

HOW TO FIND ACCURATE REFERENCE INFORMATION

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HOW TO FIND ACCURATE REFERENCE INFORMATION

When you're doing research or looking for information on a particular subject, it's a lot like a detective checking all his possible sources. The big thing is knowing who or where your sources are...

In almost all instances, your first move should be to your encyclopedias. If you don't have an up-to-date set, there's always your public library.

Most of the time, an encyclopedia will give you at least the general facts about your subject. You may have to check other sources for more detailed information.

Thus, your next move should be to books that have been written on the subject. The subject and title sections of the card catalog and/or the bound volumes of computer printouts at most public libraries should give you plenty of listings.

After you've selected a number of books for background information, check the magazines either directly related to your subject or those carrying articles on your subject. Most of the time, you'll find that magazines will provide you with more up-to-date and timely information than books.

To check out information on your subject in magazines, look in the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature. Under subject and author headings, the complete collection of this guide will list articles printed in magazines since the turn of the century. The Suggestions for Use Section will instruct you on how to read the codes under each heading. If you can't find your subject listed, think of similar subject that might be related.

If your subject is part of particular field of study, there may be a special index that will help you. Among these special indexes, you'll find: Art Index, Business Periodicals Index, Consumers Index, Education Index, Humanities Index, Social Sciences Index, Biological and Agricultural Index, Applied Sciences and Technology Index, and even a Popular Periodicals Index which lists articles that have appeared in currently popular magazines.

You'll also find that most newspapers are veritable goldmines of reference material. Most of the big city newspapers have computerized indexes. Several of the special national newspapers such as the Wall Street Journal and the Christian Science Monitor also have reference indexes.

Without a doubt, the New York Times Index is the most complete. In these newspaper indexes, subjects and people are listed alphabetically with the date, the page number, and usually with the number of columns devoted to that particular story. About all you have to do to avail yourself of this information is to drop in, tell them what kind of information you are looking for, and ask for their help in locating it within their index.

Facts on File is a world news digest that's found at most public libraries. This is a weekly publication that's broken down into four categories: World Affairs, U.S. Affairs, Other Nations, and Miscellaneous.

Editorials on File is a similar service that comes out twice a month. It's a survey of newspaper editorials that span a wide range of subjects.

Most large public libraries also keep pamphlet files for brochures from various information services and government agencies. Be sure to ask about these.

Whenever you have a question or want more information on a subject, always check first in the material that has been written about it. Public libraries and newspapers are free, and will definitely point you in the right direction even if you don't know much about sources or collecting research material.

One of the best sources of information is people. Ask around and more often than not, you'll find someone right in your own area who is well-versed on your subject. An introductory phone call and an explanation why you're researching the subject will almost always lead you to many people who will be glad to talk with you.

Interviewing and talking with people will give you the chance to ask questions or hear specific explanations about the why's that may not be fully covered in a book, newspaper or other publication.

Your questions should be open-ended - unlike those that allow for a simple yes or no. You should get the people you're talking with to talk about their experiences relative to your subject, and pose hypothetical situations, asking what they would do or what would happen.

Researching, and/or gathering information on, a particular subject can be fun, exciting and very informative. It needn't be dull or boring. The important thing is to be aware of all the available sources, and then to take advantage of them. From there, you'll find it's very much like putting a jigsaw puzzle together - the closer you get to completing the picture, the more excited you become.

Many people find when they begin a research project on a specific subject they quickly uncover so many interesting related subjects that it's hard to confine their enthusiasm to just the one subject. This is what learning is all about, regardless of the use you eventually make of the information you gather. The more you learn the more you want to learn.

Curiosity about all things, and good, basic research are the number one prerequisites for any successful writer. To have read about or experienced only a few aspects of a given subject won't interest very many people. What the people want is a thorough discussion of the subject from as many different points of view as possible, and of course, this requires research - and to do research, you've got to know where to find what it is you want.

Hopefully, we've "turned you on" with the idea that the information you're interested in, is available and virtually at your finger tips. All it takes is a wee bit of effort on your part to avail yourself of it. Just remember, whatever has been thought of or dreamed of by man since the beginning of time - there's been something written about it, and you can read about it with just a little bit of searching.