Reference Resources

What kinds of information will you find in the library Reference Collection?

• Each library has a Reference Collection with specific types of resources for finding facts or basic information on a variety of topics. When you have a research assignment the library’s Reference Collection usually is the best place to start.

• Reference books and databases provide various types of useful information and can lead researchers to additional sources of information for research projects. Reference resources can provide:
  • an historical summary or an overview of a given topic.
  • facts and statistical data.
  • access to additional relevant resources on the selected topic.

• Reference resources, both in print and online are generally an excellent starting point to conduct academic research because trusted authors and publishers write them.

• Reference resources have distinctive characteristics that help to distinguish them from the books found in the circulating collection.

Some general characteristics of Reference Sources are:

• Reference books are designed to enable the researcher to quickly look things up, not to be read cover to cover. Usually there will be just one section written on each topic.

• Reference resources, such as almanacs, encyclopedias, and dictionaries are well organized and indexed to help readers easily access the information they seek.

• Some Reference resources (known as indirect sources), such as bibliographies, indexes and abstracts, point you to the actual sources of information.

• Many Reference books provide detailed information only on a certain subject, and therefore are referred to as subject specific. While browsing the Reference book shelves, you can find subject specific encyclopedias, dictionaries, indexes, etc.

• Reference books cannot be checked out. They must remain in the library and can only be used in the library.
Types of References Resources

Reference materials fall into two broad categories: *general* and *subject-specific*.

*General reference sources* provide information on all topics while *subject-specific* reference sources focus only a specialized subject. Each subject discipline has its own dictionaries and encyclopedias.

- Encyclopedias: If you need background information or an overview of your topic, an encyclopedia is a good place to start. Subject encyclopedia articles provide more detail than general encyclopedias articles. Experts in the field may write both types.
  - Examples of *general encyclopedias* are: Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Americana, World Book Encyclopedia
  - Examples of *subject encyclopedias* are Encyclopedia of Science & Technology, Encyclopedia of Archeology, Encyclopedia of Musicians

- Dictionaries: Most language dictionaries are general dictionaries.
  - Subject dictionaries contain definitions of the terms and concepts used in a specific discipline (law, medicine, history, philosophy—any subject studied in college).
  - A subject-specific dictionary will help if you are unfamiliar with the terminology associated with your research topic. For example, when you consult a dictionary of sociology looking for the meanings of sociology terms, you will find specialized meaning(s) of the term(s) as they are used *within the context of sociology*.

Selecting Reference Sources

- Librarians evaluate all books and materials before they are added to the library's collection.

- Each researcher must examine the available resources and evaluate the contents for his or her particular research needs.

- Your specific *information needs* must be identified and then matched with the appropriate information source as part of the search strategy.

- There are many reference books to choose from, some of which are highly specialized. If you are uncertain which reference source will give you the information you need, don’t hesitate to ask for help from your instructor or from a librarian.
Encyclopedias and Dictionaries

Savvy researchers understand that their library offers access to a myriad of useful reference sources. If you need help locating or using reference materials, ask a librarian to assist you.

*Types of Reference Resources

- Encyclopedias
- Bibliographies
- Multivolume General Histories
- Biographical Resources
- Chronologies
- Dictionaries, Etymologies, and Word Origins
- Statistical Resources
- Book Reviews
- Directories
- Geographic Information Sources (Atlases, Gazetteers, etc.)
- Finding Guides (To locate Archival Material)
- Institution Documents (Yearbooks, Back Issues of Newspapers, Reports)

*Researchers need to get to know reference sources, specifically:

- what sources are available.
- how to locate the right source for the type of information needed.
- ways to make the best use of the information discovered.
- what one is likely to find in a typical resource:
  - summary information
  - definitions
  - associative and synonymous terms to make searching easier
  - names of people associated with events
  - dates and places
  - data
  - facts
  - maps
  - timelines
  - bibliographies and sources for further reading
  - biographical information
  - addresses and locations

Factors to consider in determining the type of resources to use:

- **Focus**: Do you need an all-inclusive overview, information on a particular aspect of a subject or discipline, or a narrowly focused treatment of the desired information?

- **Subject area or perspectives**: Is the subject field you are researching in the Humanities, Social Sciences, or Science? Do you want technical, visual, or statistical data?

- **Scope of coverage**: Are you looking for a general overview, a summary, or a detailed and complete treatment of your topic?

- **Viewpoints**: Do you need to write about the pros or cons of an issue, i.e., supporting or opposing a point of view?

- **Time Factor**: Do you need to find out about a historical time period, the current situation or a combination for comparison?

- **Timeline of publication**: Resources are published at different intervals, such as
  - Daily: most current (newspapers, news websites)
  - Weekly: can add perspective (news magazines)
  - Monthly: more perspective (monthly magazines)
  - Quarterly: more time for analysis (scholarly journals)
  - Annually: only once per year

- **Treatment**: Do you need to find popular materials or are you engaged in scholarly research?

- **Scholarly publications**: entries are written for and by scholars and experts. These contain results of research Endings and studies and usually lengthy with cited sources. Many academic research assignments require scholarly sources.

- **Popular publications**: entries are intended for widespread readership. Often, staff writers or journalists write popular materials for a general readership. These publications contain illustrations, anecdotal accounts, news, and current events; and cover issues of a topical nature.

- **Trade publications**: entries are written for and by professionals in an industry (e.g. advertising, automotive, media); and the readership consists of professionals in the field that the trade publication serves such as nurses, business people, librarians, etc.
What Type of Information Do You Need??

Determine the appropriate type of Reference Sources. Do you need:

- entire books on your topic, or short summaries or overviews found in Encyclopedias?
- other types of reference materials such as statistics? Your assignment may specify you need to use sources other than encyclopedias, but beginning your research with a subject or general encyclopedia can help you get started.
- general or background information from an encyclopedia or a subject encyclopedia?
- specific facts that can be found in encyclopedias, handbooks, or statistical abstracts?
- geographical facts such as an atlas or gazetteer may provide?
- biographical data to be found in a biographical dictionary or biographical encyclopedia?
- statistical charts/information published in a statistical abstract?
- primary source material? You will need to consult original sources of information such as eyewitness accounts recorded in diaries, interviews, experiments, raw statistics, etc.
- secondary source material? Secondary sources are secondhand reports: after the fact or removed from an event; a commentary based on first-hand accounts or literary texts.

Evaluating Reference Sources

When evaluating reference sources consider:

- Accuracy of information
- Authoritativeness
- Completeness
- Currency/Timeliness
- Objectivity/Bias/Balanced Opinion
- Publisher
- Documentation: does the reference book have a bibliography or notes?
- Illustrations (pictures, maps, chairs, tables)
- Ease of use
**Direct vs. Indirect Sources**

Some reference sources, like a dictionary, offer information or facts directly. Others only include references to *guide* you to the information. Direct Sources *contain* the information. Indirect Sources *point to* information sources. (See charts below.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Direct or Indirect</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>List or index of citations and summaries of other items. Abstracts can help you identify specific resources.</td>
<td>INDIRECT</td>
<td>Statistical abstract of the US - Periodical databases include article abstracts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALMANAC</td>
<td>A &quot;handy guide&quot; to facts. Usually in one volume. Includes statistics and a compilation of facts. Almanacs can be general or subject specific.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>General World Almanac - Specific Political Almanac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>A list or collection of sources of information on a specific subject or author. <em>Bibliographies have been mostly replaced by online databases that offer a list of resources along with the full text.</em></td>
<td>INDIRECT</td>
<td>GaleNet Discovering Collections A Bibliography of Jazz</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Biographical Recourses</td>
<td>Information about the lives of people. Biographical dictionaries have short entries with basic facts; Biographical encyclopedias are more detailed and lengthy; Biographies are full-length books.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Biographical dictionary of Music Who's Who in Business Charlie Chaplin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concordance</td>
<td>An alphabetical listing of keywords or phrases found in a major work or all works of a major author.</td>
<td>INDIRECT</td>
<td>Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Shakespeare Concordance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dictionary</strong></td>
<td>Lists definitions of words and phrases, or online: spelling, usage, and pronunciation guide. Can be general or subject specific.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Webster’s Dictionary Dictionary of Poetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directory</strong></td>
<td>Lists names and contact information for individuals, companies, organizations or institutions.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Telephone Directory Directory of Community Colleges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Encyclopedia</strong></td>
<td>A comprehensive collection of information. Encyclopedias provide a broad overview of facts. They can be general subject specific. Encyclopedias generally give more detail than dictionaries.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>General: Encyclopedia Britannica Subject: Encyclopedia of Gangs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gazetteer</strong></td>
<td>A dictionary of geographical places; provides information to locate a place or geographic feature; no maps.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Columbia Gazetteer of North America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guidebook</strong></td>
<td>Intended for travelers; provides detailed descriptions of places with facts and maps.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Fodor’s London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Handbook</strong></td>
<td>A brief survey or overview of a subject that may include formulas, charts, statistics, background information.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Occupational Outlook Handbook <a href="http://www.bls.gov/oco/">www.bls.gov/oco/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manual</strong></td>
<td>How-to-do-it or How it works</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Chilton’s Automotive Repair Manuals United States Government Manual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>An index points to information and tells where it can be found. The index in a book lists its contents alphabetically and gives page numbers. A reference index use citations to periodical articles, books or other information resources by subject.</td>
<td>INDIRECT</td>
<td>Readers Guide to Periodical Literature ProQuest and SIRS LA Times Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yearbooks and Chronologies</strong></td>
<td>Yearbooks summarize the year's events; they can be general or specific to a discipline. Chronologies list and summarize the main events for a specific time period.</td>
<td>DIRECT</td>
<td>Britannica Yearbook American Decades</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of Reference Books
Adapted from: "Types of Reference Books" BYU Hawaii
Website: http://www.byuh.edu/library/eng112/1frame1.htm

Dictionaries and encyclopedias are some of the most common types of reference works, but there are many kinds. The following is a list of reference books, what they do, and an example for each:

- **Dictionaries** and **Thesauri** - give word meanings, spellings, and histories (dictionaries) or synonyms and related words (thesaurus).
  Example: *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*

- **Encyclopedias** - contain articles on subjects in various fields, usually including helpful bibliographies. They can be either general or specialized.
  General example: *World Book Encyclopedia*
  Specialized example: *Man, Myth and Magic*

- **Indexes** - tell where information can be found in other sources.
  Example: *Poetry Index*

- **Yearbooks** - (often called annuals) chronicle the events of a certain year, usually in a particular field.
  Example: *Current Biography*

- **Handbooks and Manuals** - are often "how to" books, containing instructions and miscellaneous items of information on one subject.
  Example: *Occupational Outlook Handbook*

- **Almanacs** - are collections of facts, charts and statistics.
  Example: *World Almanac and Book of Facts*

- **Biographical Sources** - provide short sketches about the lives of important people.
  Example: *Encyclopedia of World Biography*

- **Directories** - list names and addresses of persons, organizations, businesses.
  Example: *a telephone book*

- **Atlases and Gazetteers** - are visual representations (atlases) or geographical dictionaries (gazetteers) that provide information about places.
  Example: *Book of the World*

- **Statistical Sources**—give data or numbers that have been compiled to quantify and compare the characteristics of people, places or things
  Example: *Statistical Abstract of the United States*