RA_x

Readers' Advisory Prescriptions
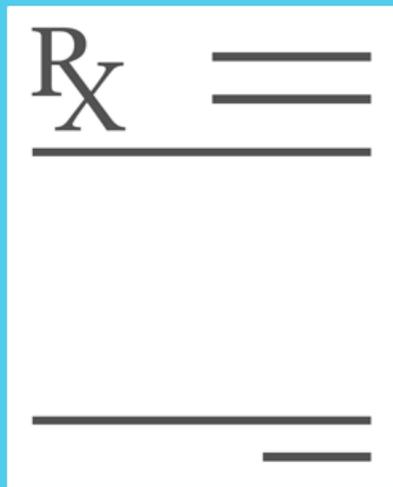
> **Libraries need to *intentionally* deliver services that result in readers finding more books they want to read. We also have to help readers realize the essential connections between reading and their lives.**
>
> *-- Duncan Smith, Co-Founder and General Manager, NoveList*

Introduction

Where is readers' advisory (RA) on your library's priority list? Is it woven into your strategic plans and goals, or not even on your radar? NoveList developed this guide to help public libraries help readers find their next favorite book.

If you're looking to make RA part of your mission, the resources and exercises in this booklet will help you assess your library's current state of services for readers – and figure out how to get to the next level.

In a 2013 survey developed by NoveList, the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA), and *Library Journal*, we learned that 100% of libraries surveyed conduct personal RA in-house – that's huge. Readers' advisory is a service libraries want to provide, and that readers want provided to them.

This document is your *Readers' Advisory (RAx) Prescription*. It's meant to serve as a tool to evaluate your readers, your staff, and your services; as a guide to the different types of readers and how to help them; as a guide to the different strengths your individual staff possess and how to maximize their effectiveness; and as a guide to assessing the services you currently offer and inspiration for opportunities to expand those services.

But this booklet is only just the beginning, a jumping off point as you start taking your readers' advisory services to the next level. There's a bevy of resources in the NoveList Idea Center, http://bit.ly/raxidea, that will help you evaluate, promote, connect, learn, educate, and inspire.

And if you think of more ideas, please share your own #RAPrescriptions with us on social media.

Ready for your RAx? Read on.

– the NoveList Team

Evaluate: Your readers

Instructions: For each category, enter the percentage of readers in your community that you think fall into that category (guess-timates are fine). The numbers you enter should total 100%. For example, you might have an even breakdown of 25%-25%-25%-25%. Later, you'll have an opportunity to compare your numbers to the average across other libraries.

How many of your readers are:

A ___ %

**Have more time,
Prefer high interaction**

These readers are familiar faces in the library, love talking books with staff, and are frequent attendees at book-related programming and events.

B ___ %

**Have less time,
Prefer high interaction**

Your "drive-by" readers fit into this category. They love and use the library but don't typically have lots of time to spend at the library.

C ___ %

**Have more time,
Prefer low interaction**

These readers enjoy spending time wandering the stacks and checking out book displays but tend to shy away from interacting with staff.

D ___ %

**Have less time,
Prefer low interaction**

Those in this group may not identify themselves as readers and typically will only come into the library when they need help with a specific need.

Evaluate: Your staff

Instructions: For each category, enter the percentage of staff at your library that you think fall into that category (guess-timates are fine)! The numbers you enter should total 100%. For example, you might have an even breakdown of 25%-25%-25%-25%. Later, you'll have an opportunity to compare your numbers to the average across other libraries.

How many of your staff are:

1 ☐ **%**

**Have more book knowledge
Prefer high interaction**

These are your RA experts. They read widely and often, and are very comfortable and skilled at providing readers' advisory to patrons.

2 ☐ **%**

**Have less book knowledge
Prefer high interaction**

These staff members are skilled at and enjoy interacting with the public but don't have extensive knowledge of different genres, authors, etc.

3 ☐ **%**

**Have more book knowledge
Prefer low interaction**

These staff are wide and avid readers, may often identify as introverts, and often don't feel comfortable or skilled at interacting with the public.

4 ☐ **%**

**Have less book knowledge
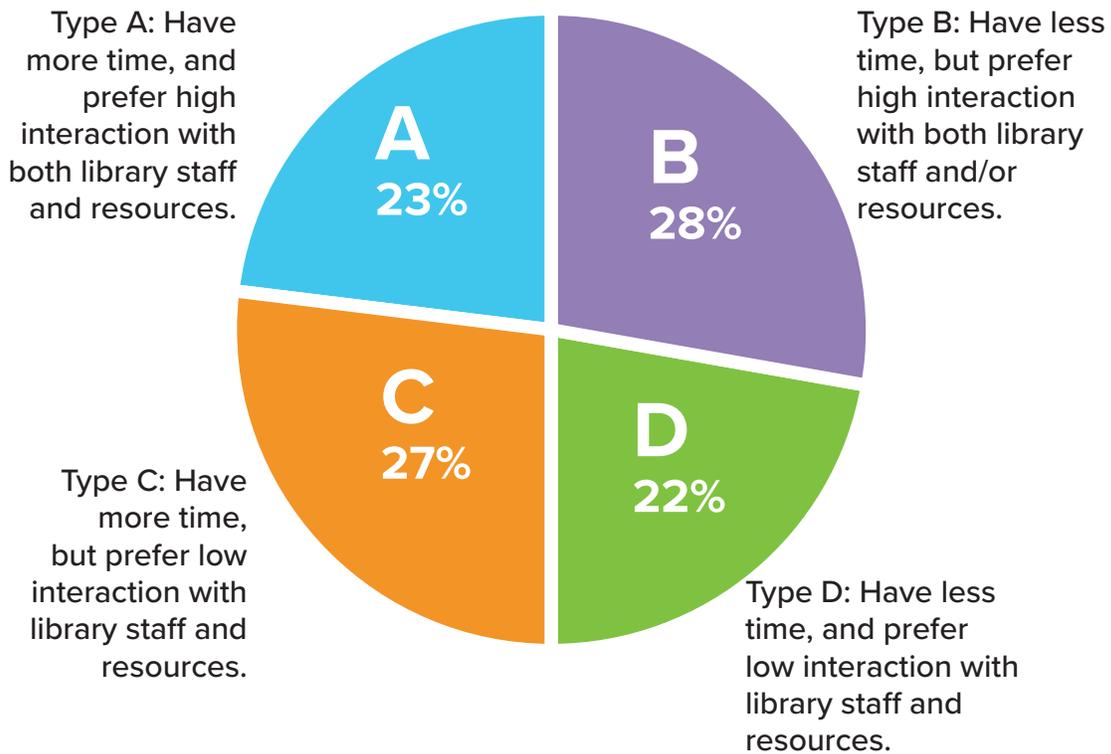Prefer low interaction**

Staff members in this category may not identify as avid readers, and thus don't feel as comfortable responding to off-the-cuff questions from patrons.

Different Types of Readers

There are a wide range of readers who not only read different authors, titles, and genres but also vary in the way they use the library and the services that the library provides.

Readers fall into four basic types. The types are defined below and the services that are best suited to address their needs are listed on the next page.

Typical breakdown of reader types

Type A: Have more time, and prefer high interaction with both library staff and resources.

Type B: Have less time, but prefer high interaction with both library staff and/or resources.

A
23%

B
28%

C
27%

D
22%

Type C: Have more time, but prefer low interaction with library staff and resources.

Type D: Have less time, and prefer low interaction with library staff and resources.

Strategies for Helping Different Types of Readers

Type A readers

Have more time, prefer high interaction

These high interaction readers are familiar faces in the library and enjoy spending time with library staff. They frequently stop by the desk and engage in conversations about books. They are interested in what everyone is reading. You will also find them at your book clubs. These are the readers that other readers turn to when they are looking for a book to read.

How to help them

While these readers make use of all of the library's book discovery services, they are *more* likely to use the services that involve contact with others (face-to-face RA, book programs). They particularly benefit from services that present and push reading suggestions to them -- e-newsletters or enriched catalogs, for example. Remember these readers *love* interaction.

Type B readers

Have less time, prefer high interaction

These readers work hard to find a place in their busy lives for their next book. These "drive-by" readers, who spend less time in the library, are frequent users of your online catalog and holds system. While these time-strapped users measure the success of a library visit by how quickly they can get in and out of your front door, they are always looking for their next new book.

How to help them

These readers benefit from having reading recommendations and series information in the catalog. Type B readers also benefit from other digital strategies that reduce their search and drive time like e-newsletters and form-based RA. These services allow them to take advantage of librarian expertise without having to drive to the library to get it.

Type C readers

Have more time, prefer low interaction

Like the previous two groups, these readers have strategies for finding their next book to read -- it just isn't as laser-focused as the two previous groups. These are your browsers -- those readers who roam up and down your stacks and stop by your book displays waiting for the right book to "speak" to them. For these self-directed readers, the library is a place to discover books. As Type C readers are self-directed they do tend to linger in the stacks but tend not to interact with staff,

How to help them

These readers benefit from services and strategies that enable them to easily locate interesting titles without asking for help. Separating collections by genre, spine-labeling, shelf-talkers, displays, booklists, and reading maps are all services that resonate with these readers. Strategies reminding these readers of staff availability and eagerness to help them find books are also helpful.

Type D readers

Have less time, prefer low interaction

All three of the previous groups would self-identify as readers. Type D readers, however, only read when they *have* to. These are the users who come to the library to solve a problem or deal with an issue (getting a job, coping with a health challenge, plan a trip, working on a school assignment). They are focused on getting exactly what they need as quickly as possible. These situational users are infrequent visitors to the library -- only using it when they feel the library can help them.
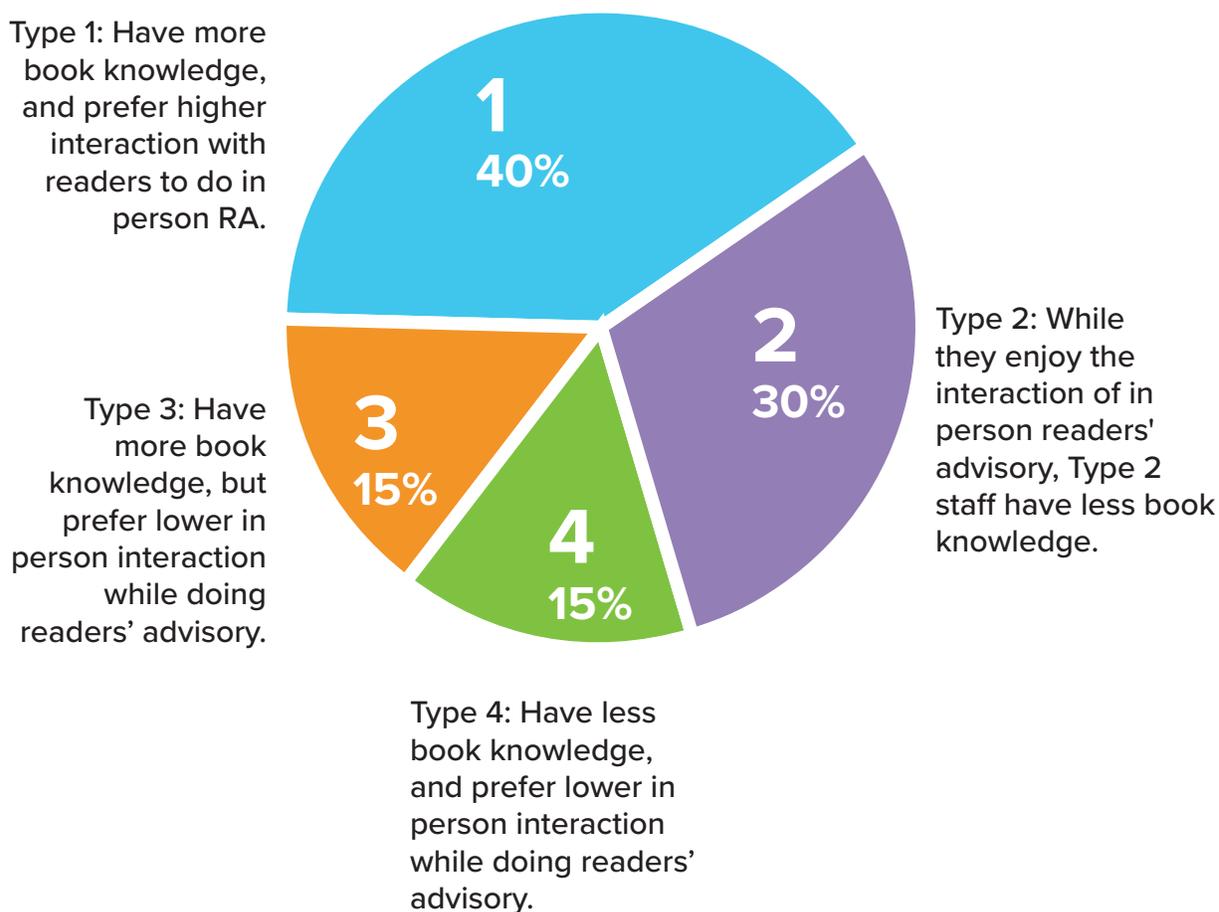
How to help them

The best strategy here is to efficiently respond to their request for assistance and to have self-directed strategies in place for those life challenges that have users coming to the library. You will also want to make sure that you have signage and materials (brochures, flyers) in place that let these users know about all of the other services they could be taking advantage of.

Different Types of Staff

Only 6% of public libraries have a dedicated readers' advisory staff. This means that in the overwhelming majority of libraries, readers' advisory is *everyone's* responsibility. Different staff members have different skill levels, talents, and resource needs. Your challenge is to determine where your staff strengths are and ensure that you are maximizing their effectiveness.

Typical breakdown of staff types

Type 1: Have more book knowledge, and prefer higher interaction with readers to do in person RA.

1
40%

Type 2: While they enjoy the interaction of in person readers' advisory, Type 2 staff have less book knowledge.

2
30%

Type 3: Have more book knowledge, but prefer lower in person interaction while doing readers' advisory.

3
15%

4
15%

Type 4: Have less book knowledge, and prefer lower in person interaction while doing readers' advisory.

Strategies for Different Types of Staff

Type 1 staff

More book knowledge, prefer high interaction

Think Nancy Pearl. These staff members are avid readers and read widely across many genres. They are very comfortable talking about books with readers and other staff members.

Type 1 staff usually have a following and are frequently asked for by name when a reader is looking for a book. Type 1 staff are great on the reference or information desk as well as leading book clubs and book-oriented programs but their knowledge and expertise is too valuable to only have it reside there.

Type 1 staff benefit the library by being accessible to other staff, creating materials that all staff can use to respond to challenging questions such as the recommendations and cheat sheets used by Type 2 staff. Give them leadership roles in staff training so that others can benefit from their expertise.

Type 2 staff

Less book knowledge, prefer high interaction

These staff enjoy face-to-face interaction with readers but frequently do not see the connection between their reference skills and readers' advisory. Type 2s often feel that if they haven't read the book they can't properly respond to a readers' advisory question.

Help these staff understand the connection between their existing skills and readers' advisory. Staff education is important for this group. This training should not only focus on the readers' advisory processes but ensure that staff are skilled and comfortable in the use of readers' advisory resources that supplement and expand their book knowledge.

Another great strategy for Type 2 is to give them tools such as cheat sheets, easy-to-hand-out brochures, and bookmarks. Give them what they need to fill in their knowledge gaps and let their natural people skills shine.

Type 3 staff

More book knowledge, prefer low interaction

Type 3 staff have robust book knowledge but they tend to shy away from face-to-face interactions with readers. These avid readers know a lot about a wide range of books, but that knowledge and expertise can stay inside of them if they don't have responsibilities that allow them to share it in ways that are more comfortable to them.

While they are not comfortable in high-pressure, fast-paced public service situations, these staff enjoy sharing what they know. The tasks for which they are ideally suited are the creation of book displays, book lists, bookmarks, and other printed materials. The creation of these materials allows them to use their knowledge without forcing face-to-face interactions.

Type 3 staff can also be excellent at responding to form-based readers' advisory questions and as editors of your book-oriented newsletters.

Type 4 staff

Less book knowledge, prefer low interaction

These staff who have less book knowledge than Types 1 and 3 like to have clearly defined roles and expectations. They prefer the comfort of having a structure to their work and don't like to be surprised by requests for which they don't have a clear and expected response.

In order for Type 4 staff to not only be but *feel* successful, they need clear, easy-to-follow guidelines for responding to reader requests. For example, when a reader places a book on hold and asks for something else to read, these staff members can show the recommendations that are in the library's catalog or refer to cheat sheets and brochures designed by Types 1 and 3 staff.

Type 4 staff can also offer to show readers the library's latest appropriate, book-focused newsletters (and offer to sign readers up for future issues). With the right tools in place, Type 4 staff can be successful readers' advisors!

Evaluate: Your RA services

Instructions: For each category, put a checkmark in the column that best indicates the current status at your library.

	Doing a GREAT job with this	Want to do MORE of this	Possibly THINKING about this	Not CURRENTLY on the radar
Face-to-face readers' advisory				
Email and/or form-based readers' advisory				
Readers' advisory on social media				
Book rivers/carousels on your website				
Educating staff about readers' advisory				
Offering book-based programming				
Shelving books according to genre				
Reading recommendations in the catalog				
Reading recommendations in self-check				
Reading recommendations in linked data				
Creating bibliographies (print or online)				
Creating book displays				
Creating book-based brochures, posters				
Creating shelf talkers				
Sending e-newsletters about books				

Strategies for Building Your RA Services

The third component of building your library's RA prescription is to assess what services you currently offer, which ones you are considering, and which ones are not on your radar. Compare these ideas to your assessment (on page 9) of what you're *currently* doing. Are there opportunities to expand your services?

Face-to-face readers' advisory

This is what people traditionally mean when they talk about readers' advisory -- a reader comes into a library and asks for more authors who write like their favorite author. Remember, however, that *any* book-oriented question, even '*does the library own book Y?*' is a potential readers' advisory question. Don't miss these opportunities! Type A readers and Type 1 staff *love* face-to-face RA.

Form-based readers' advisory

Form-based RA involves a form that allows readers to communicate their reading interests. Library staff receive the form, route it to the staff person best qualified, the staff person develops a list of titles with a rationale for their recommendations, and sends it to the reader. An advantage is that staff have extra time to do research before sending a response. Type 3 staff are great at form-based RA. It might also be perfect for staff with less book knowledge if you give them the right tools to research their responses.

Readers' advisory on social media

The social space is awash in book and reading-oriented sites and services. Ensuring that your readers who occupy these "third" places are aware of your library services is increasingly important if you want to reach all of your readers. Using social media to deliver (and market) readers' advisory service is an important way to not only reach those Type B readers but to elevate your library's reputation as the book conversation hub of your community.

Readers' advisory on your website

Use your website to introduce your readers to all of your library's book-oriented options. Everything from new book widgets, to form-based RA, to entire sections for readers to explore your collection and what your staff knows about books and reading. All types of readers will appreciate this.

Staff training on readers' advisory

Study after study shows that the majority of librarians do not get instruction on providing readers' advisory service in library school. This means that training must happen on the job. Given the fact that readers' advisory is everyone's responsibility, this training is not just for the professionals on the information services desk, but must address the needs of *all* staff. To complement their training, give staff readers' advisory tools that fill in the gaps of their knowledge and allow them to maximize their individual skills.

Book-based programs

Book discussion groups, author visits, and One Book/One Community programs are just a few examples of book-oriented programs that expand your readers' appreciation and interaction with the library. These programs are especially attractive to people who like to engage on a personal level (including Type A readers and Type 1 staff).

Collections grouped by genre

Separating your collection by genre increases the likelihood of readers finding new titles and authors. This is primarily because smaller groupings are easier, and less overwhelming to browse. So your mystery fans, don't have wade through romances or westerns; they can browse exactly what they like. Spine labels are a similar strategy. This RA tactic is particularly useful for Type C readers.

Reading recommendations in the catalog

The catalog is your *most* frequently consulted resource by both staff and readers. Adding book recommendations and series information to your catalog records is an excellent strategy for supporting self-directed readers (especially Types C and D) in finding their next good book as well as to support Types 2 and 4 staff.

Reading recommendations in self-checkout

In many libraries with self-check kiosks, up to 80% of total circulation passes through these machines. Adding reading recommendations to self-check receipts as well as self-check emails is a great way to transform these receipts into effective bookmarks and promote additional titles that are held by your library. All readers (Types A, B, C, and D) love this kind of service!

Reading recommendations in linked data

Readers are likely to *start* their search on the web. What is your strategy for being findable on the web? Maybe your library location and hours pop up in search results, but what about the fact that you own the book that a reader is searching for? The open web is the new outreach frontier and linked data is a strategy for making your library, your collection, your programs and you visible when a search starts with Google, Bing, or one of the popular search engines.

Bibliographies

Book lists are a perennial favorite with readers. They are also an excellent way of generalizing staff knowledge and expertise (think about those Nancy Pearls on your staff). Book lists are also effective ways to support Type 4 staff (less book knowledge with less interaction) in delivering quality RA.

Book displays

These "islands of possibility" are a common strategy for preemptively addressing long hold queues and getting books that are languishing in the stacks back into circulation. Displays support the browsing that Types C readers frequently engage in as well as serve as an excellent vehicle for getting the book knowledge that is resident in Type 3 staff into circulation.

Book-based posters/signage

According to a recent Pew report, most people currently learn about library collections, programs, and services while they are *in* the library. Posters and digital signs are a very visual way to not only support readers in finding their next book (think reading maps on your walls and digital signs) but to let your readers know about your RA services and showcase your staffs' book knowledge.

Book-based brochures

Sometimes a bookmark or poster isn't enough real estate to communicate all of the information that your readers need to make an informed reading choice. Consider using this long-form print format to provide an overview of a genre (mystery) or sub-genre (cozy) providing not only a list of authors and titles but background, like key traits in the genre as well as reasons why readers enjoy the titles contained in the brochure. You can also highlight various RA services or programs, like book clubs or form-based RA. Brochures are an excellent way for Type 4 staff (less book knowledge and less interaction) to deliver quality RA.

Shelf talkers

Shelf talkers are great way to highlight the high book knowledge of Type 1 and Type 3 staff AND to serve those readers roaming in the stacks. Type C readers are the ones wandering the stacks looking for inspiration. Shelf talkers allow your staff to create engaging haiku-like descriptions that will draw attention to mid-list titles that are just as potentially satisfying as the ones on the best-seller list.

Book newsletters

This is an updated version of creating bibliographies. Staff create "bibliographies" that are emailed to readers on a regular basis. This keeps the library top of mind for those busy individuals who rush in and out of the library (think Type B). Book newsletters have been proven to increase library visits and the circulation of the books contained on them. With the right tools to help (see pg 12), ready-to-go newsletters are also a perfect way to save staff time.

In the end, the most important services you provide are the ones that meet the needs of **your** community. What are the strategic goals you're trying to achieve? Which of the ideas above will help you meet the needs of *your* readers?

Revisit the assessment on page 5 and see where you have opportunities to expand in your library. And, please share your own #RAPrescriptions with us on social media.

If it's time to update your strategic goals, look for inspiration in the NoveList Idea Center -- Strategic Goals for Reader Services (found here: www.ebscohost.com/novelist/idea-center/evaluate/evaluate-strategic-language).

Putting it all Together

We hope this guide has served as an effective evaluation tool as you think about your readers' advisory services and their place in the future of your library. As you move forward, remember: different types of readers have different needs, and different types of staff have different strengths in meeting those needs. RAx is all about finding the ways those needs and those strengths can meet in the middle – just what the doctor ordered!

Tools you need

Are you looking for ways to help your staff connect with readers? Consider these essential tools from NoveList:

NoveList Plus

A curated database of read-alike recommendations that is the most comprehensive and trusted source of readers' advisory available.

NoveList Select

A catalog enrichment service that expands your *existing* catalog with NoveList's read-alikes and readers' advisory advice.

LibraryAware

An online tool that helps you keep readers engaged via hundreds of ready-to-use templates for book lists, posters, bookmarks, social media posts, and book-themed newsletters.

Linked Library Service

A service from NoveList that attracts readers to your library by making your collections visible (and discoverable!) in web search results.

Learn more about these tools: **www.ebscohost.com/novelist**