Consult general and specialized reference works

Encyclopedias and bibliographies and other general and specialized reference works help you gain an overview of your subject and locate useful sources.

For an overview of related key topics on using the library, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

Your library has general and specific reference works that can help you jump-start a research project. General reference works—including encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, biographical works, and almanacs—are helpful tools for verifying facts and getting an overview. They are also useful for pinpointing keywords for searches on your topic. The library also offers specialized reference works—including discipline-specific encyclopedias, dictionaries, and bibliographies with more focused articles and data relating to a particular subject area.

LIST OF SPECIALIZED REFERENCE WORKS AVAILABLE VIA LIBRARY DATABASE

Searches database’s collection of reference works.

Lists disciplines and subjects covered.

Individual reference works highlighted under each subject.

CREDIT: Gale Virtual Reference Library (accessed via MU Libraries, University of Missouri).
Many general and specialized reference works are available in print in the reference section of your library or online via your library’s site. Check with a reference librarian for advice on finding appropriate reference works or for help locating a specific work.

Learn It

Locate both general and specialized reference works via your library. Since many are available online, visit your library’s website and browse for guides to reference resources. Or locate specialized reference works at your library site by doing a search in which you enter the type of reference work and one or two keywords related to your topic. For example, entering the terms *encyclopedia of cold war* in a library search tool returned the following relevant reference works:

- *Encyclopedia of Cold War Politics*
- *The Cold War Encyclopedia*
- *Encyclopedia of Cold War Espionage, Spies, and Secret Operations*

Explore the reference works you locate for basic factual information and to find other sources on your topic.

**General reference works** Encyclopedias and other general reference works provide useful overviews of basic data and facts, but you should not rely on them as sources in your research paper. Almanacs list data and statistics, and atlases provide maps and geographical information. A few of the most commonly consulted general reference works include the following:

- *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*
- *National Geographic Atlas of the World*
- *Statistical Abstract of the United States*
- *The World Almanac*

**Specialized reference works** Many specialized reference works are available to provide more in-depth information and bibliographical references. Indexes (including *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*) list works published and provide publication information (for print periodicals) or advice on finding the article online (in a full-text database, for example) or in a library. Bibliographies list resources (sometimes books, sometimes a variety of sources) available on a given subject (examples include the *Modern Language Association International Bibliography* and *Political Science Bibliographies*).

Many reference works can be located online via services such as *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, *CQ Researcher*, and *Oxford Reference Online Premium* at your library’s site. A few widely used works in other categories are listed here. Check your library to see what is available.

**SPECIALIZED DICTIONARIES AND ENCYCLOPEDIAS**

- Dictionary of American History
- Dictionary of Art
- *Gale Encyclopedia of Medicine*
- Encyclopedia of Bioethics
- Encyclopedia of Education
- Encyclopedia of Psychology

**BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES**

- American National Biography
- Contemporary Authors
- Dictionary of Scientific Biography
- *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*
- Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia
- Who's Who in America
Use It

Working with a topic from a current research project, visit your library’s website and conduct a search for an article in a general reference work such as an encyclopedia, dictionary, or almanac. If necessary, visit the library to locate reference works that are not available online. Skim the article and take notes on one or two facts or positions on an issue that you would like to investigate further. Next, use your library site to search for two specialized reference works related to your topic, perhaps in specialized encyclopedias. Check the more specialized reference work for articles on your topic. Are you able to verify the facts you jotted down from the more general source? Can you find further evidence to support the positions you noted in the general source?