

Virtual Reference Assignment:

The Sacramento Public Library

CHOICE OF LIBRARY

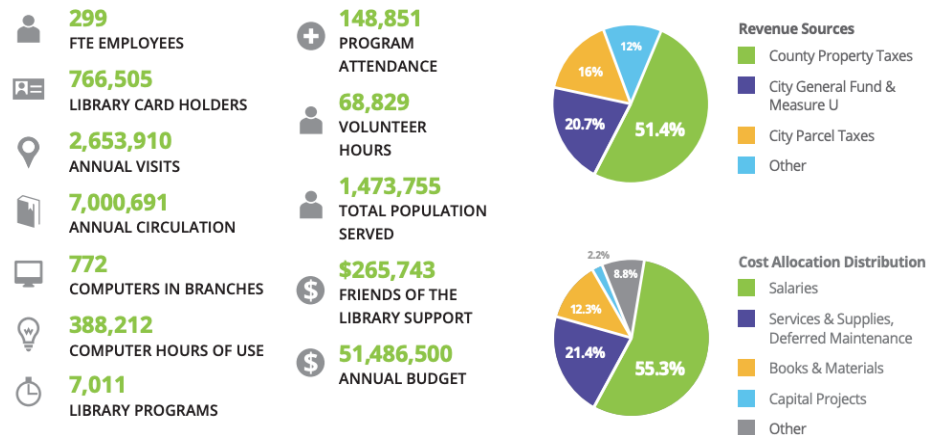
I chose to analyze my new local library, the Sacramento Public Library, because I recently started working in the Sacramento area and many of my coworkers and friends use this library frequently. It's large and offers a lot of services across the county, so I decided to learn more about it and to try using its virtual reference services.

BACKGROUND

The main Sacramento Public Library (SPL) is located in the downtown area of the capitol of California, although it has 24 locations within the larger Sacramento area and its suburbs. This year so far (2021), SPL has hosted 166 virtual programs, and has recorded over 2 million digital books checked out by patrons. Additionally, SPL offers virtual reference services seven days a week. SPL publishes an annual report and the most recent copy available is from 2019-2020. Regarding its performance, SPL writes: "The past year demonstrated Sacramento Public Library to meet the community's needs despite a shifting landscape (Annual Report)." In 2020, its digital circulation increased by 25% (Annual Report). Additionally, SPL "served 21,555 children at 13 library sites throughout the summer, increasing 58% over the previous year" (Annual Report). They also hosted "free weekly WI-FI bus visits through a partnership with SacRT, California State Transportation Agency, and City of Sacramento" (Annual Report). Through distance learning, SPL reached "1,800 students" (Annual Report). The Sacramento Public Library system is one focused on its effectiveness in serving its local communities.

Here is a snapshot of SPL on the inside (staff, budget, and resource statistics; from the Annual Report):

LIBRARY AT A GLANCE FY 2019–2020



Reference services background:

The Sacramento Public Library’s (SPL) reference information was easy to find in a targeted Google search, but was tricky to find within the SPL website. On Google, I searched “Sacramento Public Library reference chat” and found the chat hours and availability. When I was on the SPL website home page, there was a chat box, and although this was the standard virtual reference communication method, I had to dig through the site to find more information on the chat feature.

Introduction to virtual reference “secret shopping:”

I conducted two virtual reference visits. Both virtual visits were on the topic of reading advisory, and were conducted over chat. In each visit, I started with a broad request, then as I chatted with the reference librarian via the SPL website messenger, I made my request more and more specific.

“Secret shopping” instance one:

In the first virtual reference visit, I asked about science fiction. Here is the order of my questions:

- What is in your science fiction section?
- How can I find Russian authors in particular?
- I like the Strugatsky brothers, how do I find more books by them?
- **Results:** A list of books by the Strugatsky brothers, and by the librarian's recommendation, a list of books similar to the Strugatsky brothers' work.

Virtual chat summary:

This reference librarian, Haley, was prompt and enthusiastic in helping me. This accomplished **step one of the RUSA guidelines**: “establishing rapport.” By using exclamation points, phrases like “I would be happy to ____!” and phrases like “I apologize for the delay, it should just be a few more moments” to explain time gaps, I felt that she wanted to help me.

Haley didn't ask me follow-up questions to my request, which unfortunately made it harder for her to help me search (as seen in the transcript below). However, Haley always left her responses open, so that I felt comfortable asking for additional help as needed. With our back-and-forth responses, I was able to learn more about the catalog filters, the results list, and additional ways to find more information. This accomplished **step three of the RUSA guidelines**, “Develop a successful search strategy.” I also felt like I genuinely came up with more questions as I spoke with Haley, which came up as I browsed through the results lists she sent me.

I also liked how Haley sent me links to specific results pages so that I could get the information I was looking for right away. This accomplished **step four of the RUSA guidelines**, “Locate the information.” Finally, she asked multiple times if she found what I was looking for, and if I needed anything else, which accomplished **steps five and six**, “Ensure the question is answered,” and “closing.” (Step two, “negotiate the question” was the only step missed, and one could argue that we eventually negotiated the question together through our conversation.)

“Secret shopping” instance two:

My second virtual visit was on the topic of reading advisory like the first, but was much different in content and results. Here are the questions I asked:

- What children’s books do you have?
- Are there any singalong children’s books?
- Are there any other languages besides English?
- In Spanish and Chinese in particular?
- **Results:** A list of singalong children’s books written in Spanish, and another list of singalong children’s books written in Chinese. The front covers revealed that some books were in all three lists, indicating that they were translations available in English, Spanish and Chinese.

Virtual chat summary:

This reference librarian, Misty, was kind and enthusiastic like Haley, and I felt welcome right away, **accomplishing step one of the RUSA guidelines**. Misty asked me a question right away, which was different from my first reference chat. Misty’s question regarded my ability to navigate the library catalog and website, as well as my search goals. Misty’s goal question, however, was a yes/no question rather than an open-ended one, which meant I had to correct her. She had asked if my goal was to know how to request a children’s book from the catalog, and since my goal was different, I had to clarify that I was looking for singalong books, and needed help sifting through the results. Regardless, this was **step two of the RUSA guidelines**, “negotiate the question.” I’m not sure if Misty’s goal was to prompt quick responses from the virtual patron (me), which would make sense. It could have been unintentional.

She also helped me by explaining how I could filter the results myself, which helped me with **step three of the RUSA guidelines**, “develop a successful research strategy.” Misty also sent me links to the filtered results pages where I could look through the results, and sent me increasingly accurate links as our chat continued, which accomplished **step four of the RUSA guidelines**, “locate the information.” Finally, she asked if I had what I was looking for, and if I needed anything else, which **accomplished steps five and six**, “ensuring the question is answered,” and “closing.”

Analysis of virtual reference overall: Do you think your experience would be different if you were able to ask your question at a physical reference desk?

I think my experience would be different, but I also think this is not avoidable, and is instead the nature of the different environments (virtual and in-person). In each virtual visit, even with different reference librarians, there was one main thing both had in common: neither had an in-depth reference interview. I was initially skeptical of this, but after I thought about both encounters, I believe the motivations and goals behind virtual reference versus in-person reference are different.

I believe that virtual reference chat is overall a shorter process than in-person reference. I used the San Jose State King Library chat for a research question regarding Native American history and received a shorter response that I decided to not include due to its short length. If I were at a physical reference desk, I believe I would have received an in-depth reference interview and would receive more targeted assistance.

I want to support the virtual reference chat and its brevity. After considering my experience, I realized that the chat’s purpose is to serve patrons looking for quick answers. These patrons may be unfamiliar with libraries, unwilling to come into the library, or socially shy. In my case, I

didn't have a Sacramento Public Library card and wanted to see what the library was like. There is a level of safety in chat that isn't seen in in-person reference, leading to shorter attention spans and a general lack of understanding in the reference librarian's workload. It is easier for a patron to leave a chat than it is for them to leave an in-person reference interaction, and for this reason, it is thoughtful for reference librarians to be relatively short and prompt in their virtual assistance. And as in my experience, there is room for questions later in the chat, when it's more clear that a patron is invested in the quality of their results. These interview processes (virtual and in-person) should be different, and in the future, I will anticipate different experiences using virtual reference services versus in-person reference services.

One critique I do have for virtual reference is that one chat service handles all levels of requests. Perhaps a "research inquiry" chat could handle more in-depth requests, but still be managed by the same reference librarians handling general reference chat messages.

References:

Macek, R. (2021, August 23). RUSA guidelines. [Lecture notes, PowerPoint Slides.]

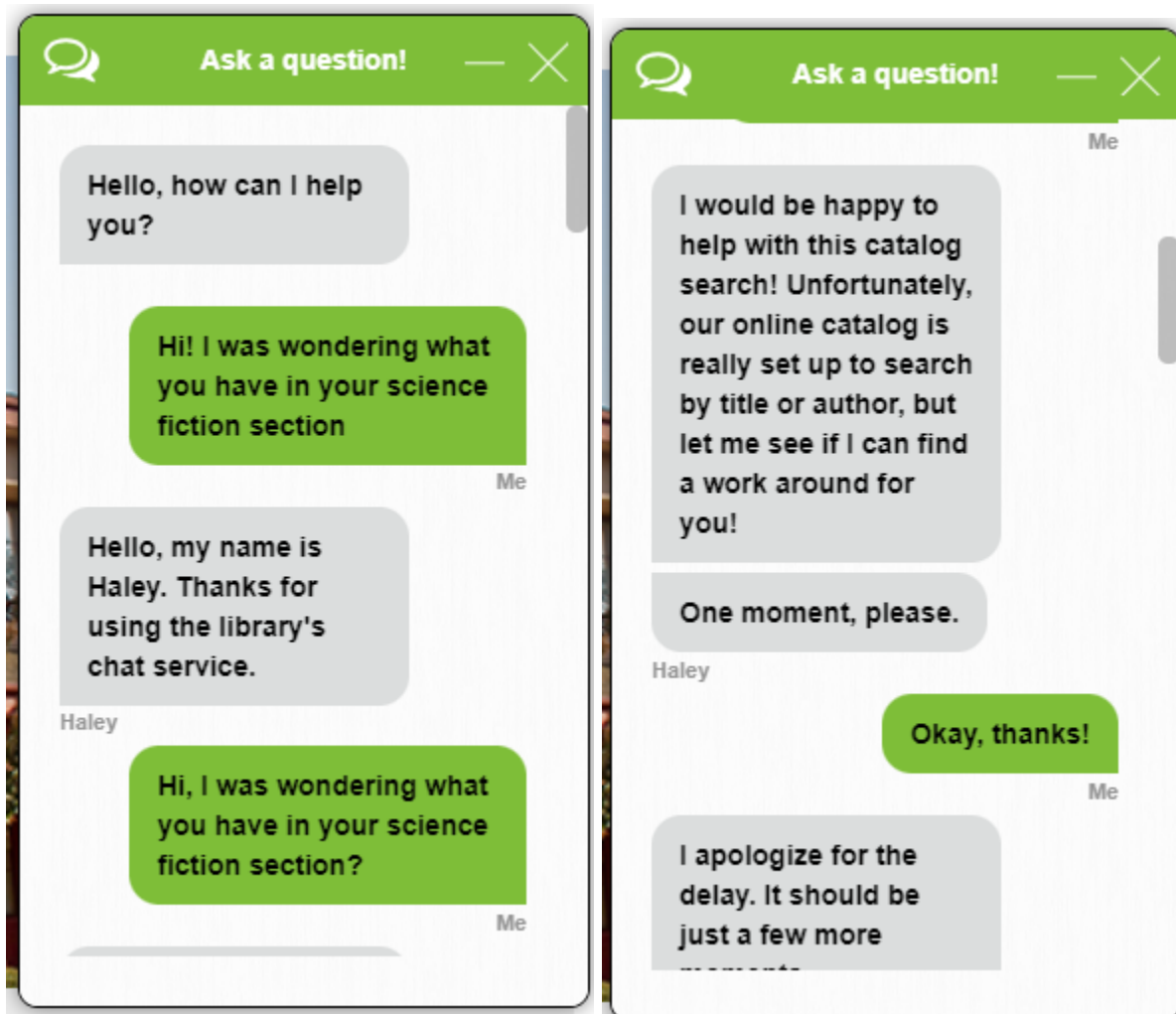
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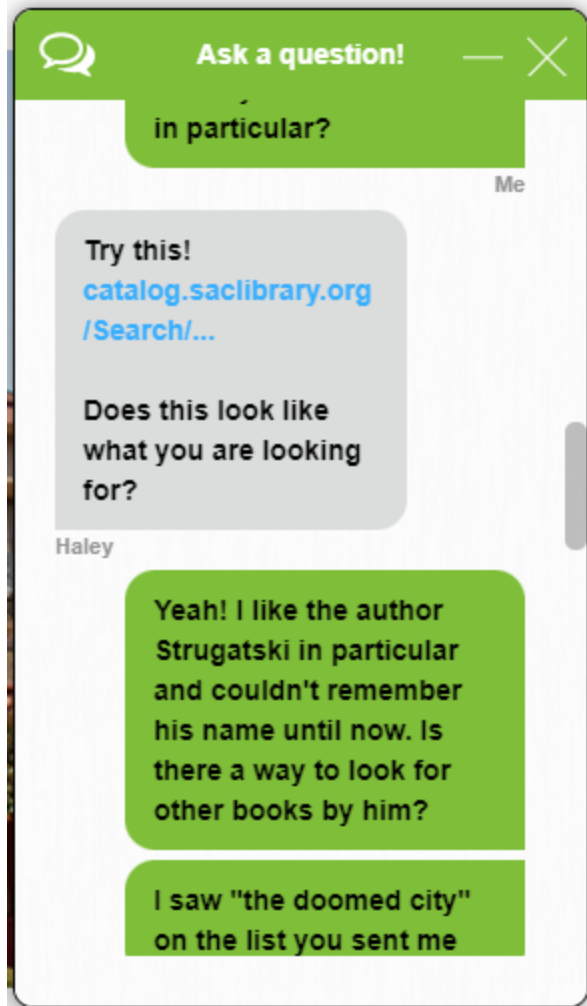
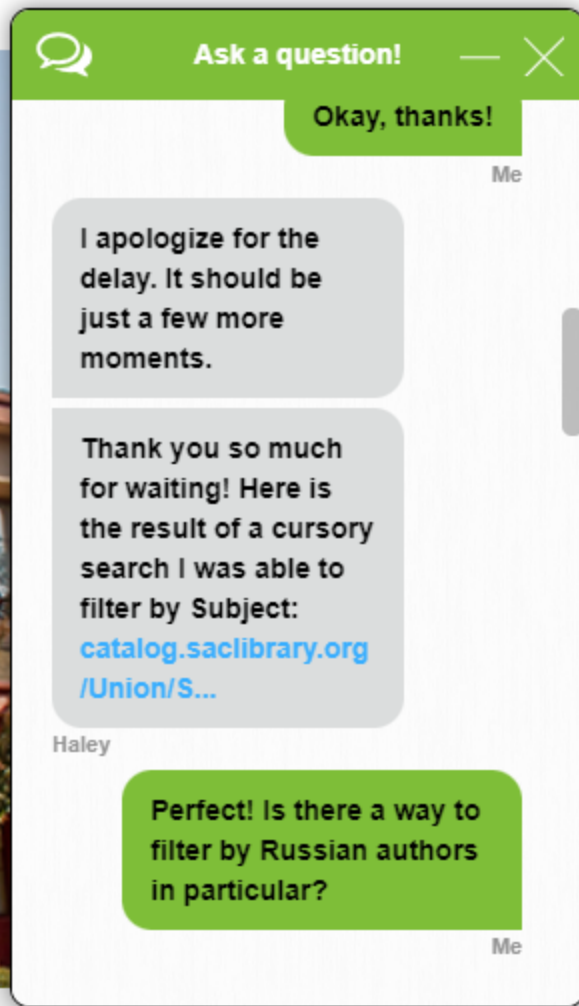
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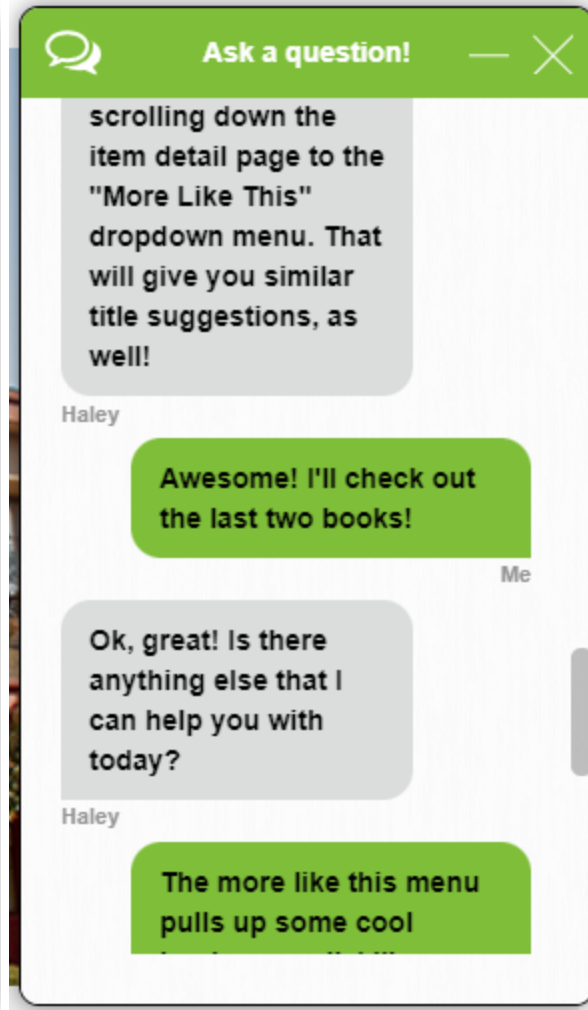
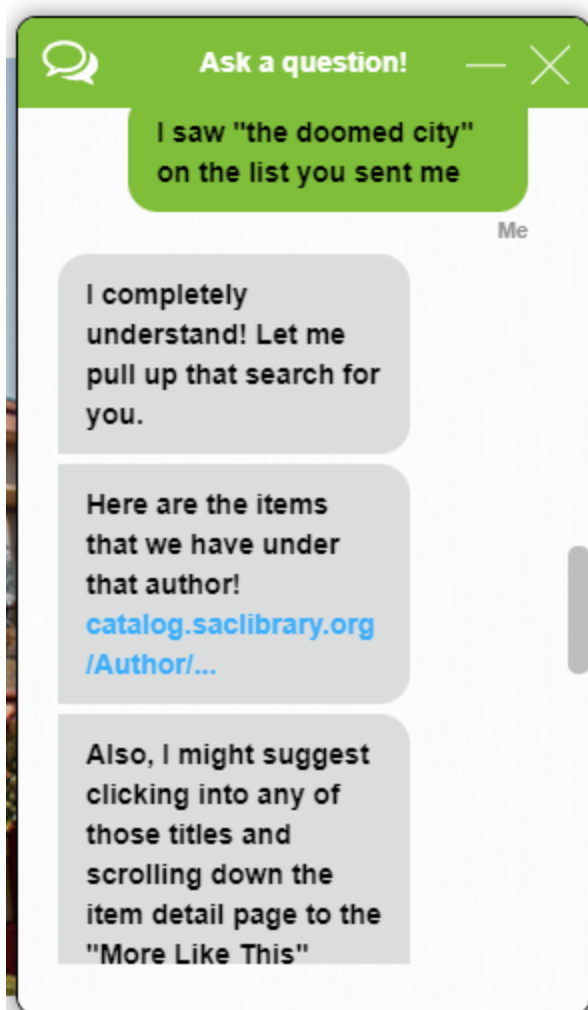
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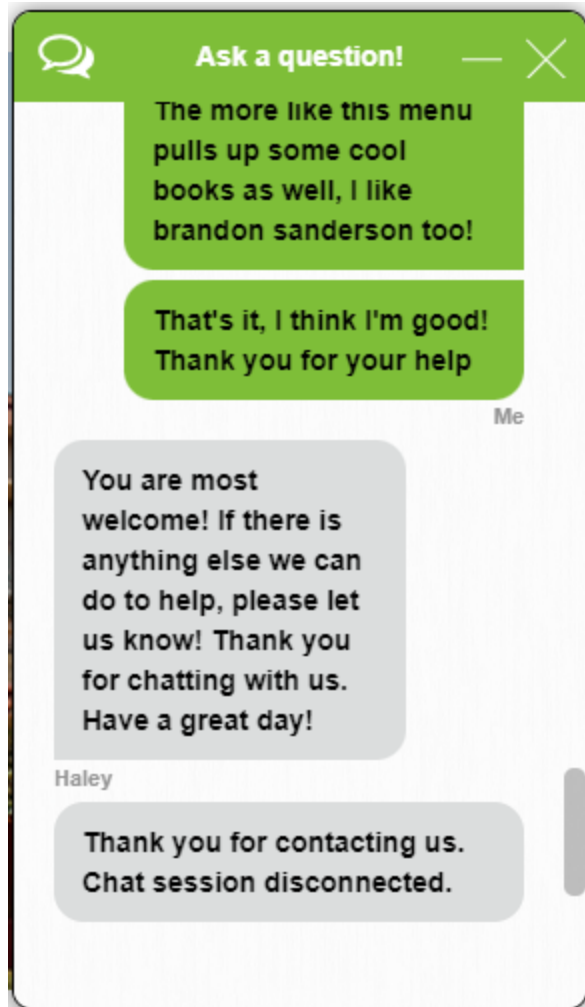
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Transcript 1: Russian science fiction.



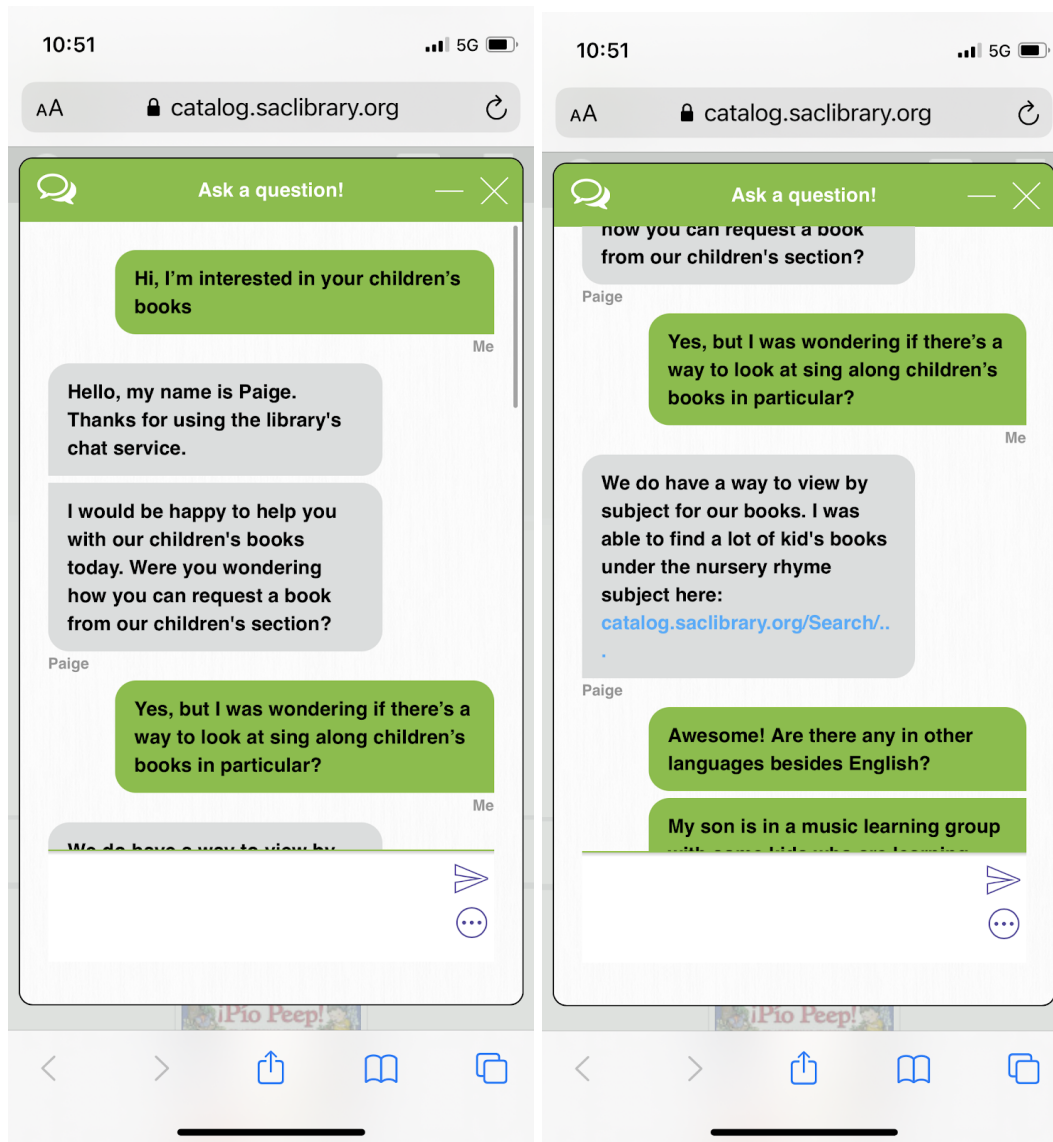


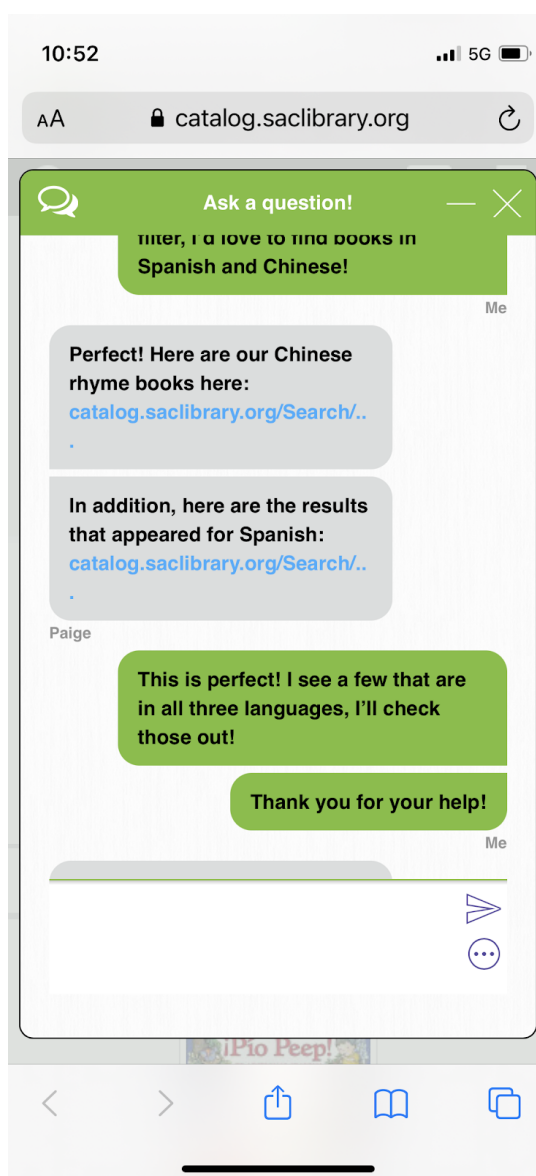
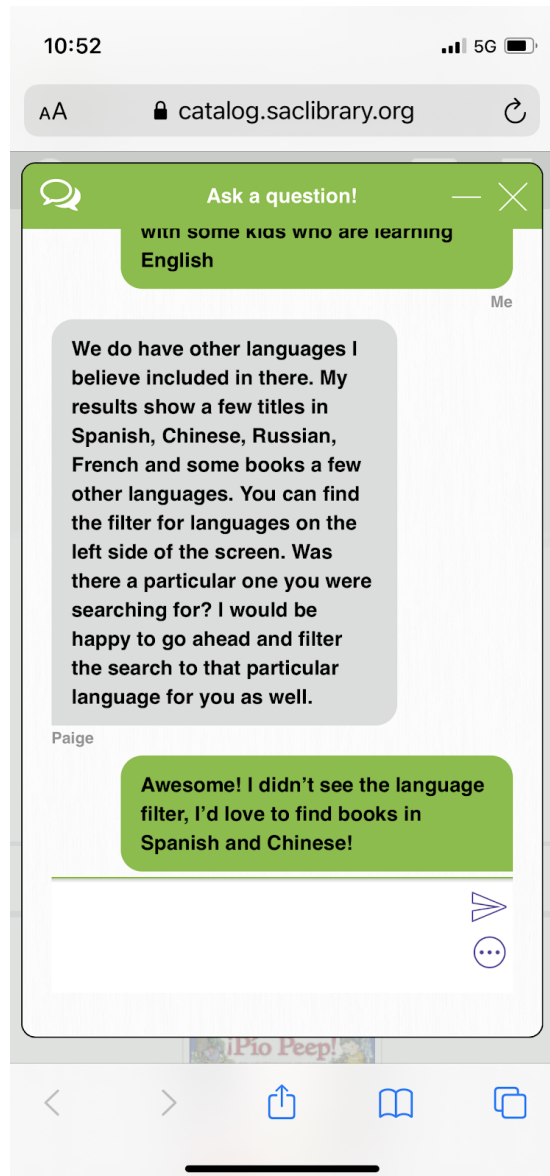


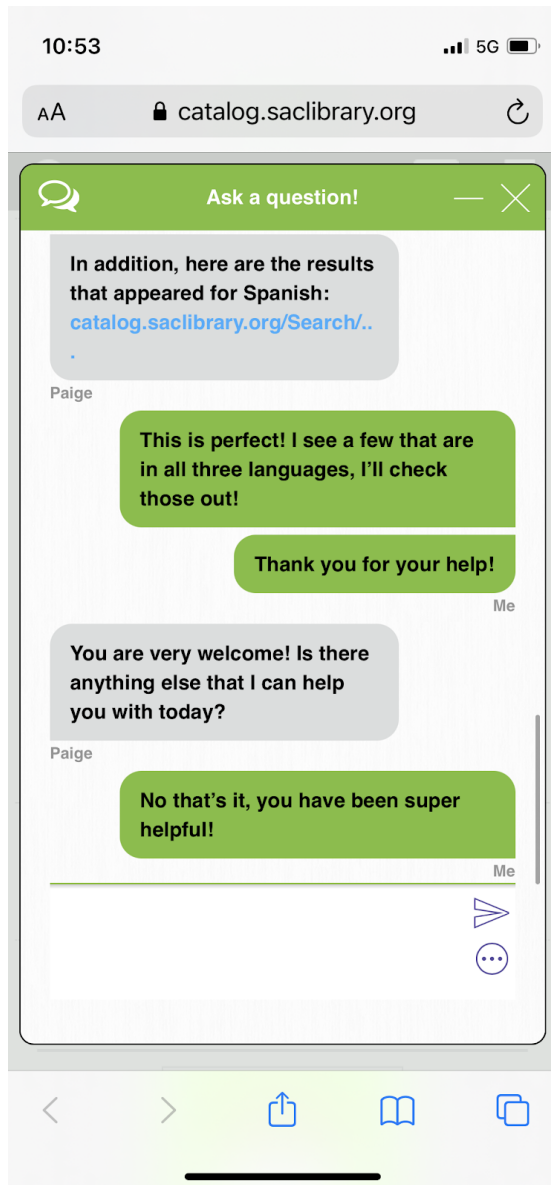


End of Transcript 1.

Transcript 2: Singalong children's books.







End of transcript 2.