

GENERAL SOURCES

Typical questions

- I'm doing a quiz. Where would be a good place to start?
- I'm stuck with my homework. Are there any good websites that would help?
- Can you recommend some good reference books to buy for use at home?
- Is there a directory of websites?

Considerations

Many single resources, printed and electronic, cover a large number of subjects. These will often be the first places to seek answers, especially if they are near to hand. The information may be brief and you may need to go on to more specialized and detailed sources, but it is surprising how often brief information, quickly obtained, satisfies most enquiries. Keep things simple and go for the obvious are two lessons quickly learned. Many of the following sources should be on the Enquiry Desk or on nearby shelves.

Where to look

Guides to reference sources

Owen, T. B. (2006) *Success at the enquiry desk*, Facet Publishing

As well as being an excellent introductory guide on how to deal with people making enquiries, this popular booklet has notes on the most useful reference works.

Bopp, R. G. (2008) *Reference and information services: an introduction*, 3rd edn, Libraries Unlimited

Gives background to reference work and resources; US emphasis.

Dixon, D. et al. (2005) *Basic reference resources for the public library*, CILIP Information Services Group

Guides to information sources is the title of a series of books published by K. G. Saur (previously Butterworth) which currently covers 25 subjects. They give more detail than is usually needed by staff in general libraries, but they provide a valuable guide for those who need to go into some depth, including the sophisticated library user.

Walford's *Guide to reference materials* (Library Association) is being replaced by

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The new Walford: guide to reference resources (Facet Publishing), general editor R. Lester.

This three-volume work is the standard UK guide to reference resources and provides a useful recourse should other approaches, such as direct appeal to library shelves, fail. Vol. 1, *Science, technology and medicine*, (2003), covers 8000 resources under 1000 subject headings. Vol. 2, *The Social Sciences*, was published in 2007; vol. 3 is in preparation, and will replace *Generalia, language, literature, the arts* (1998), 7th edn, Library Association.

Yakov, J. (ed.) (2004) *Public library catalog: guide to reference books and adult nonfiction*, 12th edn, H. W. Wilson.

A classified listing of over 8000 books regarded as 'core' to US public libraries.

Pinakes www.hw.ac.uk/libwww/irn/pinakes/pinakes.html

A free guide to information about reference sources. (The 'Pinakes' was the annotated catalogue of the great library at Alexandria.)

Almanacs and factbooks

Originally, an almanac was a book or chart containing a calendar of a given year with a record of various astronomical phenomena, predictions and other information. Nowadays almanacs tend to be annual compendia of facts. Unlike encyclopedias, almanacs and their modern equivalent, factbooks, are characterized by charts, tables, lists and diagrams rather than prose descriptions. Arrangement is generally thematic and some have an A–Z index.

The following are some of the best from this crowded market. Do get to know one or two of them well, for their arrangements are complex and not to be understood in a hurry.

Whitaker's almanack, A&C Black. Annual

A compendium of information on current affairs from a UK perspective.

Whitaker's Scottish almanack, A&C Black. Annual

Northern Ireland yearbook, The Stationery Office. Annual

A comprehensive reference guide to the political, economic and social life of Northern Ireland.

Montague, T. (2007) *The A to Z of almost everything: a compendium of general knowledge*, 4th edn, Little Brown

The Cambridge factfinder (2000) 4th edn, Cambridge University Press

Chambers book of facts (2007) 6th edn, ChambersHarrap

Financial Times (2005) *World desk reference*, 6th edn, Dorling Kindersley
25,000 facts and statistics, 600 maps, 5000 charts and diagrams.

Guinness book of answers: the complete reference handbook (1995) 10th edn,
Guinness Records Ltd

The Hutchinson factfinder (2000) 3rd edn, Helicon

Information please almanac, Houghton Mifflin. Annual
A US equivalent of *Whitaker's*.

The new Penguin factfinder, edited by D. Crystal (2005), Penguin

Pears cyclopaedia, Penguin. Annual

Reader's Digest (2003) *Facts at your fingertips*, Reader's Digest Associates

Schott, B. (2002) *Schott's original miscellany*, Bloomsbury
This is updated by *Schott's almanac*, Bloomsbury. Annual

Statesman's yearbook, Palgrave Macmillan. Annual
Describes the political, social and economic life of each country of the
world, with details of main institutions.

World almanac and book of facts, World Almanac Books. Annual
US equivalent of *Whitaker's*.

World factbook, CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Annual
Also available as a free website: [www.cia-gov/library/publications/
the-world-factbook](http://www.cia-gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook)

Electronic sources

Electronic versions of factbooks include:

www.about.com

www.ask.com (the successor to *Ask Jeeves*)

www.fact.index.com

This is an offshoot of Wikipedia (see under ENCYCLOPEDIAS below).

www.nationmaster.com

A popular version of the CIA *World factbook*, which allows users to compile
their own graphs, etc.

Encyclopedias

Encyclopedias have been the bedrock of reference and information work for over a century. They still are, though the large multivolume titles have tended to migrate to subscription websites or are obtainable as CD-ROMs and DVDs. There are now, in addition, many one-volume ‘concise’ encyclopedias on the market. Encyclopedias are exhaustively researched and well written. They should always be an early source in which to seek information.

Encyclopaedia Britannica (continuous revision) (32 vols) and *World book encyclopedia* (annual), World Book, Inc. (24 vols) are two English-language multivolume encyclopedias that remain in printed form. *World book* is perhaps more suited to a general readership as *Britannica* has, at least in its main ‘Macropedia’ volumes, a higher readership level. The longer articles of *Britannica* will be appropriate for more detailed information, although the more regular updating of *World book* and its two-volume Britain & Ireland supplement is a balancing factor. Use *Britannica*’s ‘Micropaedia’ for quick reference. Do use the indexes when the initial ‘dive-in’ approach to the main alphabetical sequence fails. CD-ROM and subscription websites are available for both titles (www.britannica.com; www.worldbook.com). *Britannica* has both concise and school editions.

Some of the older encyclopedias, such as *Chambers* and *Everyman*’s and older editions of *Britannica*, are still useful for some topics (the 9th edn of *Britannica*, 1875–89, is known as the scholar’s edition because of its essay-length articles by famous authorities).

Some excellent one-volume encyclopedias are:

Crystal, D. (ed.) (2000) *The Cambridge encyclopedia*, 4th edn, Cambridge University Press

Crystal, D. (ed.) (2007) *The Penguin concise encyclopedia*, 2nd edn, Penguin

Oxford English reference dictionary (2002) 2nd edn, Oxford University Press

Philip’s encyclopedia, comprehensive edition (2002) George Philip

All Refer www.allrefer.com

Free online basic encyclopedia for general reference sources based on a number of reference books and the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* (www.columbia.edu/cu/cee/cee.html).

Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

A free online encyclopedia of over 1.5 million articles that allows users to input material.

Issues (18 issues per year), Independence Educational Publishers

Not quite an encyclopedia, but useful for a wide range of topics, especially for school and college project work, is this series of booklets, which contain previously published information from magazines, newspapers and government sources on a wide variety contemporary issues. Material can be photocopied and is constantly updated. Over 60 titles are available covering over 1000 articles. There is an annual index. Some libraries provide the full set and/or online access (www.independence.co.uk).

The internet

Most libraries now provide public access to the internet. In many cases it will be appropriate to log the enquirer on to the internet and suggest that they search for the answer to their question themselves, either by giving them some recommended websites, or by using a search engine. Obviously it will be necessary to ascertain if they are familiar with using the internet and sometimes some light coaching may be necessary. As with printed sources, check from time to time that the enquirer is coping. Many libraries provide user guides to searching the internet. As well as freeing up your own time, it will provide the user with useful experience of using the internet for further enquiries.

Many guides to the internet are available. Some good ones are:

Bradley, P. (2004) *The advanced internet searcher's handbook*, 3rd edn, Facet Publishing

Covers search engines, weblogs, search toolbars, bookmark managers, free text searching, gateways, etc.

Cooke, A. (2001) *Guide to finding quality information on the internet*, 2nd edn, Library Association Publishing

Criddle, S. and others (2000) *The public librarian's guide to the internet*, Library Association Publishing

Poulter, A., Hiom, D. and McMenemy, D. (2005) *The library and information professional's internet companion*, Facet Publishing

Sauers, M. (2001) *Using the internet as a reference tool*, Facet Publishing

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Websites

Websites are the basic sources of information obtained through the internet. Search engines and web directories are a useful way of identifying them (see below), though librarians will soon find a number of the more useful ones. Most will have links to related websites.

Among the most comprehensive free websites are:

About **www.about.com**

Ask **www.ask.com** (previously *Ask Jeeves*)

CIA World Factbook **www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook**

Direct.gov **www.direct.gov.uk**

The focus for government information on a wide range of subjects.

Fact Index **www.fact-index.com**

A general online encyclopedia.

Home Work Elephant **www.homeworkelephant.co.uk**

The Internet Public Library **www.ipl.org**

Nation Master **www.nationmaster.com**

Refdesk **www.refdesk.com**

There are many websites that help with local enquiries, for example about forthcoming events. The local newspapers, local authorities, radio and TV companies often have good ones. Many libraries themselves have sites with useful information and good links. Get to know them.

Web search services (search engines)

‘Why have reference libraries when we now have search engines?’ is a question people sometimes ask. Search engines are now an essential weapon in the librarian’s armoury of question-answering techniques. For specific topics they are excellent, though searching for wider terms and complex enquiries can be difficult. Do learn to be clever about search strategies. You will probably have your own favourites but here are some of the more popular ones:

www.google.com

www.altavista.com

www.ask.com

www.excite.co.uk
www.hotbot.com
www.lycos.co.uk
www.yahoo.com

A useful listing of country-based search engines is www.philb.com/countryse.htm. This includes more than 4000 search engines covering 220 countries.

Metasearch services

Although generally slower than search engines, recourse to a meta search service can be useful if a search seems to be failing. These services search several search engines at once. Examples are:

www.dogpile.com
www.mamma.com
www.metacrawler.com

ChaCha Search <http://chacha.com>

This is a search engine that offers a (human) guide who looks at the results of other search engines to produce tailored results.

Mahalo www.mahalo.com

This is a human-mediated search engine that provides selected websites to the top 10,000 most commonly asked questions.

Web directories

Good Web Guide www.thegoodwebguide.co.uk

Reviews the best websites on all subjects.

Sproose <http://sproose.com>

A search engine which uses user feedback to evaluate sites.

Virtual Library <http://vlib.org>

A catalogue of websites monitored by independent authorities.

Two printed guides are:

Tips & Advice: Internet. Fortnightly. Online subscription service available

A popular periodical service giving information on useful websites.

Zakalik, J. (ed.) (1995) *Gale guide to internet databases*, Gale Research

Regional search services

It can be useful to limit a search to a region, for example, a country, by using a country domain, though this will miss websites using the international ‘.com’ suffix. Examples are:

Euro Search **www.eurosearch.co.uk**

Search UK **www.searchuk.com**

Portals

Portals are websites that lead to recommended and mediated websites on specific topics. An excellent one that covers academic subjects arranged by the Dewey Decimal Classification is **<http://bubl.ac.uk>**

Aggregators

These are websites that give access to electronic versions of reference books, often searching across all titles using keywords. Usually they are subscription sites, though many libraries now subscribe to one or more and allow users access to them, sometimes through their home computers. Check to see if your library subscribes to any of them and if any passwords are necessary. Examples are:

Cambridge Companions Online **www.cambridge.org/online/ccol**

An online collection of over 220 reference works published by Cambridge University Press.

Greenwood Digital Collection **<http://ebooks.greenwood.com>**

3000 titles from Praeger, Greenwood, Libraries Unlimited and other publishers.

Oxford Reference Online (ORO) **www.oxfordreference.com**

Online ‘library’ of over 100 reference books from 26 reference publishers, including Oxford University Press, on a wide range of subjects. Oxford U.P. also offer e-versions of some 80 of their encyclopedias and dictionaries in their subscription Oxford Digital Reference Shelf (**www.oxford-digitalreference.com**). Again, many libraries subscribe.

Credo (formerly XRefer) **www.credoreference.com**

Provides access to the content of over 270 reference titles from established publishers.

Gale Virtual Reference Library **<http://gale.cengage.com/>**

Online access to selected reference books published by Gale, Macmillan Reference, Scribners, St James Press, etc.

Know UK www.knowuk.co.uk

An online library of UK information covering over 100 titles.

For services giving access to e-books, not necessarily reference books, see chapter on LIBRARY & INFORMATION SERVICES, section on e-libraries.

Online enquiry services

There are several online enquiry services where one can ask a question that will be answered, usually by a librarian. These may work in real-time, or with a delayed response, usually within 24 hours. The main UK-based one is:

Enquire (formerly Ask A Librarian) www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk/enquire

A 24/7 real-time free information service provided by UK public libraries.

Ask.Cymru www.askcymru.org.uk

A bilingual Welsh equivalent to Enquire.

Telephone directories

After *Whitaker's almanack*, a dictionary and an encyclopedia, the local telephone directory is probably the fourth most useful reference source. It is such an obvious source that it may embarrass enquirers who realize they have it at home! Do learn how people of the same name are arranged and also how the local authority and other utilities are styled (i.e. where you find them in the A–Z sequence). The preliminary pages include much useful local information such as national helplines (BT) and street maps (Thompson).

Note that numbers beginning 08 are free to the enquirer.

Other sources

Colleagues The collective knowledge of fellow staff and regular library users is massive. Use it! And even if not massive enough, colleagues may have experienced the same enquiry, or enquirer, before, and may know where to find the answer. Some organizations compile a database of staff expertise exactly for this sort of need. Foreign languages and the ability to read music are two areas of knowledge sometimes needed where colleagues can help.

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Referral 'Asking around' can extend to other libraries and organizations, such as local authority departments. Again, it can be useful to make a record of such sources for future reference.

Leaflets The wide range of leaflets provided by public and voluntary bodies give essential information. Most libraries get free supplies, though keeping the collection up to date can be a problem.

A noteworthy service is the *Frills leaflet service*, a fee-based service to subscribers managed by Camden Libraries, which provides details and updates of over 700 free leaflets from some 400 government, charity and other public sector organizations. See www.camden.gov.uk/frills. There is a listing of suppliers: *FRILLS directory of leaflet suppliers* (2007), 19th edn, London Borough of Camden.

Fugitive files Many library and information units keep a record of answers to questions that have caused difficulty in the past and that are regularly asked. The information itself may be recorded, for example, 'how to set a barometer', 'the names of Santa's reindeer', or just the source to consult (e.g. wedding anniversaries; Roman numerals).

Newspapers and journals Much useful information is contained in feature articles in newspapers and magazines. See chapters on NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES and ARTICLES IN JOURNALS. The Clover Indexes are particularly good for general interest information.

Notes & Queries This is the title of a long-running journal in which contributors requested, and answered, many queries. Published by Oxford University Press, it is available online, full-text, from 2000. The title was taken up by the *Guardian* newspaper in a regular column. Many of the enquiries featured have been put on the *Guardian* website (www.guardian.co.uk/notesandqueries/) and published in a series of books edited by Brian Whitaker and published by Fourth Estate. There is a recent compendium: Harker, J. (2000) *The ultimate book of notes & queries*. Typically, these queries are the recondite or the 'funky', e.g. What is the origin of the tooth fairy? Do animals worry? For popular 'imponderables', both these sources may help.

Tips and pitfalls

- Always go for the obvious. Many users over-elaborate.
- With the internet, be aware of how many sites are compiled by companies with a commercial interest and which may be selective over what they contain. The same goes for pressure groups. Be aware also of bogus text

messages claiming to be from authoritative sources: the Citizens Advice Bureau has trouble with these.

- Get really familiar with a few good sources. Often the answer is there if you know how to use the book or website. (The annual quiz provided with new editions of *Whitaker's almanack* is useful training!) This also applies to search engines.
- Understand how *Encyclopaedia Britannica* works: Propaedia, Micropaedia, Macropaedia, index and yearbooks.
- Call 'time' on open-ended searches. Sometimes there *is* no answer. Sometimes the question is wrongly phrased.
- When using telephone directories, don't forget that most have three sequences: classified by subject, business and private.
- Watch out for the quiz addict, particularly over the phone. Do try to get them to do their own searching. We recommend having a limit on the time spent helping them.
- Related to this, have a 'rescue strategy' for colleagues who are getting too drawn into an enquiry. The bogus phone call is useful.
- Be sceptical over the words: 'encyclopedia', 'dictionary', 'handbook' and 'companion', since publishers tend to blur meanings; likewise be wary of 'comprehensive', 'complete' and, of course, 'up to date'.
- Always check the dates of your sources, or the date consulted in the case of websites.
- Always quote the source of your information.

