

Reference Sources

Reference sources give a wide range of information on many different subjects. The most commonly used reference sources are encyclopedias and dictionaries. These provide definitions and introductions to various topics. While there are general purpose reference sources like *Webster's Dictionary* or *Encyclopedia Britannica*, keep in mind that there are highly specialized reference sources for different professions, disciplines, and fields. These sources are indispensable in the early stages of the research process.

Author, Audience, and Purpose

Authors are often experts or scholars, but sometimes entries may be written by professional writers contracted by the publisher.

Reference sources written for general audiences include *Wikipedia* or *Webster's Dictionary*, but specialized reference sources are used by scholars, professionals, and students.

The purpose of these sources is usually to inform readers by summarizing and distilling a large number of complex topics within a single resource.

Reliability

Reference sources are generally fact-checked and sometimes peer-reviewed. Since they distill large bodies of scholarship into shorter articles, they are not as nuanced as scholarly sources.

Uses in the Research Process

Reference sources can be used when exploring, selecting, and refining a topic. They may also be useful when developing a list of keywords. Later in the research process, reference sources are a valuable tool for looking up terms and concepts encountered in scholarly literature.

Examples:

- *The Oxford English Dictionary*
- *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-V)*
- *The Encyclopedia of Ecology and Environmental Management*
- *Physician's Desk Reference*
- *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Regional Cultures*
- *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Tips for Identifying Reference Sources

- **Publication type:** These sources are often available as a large single volume, multi-volume printed resources, or online with an interface that explicitly identifies the source as an “Encyclopedia,” “Dictionary,” “Reference Guide,” etc.
- **Genre:** The writing is usually very economical, packing as much information as possible into the smallest space. Articles usually proceed from general to specific and vary in length considerably from one reference source to another.
- **Language:** Clear, accessible language is the norm, but more specialized reference sources may be written for specialized audiences with some mastery of the jargon or terminology of the field.
- **Editorial oversight:** The extent and nature of the editorial oversight and peer review varies considerably from one reference source to another.

How to Find Reference Sources

Reference sources may be located by using [Mason Search](#) or the [Mason Libraries A-Z Database page](#). There may also be print copies of certain reference sources at Mason Libraries.

