Virtual Reading Room

Service guide

University of Sydney Library & University of Melbourne Library

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Introduction to Virtual Reading Rooms

A Virtual Reading Room (VRR), uses special cameras and video conferencing to provide remote access to relevant collections/resources, making them more accessible.

A VRR service should be considered a complementary service to physical reading rooms and digitisation programs and should not be considered a replacement for either.

A VRR service provides access to Rare Books and Special Collections materials remotely in real-time, allowing clients to access items without having to travel or wait for specialist digitisation. The VRR service also gives access to collections that cannot be lent via traditional inter-library loan.

Clients can use this service as an evaluative tool for when travel is needed to see the item, or if their enquiry can be answered in a VRR session. It also helps libraries and archives when prioritising digitisation of items.

A Virtual Reading Room allows both clients and staff to better use their time and prioritise digitisation programs. If a library cannot digitise an item in-house, a VRR service can be used to meet with vendors virtually to assess feasibility of digitisation methods for unusual items without the vendor or item needing to travel.
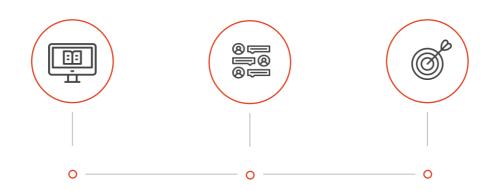

University of Sydney Library's IPEVO VZ-X being used for the Virtual Reading Room service

Service models for a Virtual Reading Room

There are several models for a Virtual Reading Room service. Depending on staffing levels or intended, audience, one may work better for an organisation than another.

Most organisations with Virtual Reading Room services find that an hour is the longest time a staff member should be providing this service for each individual session. In addition to the hour with the client, the staff member needs time to get the items and set up, as well as pack up the space unless you have a permanent dedicated VRR area.

If it is possible to have multiple people staffing the VRR service, this is a good idea. A VRR can be a good opportunity for staff that do not have regular contact with rare or special collections to get some experience, and it is a good opportunity for staff development. It can also help to ensure you are able to continue the service when staff go on leave or become unavailable.

OPEN BOOKINGS, SET TIMES
Anyone can book a VRR session online

Only available during service hours

MEDIATED BOOKINGS
Client contacts and requests a VRR session

Library assesses and approves/denies requests

TARGETED SERVICE ONLY
VRR service not advertised

Only offered to selected clients

Service model 1: Open bookings, set times

In this model, there are set times that a client can choose from when booking. The booking service is either linked or embedded in a webpage that describes the VRR service and sets expectations about what can or cannot be done in a VRR session.

Bookings are made using an online service such as Springshare's LibCal or Microsoft Bookings. These are open to anyone, but the bookings are mediated and not always approved. The request is evaluated before it is approved, and once assessed the appointment is confirmed and the virtual meeting invite is sent.

The VRR service is not offered outside of the times set in the booking system. Library staff are rostered to, or allocated to shifts. This model is less flexible for clients, but does allow for transparent availability and helps staff plan their other tasks around this service. The number of days or times the service is offered will vary depending on the organisation.

Service model 2: Mediated bookings

In this model, an email address or online form is created, and users submit a request for a booking. This is most often via a webpage on the library website describing the service and that sets expectations for what can or cannot be done in a VRR session.

Once the email requesting a VRR session is received, a conversation happens between library staff and the client about the item(s) they have selected and their suitability for the service, what the client hopes to achieve. The request is then either approved or denied. A mutually suitable time is chosen for the appointment to take place, and the virtual meeting invite is sent.

Service model 3: Targeted service only

In this model, the client contacts the reading room about a reference query or access query and is assessed to have a need that matches the VRR service.

The VRR service does not have a web presence and communications around the service are likely minimal. In this case, the client is offered a session and if they accept, a virtual meeting invite is sent for a mutually suitable time.

Mediating booking requests for the Virtual Reading Room service

Each organisation should have a clear internal document that outlines how bookings are assessed, and the steps that will be taken if the answer is yes. At a minimum, this should consider:

Physical item checks

- Is the item requested an audio-visual item or file, video game, microfilms/microfiche, or on any other legacy media carrier that cannot be viewed using the VRR equipment?
- Will the item be damaged by handling?
- Is the item too large for safe handling?
- Is it not able to be viewed well with the visualiser?

Content and copyright checks

- Does the item contain content that is offensive, or staff do not feel comfortable/safe handling?
- Does the item contain any personally identifiable content that we cannot show on the internet? (anything that would breach the Privacy Act. For example, a signature or home address of a living person)
- Is the item available commercially for purchase new?
- Does the item contain Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural knowledge or is it restricted access by gender?
- Are there any donation or access restrictions that we need to assess or gain permission for before allowing someone to view it?
- Is the item under embargo or unable to be shared for any other reason?
- Is the item available in any of our other libraries/physical collections?
- Is the item available in any of our open access repositories?
- Is the item in copyright?

Client support for the Virtual Reading Room service

Accessibility

As part of the booking process, the library should be checking with the client if they have any accessibility needs. All staff working with the VRR service should have live or automatic captions enabled as part of setting up their device for this work.

At the start of all sessions, check with the client about whether they would prefer to speak verbally or use chat functionality.

Cultural care and sensitive materials

Libraries and archives contain cultural knowledge and historical material that belong to First Nations people. A part of the mediation process for bookings should include guidance on how to manage access to these collections.

When handling items on behalf of communities that are accessing them through the Virtual Reading Room, listen respectfully to them, let them know that they can take a break or reschedule if needed.

If you are asked to stop handling or viewing an item, that the item needs to be restricted or that the item should not be touched by you, listen to the person speaking to you, and follow their advice. Record the advice given and follow cultural protocols at your institution.

Most rare and special collections contain items that use outdated and offensive terminology – It could be racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise problematic. If this is a known part of the item or collections being shown, warn the client of the content ahead of time and at the start of the session.

If this content is encountered during the session, when found for the first time, let the client know that you or they can call for a break or end of session at any time, and that they are able to rebook to resume when they feel ready.

Privacy

In managing a VRR service, remember to work within privacy laws in your jurisdiction and to protect the personal information of your clients. Ideally, any staff working in a library or archive will have completed privacy training, but if this is not available to your organisation more information is available.
- For Australians, this means working within the Privacy Act (Commonwealth), as well as any state laws.
- For Aotearoa/New Zealanders, it means working within the Privacy Act (2020).

Setting expectations and managing unexpected behaviour

If the item that has been requested has any restrictions for access, or cannot be viewed well, the client should be notified ahead of the session so that they can make the decision ahead of time to attend or cancel the session.

As a part of the booking or service discussion, clients should be made aware of any codes of conduct that the library has, and that if the code of conduct is not being met, the session will be ended.

University of Melbourne Library's Wolfvision VZ-C6 being used for the Virtual Reading Room service

Training and support for staff

Equipment training and buddying system

Develop documentation for setting up the workspace and using the equipment that you purchase. Run in-person training on using the equipment, and make sure that people have the opportunity for hands-on practice in the training session.

Set follow up time for new staff to the service to practice independently, with an experienced person on standby for them to come in and answer any questions. If doing group training, pair them up and get them to make a time that same week to play the roles of VRR session runner and client so that they can experience what it is like on both ends.

For anyone's first VRR session, make sure that there is an experienced buddy in the room that can assist as needed.

Video conferencing systems

Provide team members with instructions on how to set up video conferencing software of choice for your Virtual Reading Room. You should not need to develop these, as software companies like Zoom and Microsoft have made them publicly available.

Staff that are new to rare and special collections

If there are staff members working in the Virtual Reading Room service that have less experience with rare books or special collections, it is a good idea to develop a cheat sheet for the way that researchers speak about rare books or special collections.

Staff should be trained in the care and handling of rare and special materials before running VRR sessions.

The free course *The History of the Book in the Early Modern Period* by Trinity College Dublin is very helpful for learning more. If time is short, the content from week 1 of this course is a particularly useful introduction for new staff.

Staff safety and comfort

It is important for staff working in the Virtual Reading Room to know that they can end the appointment at any time. This could be due to the content of material being shown, client behaviour, or physical condition of the item.

If a staff member is assessing an item for an appointment and they personally are not comfortable running the session but believe that someone else may be, they should be able to trade shifts.

If an item is first approved, and then before the session is found to have a problem that would have made it fail the approvals process, the session should be cancelled.

University of Sydney Library, Rare Books and Special Collections Incunabula 97.6

Communication templates

Creating standard information emails or messages for your Virtual Reading Room Services helps with consistency of service, and to make sure that clients and staff expectations are met.

Type of email	Standard email/message should include
Booking approved	– Time and date of the session, expectations around punctuality – Link to meeting – List of items for use, and any limitations or restrictions there may be for these (for example "The item you have requested is a 39m scroll, so we will need to view it section by section") – Confirm any accessibility needs that were requested – Provide the opportunity to ask any questions
Booking denied	– Reason the booking cannot proceed – Any other options for access to the item provided to the client (for example "we have declined your booking as this has been digitised and is available in our Digital Collections [link]") – Provide the opportunity to ask any questions or make another booking for a different item
Reminder (24 hours before session)	– Time and date of the session, expectations around punctuality – Link to meeting – Link to cancel session (if using a booking system) – Any specific instructions around use of the VRR service video conferencing software
Post appointment request for feedback	– Thank client for attending – If evaluating the service, provide a link to the survey and give context as to how the information will be used
Cancellation	– Time and date of session cancelled – Reason for cancellation (if library/archive is the one cancelling the session) – Apologise for inconvenience, and give an opportunity to re-book

Equipment & software to run a Virtual Reading Room service

A Virtual Reading Room service at a minimum needs:
- A computer that has a built-in microphone, access to the internet, and can run video conferencing software
- A video camera that can be connected to a computer (at any resolution)
- Excellent Wi-Fi connection

A more advanced VRR service could also have:
- Ethernet high speed internet connection
- Separate lighting for the item (if not built-in)
- A separate microphone
- A specialist camera or visualiser system

The below tables show entry level, mid-range, and high-end options for equipment needed, but does not discuss internet connections.

Computer specification

Updated September 2023

If using Microsoft Teams	Processor	Minimum RAM	Disk space
Windows 10 or 11	Four-core processor or better	16GB	At least 3GB
One of the three most recent versions of macOS.	M1, i5, or better	16 GB	At least 1.5 GB of available space

If using Zoom	Processor	Minimum RAM	Disk space
Windows 10 or 11, with screen sharing	Dual core 2GHz or higher	16GB	At least 3GB
macOS, with screen sharing	M1, i5, or better	16 GB	At least 3GB
Window 10 or 11, using camera as video source	Quad core i7 or better	16GB	At least 3GB
macOS, using camera as video source	i7 or better	16 GB	At least 3GB

Cameras/visualisers for the VRR service

Updated September 2023

	Brand/model	Specification	Retail (AUD)
Entry level (battery powered)	IPEVO VZ-X	*Lighting* LED light (not adjustable separately to camera) *Image sensor* 8 MP Sony *Maximum capture area* 283 x 501mm *Resolution* Up to 3264 x 2448 (USB mode) Up to 1920 x 1080 (HDMI or Wi-Fi mode) *Portability* Built-in battery Weighs 1.17kg	$600
Entry level (AC powered)	Epson ELP-DC21 Document Camera	*Lighting* LED x2 (not adjustable separately to camera) Built-in LED backlight *Image sensor* 1/2.7" CMOS Sensor - 2MP 10x digital zoom plus 12x optical zoom *Maximum capture area* 297 x 526mm *Resolution* 1080p *Portability* AC power 2.6kg	$899
Mid-level	Lumens PS753	*Lighting* Built-in LED lamps and backlight (adjustable) *Image sensor* 1/2.8" 8M CMOS - 8.6 MP 300x zoom *Maximum capture area* 522 x 308 mm	$2400

		Resolution XGA / 720p / 1080p / 2160p *Portability* AC power 5.6kg	
High-end	Wolfvision VZ-C6	*Lighting* LED light projector that reduces shadows (not adjustable separate to camera) *Image sensor* 1-CMOS 1/3", 30 frames sRGB colour precision 12x optical zoom, 4x digital zoom *Maximum capture area* Depending on installation height (904 – 1748mm) *Resolution* 1080p *Portability* Depends on installation – Default is ceiling mounted, custom table with wheels can be used.	$22,219

Lighting for a VRR service

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	Brand/model	Specification	Retail (AUD)
Entry level	Anko streaming light	White LED light (warm/cool) colour temperature 3200-6500K /5V 2A Adjustable light modes and brightness 360 degree rotation USB powered	$39
Mid-level	Nanlite Compac 40B	Stand needs to be purchased separately 3200K:2,250LM, 5600K:2,115LM Colour Temperature: Variable between 5600K-3200K Brightness Control: Dimmer AC power	$190
Higher end	Phottix Kali 50 Twin Kit	2 x LED Lights, 3200-5600K with CRI: 96+ Color Rendering Built-in 2.4G Wireless Remote Control 2 x Stands Carry Bag AC power	$699

Microphones for a VRR service

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	Brand/model	Specification	Retail price (AUD)
Entry level	Blue Snowball	USB connection	$79
		Plug and play (software available)	
		Condenser capsule with cardioid pattern	
Mid-level	Blue Yeti Nano	USB connection	$139
		Plug and play (software available)	
		Built in headphone output, volume and mute	
		Cardioid and Omni pickup patterns 24bit/48kHz	
		3.5mm headphone jack for monitoring sound	
		Physical mute button	
Higher end	Elgato Wave:3	USB connection	$239
		Plug and play (software available)	
		Condenser capsule with a tight cardioid polar pattern	
		24-bit / 96kHz	
		3.5mm headphone jack for monitoring sound	
		Run finger along top of mic to mute	

Video conferencing software

Subscription	Specification
Zoom (Basic or Pro)	Maximum video resolution of 720p for the "active speaker video layout" Basic (free) plan has a maximum 40-minute meeting length Screen sharing displays content at the native resolution of the desktop, application, or portion of the screen being shared.
Zoom (Education, Business, or Enterprise)	Default resolution of 720p with maximum video resolution of 1080p, with other system requirements needed to enable 1080p Screen sharing displays content at the native resolution of the desktop, application, or portion of the screen being shared.
Microsoft Teams (free)	Basic (free) version has maximum 60-minute meeting length 1080p video by default, scales with network speed Web version of Teams produces higher resolution video than the desktop app
Microsoft Teams	1080p video by default, scales with network speed Web version of Teams produces higher resolution video than the desktop app

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