Reference Sources

**Reference sources** can provide general background information, assistance in focusing your topic, quick access to important factual and statistical information, and references to other sources of information.

**Types of reference sources**

Reference sources can be classified as either general or specialized. General reference sources are broad in scope and cover more than one subject area. Specialized or subject reference sources are narrower in scope and are limited to providing information on one subject area such as art, education, music, or religion. Below is a list of some of the types of reference sources found in a library and their uses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference source type</th>
<th>Information given</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Almanacs</strong></td>
<td>Contains astronomical and meteorological data for a given year and often includes a miscellany of other information such as trends, facts, awards, etc. Generally published annually and contains statistics, tables and charts, the year in review and general information. <strong>Examples:</strong> The World Almanac and Book of Facts The Old Farmer’s Almanac</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliographies and research guides</strong></td>
<td>Lists of works by a specific author or on a given subject, such as works of art, music, literature or lists of newspapers. Also includes title and author of a book, article, film, internet source and sometimes a brief annotation. <strong>Examples:</strong> A Guide to Reference Books Best Books for High School Readers The Humanities: A Selective Guide to Information Sources The Social Sciences: A Cross-Disciplinary Guide to Selected Sources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Biographical sources** | Information about a person’s life. May include information about an individual’s education and employment history, as well as, creative accomplishments, awards and publications.  
**Examples:**  
Biography and Genealogy Master Index  
Current Biography Yearbook  
International Who’s Who  
Who’s Who in America |
| --- | --- |
| **Dictionaries** | Information about words such as definitions, pronunciation, usage, and derivations of words. May include spelling, grammar, synonyms, antonyms, etymology, and pictures.  
**Examples:**  
Longman Study Dictionary of American English  
Webster’s New World College Dictionary  
Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary  
The Oxford English Dictionary |
| **Directories** | Addresses of people, companies, organizations, or institutions. May include other contact information such as telephone and fax numbers, email addresses, and short biographies.  
**Examples:**  
Encyclopedia of Associations  
Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media  
International Research Centers Directory  
National Faculty Directory  
Telephone Directories  
Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory |
| Encyclopedias                                                                 | Overview and background information, historical facts, bibliographies, dates, geographic facts. Also includes charts, diagrams, pictures, photographs, and biographies, as well as long and short articles on various topics. **Examples:**  
**General**  
The World Book Encyclopedia  
The New Encyclopaedia Britannica  
Encyclopedia Americana  
**Subject**  
The Dictionary of Art (Grove)  
Encyclopedia of the American Civil War  
McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology |
|---|---|
| Geographical sources – atlas and gazetteers | Atlases are collections of maps covering a given area to which may range from the entire world to a small geographic area. Specialized atlases may contain maps of such things as a historical period or product distribution. Includes place/city, state region, country, historical and geographic facts, statistics, and dates. **Example:**  
Times Atlas of World History |
| | Gazetteers are geographic dictionaries which give data on geographic places, including rivers, mountains, national parks, etc. **Example:**  
Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World |
| **Handbooks and manuals** | Technical information about a subject. Includes basic “how-to” information in a concise format. Often includes academic, technical, and disciplinary knowledge, rules, guidelines, bylaws, categories of information, and instructions. For example, a style manual includes writing form, bibliographic style, footnote style, capitalization rules, punctuation rules, abbreviation forms, grammatical rules, reference formats, instructions for writing a paper.  
**Examples:**
The Merck Manual  
MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers  
The United States Government Manual |
|---|---|
| **Indexes and abstracts** | Citations (title of work, author name, and publication title, place and date) to periodical articles, book reviews, plays, short stories, essays, movies, etc. May also include subject/keywords and abstracts.  
**Examples:**
Arts & Humanities Citation Index  
Social Sciences Citation Index  
Science Citation Index  
Book Review Index  
Contemporary Authors Cumulative Index  
Art Abstracts  
Historical Abstracts  
PsychINFO (psychology) online  
Sociological Abstracts |
| **Statistical sources** | Numerical data from a variety of sources. Often published annually.  
**Examples:**
Statistical Abstract of the United States  
U.N. Statistical Yearbook |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yearbooks</th>
<th>Significant events or progress of a particular year. Also includes lists of facts, tables, charts and statistics.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>General</strong></td>
<td>The Annual Register: A Record of World Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subject</strong></td>
<td>The Statesman’s Yearbook McGraw-Hill Yearbook of Science and Technology</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Thesauri</th>
<th>Thesauri information can often be found online along with the subject specific database. Below is a list of printed thesauri for some frequently used indexes.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Library of Congress Subject Headings</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
How to locate reference sources

There are several ways to find out what reference sources are available in the library for your topic.

1. Do a subject search in the library catalog using a broad subject (Column A) plus one of the following format terms (Column B) indicating publication type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rock music</td>
<td>bibliography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>musicians</td>
<td>biography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language</td>
<td>dictionaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fashion</td>
<td>directories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religion</td>
<td>encyclopedias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civil engineering</td>
<td>handbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drama</td>
<td>indexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>maps (use for atlases)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education</td>
<td>yearbooks</td>
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</table>

2. Consult a guide to reference books, such as:

   A Guide to Reference Books by Robert Balay

3. Ask for suggestions at the Reference Desk

Questions

1. You are writing a research paper and need to know the population of Japan. What types of reference sources would you consult to find this information?

2. You need to find an atlas of Japan. What format heading would you use to search for an atlas in the library catalog?