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CRS Report for Congress

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How to Find Information in a Library and on the Internet

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Summary

For constituents who want to learn more about topics that interest them, we prepared this guide to finding things in libraries and on the Internet. It includes background (encyclopedias, almanacs, and business, statistical, and biographical directories), current information (books and magazines), sources such as organizations and foundations and sources for government, politics, and legislation. It lists a number of Internet search engines, which can be used at many public libraries. It also suggests guides on how to search. This report will be updated at least yearly.

Background

Members of Congress receive hundreds of requests daily from constituents wanting to know about a wide variety of subjects. Many inquiries relate to current laws or topics of shared public and congressional interest and concern. Others are the types of reference or research questions that libraries handle routinely.

The Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress helps congressional offices respond to their constituents, but is limited to in both the time and effort it can spend in answering these requests. Its first duty is to provide information to Congress and to help Congress meet its legislative responsibilities. To give as much help as possible to those wishing to find more on their topics, we offer these ideas on using local libraries and the Internet.

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 began, which government agency to contact to lodge a consumer complaint with, which toaster to buy, and much more.

CRS Reports are prepared for Members and committees of Congress

Most areas have a city or county public library to help with reference and research. 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, magazine indexes, compilations of statistics, biographical directories, and so on. They can provide a great deal of information quickly. Many libraries have 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 are in many libraries and that will help find the needed information. There are many more sources, both general and subject-oriented, in libraries. Some of the publications listed here may be available only at larger public or research libraries, or at libraries which are depositories for U.S. government publications and which by law must be open to the public for their depository collections.

How To Find Information on the Internet

There are many Internet World Wide Web search engines, some of which cover several other search engines; these are labeled "meta" on the list below. Because of the dynamic nature of the Internet, sources can change, appear, or disappear without warning. Not everything that appears on the Web is true, and sites where the author is clearly identified and his qualifications given are considered more reliable by librarians who judge Web sites.

AltaVista	[http://www.altavista.com]
Excite	[http://www.excite.com]
FastSearch	[http://alltheweb.com/]
Go.com	[http://go.com/]
Google	[http://www.google.com]
HotBot	[http://www.hotbot.lycos.com]
Ixquick Metasearch (meta)	[http://ixquick.com/]
Lycos	[http://www.lycos.com]
Metacrawler (meta)	[http://www.metacrawler.com/index.html]
Northern Light	[http://www.northernlight.com/]
ProFusion (meta)	[http://www.profusion.com/]
SavvySearch (meta)	[http://www.savvysearch.com/]
Yahoo	[http://www.yahoo.com]

The libraries of the State University of New York's University at Albany list Internet search engines, including individual search engines, meta search engines, and specialty search engines at [http://www.albany.edu/library/internet/engines.html]. Each description is hotlinked to the particular search engine.

The Beaufort Library at the University of South Carolina has a tutorial, Bare Bones 101, which includes basic search tips, search strategies, and evaluating Web pages at [http://www.sc.edu/beaufort/library/bones.html].

Finding Information on the Internet, a tutorial from the University of California, Berkeley at [http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInfo.html], recommends a five-step search strategy.

The Library of Congress presents some Individual Online Guides, Courses, and Tutorials at [http://lcweb.loc.gov/global/internet/training.html#coll].

Nueva, which calls itself "library help" [http://nuevaschool.org/~debbie/library/research/adviceengine.html], tells which hotlinked search engine to use for a particular need. It has a link to NoodleQuest, the "search strategy wizard," where you can leave a message about the details of your search and get an e-mail reply.

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.* Some also have online encyclopedias available for searching.

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

One of the best places to find statistics of every kind about the United States is the *Statistical Abstract,* published each year 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, is located 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 also available online.

Businesses and corporations are listed in *Moody's Industrial Manual, Hoover's Handbook of American Business, Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors, and Executives, Ward's Business Directory of U.S. Private and Public Companies,* and

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 is generally in newspapers and magazines. By using magazine indexes, one can find articles on a 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.* Many libraries provide access to subscription indexes like ProQuest and CARL. There are also magazine articles available on CD-ROM.

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. A number of newspapers have at least current issues available online. One source for finding newspaper, radio, and other media sites on the Web is [http://emedia1.mediainfo.com/emedia/].

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 yearly and lists more than 22,000 groups. It is also available on CD-ROM. Many organizations have World Wide Web pages on the Internet, and often their reports are located 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. Federal agencies all have Web sites as well. Some World Wide Web sites for the federal government are:

- FirstGov [http://firstgov.gov]
  This portal for the U.S. government brings together a vast array of government information in a single site. Users can access information by subject or by agency through links to executive, legislative, and judicial Web sites.

- FedStats [http://www.fedstats.gov]
  FedStats is a gateway to federal government statistics from over 100 U.S. federal agencies. Statistical information can be accessed by agency and by topic.

- GovBot Database of Government Web Sites [http://ciir2.cs.umass.edu/Govbot/]

- Government Printing Office's GPO Access [http://www.gpo.gov/libraries]
  This site links users to about 175,000 individual, full-text government publications at no charge. A "site contents" link gives an alphabetical list of the major publications and databases available at the site.

- Google Search: Unclesam [http://google.com/unclesam]

- HiCitizen [http://www.hicitizen.com/]
  This site has the top government forms that people seek, both federal and state, plus links to other sites.

The *Washington Information Directory*, published yearly, 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 (rarely) to individuals for particular purposes and explains how to apply. It is available on the World Wide Web at this site: [http://www.cfda.gov]. 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."

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 Grant Ujifusa, 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 a yearly *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 (USC). Regulations are first published in the *Federal Register* (FR) and are later codified into the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR). All are available online as well.

- The CFR [http://www.access.gpo.gov:80/nara/cfr/cfr-table-search.html] and [http://www4.law.cornell.edu/cfr/].
- The USC [http://uscode.house.gov/usc.htm].
- The FR [http://www.access.gpo.gov:80/su_docs/aces/aces140.html].

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

State Government.

Most states issue a "blue book" listing officers of the state government, members of the legislature, state boards and commissions, and so on. A source giving brief information for all the states is the annual *Book of the States* by the Council of State Governments. One of its supplements, *Directory III, Administrative Officials,* lists all the state departments of health, labor, public land, and so on. Many state governments have extensive Web sites that include directory, program, and statistical information. Three Web sites that link to the various state sites are:

- State and Local Government on the Net [http://www.piperinfo.com/state/states.html]
- HPI Political Infrastructure [http://hpi.www.com/us50/ index.html]
- 50states.com [http://www.50states.com]

Books and Magazines

One finds out what books and magazines are in a library through its catalog, whether a card catalog or microfiche, online, or other version. Many libraries have access to catalogs of other libraries in their state or region. There is online access to the Library of Congress catalogs at [http://www.loc.gov/catalog/], and there are many other library catalogs on the World Wide Web.

There are many guides to help one find out about books and magazines in general. *Books in Print* (BIP) is a listing of 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. Magazines 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 publications are offered online as well. Online booksellers make it easy to find if titles are currently for sale.