

Reference resources find their place among open access and Google, study finds

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Table 1 What Is a Reference Resource, and Which Are the Most Useful?

Type	Is Reference (n = 474)	Considered a most useful reference sources for patrons (n = 474)
Abstracting & indexing resources	78%	42%
Almanacs	84%	9%
Bibliographies	71%	15%
Chronologies	64%	8%
Article databases	56%	75%
Video databases	44%	22%
Image databases	47%	27%
Statistical databases	63%	51%
Directories	88%	38%
Encyclopedias	89%	21%
Glossaries	73%	38%
Handbooks	66%	8%
Major works	26%	34%
Primary-source archives	42%	19%

What is a reference resource and which are the most useful? Credit: SAGE

How do open access sources, tightened budgets, and competition from popular technologies affect how librarians perceive and employ reference resources? How do librarians expect to utilize reference in the future? "The State of Reference Collections," a new SAGE white paper out today, finds that though the definition of reference is changing, this

is in part because reference resources now look and feel like other information sources and because other information resources perform the traditional purpose of reference – answering research questions.

"The future of reference is far from grim despite competition from Google, Wikipedia, and other resources and despite budgetary constraints, because patrons are overwhelmed by the abundance of information," the study author said. "Today, [librarians](#) point patrons to reference resources without ever referring to them as 'reference.' This includes article, statistical, and video databases. Librarians see utility in any resource that helps patrons find an answer to their research question."

Elisabeth Leonard, Executive Market Research Manager at SAGE and Former Reference Librarian, conducted the study using a combination of a survey of 482 librarians, several focus groups, and interviews. Her findings include the following:

- 75% of librarians consider article databases to be the most useful reference source.
- After article databases, the reference sources seen as most useful are statistical databases (51% of librarians found them most useful), and abstracting and indexing resources (42%).
- For most of the respondents, use of free resources is as prevalent as use of fee-based resources.
- Librarians reported either a preference for online reference (68% of academic librarians and 50% of special librarians) or no preference for reference format (60% of public librarians and 31% of special librarians).
- Of all the items reference librarians want publishers to provide, discovery services were the most desired. Leonard examined both how changes in library budgets impact how reference is defined and how the changing definition of reference impacts its

funding.

"Classifying a resource as reference may then seem like an artificial exercise, especially for those librarians for whom traditional reference sources are now part of the circulating collection or are purchased with funds from the nonreference budget," Leonard continued. "Although not all librarians believe that using traditional reference resources is necessary, for those who do, using reference resources is a passionate cause."

Table 2 Top Five Most Useful Reference Resources, by Library Type

Academic (n = 192)	Public (n = 20)	Special (n = 117)
1. Article databases	1. Article databases	1. Article databases
2. Statistical databases	2. Encyclopedias	2. Statistical databases
3. Encyclopedias	3. Dictionaries	3. Abstracting & indexing resources
4. Abstracting & indexing resources	4. Primary-source archives	4. Handbooks
5. Dictionaries	5. Statistical databases and Abstracting & indexing resources (tie)	5. Major works, primary-source archives

This image shows the Top 5 most useful reference resources by library type. Credit: SAGE

This new study is part of a series of white papers undertaken by SAGE for the benefit of the higher education and research communities.

"SAGE is dedicated to navigating the evolution of research alongside instructors and librarians," wrote Stephen Barr, President of SAGE international. "We hope that this new study will serve as a helpful resource for all information professionals serving the changing needs of students and researchers."

Provided by SAGE Publications

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