subject, many library graduate schools do not teach it, and the information about it is scattered widely with no one good place to find it. This quick guide, and the accompanying Directory of Readers’ Advisory Activities, are meant as starting points for
learning about Readers’ Advisory Services—for librarians and all those interested in learning more about the many ways that libraries and librarians connect readers with books and authors.

About the Panorama Project

The Panorama Project is the first data-driven research project focused on understanding the impact of the nation’s public libraries on book and author discovery, brand development, and retail sales. The multi-year industry initiative is supported by a growing list of publishers, booksellers, libraries, library service providers, and industry organizations. This publication is the first work-product of the project’s Readers’ Advisory Impact Committee—a volunteer group of over 40 librarians and industry professionals. The committee was convened to research and document the wide variety of Readers’ Advisory services, activities, and title recommendations provided by public libraries and librarians.

Other Panorama research projects are underway on topics such as the impact of library-sponsored author events and the impact of library-sponsored community reading events. The Panorama Project has the support of a growing list of publishers, booksellers, libraries, library service providers, and industry organizations. The project’s Advisory Council includes thought leaders from across the industry. Initial funding for the project is being provided by Rakuten OverDrive. The Panorama Project is an open membership initiative. Learn more at panoramaproject.org.

Direct (One-to-One) Readers’ Advisory Activities

This section lists “direct” readers’ advisory activities. These activities involve a direct, one-on-one encounter between a librarian or library staff member and a reader. The encounter can be face-to-face, on the phone, via email or chat, or through a form, either online or in print. In all of these cases, the result of the encounter is that the reader takes away specific reading suggestions based on his or her reading interests. The focus here is on the suggestions.

Conversations and Recommendations

Library staff members engage a reader in conversation in order to make appropriate personalized reading suggestions.

Form-based Suggestions

The reader provides responses to questions about their reading history, preferences, and tastes using a library-designed form. The form is then evaluated by library staff members who provide specific reading recommendations for that reader.
Social Media Readers' Advisory

Library staff members provide personalized reading recommendations on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and by joining services such as NetGalley and Edelweiss.

Indirect (One-to-Many) Readers’ Advisory Activities

This section lists “indirect” Readers’ Advisory activities. These activities do not involve a direct, one-on-one encounter between a librarian and a reader (though they may involve in-person encounters within book groups and similar gatherings). Here, the focus is on discovery, providing opportunities for readers to encounter new titles and authors through lists, displays, browsing aids, and other tools discussed below. This discovery can happen whether or not the librarian is present.

Recommended Book or Reading Lists

Library staff members curate titles around a specific theme, audience, or topic to create book lists, sometimes called reading lists.

Displays

Library staff members create displays of titles that are either new, recommended, or thematically related.

Social Media Book Talks

Library staff members use social media to promote new and suggested titles.

Social Media Virtual Displays

Photos of physical book displays are posted online or to social media platforms in order to reach the virtual user.

Reading Groups or Book Clubs

Libraries host book groups where patrons meet on a regular basis to discuss what they’ve been reading.

Presentations

Library staff members present a talk or presentation on a book or books that will be of interest to the intended audience.
Author Visits

An author event provides readers an opportunity to meet a favorite author or perhaps discover a new author that they might enjoy.

Newsletters

Libraries use print or email newsletters to highlight books and authors for their community.

Readers’ Advisory Podcasts

Libraries produce podcasts where staff members offer book talks, interview authors, discuss books and reading, and more.

Community Reading Campaigns

An entire community is encouraged to read the same book and participate in discussions and attend related events. These campaigns are often called One Book, One Community programs.

Community Reading Challenges

An entire community is challenged to diversify and broaden their reading.

Media Contributions/Appearances

Librarians may contribute reading recommendations to print, radio, or broadcast media.

Catalog Interventions

Libraries incorporate reading suggestions into catalog search results to connect readers with titles that might be of interest.