

What Is a Reference Collection?

Libraries maintain numerous and varied collections of materials. For example, many libraries keep videotapes, slides, and sound recordings in a separate collection often known as the Media Collection. Libraries will also usually have a separate Government Documents Collection that houses publications of the federal, state, and local governments. While not every library may have a government documents collection or a media collection, nearly all do maintain reference collections.



A library's Reference Collection is used to gather together in one convenient location standard references like encyclopedias, handbooks, and dictionaries that will provide answers to questions on any topic in any field of research. It is called a Reference Collection because its use is limited to in-library reference and because it is used heavily by the library's Reference Department to answer library patrons' questions quickly. Ideally, a library's Reference Collection should provide resources that will quickly answer any question posed by a library patron or that will at least direct the patron to a source that will answer the question.

Specialized libraries might maintain specialized Reference Collections. For example, a library that focuses on music, might maintain a Reference Collection that consists primarily of dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks of use in researching musical topics. A medical library might limit its reference materials to those sources that are particularly useful to medical research. Comprehensive libraries, like UNF's library, will try to collect reference materials suitable to any subject. Online reference collections are also now integral parts of a library's collection of reference sources.

Typical Reference Sources

Although there are many more types of sources in a Reference Collection than is practical to cover here, following are some of the most commonly collected types of reference books.

Almanacs --- Usually published annually, almanacs provide a miscellany of facts. Almost encyclopedic in coverage, they are particularly good sources for finding current statistics on nearly any topic. A couple of well-known almanacs are the *Time Almanac* (formerly the *Information Please Almanac*) and *Whitaker's Almanack*.

Atlases --- Although people usually think of atlases as being collections of maps and as being devoted solely to geography, atlases can also focus on specific subjects, such as history or art or literature. Unless a library has a separate atlas collection, atlases are typically kept in a library's Reference Collection. UNF Library keeps atlases in Reference if they will fit on the shelves without making special adjustments. Those that are very large are typically housed in a separate Map/Atlas Collection located on the second floor of the library behind the Government Documents Collection. Examples of specialized atlases include the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* and the *Rand McNally Bible Atlas*.

Bibliographies --- Bibliographies identify books, articles, and other resources available to researchers. Usually bibliographies focus on a particular subject area, like literature or sociology

or psychology, and can be used to find classic studies in a field. Examples of bibliographies that can be kept in a library's reference collection are the *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* and *Social Science Reference Sources: a Practical Guide*. Bibliographies might also be housed in other library collections, depending on their focus. A search of the library's catalog will identify where in the library a particular bibliography is shelved.

Biographies --- Biographical works are very common components of any reference collection. Although full length biographies may be written on major figures in any field, not every important person will be profiled in his or her own full-length biography and the full-length biographies are typically not kept in a reference collection. The most comprehensive sources for biographical information are collections of biographies like *Current Biography* and *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. These specialized sources provide concise biographical sketches for important figures and frequently provide references to additional biographical materials. Sources like the *Biography and Genealogy Master Index* provide historical coverage of hundreds of standard biographical works, thus making it easier for a researcher to quickly identify which biographical source to use. The *Index* is just that, an index. While it doesn't have the biographies themselves it helps to identify where to find biographies. Many libraries also have access to an excellent full-text database called the *Biography Resource Center*. If this were a print publication, it would likely be shelved in the library's reference collection.

Chronologies --- A chronology documents events over a period of time, frequently in time-line fashion. If, for example, you are interested in researching scientific progress during the 19th century, a chronology of science will give you a year-by-year, and possibly day-by-day, overview of the major scientific events for the 19th and other centuries. Some chronologies, such as the *People's Chronology: a Year-by-Year Record of Human Events from Prehistory to the Present*, cover important events regardless of area. Others may focus on a specific subject, like the *Chronological Outline of American Literature*.

Dictionaries --- Most people think of Webster when they hear the word dictionary. But dictionaries of the English language or of foreign languages are not the only types of dictionaries available in a reference collection. For nearly any subject area, a specialized dictionary of terms is available. Some typical examples include the *Cambridge Dictionary of Astronomy* and the *Computer Glossary: the Complete Illustrated Dictionary*. Rather than just give definitions, many specialized dictionaries are actually mini-encyclopedias, providing concise reference articles on major and minor concepts within a field.

Digests --- A digest is an organized collection of summaries of longer documents in an area. For example, court decisions are frequently made more accessible through the use of digests. A court digest will summarize the main points of the court decisions included and will provide access by key word or subject. One example of a case digest is the *Supreme Court Digest*, a compilation by subject of all decisions heard by the United States Supreme Court. Digests aren't limited just to court decisions. One of the most notable and frequently used digests kept in a library is the *Book Review Digest*, which provides year-by-year summaries of book reviews published in a variety of sources.

Directories --- Directories typically provide contact information for people and organizations, but may also provide additional background information as well. One of the most frequently used directories for information on the United States Government, the *Federal Regulatory Directory* provides information about federal agencies and their staff, including the scope of the agency's responsibilities and contact information for all key figures. A library's reference collection will have directories for many different disciplines and areas of interest.

Encyclopedias --- Nearly everyone has heard of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* and understands that it gathers together research length articles on nearly any subject that a person might want to explore. In addition to such comprehensive, general encyclopedias, researchers can likely find specialized encyclopedias that focus on narrower fields of knowledge in a library's reference collection. For example, a researcher trying to find out more information on the "Underground Railroad" might find the *African American Encyclopedia* an invaluable starting point. A researcher looking into cultural influences on American popular music might find the *Encyclopedia of American Cultural & Intellectual History* a useful resource for identifying ideas and further resources.

Gazetteers --- A gazetteer is a geographical dictionary that includes brief descriptive, geographical, historical, and/or statistical information on specific places. For example, the *Columbia Gazetteer of North America* provides brief description and location information for places throughout North America. Library Reference Collections typically have numerous gazetteers covering the entire world or regions of the world. Occasionally, a gazetteer may focus on a specific subject area, such as is the case with the reference work, *Susan B. Anthony Slept Here: a Guide to American Women's Landmarks*.

Handbooks --- Also frequently referred to as manuals, handbooks are typically practitioners' guides to specific fields. For example, a chemist or physicist will be familiar with the *CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, a standard reference for the chemical and physical sciences. An educator will likely be familiar with the *Fourth Handbook of Research on Teaching*. Handbooks will also be available in the library's general collection, but the Reference Collection is typically the home for the most recent editions of specialized handbooks for various fields of research.

Indexes --- Indexes are usually thought of as guides to articles in periodicals and newspapers. While this is generally true, there are other types of indexes as well. *Columbia Granger's Index to Poetry in Anthologies* is a prime example of an index that doesn't cover periodicals. The *Columbia Granger's* indexes books of poetry, thus making it easier for a researcher to track down a specific poem in a collection. This is just one example of the many types of indexes typically found in a library's reference collection.

Pictorial Works --- Certain subjects can be explained better if they are illustrated. Pictorial works use photographs, drawings, or other types of illustration to help develop clearer understandings of various topics. Some examples of typical pictorial works in a library's reference collection are the *Cambridge Illustrated Glossary of Botanical Terms*, the *Visual Food Encyclopedia*, and the *World Atlas of Birds*. Many specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries will include illustrative materials, but those that are profusely illustrated may be described as "pictorial works" in the catalog.

Statistical Works --- Reference collections are particularly strong in their offerings of statistical works. Researchers looking for data on nearly any subject can likely find ample statistical data in a library's reference collection. Sources like *Key Indicators of County Growth* and *Sourcebook of Zip Code Demographics* are excellent sources for demographic information. Books like *Global Report on Crime and Justice* provide current figures related to criminal justice. While books like *Americans at Play: Demographics of Outdoor Recreation & Travel* provide data on how Americans spend their leisure time. Regardless of subject, a library's reference collection should have a source that provides statistical data specific to the subject.

Yearbooks --- Yearbooks can provide statistical data as well as topical articles updating information in a variety of areas. The most commonly thought of yearbooks are encyclopedia

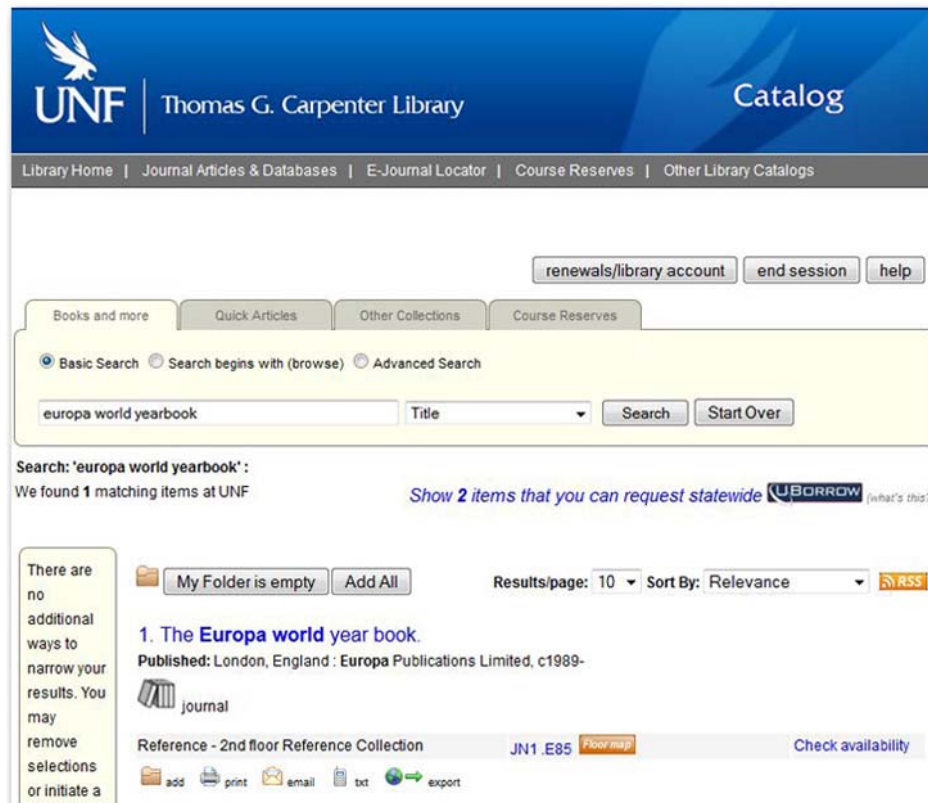
yearbooks. These yearly publications are used to update the information contained in a set of encyclopedias in between revisions. An encyclopedia may not be revised on a yearly basis, so the yearbooks provide the means for keeping the articles up to date without publishing a whole new edition. Yearbooks might also be issued to update knowledge in a particular field. Examples of typical yearbooks include the *Broadway Yearbook*, which provides a recap of the year's theatrical events, and the *Europa World Yearbook*, which annually updates information on every country of the world.

As of 2013, the UNF Library housed over 13,000 titles in its Reference Collection, so a researcher might reasonably expect to be able to find support for any research project and to find answers to nearly any question. If the needed material is not directly available in the Reference Collection, typically, one of the available sources will provide guidance for locating the information in other sources.

Finding Print Reference Sources in the UNF Library

If you already know the title of a reference book that you would like to find in the UNF Library, you merely need to search the Library's Catalog by title to find its location. For example, to find the *Europa World Yearbook* mentioned above, enter the Library's Catalog, type in the title of the book in the space provided, and press the Enter key. You will be given a listing for the book with a location and call number.

Basic Search in Mango



This, of course, is the best case scenario. Most of the time you might be looking for a certain type of information but probably will not know an exact source to go to. In this case, you will need to know how to search for reference books based on the type of information that you are trying to find.

Using the Advanced Search Capabilities of the Library's Catalog to Find Reference Materials on a Particular Topic

Although there are many ways to look for reference books in the UNF Library, the Advanced Search screen offers the best approaches. For one, the Advanced Search allows you to limit to a particular location in the Library. Notice in the sample form below that one of the options is to choose a specific "Location." Click the down arrow to the right of the "All" selection to see what other options are available. You'll notice that Reference is one of the locations that you can choose.

Notice also that in the top portion of the form, you can choose a combination of up to three keywords or phrases and search for the information "Anywhere" it matches in the catalog descriptions. You can also choose other ways to search in addition to keyword. Keyword can sometimes be quite inaccurate in identifying appropriate materials since the keyword search looks at every descriptive word in the catalog regardless of location. To see the other options for searching your terms in the catalog, click one of the down arrows to the right of the Anywhere caption pictured in the illustration below. You'll find included the ability to search by Subject Heading, by Author, and by Title.

Advanced Search in Mango

The screenshot shows the UNF Thomas G. Carpenter Library Catalog interface. At the top, there is a blue header with the UNF logo and the text "UNF | Thomas G. Carpenter Library" and "Catalog". Below the header is a navigation bar with links: "Library Home", "Journal Articles & Databases", "E-Journal Locator", "Course Reserves", and "Other Library Catalogs".

The main search area is titled "Advanced Search" and includes the following options:

- Option 1: Search for words**
 - Three search input fields, each followed by a dropdown menu set to "Anywhere".
 - AND dropdown menus between the input fields.
 - Buttons: [hide other search options], Search, Start Over
 - Limit your search further by:
 - Location: ALL
 - Format: ALL
 - Language: ALL
 - Published from (year): [] to: []
 - Books in the library
- Option 2: Boolean Searching:**
 - Use OR, NOT between words; AND is assumed. Use parentheses for nested terms and quotations for phrases: "united states" finance NOT history
 - Search Boolean (boolean search tips)
- Option 3: Search lists of titles, call numbers, etc.**
 - This link will take you to the previous catalog.

A better search method is to choose Subject Heading from the pull down menus and to enter terms that describe your subject. For example, if you are looking for an encyclopedia of history, you might choose Subject Heading to focus the search, input history and encyclopedia as your search terms, and then choose Reference as the Location. Look at the example below and try it in the UNF Library catalog.

History Encyclopedia Search in Mango

UNF Thomas G. Carpenter Library Catalog

Library Home | Journal Articles & Databases | E-Journal Locator | Course Reserves | Other Library Catalogs

renewals/library account end session help

Basic Search Search begins with (browse) **Advanced Search**

Option 1: Search for words

history in Subject Heading
AND encyclopedia in Subject Heading
AND in Anywhere

[hide other search options] Search Start Over

Limit your search further by:

Location: Reference
Format: ALL
Language: ALL
Published from (year): to:
 Books in the library

Option 2: Boolean Searching:

Use OR, NOT between words; AND is assumed. Use parentheses for nested terms and quotations for phrases: "united states" finance NOT history

Search Boolean (boolean search tips)

Option 3: Search lists of titles, call numbers, etc.
This link will take you to the previous catalog.

The result of the above search will be all books in the UNF Library's Reference Collection that are described as focusing on the subject history and which also are listed as encyclopedias.

This basic approach will work for nearly any topic that you choose. One thing that you will need to realize is that very specific topics may not work. For example, you are not likely to find an entire encyclopedia devoted to Jacksonville, Florida, but you will likely find information about Jacksonville in a handbook or encyclopedia that focuses on Florida or on Florida cities. In other words, if your first search produces no results, try working with a bit broader topic to find a book or set of books that might include your subject.

Choosing the Correct Strategy -- The Words You Choose Make a Difference

As indicated above, your choice of words can affect the success of your search. You should always limit your search to Reference as a Location if you are looking for reference books, but the search may fail if you choose a topic that is way too specific. Keep in mind that library cataloging covers the broader topics when it provides access to comprehensive works like encyclopedias, handbooks, and directories. In other words, you may easily find an encyclopedia of economics (a subject area) but not an encyclopedia of gross domestic product (a very specific economic topic that might be included in an encyclopedia of economics).

The following examples should further clarify how to think about your topics when you search for reference books.

If you are looking for:

A biography of Elton John

Try searching for:

A biographical dictionary of contemporary musicians. Your subject keywords might be music and biography. If you don't find what you need your first try, try variations on the words, such as musician or musicians and biographical or biographies. Don't forget to limit your search to the location Reference and to choose Subject Heading as your strategy.

The history of General Electric Company

An encyclopedia of company histories. Try searching by subject keyword for company and history and encyclopedia using the Reference location to limit the search to the Reference Collection.

Demographic data for Charleston, South Carolina

A statistical source for the United States. You might try using "united states" and demographics as your starting subject keywords. (Note that United States is entered in double quotation marks. This forces a match on the exact phrase.) And, of course, limit your search to the Reference location.

Recent developments in mainstreaming handicapped children

A handbook or manual that covers recent developments in education. Try searching the subject keywords education and handbook in the library's reference collection.

The definition of the musical term a capella

A dictionary of music. Try the subject keywords music and dictionary Do you need a reminder to limit your search to the Reference Collection?

A date-by-date overview of American history for the year 1886

A chronology of American history. Try "united states" and chronology as your subject keywords. (Do use quotes around United States.)

An address for the Boy Scouts of America

A directory of nonprofit organizations. You might have to try a couple of angles here, but try directories as a subject keyword to locate any reference books described as directories. Try combining this with associations or with nonprofit as other subject keywords. In other words, be flexible in your thinking about how to describe your need.

These are but a few examples of possible questions and possible search strategies for finding the right source in the library's Reference Collection. The key is to be able to place your question into a broader context and then to be able to search that subject in the library's catalog effectively.

Reference Databases

Libraries that invest in online databases will likely have at least one or more online reference collections. Examples include *Credo Reference* and *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Online encyclopedias like *Britannica* might also be available. Within an online system, a researcher will be able to find maps, chronologies, histories, analyses, images, biographies, a wealth of research materials. Online systems can be used to quickly look up terms, to read background information on a multitude of topics, and to search for ideas within broader subjects. In most cases, articles located via online sources will also provide references that will assist a researcher in finding related materials.

For example, a search of *Credo Reference* on the topic "William Shakespeare" turns up nearly 1600 matches coming from over 500 reference works. An advanced search for exact matches on William Shakespeare and authorship brings up 7 results. The result comes from a variety of sources, including *The Crystal Reference Encyclopedia*, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, and *Shakespeare's Theatre: A Dictionary of His Stage Context*. Articles coming from *Credo* might be a single page or multiple pages long.

Articles will often include references that help to point researchers in the direction of related information. While the articles found in reference databases will likely not be substantial enough as sources for college level research papers, they certainly can help to answer questions quickly and provide researchers with additional search terminology and additional leads to further information sources.

Like print reference sources, online reference collections and encyclopedias are designed to provide authoritative answers to a multitude of questions quickly.

Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.