

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, references 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 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 help those 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, usually for a fee, and CD-ROMs for readers to use themselves. Many provide access to the Internet and the World Wide Web for their users.

This guide gives examples of some general reference works that many libraries have that will help find the needed information. Libraries have many more sources, both general and subject-oriented. 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 qualifications given are considered more reliable by librarians who judge Web sites.

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/bones.html>] and [<http://www.aarp.org/learninternet/>]

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!, a World of Searching, 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, and a discussion forum (free registration required for the forum).

[<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, 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*. Many specialized directories 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. Many libraries provide access to subscription indexes like ProQuest, 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.

[<http://lii.org/search/>]

Newspapers on Web has more than 4,000 U.S. newspapers, plus international and college campus papers.

[<http://www.newslink.org/news.html>]

OnlineNewspapers.com is "A gateway to 10,000 online newspapers from around the world."

[<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 on the Internet, and often their reports are located there. A printed and CD-ROM guide to these organizations is the yearly *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. Federal agencies all have Web sites as well. Some Web sites for the federal government are as follows:

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. It aims to help citizens, businesses, state, local, and tribal government employees, and U.S. territories.

FirstGov for Kids

[<http://kids.gov/>]

"This site was developed and is maintained by the Federal Consumer Information Center. It provides links to federal kids' sites along with some of the best kids' sites from other organizations, all grouped by subject."

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.

GPO Access

[<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/index.html>]

This Government Printing Office 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>]

Search U.S. government sites with Google.

GovBenefits[<http://www.govbenefits.gov/GovBenefits/jsp/GovBenefits.jsp>]

Federal government agencies with benefit programs of all kinds.

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

Created by a federal-state partnership, 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.

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

FirstGov for Science. “Science.gov is a gateway to authoritative selected science information provided by 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, 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 Web at [<http://www.cfda.gov>].

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. The most current information is on these Web sites:

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 sponsored by the Dirksen Congressional Center.

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. All are published every two years.

The *Congressional Record* 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 [\[http://uscode.house.gov/usc.htm\]](http://uscode.house.gov/usc.htm)

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

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>], 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 Web sites, 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 Web sites 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 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. Online access to the Library of Congress catalogs is at [<http://catalog.loc.gov/>], and many other library catalogs are on the Web.

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; its companion, *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, lists them by subject. Online booksellers make it easy to find if titles are currently for sale.

How to Find Information Online. Download Article. Explore this Article. For information on the Arts, check out the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), Art Cyclopedia, or UBUWeb. For information on history, try the Perseus Digital Library, Project Gutenberg, or Digital History. For medical and scientific articles, visit BioMed Central. To find information online, start by typing in few simple search terms using the search engine of your choice. If you need very precise results, put quotations marks around your search terms to get results that contain those exact words or phrases. It's also a good idea to try synonyms and rephrasing your queries to complete a thorough search. Depending on the complexity of your search and how successful it was using previous methods you might want to generate a wordlist. It's useful when you need to try a lot of options as you don't have a clear picture of what username should be but have a lot of guesses. I have used this Python script for generating the wordlist below: Name and surname were specified in Names.txt, in Terminal we just see the output. Username search. Whois provides information about the registered users or assignees of an Internet resource, such as a domain name, an IP address block, or an autonomous system. There are many Whois resources, these are the good ones: whois.icann.org and whois.com. Reverse Whois. Most information is found on the Internet by utilizing search engines. A search engine is a web service that uses web robots to query millions of pages on the Internet and creates an index of those web pages. Internet users can then use these services to find information on the Internet. Search engines are especially helpful when you don't know the URL of a website, but need to find it. When searching for information on the Internet, keep the tips below in mind to improve your searches. Surround searches in quotes. If you are searching for a specific phrase, such as computer help, place quotes around the phrase to get results for that exact combination of words. For example, type "computer help" as your search criteria to match pages where those two words appear together. How to Find Information. No matter how you do your background research, record your sources and take good notes as you go. Your teacher may be able to offer you some tips. Library Research. One of the most valuable resources at the library is not a book, but a person. If you want some advanced tips on using the Internet to find information, the Evaluating Resources guide from the Library at the University of California, Berkeley is an excellent resource. Before you begin Internet research, review internet safety with your parents. Email addresses, user account names, and screen names should never include your name, birthday, name of your school, or any combination of personally identifiable information. Don't assume your posts are private.