

Las Positas College Library

Reference Books

Why use reference books?

Reference books—general and subject-specific encyclopedias, almanacs, handbooks--can expedite research by

- providing an overview of a subject or topic
- helping to further define the scope of a research topic
- presenting background information in a condensed format
- clarifying concepts by presenting easy-to-grasp graphics (e.g., sidebars, timelines, maps, photos, illustrations)
- highlighting facts, statistics, and definitions
- identifying key terms, concepts, and language useful for constructing searches in the online catalog and databases
- listing references to other sources of information (e.g., “For Further Reading”)

Anatomy of a typical reference book:

Title page: Contains title, author or editor, city of publication, and publisher.

Verso of title page: Contains copyright information.

Author(s): Person(s) responsible for the original content of the work.

Editor(s): Person(s) responsible for compiling and editing the articles or chapters that make up the work.

Edition: Tells how many times a work has been printed. Edition numbers most often appear on title pages of works whose information is updated regularly, such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, and almanacs.

Publisher: Name of publishing house usually located on the bottom of the title page or on the verso of the title page.

Editorial Board/Advisors: People appointed to advise the editorial board.

Contributors: Names of the authors that wrote the articles, often accompanied by the institutions with which they are affiliated.

Table of Contents: A list of the chapters or parts of the book.

Foreword/Preface: Section in the front of the book where the author or editor states the purpose for writing the book, the scope of the book, and the intended audience (i.e., scholar, undergraduate, or casual reader).

Introduction: Section in the front of the book that discusses the subject of the book and often gives instructions on how best to use book.

Appendix: Supplementary material that cannot be easily integrated into the text.

Glossary: A list of specialized terms with definitions or explanations, usually found in the back of the book.

Index: An alphabetical list of topics, names, and/or subjects located at the back of the book.