

Geoscience Encyclopedias and Their Potential for Classroom Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Encyclopedias, especially those focusing on a single subject or narrow range of topics, are important but underused library resources. Encyclopedic consultation is often viewed as an academic weakness. It can, however, be viewed as an academic strength and effectively incorporated into instructional programs. Since this article is written from a librarian's perspective, it is not suggestive of specific instructional techniques. Instead, it addresses the difficulties that can arise in identifying titles appropriate for instructional purposes. Using a combination of methods, a list was derived of approximately 250 geoscience related encyclopedias that are available in North American libraries.

Keywords: Geoscience – Literature and Libraries;
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INTRODUCTION

Encyclopedias comprise a major genre of printed and electronic reference material available in most libraries. The range and depth of subject content, and clarity of the writing style offered in major encyclopedias often impress librarians. Even so, encyclopedias are often underused, especially for instruction purposes. Patrons rarely ask for them by title and few instructors assign or even encourage their use by students. Many instructors discourage or even prohibit their use. However as the introduction to a comparative guide to encyclopedias notes, "Not everyone agrees with this reasoning ... Mindlessly insisting that students not use encyclopedias in the course of their school work is, frankly, a strange approach to education. It suggests a weak and rigid teacher who lacks understanding of the spirit of learning." (Kister, 1994, p.10).

One of the reasons for this under use appears to be a common misconception by both students and instructors that encyclopedias are by definition general and simplistic. All too often, encyclopedic consultation is viewed as an academic weakness. Another reason is that most students and instructors are unaware of the existence of subject specialty encyclopedias that focus on a single subject field or even a few topics within a given field. Usually these sources are prepared for a sophisticated and specialized audience.

One of the purposes of this article is to suggest that the consultation of encyclopedias, especially the subject specialty titles, is often an academic strength not a weakness that can be encouraged by their inclusion in instructional programs. Since this article is written from a librarian's perspective, it is not suggestive of specific instructional techniques. One of the major functions of the library field is to create meaningful order of the literature of various subjects and to suggest meaningful patterns for the use of this material. Therefore a second purpose of this article is to provide a list of recently published geoscience related encyclopedias that are

available in libraries throughout North America. The author infers that significant instructional potential for the secondary and undergraduate levels exists in these sources. It is up to the instructors to realize this potential by including these sources in their curricula.

It is relevant to note that this article is an outgrowth of the author's experience in teaching a one-credit university level course in library resources and research methods. The session on encyclopedias proved to be the most popular. Students would sometimes turn in assignment sheets with complementary comments scribbled in the margins. One particularly useful set of questions asked them to browse the library shelves and identify 9 different encyclopedias, 3 each in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences.

SCOPE OF ENCYCLOPEDIAS

The term "encyclopedia" has been used since the 17th century to designate publications summarizing large segments of knowledge. (Cheney, 1972, p. 45). Quite logically, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has one of the clearest descriptions of modern encyclopedias. It says:

An encyclopaedia is a self-contained reference work with two main aims: to include up-to-date knowledge about a particular discipline or group of disciplines and to make this knowledge conveniently accessible. An encyclopaedia differs from a dictionary in that it can explain subjects in detail, rather than merely supplying definitions of words and phrases. It differs from an almanac in that the information contained in the latter is dated. It differs from pedagogical texts in its attempt to be easy to consult and be readily understood by the layperson.

To ensure comprehensiveness and depth of coverage, an encyclopaedia is generally written in the form of many separate articles, often by experts in the field. These articles include background and historical information as well as current material, which consists of varying combinations of text, tables, charts, illustrations, and, in the case of electronic encyclopaedias, audio and video recordings. Some encyclopaedias also offer study and learning guides, as well as yearly supplements that provide updates of various kinds. (New Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2002, p. 487).

Individual articles often contain bibliographies specifically designed to lead the reader to additional key material. The articles are edited forming a coherent work with a consistent style suitable for a particular audience.

Of particular interest to secondary and post-secondary educators, are the subject oriented encyclopedias that provide comprehensive summaries in broad categories such as science and technology, traditional academic subjects such as chemistry, topics

such as sedimentation, or cross-disciplinary studies such as earth systems science. These may be single or multi-volume. A leading authority on library reference material estimates there are 1,000 English language subject encyclopedias (Katz, 1997, p. 239). This seems unusually conservative by other accounts. More importantly, both the quantity and quality of the subject encyclopedias exceeds that of the general encyclopedias. (Kister, 1994).

INSTRUCTIONAL POTENTIAL OF ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Scientific fields rely heavily on journals and conference proceedings. This material is compressed into secondary handbooks, treatises, textbooks and encyclopedias. This compression or compaction of primary literature is more extensive and sophisticated in the sciences than the social sciences or humanities. The ability to use this compression process often affects the results and satisfaction in scientific literature searching.

The synthesis of concepts and ideas is often expressed most clearly in secondary or tertiary literature. The subject encyclopedias represent some of the best and most accessible intermediate steps between textbooks and technical journals. Encyclopedias are of course no substitute for primary or even secondary literature. They can however, make that literature more comprehensible.

Pragmatically, the subject encyclopedias can be used to clarify and extend textbook explanations. They are one of the best ways of quickly assessing the potential range of topics within a broad subject. They can be used to select term paper topics. They are good sources for the introductory material in these papers. Finally, they are a source for bibliographies of additional material on those topics. Many encyclopedias make a point of mentioning classic or highly influential references. Instructors can also use encyclopedias to organize curricula, prepare lecture notes or assign topics.

Surprisingly, there are few articles in either the educational or geoscience literature on the instructional use of encyclopedias above the middle school level. One of the best, (Safford, 1994) advocates teaching effective encyclopedia use by focusing on the content and value appropriate to a given level rather than the mechanics of consulting indexes.

Rather than being encouraged to copy large chunks of information from encyclopedias, students can be taught to record key words, phrases, events, names, and citations that can later be incorporated in searches in catalogs, indexes, online databases, and on the Internet. When students are allowed to choose their own topics for research, encyclopedias are invaluable for uncovering ideas for research beyond the currently-trendy topics. The organization of articles in encyclopedias can help students organize their own topics, or, more likely, help them limit or broaden their subjects... Rather than thinking of encyclopedias as merely a summary of facts, we should encourage reflective exploration of the connectedness of things by teaching encyclopedias as the remarkably rich, full micro-libraries they are." (Safford, 1994, pp. 31-32).

Another author (Martin, 1994) is one of the few to give a specific lesson plan for the use of a subject encyclopedia, in this case, *The Grolier World Encyclopedia of Endangered Species*. The *GeoRef* database includes only one citation to the use of encyclopedias in geoscience instruction, "A Rock Encyclopedia That Includes Rock Samples" (Laznicka, 1981). This article describes a locally produced combination of rock samples with encyclopedic descriptions of those samples. Although this is an ingenious design, it uses the term encyclopedia in a different manner than normally understood. A few additional articles make casual but not extensive discussion of incorporating encyclopedias into geoscience literature searching and writing. (Davis, et al., 1994; McCartney, 1992).

IDENTIFYING SUBJECT ENCYCLOPEDIAS

There is no comprehensive listing of subject encyclopedias. Nor is there a quick and easy way to separate them from other materials in local library or commercial on-line catalogs. However, there are several methods that used alone or in combination will give excellent results. The first and simplest is to browse the reference shelves of any suitable library. Most libraries place most subject encyclopedias in their reference collections. Some of the more esoteric may be in the general circulating collection, as may the earlier editions of major titles. Most but not all encyclopedias have the word "encyclopedia" in the title, readily visible on the spine or cover of the book. Therefore effective browsing requires only basic familiarity with the library's classification system. For example, in the Library of Congress (LC) system, GB is physical geography, QE geology, QB astronomy, QC physics, QH natural history, and TN mining. Browsing these areas alone would reveal numerous geoscience encyclopedias. Some other relevant areas include GE (environmental sciences, a relatively new classification), GN (physical anthropology), and TP (chemical technology).

A second, more exacting, but also more laborious method is to check library catalog(s) for specific titles or subject areas. This method will identify CD-ROMs and on-line encyclopedias that would be missed by browsing the shelves. Keyword title searching is available in most on-line library catalogs. For semi-technical non-fiction material this is often better than using a structured subject approach. For example, keyword title searching combining "encyclopedia" with any given subject, academic sub-field or even topic may give good results.

In many library catalogs, a structured subject search would be the most comprehensive approach that would sift out unrelated material. This method relies on the official Library of Congress (LC) subject headings. Each encyclopedia is given one or more subject headings, with a subdivision of Encyclopedias. For example, *Encyclopedia of Volcanoes* is given a subject heading of Volcanoes - Encyclopedias; *Encyclopedia of Earth System Science* is given a subject heading of Earth Sciences - Encyclopedias. A drawback of this approach is that little leeway is given for approximations. For example, a subject search for Astronomy - Encyclopedias will not list *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Sun* as that book was given the subject heading of Sun - Encyclopedias. This system will not self-correct to broaden or narrow the search.

A variant of this approach is to search in a national level rather than local level catalog. *Books in Print* and

OCLC's *WorldCat* are two such databases. The latter is an on-line union catalog of OCLC member libraries that includes over 49 million catalog records. Subject oriented databases like *GeoRef* and *GeoBase* are useful but should be used with caution. They tend to focus on book reviews and frankly miss the majority of encyclopedias even within narrow definitions of their subject fields. Recently, *GeoRef* has analyzed individual articles within selected encyclopedias. However, this indexing is not systematic.

A third approach is to consult a published bibliography or evaluative guide to encyclopedias. There are at least five such sources:

- 1) *ARBA Guide to Subject Encyclopedias and Dictionaries* (Awe, 1997).
- 2) *Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, and Other Word-Related Books* (Brewer, 1988).
- 3) *First Stop: the Master Index to Subject Encyclopedias* (Ryan, 1989).
- 4) *Kister's Best Encyclopedias: a Comparative Guide to General and Specialized Encyclopedias* (Kister, 1994).
- 5) *Subject Encyclopedias: User Guide, Review Citations, and Keyword Index* (Mirwis, 1999).

All five of these help identify specific encyclopedias; yet all are selective, none are comprehensive. The *ARBA Guide* (Awe, 1997) consists of short reviews of the encyclopedias extracted from *American Reference Books Annual* (ARBA) over the previous decade. It is highly selective but does have sections on Earth and Planetary Sciences, Mining Engineering, and Petroleum Engineering. *Dictionaries, Encyclopedias, and Other Word-Related Books* (Brewer, 1988) consist mostly of reproductions of Library of Congress cataloging records organized by the LC classification numbers. *First Stop* (Ryan, 1989) is potentially more useful as it indexes the individual articles within the encyclopedias. In practicality it is limited not only by its 1989 imprint date, but because it indexes only 430 reference books. *Kister's Best Encyclopedias* (Kister, 1994) includes an annotated bibliography organized by subject. There are sections on Earth, Energy, and Environmental Sciences, and Astronomy and Space Science. *Subject Encyclopedias* (Mirwis, 1999) consists of two parts. Part 1 lists approximately 1,000 subject encyclopedias published during the 1990s. Part 2 is an index to articles written within the encyclopedias. But like *First Stop* (Ryan, 1989) its usefulness is limited as only 98 encyclopedias from part 1 were selected for in depth indexing.

A fourth approach is to look for in house guides produced by individual libraries. A fine example is "Print Resources in the Earth, Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences" compiled by the Syracuse University Library: (<http://libwww.syr.edu/research/internet/earth/pri nt.html>).

GEOSCIENCE ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Any of the above methods can be used to identify encyclopedias that directly or indirectly concern the geosciences. However, two fairly obvious problems result. Since there are no clearly accepted criteria of what constitutes an encyclopedia, the content, format, scope and quality of individual titles varies considerably. Realistically there is no way to avoid this. The second problem concerns the appropriate boundaries of a search for geoscience encyclopedias. How deep should a

researcher look into related fields such as biology, astronomy, physics or chemistry? This becomes a matter of individual preference.

A third but not so obvious problem is that relevant articles are often published in seemingly irrelevant sources. Many of these concern historical, philosophical, social, political, and policy issues not addressed in strictly scientific sources. For example, *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance* includes articles on geography and cartography, geology, mining and metallurgy; *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* includes articles on science and engineering ethics as well as scientific publishing; *The Encyclopedia of Religion* includes a section on the sacred geographies of various cultures; *Encyclopedia of Rural America* includes articles on groundwater, hydrology, environmental protection, the mining industry, and the petroleum industry; *Encyclopedia of U.S. Foreign Relations* includes material on the history of U.S. environmental foreign policy; *The Dictionary of Art*, a monumental award winning work that took a decade to produce and costs several thousand dollars includes sections on gem engraving and the uses of different kinds of limestone; and *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures* includes almost 50 pages on the maps and map making activities of various cultural groups including native North Americans.

In theory, the *First Step* (Ryan, 1989) and *Subject Encyclopedias* (Mirwis, 1999) bibliographies would identify these sources. However, as mentioned above, even if updated, they would be incomplete and sketchy at the best. The only way to identify articles hidden away in non-apparent sources is to browse a well-stocked library and skim the tables of contents and indexes of a wide variety of sources.

Special mention should be made of the relatively well known *Encyclopedia of Earth Sciences Series*. This is an outstanding series of about 20 single volume encyclopedias of numerous geoscience topics under the general editorship of Rhodes Fairbridge since 1966.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE APPENDICES

Two appendices were constructed to assist with the identification of encyclopedias explicitly dealing with geoscience topics and those in closely related fields with potential relevance to geoscience instruction. Over 220 of these titles are listed in Appendix 1. In recognition of the importance of the *Encyclopedia of Earth Sciences Series*, this series is listed separately in Appendix 2.

To construct the appendices, all five of the bibliographies were consulted for titles. Then four on-line bibliographic databases, OCLC's *WorldCat* (a library union catalog of over 49 million records), *Books-in-Print*, *GeoRef*, and *GeoBase* were checked for additional titles. A very broad search was constructed to examine records with "encyclopedia" or "encyclopedias" or "encyclopaedia" anywhere in the cataloging fields. The results were limited to works published 1980 or later. Although this range of dates is largely arbitrary, a substantial enough list of titles resulted. This also gives twenty years for various kinds of topics and interpretations to emerge and possibly recycle.

Again, in recognition of the importance of the *Encyclopedia of Earth Sciences Series*, this series is listed in its entirety, including those volumes that were published

before 1980. Several changes in publishers make this series somewhat difficult to trace. Personal correspondence with the series editor was correlated with the OCLC cataloging entries. Additional titles in this series are in preparation.

Over 52,000 summary level computer records from these four databases were manually scanned. Printouts were made of the most relevant titles. These titles are given in the two appendices. No attempt was made to evaluate the quality of the individual titles.

A subjective title-by-title judgment was made to include or exclude material in related fields such as astronomy, biology, and anthropology. As best as possible, titles intended for a juvenile audience were excluded. State and country encyclopedias were also excluded from the list. A few highly technical sources that appeared to be trade directories rather than subject encyclopedias were excluded from the list. Foreign language encyclopedias were included only if the cataloging entry included a parallel English title. A few questionable titles were obtained from interlibrary loan and physically examined. This resulted in the elimination of an asteroid encyclopedia that concerned astrology more than anything else. Finally, to the extent possible, duplication between American and British printings of the same sources, and other minor quirks that can often affect construction of bibliographies were accounted for.

Skimming the appendices quickly several patterns are apparent. One is the overabundance of dinosaur encyclopedias. Another is the recent appearance and abundance of environmental encyclopedias. Another is the caution that needs to be taken when looking for individual titles due to the American and British spellings of "encyclopedia" vs. "encyclopaedia".

CONCLUSION

Encyclopedias that focus on individual subjects or small clusters of topics constitute a major category of library sources that are often overlooked. Even more overlooked, is the potential they offer for systematic inclusion in high school and undergraduate instruction. Instructors at these levels can comfortably use them as sources for classroom preparation. Students at these levels can comfortably use them as sources for assignments, and as transitions between general and technical literature.

Difficulties can arise in attempts to identify encyclopedias appropriate to a given context including geoscience instruction. Browsing key sections of the reference area of a suitable library and examining the contents and indexes of various titles is a simple and effective method for instructional selection. Published bibliographies can be used to identify additional titles. However, none of the existing bibliographies are comprehensive. Selective use of title and subject searching in library catalogs can identify a reasonable percentage of subject encyclopedias in specific areas. Manual examination of library catalog records is perhaps the only way to collect a full range of encyclopedia titles suitable for a given purpose. Even then the parameters of the listing are largely subjective. To assist geoscience educators, a list of approximately 250 encyclopedia titles

compiled by all of these methods is given in the following two appendices.

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APPENDIX 1: GEOSCIENCE RELATED ENCYCLOPEDIAS 1980-2002 (Excluding the Encyclopedia of Earth Sciences Series)

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