Using Print Reference Sources for Research
What are reference books?

- Books such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, and directories that are often used to answer quick questions or provide background information about a topic before pursuing more detailed research. This is especially helpful when you begin researching a topic you know little about.

- A volume that contains facts, statistics, biographical information, or other such information. Or, it may also be used to find information in other sources.
What are reference books? (continued)

- Books in which the content is organized alphabetically so that you can look up the exact part of the information that you need.

- A book meant to be used for specific pieces of information rather than to be read straight through like a novel. You simply “refer” to them when you need quick, basic information.

- Reference books are used in the library only and are not checked out due to their high demand. They are also shelved separately from the rest of the book collection.

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Why use reference books?

- Not all information found on the Internet is reliable or correct.
- Not all online databases will always have the type of information you may need.
- Reference books have been written and researched by scholars and professionals who have a thorough knowledge of the topic.
- Reference books are reviewed and edited by other scholars and professionals before they are published to ensure that the information is accurate.

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Types of Reference Books
Index

- An index *points the way to other materials* by giving a citation to periodical articles, books, or other information sources.

- Many print indices now exist as online databases. (Example: Library Catalog)

- An index can be a volume unto itself, or it can be a section in the back of a book that leads you to information within that book.

- Many encyclopedias or other multi-volume reference books have an index volume for the whole set as the last volume in the set.

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Index Example:

THE COLUMBIA GRANGER’S INDEX TO POETRY IN ANTHOLOGIES

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Encyclopedia

- Provides background information on topics, subjects, people, places, etc.
- May be general or subject-specific.
- Main entries are alphabetical, but the index is the most effective way to access the information.
- Encyclopedias are ideal reference tools to begin your research since they contain articles on thousands of topics, explanatory material, and data on people, places, and historical events.
- Encyclopedias also include information on historical topics, which can be difficult to find in many online resources.

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Encyclopedia Example:

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Subject Encyclopedia

- Subject encyclopedias are like general encyclopedias, only the *articles focus on a specific topic, field or subject area.*
- Subject encyclopedias can be a single volume or a multi-volume set.
- There are literally thousands of subject encyclopedias available.
- Many subject and general encyclopedias are also available as online databases.

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Subject Encyclopedia Examples:

- Facts on File Encyclopedia of Art
- The Encyclopedia of American Law Enforcement

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Dictionary

- Dictionaries define words and terms; confirm spelling, definition, and pronunciation; are used to find out how words are used; help to locate synonyms and antonyms, and to trace word origins.
- Subject dictionaries define specialized or technical language in a given field.
- Special purpose dictionaries treat special categories of words such as slang or synonyms.
- Language dictionaries give equivalent words and word usage in other languages.

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Dictionary Examples:

- The Oxford English Dictionary
- American Slang Dictionary

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More Dictionary Examples:

- Saunders Comprehensive VETERINARY DICTIONARY (D. C. Blood, V. P. Studdert, C. C. Gay)
- Dictionary of the SOCIAL SCIENCES (Craig Calhoun, editor in chief)

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Biographical Sources

- Contains *articles about the lives and works of various people.*
- A *biographical dictionary* will have *short* entries about people.
- A *biographical encyclopedia* will have *longer* articles about people.
- Biographical sources may be broad or narrow in their focus.

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Biographical Source Example:
Atlas

- An atlas *contains maps*, charts, or illustrations of a geographical area or subject.

- Atlases may contain accompanying text and are usually related in subject or theme.
Atlas Examples:

1. Compact Atlas of the World

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Gazetteer

- A *dictionary of geographical places*. It does NOT include maps.

- A gazetteer gives information about places and geographical data.

- Use it to find information on cities, states, countries, mountains, lakes, rivers, etc.

- Example: How tall is Mt. Everest?

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Gazetteer Example:

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Guidebook

- Provide detailed descriptions of places.
- Intended for travelers.
- Contains geographical facts plus maps.
- May contain special points of interest for travelers.
Guidebook Example:

WORLD HERITAGE SITES
A COMPLETE GUIDE TO 878 UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES

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Directory

- *Lists* names, addresses, and phone numbers of people, companies, organizations, and institutions.
- There is usually a common theme.
- It must be current to be useful as this type of information can go out of date quickly.
- Example: a phone book/directory

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Directory Examples:

- The Book of gods & goddesses
  - A Visual Directory of Ancient & Modern Deities
  - Full of inspiring facts and features, maps and mythology
  - Gods and deities from all major cultures and religions
  - Eric Chaline

- Jobs Directory
  - 1001 Employers and Great Tips For Success!
  - 392 International Businesses
  - 125 Colleges and Universities
  - 124 Nonprofit Organizations
  - 100s of Web sites and Job Services
  - 103 Contractors, Consultants
  - Ron and Caryl Kranich, Ph.Ds

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Chronology

- A chronology *lists the events described in order of the date on which they occurred.*
- A chronology helps to place people, events, organizations, etc., in context.
- Example: What else happened in America during the Vietnam War?
Chronology Example:
Almanac

- An almanac is a *collection of facts and statistics*, usually published in one volume, and usually published yearly.
- Can be current or retrospective and are often in table format.
- Can be general or subject-specific.
- Example: Who won the Super Bowl for the last 5 years?

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Almanac Example:
Handbook

- *Handbooks* treat one broad subject briefly, or gives a brief survey of a subject.
- These are also referred to as companions or compendiums.
- Handbooks are often written for practitioners, so they may be compact in size for ease of use.

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Manual

- *Manuals* tell how to do something or how something operates.
- You usually receive a manual on how something works when you purchase a new item such as a cell phone, a DVD player, computer software, etc.
Manual Example:

LINEMAN AND CABLEMAN’S Field Manual

Thomas M. Shoemaker and James E. Mack

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Don’t forget!

- There are many more types of reference sources that serve various purposes.
- A librarian can help you find just the right reference book for your quick, specific, or background information needs.