

FUNDAMENTALS OF

Reference

CAROLYN M. MULAC



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Carolyn M. Mulac has more than thirty years' experience in reference work. An active member of ALA's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), she has served on a number of committees and chaired the *Reference Books Bulletin* Editorial Board, the Dartmouth Medal Committee, and the Management of Reference Committee. She has reviewed reference sources for *Booklist* since 1991 and contributed to the 6th and 7th editions of *Reference Sources for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries*. She also reviews books on the performing arts for *Library Journal* and contributes to *Booklist's* Points of Reference blog. In 2008 she received the Illinois Library Association's Reference Services Award.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi

PART 1: Reference Sources **1**

1	Encyclopedias.....	5
2	Websites	11
3	Dictionaries	17
4	Almanacs, Handbooks, and Yearbooks.....	23
5	Indexes.....	29
6	Directories.....	35
7	Geographical Sources	41
8	Biographical Sources.....	45
9	Statistical Sources	49

PART 2: Reference Services **55**

10	The Reference Interview.....	57
11	Reference Service in Person	61
12	Telephone Reference Service.....	65
13	Online Reference Service	69
14	Reference Service to Children and Young Adults	77
15	Reference Service in Special Subjects.....	83

16	Reference Policies.....	91
17	Reference Standards.....	97
18	Reference Evaluation.....	101
	Appendix: ALA Documents	109
	Bibliography	111
	List of Reference Sources Discussed in Part 1	119
	Index	125

INTRODUCTION

REFERENCE LIBRARIANS KNOW a little about a lot of things. Our work is a mosaic of subjects, formats, and modes of service, and we are constantly adding pieces of information, bits of experience, and shards of knowledge. The purpose of *Fundamentals of Reference* is to present an outline of the big picture that is reference. Further reading, study, and experience will fill in the details and create the reader's own reference mosaic.

Fundamentals of Reference is intended as an introduction to reference sources and services for a variety of readers, from library staff members who are asked to work in a reference department for a short period of time to managers and other librarians who wish to familiarize themselves with this area of the profession. Students in graduate programs of library and information science (LIS) and library technical assistant programs may also find it helpful.

In part 1, which covers reference sources, the print and electronic tools of the reference trade are discussed. In part 2, the focus is on various types of reference service, including telephone and electronic reference, as well as reference evaluation, policies, and standards.

The bibliography includes a variety of readings about reference, and the appendix features a number of key American Library Association (ALA) documents.

Fundamentals of Reference is my look at the tools and techniques of reference through the lens of more than thirty years as a reference librarian. The views expressed and mistakes made are entirely my own.

Reference Sources

Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves,
or we know where we can find information upon it.

—Samuel Johnson

REFERENCE LIBRARIANS, TOO, are of at least two kinds: subject specialists whose expertise consists of an in-depth knowledge of a single subject or related subjects in a single field, and generalists, who are familiar with the main ideas of a variety of topics. I count myself among the latter.

A popular conception of reference librarians might have us spouting answers off the tops of our heads, but the reality is that knowing *where* (and often *how*) to find the answer is our real forte. Mary Goulding wrote about “the most exciting premise of reference services—that no one, not even the most experienced, knows all the answers; we are simply trained to use the vast network that helps us find them.”¹ This “vast network” consists of colleagues, collections, catalogs, contacts, and more.

Once upon a time all a reference librarian had to do in order to provide good reference service was to memorize the titles and main features of the major reference books in each subject area. When asked a question, a quick run through that mental card file provided one or more titles that were sure to hold the answer—and usually did. The book—and it was always a book—was pulled from the shelf, pages were flipped through, and—voilà! the answer was read or shown to the questioner. Today we—and our patrons—have many

more choices (and formats) at our disposal. While anyone can “google” a query and find some kind of answer, what the reference librarian adds to the search is the ability to determine the most appropriate and authoritative source to use in order to find an accurate answer.

Just as architects use drawings and accountants use spreadsheets, reference librarians use reference sources; they are among the tools of our trade. And just as architects and accountants often use computers to create drawings and spreadsheets, reference librarians often use online sources.

What is a reference source? Although you might say that nearly anything could be a reference source—the daily newspaper, a website, a train schedule, or a recipe on the back of a box or can—here is how the *ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science* defines one: “Any source used to obtain authoritative information in a reference transaction. Reference sources can include printed materials, but are not limited to databases, media, the Internet, other libraries and institutions, and persons both inside and outside the library.”²

Reference books are probably the most familiar type of reference source found in every library. What, exactly, is a reference book? Again, the *ALA Glossary* provides a definition: “1. A print or electronic book designed by the arrangement and treatment of its subject matter to be consulted for definite items of information rather than to be read consecutively.”³ For the discussion

in this section, this definition is the one to keep in mind.

Although the world of reference publishing may be shrinking in terms of the number of reference publishers (because of corporate mergers and acquisitions), in terms of the number of reference titles published, it continues to expand. How can you keep current? Reading reviews is one way, and in our field we are fortunate that most reviews of reference sources are written by reference librarians who examine titles not only with the critical eye of a reviewer but also through the experienced eyes of a practitioner. Reference sources are regularly reviewed in the following publications: *Reference Books Bulletin*, a section of



Some Reference Tips

- Familiarize yourself with reference sources by taking a look at the *Enoch Pratt Free Library Brief Guide to Reference Sources*, *Reference Sources for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries*, and *Guide to Reference*.
- Visit the reference section of your local public library or a college or university library and see how many of the titles mentioned in this chapter you can find.

ALA's *Booklist*, in which reviews are written by members of the *Bulletin's* editorial board as well as by contributing reviewers; *Library Journal*, in which reviews are written by current and former librarians; ALA's *Choice*, in which reviews are written by and for academic librarians; and *Reference and User Services Quarterly* (RUSQ), a publication of ALA's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), in which reviews are written by volunteer librarians. Regular perusal of these publications, in which reviewers are encouraged to compare new titles with existing works, will keep you well informed.

There are also a number of reliable publications that recommend and review reference titles on a larger scale: The purpose of the *American Reference Books Annual* (ARBA) "is to provide comprehensive coverage of English-language reference books published in the United States and Canada during a single year."⁴ Since 1970, ARBA has provided thousands of reviews written by hundreds of subject specialists and library professionals. In 2002 Libraries Unlimited, ARBA's publisher, launched *ARBAonline*, a database offering all the reviews published in ARBA's print version since 1997. The *Enoch Pratt Free Library Brief Guide to Reference Sources*, now in its tenth edition, is a compact, user-friendly handbook that "lists and discusses a selection of basic and popular reference works that are likely to be encountered in larger libraries in the United States today."⁵ *Reference Sources for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries*, now in its seventh edition, offers brief reviews of standard as well as recent reference works in a variety of formats written by members of the *Reference Sources for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries* Editorial Committee of the Collection Development and Evaluation Section of RUSA. One of the acknowledged classics of reference publishing, ALA's *Guide to Reference Books*, became the *Guide to Reference* in its twelfth edition and is now published in an electronic format only. Its contributing

Interested in how reference works are created?

Distinguished Classics of Reference Publishing, edited by James Rettig (Oryx, 1992), traces the history of some of the most notable reference books ever published.

Want to keep up with reference sources and trends? Follow these blogs:

No Shelf Required, www.libraries.wright.edu/noshelfrequired/

Points of Reference, <http://pointsofreference.booklistonline.com>

editors include subject experts representing a wide variety of academic and public libraries. Their concise annotations describe more than 16,000 print and electronic reference resources.

In part I I am going to review some of the most frequently used types of reference sources and discuss some specific titles. Among the types of reference sources to be considered are encyclopedias, dictionaries, websites, and directories. A list of all reference sources mentioned will be found after the bibliography.

Notes

1. Mary Goulding, "Real Librarians Don't Play Jeopardy," *Illinois Libraries* 77, no. 2 (1991): 142.
2. Michael Levine-Clark and Toni M. Carter, eds., *ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science*, 4th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 2012), s.v. "reference source."
3. *Ibid.*, s.v. "reference book."
4. *American Reference Books Annual*, vol. 37 (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2006), xiii.
5. Thomas H. Patterson, John A. Damand, and Rachel Kubie, *Enoch Pratt Free Library Brief Guide to Reference Sources*, 10th ed. (Baltimore, MD: The Library, 2000), xii.

Encyclopedias

It's the E-N-C-Y-C-L-O-P-E-D-I-A. Just look inside this book and you will see, everything from "A" clear down to "Z."

—Jiminy Cricket

KENNETH KISTER DEFINES an encyclopedia in less Disneyesque terms: "An encyclopedia is a reference source published in either print or electronic form that summarizes basic knowledge and information on all important subjects or, in the case of a specialized encyclopedia, a particular subject."¹ An encyclopedia is often the best place to start when you are attempting to answer a question about a topic that is new or unfamiliar to you. Even when you are familiar with a subject—or actually know a specific fact—an encyclopedia can provide a quick, accurate, and authoritative answer. Just as there are reference librarians who are subject specialists and reference librarians who are generalists, there are encyclopedias which focus on a single subject and those which cover all subjects.

General Encyclopedias

General encyclopedias are probably the most familiar type of encyclopedia. Although today there are fewer general encyclopedias in print than there were

a decade ago, publishers are still producing them, often along with an online version. Among general encyclopedias, the large, multivolume sets are the most prominent, although there are also some single-volume general encyclopedias.

In my experience, which has consisted mainly of providing general reference service, I am most familiar with what I like to think of as the “Big Three” of encyclopedias: the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Encyclopedia Americana*, and the *World Book Encyclopedia*. I’ve listed them in order of size, from largest to the smallest, but a more accurate listing might be one done in terms of frequency of use. In that case, reverse the order: in a general reference setting, particularly in a telephone ready-reference service, the *World Book Encyclopedia* is one of the most frequently consulted reference works. Even now with the plethora of online sources available (among them *World Book Online*), there is nothing like opening a volume of the *World Book* and knowing you will find that list of the seven wonders of the world or a basic explanation of how a bill becomes a law. When I’m looking for a little more on a subject, perhaps an overview as well as a short bibliography, the *Encyclopedia Americana* would be my choice. And when I’m in search of even more, perhaps a detailed outline or history of a particular concept or place, as well as a substantial bibliography, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* would be the one I consult. At this point I should also mention that both the *World Book Encyclopedia* and *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are available in online versions (*World Book Online* and *Britannica Online*) as well as print versions. Britannica recently announced that the 2010 print edition will be its last version in print. The last print edition of *Encyclopedia Americana* was published in 2006; there is an online version of *Americana* within *Grolier Online*.

These are my personal favorites; there are other encyclopedias available, among them *Compton’s by Britannica* and *The New Book of Knowledge*. One of the best ways to keep current with the world of encyclopedia publishing is to read *Reference Books Bulletin’s* “Encyclopedia Update” published annually in the September 15 issue of *Booklist*. The authors look at both print and online encyclopedias and begin each update with a brief look at the state of encyclopedia publishing. These updates include careful evaluations of the scope, content, and functionality of the latest print and online encyclopedias. *Purchasing an Encyclopedia: 12 Points to Consider* (Booklist Publications/ALA, 1996) reprints the 1995 “Encyclopedia Update.” Those twelve points are authority, arrangement, subject coverage, accuracy and objectivity, recency, approach, style, bibliographies, illustrations, multimedia, physical format,

and yearbooks and other special products. These considerations are useful not only in purchasing an encyclopedia, but in selecting an encyclopedia to use in a particular reference situation.

Kenneth Kister offers the following points for consideration when evaluating an encyclopedia:

1. Does the encyclopedia provide the material you and others who will be using it are likely to need?
2. Is the encyclopedia comprehensible to you and others who will be using it?
3. Is the encyclopedia produced by reputable people?
4. Is the encyclopedia reliable?
5. Is the encyclopedia free from bias and stereotype?
6. Is the encyclopedia reasonably current?
7. Is the encyclopedia easy to use and are its contents readily accessible?
8. Does the encyclopedia include well-selected bibliographies?
9. Is the encyclopedia adequately illustrated?
10. Is the encyclopedia in book version physically well made and aesthetically pleasing?
11. Does the encyclopedia offer any special or unique features?
12. Is the encyclopedia available in both print and electronic form, and, if so, which do you want?
13. Is the encyclopedia fairly priced?
14. What do published reviews say about the encyclopedia?
15. How does the encyclopedia compare with its major competitors?²

Again, although some of these points may be of more concern to individuals purchasing an encyclopedia, either for a library collection or home use, many more of them should be of interest to someone deciding on a reference source to consult.

Specialized Encyclopedias

There are specialized encyclopedias covering almost any topic imaginable: just try a keyword search using “encyclopedia” and the subject of your choice

in *BooksInPrint.com* or any online library catalog and look at the results. Specialized encyclopedias may be scholarly or popular in nature and single- or multivolume in format. Here are some examples of specialized encyclopedias chosen to illustrate the variety of subjects covered:

- All Things Austen: An Encyclopedia of Austen's World.* A tour of the beloved writer's milieu.
- American Medical Association Concise Medical Encyclopedia.* A consumer medical reference book offering 3,000 entries on illnesses, nutrition, parts of the body, and numerous other topics.
- The Baseball Encyclopedia: The Complete and Definitive Record of Major League Baseball.* 10th revised edition. A classic sports reference book that documents "America's pastime."
- Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia.* 5th edition. A one-volume companion to world literature first published in 1948.
- Encyclopaedia Judaica.* 2nd edition. 22 vols. An award-winning, landmark work of scholarship devoted to all aspects of Jewish history, culture, and religion. Available online as part of the Gale Virtual Reference Center.
- Encyclopedia of Chicago.* A comprehensive one-volume work with many special features produced under the auspices of the Chicago History Museum, the Newberry Library, and Northwestern University. Also available online at www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org.
- Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History.* Examines hair as an indication of social class, gender, ethnicity, and more.
- Encyclopedia of Popular Music.* 4th edition. 10 vols. A multivolume look at popular music in all its forms from 1900 to the present.
- Encyclopedia of Southern Culture.* All aspects of southern life and lore are examined in this award-winning, single-volume work of scholarship.
- Encyclopedia of Television.* 2nd edition. 4 vols. Published under the auspices of the Museum of Broadcast Communications, this multivolume set offers hundreds of entries on many facets of the medium. The text of the 1st edition is available on the museum's website at www.museum.tv.
- Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress: For Congress, the Nation and the World.* Essays on the library's collections, articles on its buildings

and history, biographies of the Librarians of Congress and more in a single-volume encyclopedia on the largest library in the world. *Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations*. 12th edition. 5 vols. Since its first one-volume edition published in 1960, this has remained a standard reference work on the countries of the world. Available online as part of the Gale Virtual Reference Library.

A Word about Wikipedia

Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) is the online “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” In the last ten years, *Wikipedia* has become one of the most frequently visited sites on the Internet. It has also generated considerable discussion among reference practitioners. In *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction*, Melissa A. Wong notes that, “although librarians should be wary of consulting *Wikipedia* for ready-reference factual information, the encyclopedia can be a valuable resource for general background information and pre-research information.”³ In an article entitled “Wikipedia: Friend or Foe?” Kathy West and Janet Williamson reported on a study undertaken “to assess whether Wikipedia can be used and recommended as a credible reference or information tool.”⁴ They concluded that “like any knowledge source, it should not be used in isolation from other sources of information. It is one tool in our information toolkit.”⁵ In other words, *Wikipedia* is *a* source, not *the* source. Casper Grathwohl considers the use of *Wikipedia* as a way to begin research on the Web. He writes that

through user-generated efforts, Wikipedia is comprehensive, current, and far and away the most trustworthy Web resource of its kind. It is not the bottom layer of authority, nor the top, but in fact the highest layer without formal vetting. In this unique role it therefore serves as an ideal bridge between the validated and unvalidated Web.⁶

Reference Tip

One way to evaluate an encyclopedia is to take a topic and look it up in several different encyclopedias and consider how it is treated in each. This can be particularly enlightening if you choose a controversial topic.

Notes

The chapter epigraph is from Lorraine Santoli, *The Official Mickey Mouse Club Book* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 135.

1. Kenneth Kister, *Kister's Best Encyclopedias: A Comparative Guide to General and Specialized Encyclopedias* (Phoenix: Oryx, 1994), 3.
2. *Ibid.*, 17–20.
3. Melissa A. Wong, "Encyclopedias," in *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction*, 4th ed., ed. Richard E. Bopp and Linda C. Smith (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), 544.
4. Kathy West and Janet Williamson, "Wikipedia: Friend or Foe?" *Reference Services Review* 37, no. 3 (2009): 260.
5. *Ibid.*, 270.
6. Casper Grathwohl, "Wikipedia Comes of Age," *Chronicle Review*, January 7, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Wikipedia-Comes-of-Age/125899/>.

INDEX

A

abstracts, defined, 29–30

acronyms and abbreviations, 20

Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary, 20

Agosto, Denise E., 67

ALA. *See* American Library Association (ALA)

ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science

on abstracts, 29

on compendium, 23

on directories, 35–36

on indexes, 29

on reference interviews, 57–58

on reference services, 56

on reference sources, 2

Alibris website, 39

All Things Austen encyclopedia, 8

Allcock, Jana C., 86

Allen, Bryce, 101

almanacs (reference sources), 23–25

Amazon.com website, 39

American Association of Law Libraries, 86

American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), 47

American FactFinder website, 50–51

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 18–19

American Library Association (ALA)
Association of College and Research
Libraries, 106

Booklist, 3, 6, 106

Choice magazine, 3, 12, 106

Code of Ethics, 85–86

Guide to Reference, 2–4, 106

Reference and User Services Association,
3, 11–12, 58, 81, 84, 89, 92, 98, 100

*Reference Sources for Small and Medium-
Sized Libraries*, 2–3, 45–46, 106

reviewing reference sources, 3

Young Adult Library Services
Association, 81

The American Library Directory, 37

*American Medical Association Concise
Medical Encyclopedia*, 8

American National Biography Online, 47

American Reference Books Annual (ARBA),
3, 106

American Religion Data Archives database,
53

America's Top-Rated Cities, 52–53

America's Top-Rated Smaller Cities, 53

Anderton, Holly, 67

ARBAonline database, 3
 Ashton, Chuck, 80
 Association of College and Research
 Libraries (ALA), 106
 Association of Religious Data Archives, 53
Atlas of the World, 42
 atlases and maps, 41–42

B

Babel Fish website, 21
 Barnes, Newkirk, 87
Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 21
Baseball Almanac, 25
The Baseball Encyclopedia, 8
 Beck, Lynne, 73
Benet's Reader Encyclopedia, 8
 Biggs, Mary, 106
 biographical sources, 45–48
Biography and Genealogy Master Index
 (BGMI), 46
Biography in Context (BIC), 46
Biography Reference Bank, 46
 Bishop, Kay, 78
 blogs about reference sources and trends, 3
 Bobrowsky, Tammy, 73
Book Review Digest, 32
Book Review Index, 32
Booklist (ALA), 3, 6, 106
Books in Print, 8, 38
 Bopp, Richard E., 56
 Box Office Mojo website, 53
Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook, 26
 Brown, Stephanie Willen, 57
 Bunge, Charles, 104
 Bureau of Justice Statistics website, 54
 Bureau of Labor Statistics, 51
Business Rankings Annual, 53
 Business Reference and Services Section
 (RUSA), 89
 business reference service, 88–89
 business statistics, 51–52
Business Statistics of the United States, 51

C

Canada Post website, 37
Canadian Almanac and Directory, 24
 Carlyle, Thomas, 45
 Carter, David S., 73–74

Cassell, Kay Ann
 on assessing reference collections, 104
Reference and Information Services in the
21st Century, 56, 69, 83
 on reference librarian role, 84
 on weeding reference materials, 107
 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,
 52
 Charles Scribner's Sons (publisher), 47
The Charleston Advisor (TCA), 14–15
Chase's Calendar of Events, 26
 chat reference service, 73–74
 children and young adults reference service,
 77–82
 ChildStats.gov website, 54
Choice magazine (ALA), 3, 12, 106
 citing sources, 67, 87
 Clifford, Anne, 94
 Cobb, David A., 43
 Code of Ethics (ALA), 85–86
The Columbia Gazetteer of the World, 43
 communication skills in reference services.
See reference services
 compendium, defined, 23
 Condon, Charles J., 87–88
Conducting the Reference Interview (Ross et
 al.), 58
 County Business Patterns website, 51
 CQ Press website, 39
CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics,
 25–26
 crossword puzzle dictionaries, 19

D

Desai, Christina M., 75
 dictionaries (reference sources), 17–21
Dictionary of American Biography (DAB),
 47
 digital reference. *See* online reference service
 directories (reference sources), 35–39
Directories in Print, 36
Directory of Special Libraries and Information
Centers, 37
 Disraeli, Benjamin, 49
Distinguished Classics of Reference Publishing
 (Rettig), 3
 Drexel College of Information Science and
 Technology, 13

E

Ebert, Roger, 11
Education State Rankings, 53
 Election Statistics website, 54
 electronic reference sources, 45–48
 e-mail reference service, 70–72
Emily Post's Etiquette, 26
Encyclopaedia Britannica, 6
Encyclopaedia Judaica, 8
Encyclopedia Americana, 6
Encyclopedia of Associations, 36
Encyclopedia of Chicago, 8
Encyclopedia of Hair, 8
Encyclopedia of Popular Music, 8
Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, 8
Encyclopedia of Television, 8
Encyclopedia of the Library of Congress, 8–9
 encyclopedias (reference sources), 5–9
Enoch Pratt Free Library Brief Guide to Reference Sources, 2–3
Essay and General Literature Index, 32
 ethical considerations for reference services, 85–86
 etymological dictionaries, 18
The Europa World of Learning, 38
Evaluating Reference Service (Whitlach), 105
 evaluating reference services
 about, 101–102
 measuring and assessing considerations, 102–104
 planning considerations, 102
 for reference collections, 104–107
 for reference staff, 107–108

F

Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins, 21
 Fagan, Jody Condit, 75
Famous First Facts, 25
 Federal Interagency Council on Statistics, 50
 Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 54
 FedStats website, 50
 Fisher, Donna M., 61
Fodor's Travel Guides, 43
 follow-up to reference interviews, 59–60, 80–81
 food dictionaries, 19

Food Dictionary, 19
Forbes Travel Guides, 43
 foreign-language dictionaries, 18, 21
 Forte, Eric, 50

G

Gale Cengage Learning (publisher), 32, 46
Gale Directory Library, 37
 Garnett, Emily, 65
 gazetteers, 43
 general periodical indexes, 30–31
 geographical sources, 41–44
 Google Earth website, 42
 Google Talk, 74
 Goulding, Mary, 1
 Grant, Malaika, 73
 Grathwohl, Casper, 9
 Green, Samuel S., 55–56
 Grey House Publishing, 38
Guide to Reference (ALA), 2–4, 106
 guidebooks, 43–44
Guinness World Records, 26

H

H. W. Wilson Company (publisher), 30, 32, 46–47
A Handbook for Literature, 25
Handbook of Denominations in the United States, 25
Handbook of U.S. Labor Statistics, 51–52
 handbooks (reference sources), 23, 25–26
 Harper Collins (publisher), 21
 health statistics, 52
 Hiremath, Uma
 on assessing reference collections, 104
 Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century, 56, 69, 83
 on reference librarian role, 84
 on weeding reference materials, 107
Historical Census Browser, 51
 historical dictionaries, 17
 Hoover's Business Press, 39
 Houghton, Sarah, 75

I

IM reference service, 74–76
 indexes (reference sources), 29–33, 47
 information services. *See* reference services

information services staff. *See* reference librarians

Injury Facts publication, 54

Internet Library for Librarians website, 15

Internet Public Library (IPL), 13

interviews, reference. *See* reference interviews

ipl2 website, 14, 21, 70

J

Jennerich, Edward J., 58

Jennerich, Elaine Z., 58

Johnson, Roberta, 62

Johnson, Samuel, 1

Journal of Business and Finance

Librarianship, 89

Journal of Hospital Librarianship, 86

Journal of Library Administration, 89

Journal of Youth Services in Libraries, 81

K

Kane, Joseph Nathan, 25

Katz, William A.

on dictionaries, 17–18, 20

on geographical sources, 41

on reference librarians, 11

on reference policies, 94–95

Kister, Kenneth, 5, 7, 13

Kister's Best Dictionaries for Adults and Young People, 20

Kuhlthau, Carol Collier, 81

L

Larousse (publisher), 21

legal reference service, 87–88

Legal Reference Services Quarterly, 88

Leita, Carol, 12

Librarian's Internet Index (LII), 12–13

Libraries Unlimited (publisher)

American Reference Books Annual, 3, 106

ARBAonline database, 3

Recommended Reference Books for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries and Media Centers, 106

Reference and Information Services, 9, 30, 36, 43, 50, 56

The Library and Book Trade Almanac 2010, 26–27

Library Journal, 3, 12, 65, 106

Library of Congress, 8–9, 14

Library Services and Technology Act, 12–13

Libweb website, 37

listening/inquiring in reference interviews about, 59

for children and young adults, 79–80

for e-mail requests, 71

for health/medical topics, 86

M

Mallory, Mary, 50

Map Collections website, 42

Mappy Road Guide website, 42

MapQuest website, 42

maps and atlases, 41–42

Marquis Who's Who on the Web, 46

MARS: Emerging Technologies in Reference Section, 11–12

Massey-Burzio, Virginia, 99

Medical Library Association, 85–86

medical reference service, 86–87

Miller, Jonathan, 104

mission statements, 92

MSN Instant Messenger, 74

Murfin, Marjorie, 104

N

Naiman, Sandra, 107

National Atlas of the United States, 42

National Cancer Institute, 52

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), 52

National Institutes of Health, 52

National Safety Council, 54

The New Century Cyclopedia of Names, 47

The New Food Lover's Companion, 19

New York Times Index, 31

newspaper indexes, 30–32

Nilsen, Kirsti, 58

No Shelf Required blog, 3

Nolan, Christopher W., 105

Notable Last Facts, 25

O

O'Gorman, Jack, 45

The Old Farmer's Almanac, 24–25

One Across.com website, 19

OneLook Dictionaries website, 21
 online reference service
 about, 69–70
 chat reference, 73–74
 e-mail reference, 70–72
 IM reference, 74–76
 online reference sources, 45–48
Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Almanac, 24
Oxford Atlas of the United States, 42
Oxford English Dictionary, 19
 Oxford University Press, 21, 47

P

Partridge, Eric, 20
 Pellack, Lorraine J., 98
 periodical indexes, 30–31
 Perry-Casañeda Library Map Collection, 42
Play Index, 32
 Points of Reference blog, 3
 Polanka, Sue, 45
 policies on reference services
 about, 91–92
 on mission statements, 92
 on organizational structure, 93
 on personnel, 93
 on reference collections, 93–95
 on services and service philosophy, 93
 Population Clock (U.S.), 51
 population statistics, 50–51
 ProQuest Research Library database, 31–32
Public Libraries (publication), 62, 75, 79
Purchasing an Encyclopedia, 6–7

Q

question negotiation, 58
 quotations, reference sources for, 21

R

Radford, Marie L., 58, 100
Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide, 43
Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 18
 ratings and rankings, 52–53
Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, 30–31
Recommended Reference Books for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries and Media Centers (Libraries Unlimited), 106

Reference and Information Services (Libraries Unlimited)
 about, 56
 on directories, 36
 on gazetteers, 43
 on indexes, 30
 on statistics, 50
 on Wikipedia, 9

Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century (Cassell and Hiremath), 56, 69, 83

Reference and Online Services Handbook (Katz and Clifford), 94

Reference and User Services Association (ALA)
 about, 3
 recognizing reference websites, 11–12
 on reference evaluation, 101–102, 106
 on reference interviews, 58, 71
 on reference policies, 92
 on reference services, 61, 71, 81, 84, 89
 on reference standards, 97–100

Reference and User Services Quarterly
 about, 3
 best reference websites, 11–12
 on citing sources, 67
 on reference standards, 98, 100

Reference Books Bulletin

 about, 3
 benchmarks, 13
 Encyclopedia Update, 6
 reviews of web-based resources, 12

reference desks, 61–63
 reference evaluation. *See* evaluating reference services

The Reference Interview as a Creative Art (Jennerich), 58

reference interviews
 about, 57–58, 77–7882
 approachability in, 58–59, 78
 follow-up to, 59–60, 80–81
 health/medical topics, 86–87
 interest in, 59, 79
 listening/inquiring in, 59, 71, 79–80, 86
 searching in, 59, 80
Reference Librarian (publication), 73–75, 106–107

- reference librarians
 - about, 1–2, 11
 - Code of Ethics, 85–86
 - commitment of, 97, 100
 - evaluating, 107–108
 - reference policies on, 93
 - role of, 55, 84–85
 - teachable moments for, 80
 - reference policies. *See* policies on reference services
 - Reference Quarterly* (publication), 92
 - Reference Reborn* (Zabel), 100
 - reference services
 - about, 55–56
 - to children and young adults, 77–82
 - evaluating, 101–108
 - online, 69–76
 - in person, 61–63
 - policies on, 91–95
 - reference interviews, 57–60, 71, 77–82
 - in special subjects, 83–90
 - standards for, 97–100
 - via telephone, 65–68
 - Reference Services Review* (publication), 92, 99
 - reference sources
 - about, 1–4
 - almanacs, 23–25
 - biographical sources, 45–48
 - citing, 67, 87
 - defined, 2
 - dictionaries, 17–21
 - directories, 35–39
 - electronic, 45–46
 - encyclopedias, 5–10
 - geographical sources, 41–44
 - handbooks, 23, 25–26
 - indexes, 29–33
 - reviewing, 2–3
 - statistical sources, 49–54
 - websites, 11–15
 - yearbooks, 23, 26–27
 - Reference Sources for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries* (ALA), 2–3, 45–46, 106
 - reference standards, 97–100
 - Reitz, Joan M.
 - on compendium, 23
 - on digital reference, 69
 - on gazetteers, 43
 - on maps, 41
 - on reference interviews, 58
 - on visual dictionaries, 20
 - Rettig, James, 3
 - Reverse Acronyms, Initialisms and Abbreviations Dictionary*, 20
 - RhymeZone website, 19
 - rhyming dictionaries, 19
 - Ross, Catherine Sheldrick, 58, 60
 - Ross, Celia, 89
 - Rough Guides*, 43
 - RUSA. *See* Reference and User Services Association (ALA)
 - RUSQ. *See* Reference and User Services Quarterly
- S**
- Salveggi, Anthony, 78
 - Schmidt, Aaron, 74
 - Schneider, Karen G., 70, 72
 - Scout Report*, 12
 - search process in reference services, 59, 80
 - services, reference. *See* reference services
 - Shakespeare, William, 23, 29, 35, 41
 - Short Story Index*, 32
 - slang dictionaries, 20
 - Smith, Linda C., 30, 56
 - Smith, Sally Decker, 62
 - Smithsonian Institution website, 14
 - sources for reference materials. *See* reference sources
 - special subjects, reference services in, 83–90
 - specialized encyclopedias, 7–9
 - specialized indexes, 32
 - Sporting News*, 53
 - Sports Illustrated Sports Almanac*, 24
 - sports statistics, 53
 - standards, reference, 97–100
 - The Statesman's Yearbook 2011*, 26
 - Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 50
 - statistical sources, 49–54
 - Stephens, Michael, 74
 - Straw, Joseph E., 36
 - Strong, Susan, 79
 - subject dictionaries, 19

T

telephone directories, 38
 telephone reference service, 65–68
The Charleston Advisor (TCA), 14–15
 Thomas, Deborah A., 86
The Time Almanac, 24
 Tucker, James Cory, 88–89
 Tyckoson, David, 56, 63, 106

U

Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory,
 31, 37
*The U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D Librarian*
 (publication), 80
 unauthorized practice of law (UPL), 87–88
 UNdata website, 50
 United Nations World Health Organization,
 52
 United States Census Bureau, 43, 50
 United States Geological Society, 42
 United States Postal Service (USPS), 37
 University of Michigan, 13
 University of Texas–Austin, 42
 University of Wisconsin–Madison, 12
 UPL (unauthorized practice of law), 87–88
U.S. Gazetteer, 43
 U.S. Population Clock, 51

V

Vavrek, Bernard, 91
 visual dictionaries, 20

W

Ward-Callaghan, Linda, 77–79

Washington Information Directory, 38–39
 websites (reference sources), 11–15
Webster's Third New International Dictionary,
Unabridged, 18
 weeding reference materials, 107
 West, Kathy, 9
 West, Mae, 17
Whitaker's Almanack, 24
 Whitlach, Jo Bell, 105
 Wikipedia, 9
 Wilkins, Craig, 89
 Williamson, Janet, 9
 WilsonWeb suite, 47
 Wong, Melissa A., 9
 WOREP (Wisconsin Ohio Reference
 Evaluation Program), 104
The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 24
World Book Encyclopedia, 6
World Health Report, 52
 WorldCat website, 39
Worldmark Encyclopedia of the Nations, 9

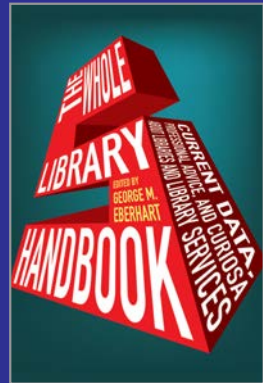
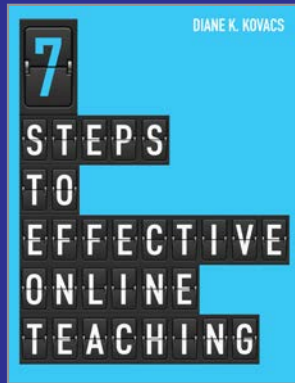
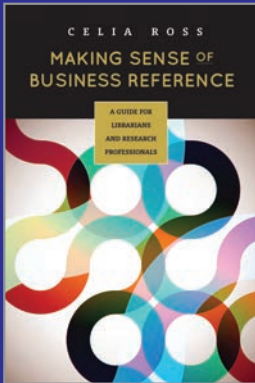
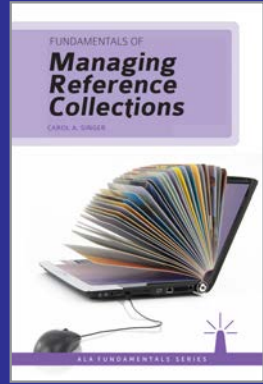
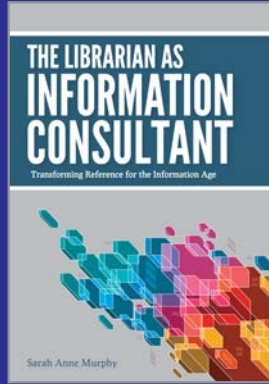
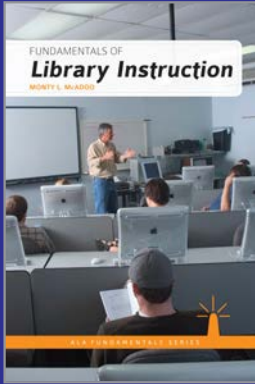
Y

Yahoo! Messenger, 74
*Yearbook of American and Canadian
 Churches*, 27
 yearbooks (reference sources), 23, 26–27
 Young Adult Library Services Association
 (ALA), 81
 young adults and children reference service,
 77–82

Z

Zabel, Diane, 100

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