

RESEARCH CONCEPTS & PRACTICE

Background Research: Reference Books

What are Reference Books?

Reference books are resources designed to be consulted for specific information rather than to be read completely. There are reference books available on just about any topic imaginable. Reference books are very useful in the research process and serve a variety of purposes.

- Provide **concise overviews** of your topic
- Spark **ideas on how to focus** your topic (great preliminary reading material!)
- **Answer and expand research questions** you've posed
- Help you **create new research questions**
- Point you toward **additional sources of information** on your topic

Types of Reference Books

There are many different types of reference books, including: almanacs; encyclopedias; atlases; gazetteer; bibliographies; handbooks; biographical dictionaries; Indexes; chronologies; literary criticism; concordances; manuals; dictionaries; yearbooks; directories

Categories of Reference Books

Reference books fall into two broad categories, General and Specialized (also called Subject) sources. Specialized sources tend to be more scholarly, and therefore more appropriate to use in college-level research.

General Sources	Specialized Sources
<i>World Book Encyclopedia</i> <i>Encyclopedia Britannica</i> <i>New American Heritage Dictionary</i> <i>World Almanac</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion</i> <i>Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace, and Conflict</i> <i>New Grove Dictionary of Art</i> <i>Almanac of American Politics</i>

Where to find Reference Books

Search ABC-CLIO eBook Collection and Gale Virtual Reference Library to locate and retrieve articles from online reference titles. These databases can be found on the Library's web page under the **Find Articles** link, and can be accessed both on and off-campus.

Reference book titles can also be identified in the library catalog by conducting an advanced search and limiting you material type appropriately. Since reference books are usually catalogued under broad subject headings, this is where brainstorming broader terms can really pay off.

Examples:	<u>Research Topic</u>	<u>Broader topic (and Library of Congress area)</u>
	Body Image	Psychology (BF) Sociology (HM-HV)
	Factory Farms	Agriculture (S) Food – Social Aspects (GT)
	Media/Politics	Language (P) Political Science (J) Television (PN)
	Various Art Forms	Visual Arts (N) Music (M) Film (PN)

Print reference titles cannot be checked out, though students are free to make copies and/or to use the books in the library.

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Background Research: Research Databases

Why Research Databases?

Like reference books, online research databases such as *CQ Researcher* and *Facts on File* are great sources of background information

- Offer thorough and accessible **topic overviews**
- Spark **ideas on how to focus** your topic
- Help you to **develop new and/or expand research questions**
- Provide **specific answers to research questions** already posed
- Point you toward **additional sources of information** on your topic (bibliographies)

CQ Researcher

The CQ Researcher Online is an award-winning database presenting comprehensive reporting and analysis on issues in the news. Controversial topics are addressed in a balanced, unbiased manner. CQ Researcher reports include an overview of the topic, background information, a look at the current situation, projections for the future, a thorough chronology, a pro and con argument dealing with some aspect of the topic at hand, a comprehensive bibliography, and a list of www contacts. CQ Researcher reports can be printed or emailed in their entirety, and the database can be used from home. One feature students love about CQ Researcher is that it tells you how to cite its articles using both MLA and APA format.

Facts on File Databases

The Facts on File databases include several components: the complete content from *Facts on File World News Digest* since 1940, plus *Issues & Controversies*, *Issues & Controversies in American History*, and *Today's Science*. *Issues and Controversies* is a great source of information on current events, while *Today's Science* is a strong source for hot topics in the sciences such as global warming, bioterrorism, and Avian Flu. Facts.com also provides MLA and APA citation information.

SUMMARY

Background resources are a good starting point for any research project. I encourage you to turn to these background sources in your preliminary reading. They will help you focus your existing ideas on your topic, as well as provide new ideas on where you can take your research. They are a great, succinct way to answer defining research questions, to expand cause/effect and pro/con type questions, and to just help you “get your head around” a new topic. The bibliographies present in many background sources can lead you to many more sources, ensuring that you don’t have to “reinvent the wheel.”

Know their limits. If you want “in-depth” information on your topic, if you really want to drill down and explore a particular cause or effect, or a particular argument, then you will want to turn toward full-length books or journal articles.