You may already be familiar with certain kinds of reference books, such as encyclopedias and dictionaries. While the Library does have many of these, it also has hundreds of specialized subject and topical encyclopedias (e.g., The Encyclopedia of Capital Punishment) as well as comprehensive collections of entries on a given topic (e.g., Hate Crimes, a 4 volume set that provides analyses of every aspect of the topic). The entries in these reference sets are written by experts in their fields and so are often a good place to begin your research.

Many of our reference sources are available in both print and electronic form.

Library home page:  http://academics.tctc.edu/lynx

Catalog Searching for Reference Books (print & electronic)

Because large reference books cover information that could be described by several thousand detailed Library of Congress subject headings or by one general subject heading, more often the general subject heading is used. For example, The Encyclopedia of Crime & Justice has an excellent entry on Capital Punishment but does not appear in a catalog search for that subject. Instead, the title has the more general subject headings of Criminology – Encyclopedia and Criminal Justice, Administration of – Encyclopedias. For this reason, your best catalog searches for reference books will use a broad, general term rather than a specific, narrow one. You may also add a word such as “encyclopedias” to your search, but this could have the unintended side effect of failing to find those reference books, described above, that are not technically encyclopedias. For more on catalog searching, see the hand-out titled ‘Library Books—Print & Online’

Using Online Reference Sources

For this reason, it might be more effective to search the online reference sources. From the library home page  http://academics.tctc.edu/lynx  scroll down until you see the Electronic Reference Sources area as shown on the left. The links indicate which publisher provides the sources. Many students find that the “Gale Virtual Reference Library” is the most helpful group of titles.

Click here to access

The search engine for the Virtual Reference Library is quite easy to use. You may change the type of search from the default of “keyword” to several different other types. This is fully explained on the next page.

You have access to the full text of hundreds of authoritative reference books online, in these subject areas. Also, you do NOT need to specify a reference book title or even the subject area you wish to search; just enter your search terms.

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Search Strategies for Reference Sources

The second type of search is a **Keyword** search. It searches significant areas of information (known as fields), such as titles, authors, subjects, and so on. Since it searches a broad range of key fields at once, it is often the default type of search.

A subject **Search** looks for the term in only the subject field. If you know the Library of Congress subject term for your topic, this is a good choice. Notice how the number of books found in each search is getting smaller – our search strategy is becoming more specific.

Usually the most specific search is a **Title** search. This means that reference book articles contain your search term in the title and it is likely to be the main focus of the article.

By changing only the type of search we do for a term we have drastically reduced the number of reference sources we have to contend with. For a topic such as **Capital Punishment**, that is a good thing. However, if your topic is quite narrow and you are having the opposite problem, that of not finding enough sources, you can choose to broaden your search by going from a **Title** search to a **Subject** search through **Keyword** and **Entire Document** searches.

Accessing the Articles

You may read and print this encyclopedia article either as a full-text file, or in the .pdf format. Both contain all of the information that is found in the print version on the library shelf.