



DELAWARE TECHNICAL & COMMUNITY COLLEGE LIBRARIES

HOW TO USE REFERENCE SOURCES

A reference source is:

- A tool used for finding specific facts about a subject.
- Handy for the correct spelling of a word or quick background information and statistics on a topic.
- A good starting place for any research project.

Types of reference sources:

- Examples are: dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, directories, and handbooks.
- Reference sources can be general or specialized (subject specific).
- Reference sources are available in *print* format or *online*. More and more reference sources are available on the Internet, but most information still exists in print only. It will be a long time before everything is digitized. Also, the information on the Internet varies in quality and most has not been reviewed and selected by experts such as librarians. Online sources are not always free. This handout will concentrate on print reference sources.

How is a reference source used?

- If the source is a *dictionary*, search *alphabetically*.
- Most reference books have a “*How to Use*” section to help with access.
- Reading an entire reference book is not necessary – instead, consult it quickly, by using the *index* and/or *table of contents*.

The power of an *index*.

Compare these entries for the subject **economics** from the table of **Contents** vs. the **Index** of The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2002.

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DICTIONARIES

A dictionary is an alphabetical list of words with pronunciation, meaning, usage, etc. Words are arranged alphabetically letter-by-letter in a dictionary. For example: "grapefruit" would be listed in the following way:

grape
grape cure
graped
grape family
grape fern
grapefruit
grape green

General Dictionaries - General dictionaries of the English language can be either *abridged* or *unabridged*. Unabridged contain many more words than abridged dictionaries and each entry is more detailed and complete. Ex: Random House Webster's College Dictionary (1535 pages) would be an abridged dictionary vs. Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (2230 pages).

Specialized Dictionaries - Provide definitions or short explanations of the terms used in a specific area of interest. There are dictionaries for business, the law, medicine and nursing, computer science, etc. Ex: Black's Law Dictionary, Stedman's Medical Dictionary.

THESAURUSES

A thesaurus is a listing of synonyms and antonyms of words. One well known thesaurus is: **Roget's International Thesaurus**. This thesaurus groups words with similar meanings. To search Roget's, **first check the index**, which lists words alphabetically. Each word is labeled with a **number**, which indicates where the synonyms are located in the thesaurus. A "How to use this book" section can be found in the front. Other thesauruses are arranged alphabetically.

ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Encyclopedias are a good source of background information on topics, and are an excellent place to begin research.

General Encyclopedias - General encyclopedias provide a broad overview of many topics in brief articles. The articles may have a list of references which could lead the reader to more specialized information. Examples of general encyclopedias are: Encyclopedia Americana, World Book Encyclopedia.

Finding Information in a Print Format Encyclopedia - The key to finding information in an encyclopedia is to use its **index**, which is usually the last volume of the set.

The index will lead you to another volume and page in the set.

For instance, the Encyclopedia Americana index for the subject mythology is:

MYTHOLOGY 19:699-706 which leads you to the article on mythology in volume 19, beginning on page 699
Other encyclopedia indexes give similar entries. For example, World Book:

Mythology M:973 will lead you to volume M, page 973.

Specialized (subject specific) Encyclopedias - Provide information on topics in a specific area of interest. There are encyclopedias for criminal justice, medicine and nursing, computer science, etc. Ex: *Encyclopedia of Crime & Justice*, *Encyclopedia of Computers and Computer History*.

OTHER USEFUL REFERENCE SOURCES:

- almanac—an annual publication containing facts and statistics often presented in figures, tables or charts. Ex: *Almanac of Architecture and Design 2000*.
- atlas—a collection of geographic maps, tables, plates, etc. Ex: *The Historical Atlas of the American Revolution*.
- directory—a list of persons or organizations with addresses, affiliations, and other similar information. Ex: *National Directory of Fire Chiefs, Rescue & Emergency Departments*.
- handbook—a listing of facts relevant to a particular discipline or subject, much of it presented in condensed forms, like equations, formulas, tables, graphs, or charts. Ex: *Juran's Quality Handbook*.
- manual—gives instructions, rules, and procedures for performing certain tasks. Ex: *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

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