

UNIT 4: HIERARCHIES OF READING: THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA IN RESEARCH

What is an Encyclopaedia?

Based on a medieval notion of presenting an encompassing view of knowledge, and further refined in the eighteenth century as a 'repository of all known facts', the modern encyclopaedia emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as a work which was an overview of current information on any particular topic, using a retrieval system. The simplest retrieval system is an alphabetical list of topics. In most works this is reinforced by a cross-referencing system – how well and how completely this is done is a key measure of the quality of an encyclopaedia. Since many modern encyclopaedias also exist in electronic format, information retrieval is often based on using a built-in search-engine to look for words or phrases; while in many encyclopaedias there are indices of words or topics which back-up the cross-reference system. In many encyclopaedias there are also study guides where articles are listed in such a way as to provide the newcomer to an area with a collection of distinct entries which can, taken together, provide an introductory course on a topic. In actual research, you will often be building just such a study guide of your own.

Encyclopaedias may be of different kinds. The following offers one method of categorising them:

- General single-volume works
- General multi-volume works (e.g. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*)
- Single-volume subject specific works (e.g. any of the volumes in the *Oxford Dictionary of ...* or *Oxford Companion to ...* series)
- Multi-volume subject specific works (e.g. Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*)

As a general rule each category above contains material of greater detail, depth and complexity (in the sense of assuming prior knowledge) than that preceding it. As a rule of thumb, works in the first category are of little value in academic research except for ascertaining 'the popular conception' of a topic.

Shapes and Forms

Subject specific encyclopaedias appear under a variety of names in addition to *The Encyclopaedia of ...*. Here are some of them:

- *Dictionary of ...*
- *Companion to ...*
- *Lexicon to*
- *Key to ...*

Do not forget that *atlases* are often encyclopaedias presented through the medium of maps.

As a general rule the title 'encyclopaedia' is reserved for the most detailed level of research reference works, yet there are many exceptions. For example, in the area of the study of the Christian scriptures the most detailed encyclopaedic work at present is the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York 1992) – and this is a tradition going back to James Hastings' 5 volume *Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh 1898-1904).

In recent years a large number of encyclopaedias have appeared in electronic form, while others have appeared in paper and electronic form, and there has been a great increase in the number of reference works since technology is reducing the costs of organising and publishing these works.

Online Resources

There are numerous on-line reference works which you will find useful in your studies. Make sure you attend the 'Introduction to Library Resources' run by members of the library staff at the Faculty of Humanities Postgraduate Residential Week in July in order to access such information. If you cannot attend the residential week you can obtain a very useful information pack about library resources available to postgraduate students from Galen Jones in the library (g.jones@uwtsd.ac.uk). Sites on the Internet such as Wikipedia and sites run by individuals come with an academic health warning! Whilst some are well written and argued, many lack the essential peer-review process which checks for the accuracy and credibility of the information contained in these sites.

Why Use Encyclopaedias in Research?

As a general rule make encyclopaedias your first port of call. The reasons are as follow:

- They distil a vast body of secondary literature into a small space so that you can begin to engage with the subject in ways that enable you to see the wood rather than a mass of trees.
- They usually present the state of play at the time of writing, and explain the shifts in intellectual paradigms that may have taken place previously.
- They will often show the varieties of opinion on a topic and so set specific books or articles within a larger context of academic debate.
- They are time-efficient.

What Encyclopaedias are Available?

In recent decades there has been an explosion in the production of reference works and this shows no signs of diminishing. Therefore, the best way to find out systematically what is available is to spend time looking on the shelves of the reference section of libraries. Remember to search the reference section thoroughly since publications which you think relate to one area, may be viewed by a librarian as belonging

elsewhere.

Eg, where would you locate this work?

K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst eds, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd revised edition; Brill, Leiden / Eerdmans, Cambridge 1999).

Some libraries place it under 'Theology' or 'Religion' or more precisely under 'Scripture'; but it has been found also under 'Folklore,' 'Classics,' and 'Literature: General.'

There is no substitute for scrutinising closely the items on library shelves, and every researcher is continually discovering new resources and adding to their list of available tools.

Using Encyclopaedias

The rule of thumb is to move, first, from general encyclopaedias to more specific works; and second, from survey (usually one volume) works to more detailed works.

Think of it in terms of trying to locate, on a map, a town in a foreign and unfamiliar country. You might start with a world map to get your bearing, then you would in all likelihood ignore the other countries of the world and focus only on the country of interest. You would then zoom in on the region where the town is located, and you would eventually get down to a road atlas that shows you how to get about the town. When you have reached the street map level, you are, by analogy, no longer using encyclopaedic works, but the equivalent of textbooks and specialised studies.

Some Words of Caution

Perspective

While in most cases contributors to an encyclopaedia are asked to give an overview of the subject rather than advance one scholarly position, there is still always a question of perspective. Familiarity with an encyclopaedia through repeated use will usually give one a 'feel' for its perspective. Therefore, one should always try to use as many encyclopaedias as one has available in any one search.

One Built on Another

When you have tracked an entry through several encyclopaedias, you may notice that there is a very bad habit of one building upon another so that the same examples can be traced in a tradition spreading over decades. When you find this happening, find the earliest and ask why has no one challenged this version.

Secondary Literature Already Dated

While encyclopaedias attempt to be up-to-date at the time they appear, the production

process is such that even a new encyclopaedia is frequently dated in its references to secondary works by one to two years. While this is usually not a problem except to the specialist – who has, by definition, already moved beyond the stage of encyclopaedias in the area – it is a factor to be borne in mind.

Using Older Encyclopaedias has a Value

Since encyclopaedias aim to give the state of play at the time of their publication, consulting older works and comparing these with later ones can often be the easiest way to build up a history of scholarship, to see how your field has developed, and how the pressures and fashions of a period have affected scholarship.

Accessing Encyclopaedias

While many can afford some basic reference works for their own shelves or a CD for their own computer, there are works which, in general, only libraries can afford, and which they assume to be permanently available and so place them in 'reference sections.' This means that they cannot be borrowed.

Therefore, when you are physically in a library, using these works is a most efficient way to use your time. Moreover, since by their nature these works are short introductions, syntheses, or synopses, they are items that are easy and economical to photocopy and worth retaining in your file of photocopies. So even greater time-efficiency can be achieved by using your time in a library to identify those entries in reference works relevant to your task, and then copying those entries for study later.

Many reference works now exist on the Internet or can be accessed via the Internet from this University's Library. If you have not already received the publication *A Guide to Library and Internet Resources* you should request one from the librarian. It contains useful materials on using the library and the Internet.