

WASHINGTON COUNTY (OREGON) LAW LIBRARY

GOLDEN RULES OF LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICE When serving patrons with legal problems.

(Legal problem questions are different from the legal research questions you get from students, researchers, writers, legislators, journalists, etc. Those you may answer.)

GOLDEN RULE 1: DO NO HARM.

GOLDEN RULE 2: Library patrons do not have legal questions; they have legal problems that you cannot solve. You can, however, respond and provide useful referrals.

GOLDEN RULE 3: If you read only what is written in the statutes, the cases, and the constitutions you will be absolutely wrong about what the law is.

THINGS YOU SHOULD SAY, AND REPEAT AS NEEDED

1. I am not a law librarian.
2. I am not a lawyer.
3. I know nothing about the law, its practice, or its procedure.
4. If you want legal advice, you will need to speak to a lawyer.
5. Paralegals are not able to advise you on the law, on what legal options you have or on how to fill out or draft a form that may affect your legal rights and responsibilities. Only a lawyer can do those things.

SHORT LIST OF ACCEPTABLE REFERRALS

- Law school libraries and clinics
- [Legal Aid Services of Oregon \(LASO\)](#) (check website for local phone numbers)
- Legal research blogs (e.g. [Oregon Legal Research blog](#) sidebar links)
- Federal, state, and local government, social service agencies, and nonprofits (and [211 Info](#))
- [Oregon Judicial Department \(OJD\)](#)
- [State of Oregon Law Library](#): 503-986-5640
- [Oregon Legislative Liaisons](#): 503-986-1000
- [Oregon State Bar \(OSB\)](#): 503-684-3763
- Public library websites
- [State of Oregon government offices, administrative](#) and [legislative](#)
- **Caveat emptor:** If you refer patrons to non-official websites that compile laws and/or forms, please remind them that these unofficial documents and collections may not be accepted by courts, complete, updated, corrected, or authentic.

A FEW THINGS YOU NEVER SAY TO PATRONS (with legal problems)

(Needless to say, this is not a complete list.)

- “Let me look for the law.” [Say, “*I’ll show you how to research the law.*”]
- “I might be able to refer you.” [You WILL refer, to a lawyer, a law library, etc.]
- “I can’t help you.” [You can help; you just can’t help “*find the law.*”]
- “I’m going to search the statute [handbook, case, etc.] and find an answer for you.”
- “I’m not finding the answer; let me keep searching.” [Please refer.]

WHY NOT SAY THESE THINGS?

- Please don’t ever say that you’ll “*look for the law as it’s written*” or any other way, in fact, please don’t ever say you will *LOOK FOR THE LAW*. You won’t find it. Golden Rules #1 and #3.
- “*I’m going to search these [laws, legal research guide, handbook, etc.]*.” Please do not say this. The patron needs to do the reading. You may, silently, scan the materials to look for other links or resources, but never tell the patron you will do the reading to look for an answer to their question. Golden Rules #1 and 3.
- “*I’m not finding the answer in the [handbook, brochure, website, etc.]*.” You won’t find answers to your patron’s legal problems. Patrons may find what is or what they believe are answers to their problems, but you will never, ever find it, so don’t give them the impression you are looking for anything other than a resource they can consult or read. Or, just refer.
- “*My educated guess is that this statute means xxx.*” Never, ever say this in response to a question about whether or not a particular law applies to the patron’s situation. You do not have an educated case about what the law is. No lawyer would say this about a statute, without doing further research - and having a client to whom the law may or may not apply.
- Forms: Few fill-in-the-blank legal forms exist. Even if they do, it is seldom a matter of just filling in a form - for so many reasons! [Golden Rule #1.] It is also next to impossible for someone to research a legal claim (other than “small claims” action and even then ...) at a public library that doesn’t have up-to-date statutes, regulations, case law, secondary sources, etc. [See also, the [Legal Forms Pyramid](#) at Oregon Legal Research blog, 7/3/08 posting.]
- Small claims forms are available at most county circuit court web sites or at courthouses, including Justice Courts. Also, the [Oregon State Bar Referral and Information Service](#) can make a referral to a Small Claims Coach. (*In many small claims cases, the opposing side has retained counsel, so consultation with a small claims coach may be worth the time and cost.*)

LAURA’S BOTTOM LINE: “*I have been a law librarian for almost 25 years; I know my way, blindfolded, around a law library and legal research tools. I HIRE ATTORNEYS.*”