

CRS Report for Congress

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How to Find Information in a Library and on the Internet

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Summary

This guide to finding information in libraries and on the Internet has been prepared for constituents who want to learn more about topics that interest them. It includes background directories, current information, reference books, and websites for government, politics, legislation, and other sources. It lists a number of Internet search engines, which can be used at many public libraries. It also suggests guides on how to search, including one for kids. This report will be updated as necessary.

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 in the time and effort it can spend on these requests. Its first duty is to help Congress meet its legislative responsibilities. To help constituents wishing to find more information, ideas on using local libraries and the Internet are presented in this report.

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.

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, often for a fee, and CD-ROMs and online databases for readers to use themselves. Most provide free access to the Internet for their users.

This guide gives examples of some general reference works that many libraries have. Some works 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 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/her qualifications given are considered more reliable by librarians who judge websites. One guide to evaluating websites with links to a number of other sites is found at [<http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/webeval.html>].

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| AltaVista | [http://www.altavista.com] |
| All the Web | [http://alltheweb.com/] |
| Google | [http://www.google.com] |
| HotBot | [http://www.hotbot.lycos.com] |
| Metacrawler (meta) | [http://www.metacrawler.com/index.html] |
| ProFusion (meta) | [http://www.profusion.com/] |
| Teoma | [http://www.teoma.com] |
| Vivisimo (meta) | [http://vivisimo.com] |
| Yahoo | [http://www.yahoo.com] |

A descriptive list of Internet search engines is hotlinked to each search engine. The State University of New York’s University at Albany libraries produced it. [<http://library.albany.edu/internet/engines.html>]

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

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

NoodleQuest calls itself the “search strategy wizard,” where you can fill out an online form about the details of your search and get an e-mail reply. [<http://www.noodletools.com/noodlequest/>]

PowerReporting, a resource for journalists, presents a tutorial on Web search strategy and syntax that has some helpful tips. [<http://powerreporting.com/altavista.html>]

KidsClick!, “web search for kids by librarians,” uses simple terms and brightly-colored examples to explain how to search the Web, which adults and children can enjoy and profit from. [<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/KidsClick!/>]

AARP’s tutorial for the beginner covers the very basics: Web browsers, menus, toolbars, Web addresses, getting around on Web pages, bookmarks, printing, and help for common problems. It features simple instructions, illustrations, definitions. There is also an intermediate tutorial. [<http://www.aarp.org/learninternet/>]

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*, and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 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, Oscar winners, 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 the free, quarterly *Consumer Information Catalog*, the *World Factbook*, the annual *Budget of the United States Government*, and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, among 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* is useful. For current newsmakers, start with *Current Biography*, *Who’s Who in America*, or *Biography Index* (some are also available online).

Businesses and corporations are listed in *Mergent’s Industrial Manual*, *Hoover’s Handbook of American Business*, *Standard & Poor’s Register ...*, *Ward’s Business Directory of U.S. Private and Public Companies*, and *Thomas Register of American Manufacturers*. Specialized directories list businesses by location or by industry.

The Librarians’ Index to the Internet at [<http://lii.org/>] has links to more than 15,000 sites in categories, which makes finding things easy. These are librarian recommended, and they “focus on gathering and organizing high-quality resources.”

Firstfind.info at [<http://www.firstfind.info/>], designed for new Internet users, provides annotated listings for websites in a variety of areas written in simple English. The “Help” section has tutorials on navigating the Internet and Firstfind.info, and on using PDF files. Created by the Westchester, New York, Library System,.

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. Many libraries provide access to subscription databases like ProQuest, which indexes magazines and newspapers, and 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.

Librarians' Index to the Internet includes radio and other media, at [<http://lii.org/search/>].

Newspapers on Web has more than 4,000 U.S. newspapers, plus international and college campus papers, at [<http://www.newslink.org/news.html>].

OnlineNewspapers.com is "A gateway to 10,000 online newspapers from around the world." See [<http://OnlineNewspapers.com/>].

Organizations

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. Many groups have Web pages and often their reports are located there. A printed and online guide to these organizations is a yearly publication, *Encyclopedia of Associations*, which lists more than 22,000 groups.

Government, Politics, and Legislation

Executive Branch. The federal government is large and complicated, and it 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. All federal agencies have websites as well. Some websites for the federal government are as follows:

CareerOneStop [<http://www.careeronestop.org/aboutus.asp>]

This site aims to help those who want a new job, to hire new employees, or to get ahead in their career by listing jobs, résumés, and career information. From a federal-state partnership.

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.

FirstGov.gov [<http://www.first.gov>]

This U.S. government site rings together a vast array of government information. Users can access information by subject or by agency through links to executive, legislative, and judicial websites. It aims to help citizens, businesses, and U.S. territories.

FirstGov for Kids [http://kids.gov/]

“This site provides links to federal kids’ sites along with some of the best kids’ sites from other organizations, all grouped by subject.”

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

Search U.S. government sites with Google.

GovBenefits [http://www.govbenefits.gov/govbenefits/index.jhtml]

Federal government agencies with benefit programs of all kinds.

GovLoans.gov [govloans.gov]

“GovLoans.gov is your gateway to federal loan information.” Five federal agencies created this single point of access for federal loan information on the Web.

Science.gov [http://www.science.gov]

Subtitled FirstGov for Science, “Science.gov is a gateway to authoritative selected science information” from U.S. government agencies, including research and development results.

The *Washington Information Directory*, published yearly, tells which government agencies, congressional committees, and private groups in Washington, DC, 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 Web at [http://www.cfda.gov].

Legislative Branch. The *Congressional Directory*, which is online at [http://www.gpoaccess.gov/cdirectory/index.html], is the official directory of Congress, with lists of Members and committees, biographical information on Members, statistics, and so on. The most current information is on these websites:

House of Representatives [http://www.house.gov/]

Senate [http://www.senate.gov/]

Congress for Kids [http://www.congressforkids.net/]

Uncle Sam takes kids on a tour of the federal government at this site.

Two privately-published books are also good sources on Members of Congress: *Almanac of American Politics* (Washington, National Journal) by Michael Barone and Richard E. Cohen, and *Politics in America*, published by CQ Press. Both are biennial.

The *Congressional Record* at [http://www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html] is the official record of congressional activity. Another publication that reports on the activities of Congress is Congressional Quarterly’s *CQ Weekly*. The *Weekly* is cumulated into a yearly *Almanac*.

LexisNexis Academic & Library Solutions (formerly 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.

USC [\[http://uscode.house.gov/search/criteria.php\]](http://uscode.house.gov/search/criteria.php)

FR [\[http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html\]](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html)

Regulations.gov [\[http://www.regulations.gov/\]](http://www.regulations.gov/)

This gives the full text of proposed regulations and provides for citizen comment.

CFR [\[http://www.gpoaccess.gov/cfr/index.html\]](http://www.gpoaccess.gov/cfr/index.html) and
[\[http://www4.law.cornell.edu/cfr/\]](http://www4.law.cornell.edu/cfr/)

An extremely useful source for bills and laws is THOMAS [\[http://thomas.loc.gov\]](http://thomas.loc.gov), prepared by the Library of Congress with data from the House and Senate. 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 1989, summaries of legislation since 1973, links to committee websites, and other information.

State Governments. 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 websites that include directory, program, and statistical information. Three sites that link to the various state sites are listed.

State and Local Government on the Net [\[http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm\]](http://www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm)

50states.com [\[http://www.50states.com\]](http://www.50states.com)

GovEngine.com [\[http://www.govengine.com/index.html\]](http://www.govengine.com/index.html)

Books and Magazines

One finds 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. Online access to the Library of Congress catalogs is at [\[http://catalog.loc.gov/\]](http://catalog.loc.gov/), and many other library catalogs are on the Web.

Library Catalog Tutorial at [\[http://libcat.infopeople.org/#\]](http://libcat.infopeople.org/#) provides a tutorial about searching library catalogs, a guide for users of online library catalogs, covering the uses of the catalog, basic search methods, and how to interpret search results to get to the desired items. Created by the Infopeople Project.

There are many guides to help one find out about books 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; *Subject Guide to Books in Print* lists them by subject. Online booksellers make it easy to find if titles are currently for sale.