A Research Guide for

Biography

A research guide is an introduction to researching a topic. It lists the best introductory sources to help you start your research, but it is not a comprehensive bibliography of the topic. Please ask a reference worker for further help.

Scope

Every field of human knowledge involves biography. Whether you are studying history, business, law, medicine, science, or religion, you will probably want to know about someone’s life. The sources listed on this guide will provide you with biographical sketches or essay-length biographies. For book-length biographies, check the library catalog.

The best place to begin with finding a biography is the library’s subscription databases. The Biography Resource Center is the easiest place to begin your search for a broad range of important people, living and dead. American National Biography Online and Oxford Dictionary of National Biography Online are useful and convenient versions of authoritative print sources.

If you can’t find someone’s biography online or if you need more information, don’t neglect the library’s print collection. If you know nothing about a person, begin with Biography and Genealogy Master Index or Biography Index. Those indexes will guide you to sources with biographical sketches about your subject. If you already know something about the person, such as his nationality or occupation, you can begin with a specialized book. For example, if you wanted to know about a U.S. president, you could check American National Biography; if you wanted to know about the author of a book, you might check Contemporary Authors. The specialized works listed below are just a small fraction of the biographical sources available in the Mack Library. Check the library catalog for others, or ask a library worker for a recommendation.

Electronic Resources

Electronic resources are subscription databases available from a link on the library’s website.

Gives biographical information on more than one million people throughout history, around the world, and across all disciplines. Combines 250,000 biographies from Gale Group sources with nearly one million biographies from The Complete Marquis Who’s Who.


The American National Biography Online is the premiere biographical resource on over 18,000 people from all eras who have influenced and shaped American history and culture. It offers sophisticated search capabilities, lively and detailed articles, internal cross-references, up-to-date bibliographies, thousands of photographs and illustrations, and links to external web resources. Also included, over nine hundred articles from The Oxford Companion to United States History edited by Paul S. Boyer, which provide information on the landmark events in our nation’s history and give context to the lives included in ANB Online.

Gale Virtual Reference Library. Gale.
http://find.galegroup.com/gvrl/start.do?prodId=GVRL&userGroupName=bju_main
Gale Virtual Reference Library is a database of encyclopedias and specialized reference sources for multidisciplinary research. It includes sources such as Business Leader Profiles for Students, Contemporary Novelists, Contemporary Poets,
International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers, among others with biographical information.


Literature Resource Center (LRC) provides online access to Contemporary Authors, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Contemporary Literary Criticism, Twayne’s Authors Series, Scribner Writers Series and more.


The Oxford DNB is a collection of over fifty thousand specially written biographies, which describe the lives of people who shaped the history of the British Isles and beyond.


View a biography of an author’s life and works; design your own search, using words or phrases, or customize a search by genre, gender, ethnicity/nationality, time period, and language; view topics with a highly selective, curriculum-related list of writers to use as research starting points.

Reference Works
Reference works include encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, and almanacs. They are available in the reference section.

Indexes

R. REF 016.92 B5107  Biography and Genealogy Master Index. Detroit, MI: Gale, 1975–.

This is the most comprehensive biography index available; it indexes many biographical encyclopedias and periodicals. You will have to check multiple volumes of BGMI to make certain that you have searched every edition of the works indexed. Be sure to look for a person by any variations in name, since BGMI makes no effort to cumulate name variants or to provide cross references.


This index covers biographical material, such as interviews, obituaries, letters, diaries, memoirs, bibliographies, and biographies, that are contained in periodicals and books. Check the volume for each year to find all the sources about a person.

World


For world historical figures not contained in more specific works, this encyclopedia offers brief biographical essays, with bibliographies.
American


*ANB* is the most authoritative source for biographies of important Americans. It covers from the colonial America to very near the present, but all its subjects are deceased. It is more selective than some sources (it has been called “who’s really who”), but it provides detailed, lengthy essays written by leading scholars. Each entry lists the primary and best secondary sources available for the life of the subject. The supplementary volumes contain an index by occupation. Also available online.


*DAB* is the predecessor of *ANB*. It has not been completely superseded, however. *DAB* covers some people not included in *ANB*, and because its entries were written by different authors, it often provides different perspectives.


This work is not as authoritative as *ANB* or *DAB*, but it contains many biographies of more obscure figures. The *Cyclopedia* published biographies of people who were still living and grouped them according to their importance, so the volumes are not alphabetical. Use the index to find subjects.


This edition of *Who’s Who* offers biographical data about and contact information for important living Americans. See also regional and topic *Who’s Who* (e.g., *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest* and *Who’s Who in American Art*). All those publications are searchable through the Biography Resource Center.

British


*DNB* is the most authoritative, and perhaps most comprehensive, source for biographies of important Britons. It covers from the earliest times to AD 2000, but all its subjects are deceased. It provides detailed, lengthy essays written by leading scholars. Each entry lists the best secondary sources available for the life of the subject. An earlier edition written by different authors is available in dead reference; see a librarian to consult it. Also available online.

Specialized


Though this work covers more than biographies, it includes biographical information for many musicians and composers. Also available as Oxford Music Online.

A complement to *American National Biography, AANB* is the most authoritative and comprehensive source for biographies of African Americans.


The broadest reference work available for biographies of women, from ancient times to the present. The articles, which can be quite lengthy, include biographical précis and lists of selected works. Besides biographies of individuals, the encyclopedia also includes collective biographies of groups of women, for example, astronauts. The first volume contains genealogical charts, organized by nation or empire, and a helpful user’s guide. The last volume contains indexes by era, geography, occupation, and name.

REF 928 C767 *Contemporary Authors.* Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1962–.

Though its organization can be confusing, *Contemporary Authors* is valuable for finding biographical information about virtually any published author. *CA* includes also included are lists of works and other critical/biographical sources. *CA* can be searched in the Biography Resource Center, an online database, but for any given person the print version may contain older articles not available online.

---

**Call Numbers and Subject Headings**

*Call numbers* are places to check in the library. Go to that location, and browse the shelves for books on that topic. *Subject headings* are suggested terms to use when searching the library catalog. Search for them by “subject,” not by “keyword.”

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Call Number</th>
<th>Subject Headings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>920 – Biography/genealogy</td>
<td>925 – Scientists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>921 – Philosophers and psychologists</td>
<td>926 – Persons in technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>922 – Religious leaders, thinkers, workers</td>
<td>927 – Persons in the arts and recreation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>923 – Persons in social sciences</td>
<td>928 – Persons in literature, history, biography, genealogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>924 – Philologists and lexicographers</td>
<td>929 – Genealogy, names, insignia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Periodicals**

Periodicals are published regularly, and they are usually indexed. They can be found in the periodicals room on first floor.

*Christian History & Biography.* Christianity Today.

Brief historical and biographical essays, intended for a popular audience.

REF 920.01 C936 *Current Biography.* New York: H. W. Wilson, 1940–.
Current Biography publishes biographies of “living persons in all fields of human accomplishment.” Issues appear monthly and are cumulated yearly. Check index for years through 2005; check individual volume indexes for later years.

Other Resources at the Mack Library

Biographies  Second floor

All biographies in the Mack Library are shelved in the biography section on the second floor. Search the catalog for the person, or browse the biographies alphabetically.

Websites

Websites are recommended sources available free online.


Sponsored by A&E Television, the website has a strong leaning towards celebrity biographies. The content is an online version of the Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia, with updates from Biography Magazine.

http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp

An online version of a print source by the same name. You can search for biographical information of all members of Congress, including the Continental Congresses and Congress during the Articles of Confederation, by name, position, state, party, year, and Congress number.


Lists websites that offer biographies.