USING REFERENCE SOURCES
Think of reference sources as sources you refer to rather than read cover to cover, hence the name “reference.” These sources generally summarize topics or assist in finding secondary literature. Their purpose is to provide background information, short answers to simple questions, or to help you find other sources. They are also great for quick facts, statistics, or contact information, and can be very useful for learning specific vocabulary. Many contain great bibliographies for further reading or additional sources on your topic.

In short, they can be a great starting point for research. After doing a little reading about a topic in an encyclopedia or other reference source, you should have a better idea of how to focus your topic and where to look for further information.

Most print reference sources cannot be checked out from the library. However, online reference sources are available on the library’s website and can be accessed from home, though some require that you be affiliated with the university.

Following is a list of the most common types of reference sources, and examples of each:

- **Almanacs** are typically single-volume works with statistics and a compilation of specific facts. Examples include the *World Almanac and Book of Facts* and *Information Please Almanac*. *Information Please* is also available online: [http://www.infoplease.com/](http://www.infoplease.com/)


- **Bibliographies** provide literature on a specific subject or by a specific author. One example is the *Bibliography of American Literature*.

- **Biographies** are sources of information about the lives of people. Examples are the *Twentieth-Century British Humorists* and *Who’s Who in America*. An example of an online biographical reference source is *Biography.com* located at: [http://www.biography.com/](http://www.biography.com/)
• **Concordances** are alphabetical listings of keywords or phrases found in work of an author or work in a collection of writings. Examples are the *Concordance of Federal Legislation* and the *Topical Bible Concordance*.

• **Dictionaries** define words and illustrate pronunciation. They are also used to find out how words are used, help to locate synonyms and antonyms, and trace the origin of words. Examples of general dictionaries include *Webster’s Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. An online example is *Oxford English Dictionary*: [http://www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com). Examples of subject-specific dictionaries include *Dictionary of Music Education* and the *Encyclopedia of Law and Higher Education*. An online example is the *Dictionary of Slang* located at: [http://www.peeves.co.uk/slang/](http://www.peeves.co.uk/slang/)

• **Directories** list names and addresses of individuals, companies, organizations, and institutions. Examples include the *Directory of Corporate Affiliations* and the *Encyclopedia of Associations*.

• **Encyclopedias** cover topics in a comprehensive, but summary fashion. They are useful for providing facts and giving a broad survey of a topic, and are often written by specialists. Examples include general encyclopedias, such as the *World Book Encyclopedia* or *Encyclopedia.com* located at: [http://www.encyclopedia.com/](http://www.encyclopedia.com/), and subject-specific encyclopedias, such as the *Encyclopedia of Education* or the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy of Education* located at: [http://eepat.net/doku.php?id=editorial](http://eepat.net/doku.php?id=editorial)

• **Gazetteers** are dictionaries of geographical places. Examples include the *Historical Gazetteer of the United States* and the *Utah Atlas & Gazetteer*.

• **Guidebooks** provide detailed descriptions of places, and are intended for travelers. They often include both maps and geographical facts. One example is the *Hiker’s Guide to Utah*.

• **Handbooks** treat one broad subject in brief, or give a brief survey of a subject. Examples are the *Handbook of American Popular Culture* and the *Business Plans Handbook*.

• **Manuals** provide “how to” information, such as how to write a correct citation. An example is the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition*.