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A Showcase of Specialty Reference Books: Orders of Battles, Graphic Indexes, and Other Lesser-Known Types of Works

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The Internet has become an all-purpose reference tool these days, but, as those of us in reference and collection development know, reference books offer information with a depth and accuracy that is often missing on the free Web. Everyone is familiar with common reference books like encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs, atlases, and handbooks. But have you ever heard of an ordnance, armory, or formulary? Do you have any books with graphic indexes at your library? Have you ever run across an order of battle while sauntering through the reference stacks? Here’s one that has perplexed me for a while — how is a cyclopedia different from an encyclopaedia? And, I know what a chronology is and I know what a bibliography is — but what’s a chronological bibliography? Knowing the terms for these specialty types of reference books can help us decide what reference books to use for patrons’ questions, or whether a potential purchase fits into our collecting policy. You probably already have several of these types of books in your reference collection, and you might hear about others in this article that would make good additions. Several of them are subtypes of the standard types of reference works, and others are wholly unique. Many are available as print as well as eBook formats. Let’s look more closely at some of the lesser-known members of the reference world!

Specialty Types of Reference Books

Order of Battle — provides summative, standardized entries for all the military units (divisions, regiments, battalions, etc.) in a particular war. Orders of battle have a very different design than military history encyclopedias: the orders of battle are set up according to military hierarchy instead of alphabetical topics. To take one example, Order of Battle, U.S. Army, World War II shows everywhere each unit was stationed throughout the global conflict, every campaign that each unit fought in, and, in many cases, insignias, photographs, and narratives. In addition to use by military historians, veterans refer to orders of battle to document their unit’s participation in a particular battle. Genealogists can peruse an order of battle to find out where a grandparent was stationed. Most major wars now have an order of battle; type in “order of battle” and the name of the war in your OPAC or WorldCat to find them.

Gazetteer — gives locations and often descriptive information about towns, ponds, hills, and other geographic features. Gazetteers are different from atlases in that they don’t include maps but rather tell you where the place is, sometimes using geographic coordinates. I know what you’re thinking: MapQuest and Google Earth can find places for you in a flash. Specialized gazetteers, however, can prove quite valuable to researchers by bringing together contextual information that Internet search tools usually don’t. For instance, The Literary Gazetteer of England gives you not only the location but also the significance of various places associated with over 500 English authors. You can find out what famous writers came from, or lived in, a specific town. It also tells of references to the places in literary works even if the author did not reveal the name of the town or feature. For example, read about the downs that Tennyson immortalized in his lyrics, or find out which buildings in Bedford likely inspired the various destinations in Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress.

Book of days — lists the major events that happened on each day of the year. Sometimes, books that fit into this genre are called by other terms, so you may have to experiment with various keywords to find them. Sure, Internet search tools can help us find out what happened on a given day as well. Once again, however, the reference book can provide much more specialized, substantial information. For example, there are books of days for the literary world and Minnesota history that focus on memorable events in those areas. Books of days come in handy for organizing weekly exhibits or programs, answering questions for those “what happened on your birthday” papers often encountered in public and high school libraries, or helping scholars...
display contextual facts such as what authors were born on the same day.1

**Caldronal convertor** — “Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492” — on the calendar that Europeans used, that is. But when did he sail the ocean blue on the Aztec, Chinese, or Zulu calendars? I use the term calendric convertor to refer to those books that can help with this type of question because they translate dates from one calendar to another. Some are chock-full of algorithms that can perform the conversions. Others offer tables that correlate the dates on the Western calendar with the dates on the other calendars. Hard core history enthusiasts and archaeologists make the most of these sophisticated, semi-mathematical tools.5

**Graphic index** — You are sitting at your reference desk when an archaeologist approaches with a piece of pottery that has a mysterious symbol on the side. She asks you what the marking means. But, how do you look up a symbol when you don’t even know what it’s called? You’ll need a graphic index, sometimes known as a pictographic dictionary. These tools allow you to find information using pictures rather than the traditional linguistic way. You might try Carl G. Liungman’s Dictionary of Symbols which offers a graphic index in the back that groups symbols by common features such as crosses, circles, and other shapes. You can glance through these groups until you find the symbol, and you’ll get a citation number that will refer you to a section with the meaning. There are several other types of graphic indexes. Coin collectors use photographic indexes of coins a lot. Another example is the Oxford Visual Dictionary which offers diagrams of many things in everyday life. It can help answer those questions like “A part on my bicycle is broken — it’s the thingamajig between the circle-part and the whatchamacallit-pole. What do you call that thing?” Turn to the diagram on bicycles and direct the patron to point to the part in question. You’ll also find diagrams of hair dryers, calendars, and not available online.

**Discography** — provides standardized entries of musical recordings with label information and production details that allow for precise identification. According to Oxford Music Online, a discography is not the same as a conventional catalog, which supplies only basic description. A discography goes beyond this information to establish all the facts that distinguish one recording from another or identify a recording issued in more than one format, and may also distinguish multiple recordings of a work by the same performer.6 For this reason, a discography usually includes the album’s label name, master number, format, songs, performers, and reissues. This meticulously-crafted type of reference book arose in part to help sort through the massive tidal wave of jazz album production in the twentieth century, as many of the albums were produced with slightly different labels by various studios. One musical scholar notes that “discography” was coined for a “new reference book, unlike any ever published — a book that tried to give standardized information about each record that might interest a serious jazz collector.”7 Some discographies may encompass a genre such as The Essential Rock Discography,8 a book organized by alphabetical order of the band name and offering profiles as well as album lists. Others focus on one musician, and may have separate chapters for releases, sessions, and Billboard chart listings. In another example, All of Me: The Complete Discography of Louis Armstrong, the compilers arrange the recordings chronologically and include a tune index at the back. Other discographies are listed by record label.9 All in all, the discography is another reference tool with a unique history — and a great value for today’s librarian.

**Filmography** — You guessed it — it’s a cousin of the discography, except it focuses on movies rather than music. It may concentrate on a particular director, actor, time period, or theme.

**Cyclopedia** — Another word for encyclopaedia! The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes that cyclopedia comes from the Greek words for “circle” and “learning.” When European encyclopedists of the early modern period tried to translate the ancient Greek word for encyclopaedia they incorrectly left off the en- prefix at first. Eventually, they discovered the error. Accordingly, a Dutch scholar of the time, Vossius, observed that among the authors of his day “encyclopaedia was used by some authors, but encyclopaedia by the best”.10 Encyclopedia eventually came to be the more commonly used term, but some authors still prefer the slightly erroneous title of cyclopaedia.11 However, the content of a cyclopedia is usually just as accurate.

**Lexicon** (or lexiicon) — the original, and a still used, meaning is a dictionary of Hebrew, Greek, Syrian, or Arabic. However, the term has also broadened its meaning over time. Lexicon is now applied to any dictionary for a specific field or subject area, similar to a glossary. Business people may use lexicons like The Digital Lexicon: Networked Business and Technology A-Z, and political scientists can consult Coming to Terms with Security: A Lexicon for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Confidence-Building.12

**Fieldbook (or fieldguide)** — originally a booklet that a surveyor used to jot down measurements, or an album that a botanist used to collect specimens. Today in the sciences, fieldbooks are usually reference books with descriptions and illustrations that help readers identify and evaluate particular subjects (such as insects, birds, rocks, etc.) that might be hard to distinguish against other closely-related members of the same type. Some fieldbooks also have “identification keys” that categorize subjects. Students of botany will find the Field Guide to Wildflowers to be helpful before and after heading out to a foray in the forest. In addition to fieldbooks for animals and plants, there is even a Field Guide to Bacteria. However, in addition to its use in the sciences, fieldbook sometimes means any type of book that practitioners from any of the professions use while out in their fields, sort of like a manual. For example, teachers may consult fieldbooks that tell them how to implement various techniques in the classroom. Another interesting example is the Field Guide to the American Teenager (this one is for parents, of course).13

**Formulary** — lists the formulas and standards for making chemicals and drugs. A formulary for medicines is called a pharmacopeia. Accordingly, The United States Pharmacopeia is an authoritative reference book for the medical field. Sometimes “formulary” applies to the continued on page 50
food industry standards; my favorite is The Formulary of Candy Products.\textsuperscript{16}

Catalog of Incunabula — I have passed by the reference shelves a few times and noticed catalogs, bibliographies, or checklists of incunabula. These works list incunabula, books or pamphlets printed before 1500 (although it sometimes refers to any books that are the first in their genre). Incunabula comes from the Latin words “cradle” and “birthplace.”\textsuperscript{71} (OK, I admit that incunabula itself is not a type of reference book, but I’ve noticed it often occurs in reference book titles, especially in archives and academic libraries, so I thought I would mention it!)

All the Kinds of Bibliographies — True, WorldCat and other tools can generate a bibliography on a topic in seconds; however, human-created, print bibliographies can still help committed library sleuths find and evaluate materials in ways that online tools may not. Here are some specialty bibliographies:

• An analytical bibliography may evaluate the content, but it also describes the physical aspects of books, including such things as the covers, bindings, paper, illustrations, etc. Many include photographs of the books. Subtypes include descriptive, textual, and historical bibliographies. Descriptive indicates that the listing provides in-depth information about the book’s physical characteristics. Textual means the bibliographers compare the original manuscript of the book to its subsequent printings with a keen eye towards any discrepancies. Historical means that the bibliography discusses the history of the technology and people producing the books in addition to the book itself (albeit sometimes historians simply mean that the bibliography covers a historical topic). Grab an analytical bibliography if you are helping historians, literary experts, book arts scholars, book collectors, or patrons who’ve found mysterious tomes in their attics.

• Enumerative means the bibliography doesn’t usually include a lot of annotation — but it can give you a fairly comprehensive listing.

• Use a chronological bibliography to see the order that an author published their works, or the publication order of books about a subject. These are great for tracing the history of an idea. Consult British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography to view year-by-year the titles published on this topic, and thus see how the vision of a perfect society changed over time.

• An exegetical bibliography lists works that interpret the Bible, and is usually arranged for the order of the Scripture verses.

• And, finally, a biobibliography lists the works both by as well as about a figure. The subtitles of these works sometimes describe their contents as “a primary and secondary bibliography” of a person.\textsuperscript{13}

Conclusion

Specialty reference books instill value in our collections. Some of them are nuances or imitations of standard works, and they should merit a place in our collections along with the more commonly-titled ones. Others give us vistas for searching that standard reference books do not. Collectors or bookworms like me are fascinated by this. Internet search engines can do some of these things sometimes describe their contents as “primary and secondary bibliography” of a person.

Endnotes