

CRS Report for Congress

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How to Find Information in a Library

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Summary

For constituents who want to learn more about the topics that interest them, the Congressional Research Service has prepared this guide to locating information in libraries. It includes sources of background information (encyclopedias, almanacs, business directories, statistics, and biographical directories), current information from newspapers and magazines, organizations, foundations, government, politics, legislation, and books and periodicals. It lists a number of Internet search engines. This report will be updated from time to time.

Background

Members of Congress receive thousands of requests daily from constituents wanting information about a wide variety of subjects. Many inquiries relate to current laws and legislation or topics of shared public and congressional interest and concern, but others are the types of reference or research questions that are handled routinely in libraries.

The Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, in assisting congressional offices to respond to questions from their constituents, is limited in both the time and the material it can expend in answering these requests; its primary duty is to provide information to Congress and to help Congress meet its legislative responsibilities. However, in an effort to provide as much assistance as possible to constituents wishing additional information on their subjects, we offer the following suggestions on using materials in local libraries.

How to Find Information in a Local Library

Libraries today serve as clearinghouses for practical information as much as collections of learning, research, and bestsellers. Librarians can help one learn how a certain holiday originated, which agency to contact to lodge a consumer complaint, which food processor to buy, and much more.

Most areas have a city or county public library to help with reference and research problems. College and university libraries often provide some public access to their collections. Even a small library has resources that, if used creatively, can often answer a question or at least suggest a source where information can be found.

Every library has a reference collection of books for use in the library, including encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, periodical indexes, biographical directories, compilations of statistics, and so on. They can provide a great deal of information quickly. Many libraries have electronic online searching, usually for a fee, and CD-ROMs for readers to use themselves. Many provide access to the Internet and the World Wide Web.

This guide gives examples of some of the general reference works that can be found in many libraries and that will help find the needed information. There are many more sources, both general and subject-oriented, available in libraries. Some of the publications in this guide may be available only at larger public or research libraries, or at libraries which are depositories for U.S. government publications, which by law must be open to the public for their depository collections.

Internet Access

There are a number of Internet World Wide Web search engines, some of which cover several other search engines; these are labeled “multi” on the list below.

All-in-One	[http://www.albany.net/allinone]
AltaVista	[http://www.altavista.digital.com]
Excite	[http://www.excite.com]
Hotbot	[http://www.hotbot.com]
InfoSeek	[http://www.infoseek.com]
Lycos	[http://www.lycos.com]
Metacrawler (multi)	[http://www.beta.metacrawler.com] [http://metacrawler.cs.washington.edu:8080]
Northern Lights	[http://www.nlsearch.com]
Open Text	[http://www.opentext.com]
ProFusion (multi)	[http://www.designlab.ukan.edu/profusion]
SavvySearch (multi)	[http://guaraldi.cs.colostate.edu:2000/form?beta]
Yahoo	[http://www.yahoo.com]

Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, sources can change, appear, or disappear without warning.

General Background Information

Among the most useful reference works are encyclopedias, which provide brief information on a great many topics. Many libraries have several encyclopedias, such as the *World Book Encyclopedia*, *Encyclopedia Americana*, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and *Academic American Encyclopedia*.

Almanacs such as the *World Almanac* and the *Information Please Almanac* provide in a compact form brief information on a great many topics. They have historical information, statistics, lists of winning teams, election results, etc.

One of the best places to find statistics of every kind about the United States is the *Statistical Abstract*, published annually by the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) and available in nearly every library. Other useful government publications are *Historical Statistics of the United States from Colonial Times to 1970*, *Public Papers of the Presidents*, the annual *Budget of the United States Government*, and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, among many, many others.

Biographical information, whether about people living now or historical figures, can be found in many places. In addition to what the encyclopedias can provide, *Webster's Biographical Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of American Biography* are useful. For current newsmakers, one can start with *Current Biography*, *Who's Who in America*, or *Biography Index*. Some of these sources are available electronically.

Businesses and corporations are listed in *Moody's Industrial Manual*, *Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors, and Executives*, *Hoover's Handbook of American Business*, *Ward's Business Directory of U.S. Private and Public Companies*, and the *Thomas Register of American Manufacturers*. There are many specialized directories that list businesses by location or by industry.

Current Information

The latest information on topics of current interest can generally be found in newspapers and magazines. By using periodical indexes, one can find articles on a particular topic or by a particular author. One of the most widely-used general magazine indexes is the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. Others are *Magazine Index* (microform or electronic), *Social Sciences Index*, and Public Affairs Information Service *Bulletin* (known as PAIS). Examples of indexes on special topics are: *Art Index*, *Education Index*, *Humanities Index*, and *General Science Index*. There are also periodical articles available on CD-ROMs.

A number of U.S. newspapers publish indexes, and the one most often used is the *New York Times Index*. A weekly news summary, *Facts on File*, can be used to find the date of an event and a brief summary.

Organizations and Foundations

Organizations can be useful sources of information when printed sources fail. There are thousands of national associations in the United States, ranging from very small to very large, and they can often provide information on a topic or point out other sources that may be contacted. A guide to these organizations is the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, which comes out annually and lists more than 22,000 groups. Many organizations have World Wide Web pages on the Internet, and often their reports are available there.

Foundations are of interest to people who are looking for funds for various purposes, although most grants are to groups rather than individuals. The Foundation Center, headquartered in New York, has a library in every state and publishes the *Foundation Directory*, which lists the principal grant-making foundations in the United States.

Government, Politics, and Legislation

Executive Branch

The federal government is large and complicated, and has a bewildering number of agencies and bureaus. The *United States Government Manual* can help people discover which agency to contact for information, as it lists all the government departments and agencies and explains what they do.

The *Washington Information Directory*, an annual publication, tells which government agencies, congressional committees, and private groups in Washington, D.C., are interested in particular topics. The *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance* lists the government programs that give money to groups or individuals for particular purposes and explains how to apply. The *Government Assistance Almanac* by J. Robert Dumouchel (Detroit, Omnigraphics. Annual), a guide to the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance*, reduces the information to "the essentials." On the World Wide Web, the *Catalog* is available at: [<http://www.gsa.gov/fdac/queryfdac.htm>]

Two World Wide Web sites are the GovBot Database of Government Web Sites [<http://pardoo.umass.edu/GovBot>] and the Government Printing Office's GPO Access [http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aaces001.html].

Legislative Branch

The *Congressional Directory* is the official directory of Congress, with lists of Members and committees, biographical information on Members, statistics, and so on. Two privately-published books are also good sources of information on Members of Congress: *Almanac of American Politics* (Washington, National Journal) by Michael Barone and **Politics in America**, published by Congressional Quarterly, Inc. All are published every 2 years.

The *Congressional Record* is the official record of congressional activity. Another publication that reports on the activities of Congress is *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, published by Congressional Quarterly, Inc. The *Weekly Report* is cumulated into

an annual *Almanac*. The *National Journal* is another weekly that reports on activities of Congress, although its emphasis is more on the executive branch.

The Congressional Information Service, Inc., collects congressional publications and laws and issues them on microfiche along with the printed *CIS Index/Abstracts*, which provides a subject approach to publications (reports, hearings, documents) of Congress.

Laws passed by Congress are published in the *United States Statutes at Large*, and the permanent general laws are later collected and codified into the *United States Code*. Regulations are first published in the *Federal Register* and are later codified into the *Code of Federal Regulations*.

An extremely useful source for legislation is THOMAS, legislative information on the Internet: [<http://thomas.loc.gov>]. It has public laws and bill summaries since 1973, House and Senate roll call votes for several years, the *Congressional Record* text and index since 1994, bills full text since 1993, links to committee Home Pages, and other things.

State Government

Each state generally issues a “blue book” listing officers of the state government, members of the legislature, state boards and commissions, and so on. A source providing brief information for all the states is the *Book of the States*. One of its supplements, *State Officials Classified by Function*, lists all the state departments of health, labor, and so on.

Books and Periodicals

One finds out what books and periodicals are in a library through its catalog, whether a card catalog, microfiche, online, or other version. Many libraries have access to catalogs of other libraries in their state or region, and may have access to catalogs of other libraries as well. For example, there is online access to the Library of Congress catalogs at the following address: [<http://www.loc.gov/homepage/online.html>]

There are various guides to help one find out about books and periodicals in general. *Books in Print* (BIP) is a listing of all the books currently on sale and available from U.S. publishers and bookstores. BIP lists books by author and title; its companion, *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, lists them by subject. The *Cumulative Book Index* (CBI) lists—by author, title, and subject—books published in English anywhere in the world. Periodicals can be identified in such bibliographies as *Standard Periodical Directory*, *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, and *Ulrich’s International Serials Directory*. Several of these directories are available online as well.