

EB article on Encyclopedias

"...encyclopedias attempts to give a comprehensive summary of what is known of each topic considered."

"People look to encyclopedias to give them an adequate introduction to a topic that interests them. Many expect the encyclopedia to omit nothing and to include consideration of all controversial aspects of a subject."


"Some booksellers and publishers nevertheless confirm that there is, however unreasonable, a certain amount of public prejudice against the single-volume form, and that most people prefer a multivolume work."

"...ensuring that the articles of the 11th edition of the EB were kept within the mental range of the average man. The problem of the encyclopedist has always been to strike the right mean between too learned and too simplified an approach."

Yearly supplements - "In the main they are more effective in recording the events and discoveries of each year than they are in keeping the main articles up-to-date, but they perform an essential duty in informing their readers of much that is not reported or that is only inadequately reported in the press..."

typical for established encyclopedias to provide a reader inquiry service which gives a reader access to encyclopedia's files on a given subject.

Britannica follows policy of continuous revision, articles are updated as necessary; approximately 10% are revised in any given year; each article is revised at least once every 10 years; revisions in science and technology more frequent than humanities.

 "Within the past 2000 years, it is possible to perceive a pattern in encyclopedia production that closely corresponds with the changing social needs of each age."

"The comparatively brief entries in the encyclopedia dictionary had, by accident of the alphabet, fragmented knowledge to such an extent that users received only a disjointed knowledge of the things in which they were interested."

speaking of the 1st edition of the EB - "...thus incorporated the comprehensive treatment of important subjects accorded by the earliest form of encyclopedias and had supplemented this with the attraction of the brief informative notices of minor topics that had been the chief feature of the encyclopedic dictionary. The key to their success was, however, their retention of the single alphabetical sequence."

The Brockhaus (Konversationslexikon form) - "throughout its existence has faithfully followed a system in which the whole of knowledge has been analyzed into very specific topics. These topics are arranged alphabetically and, under each heading, condensed entries convey the essential information. By ingenious cross-references, entries are linked with other entries under which further information can be found, thus avoiding the inclusion of an index."

(if the form of an encyclopedia serves the needs of the age, what are the needs of the current period and how do they differ from the past, recent and far? There is a parallel here with the development of science and science disciplines. my guess -- encyclopedias today cannot hope to summarize all that is known on a given topic, frankly to attempt to do this as the current EB does tends to obscure the forest because of undue focus (and fuzzy focus at that) on the trees. as science develops and as we have collected so much info on diverse topics that what is needed now, at least in an encyclopedia is the presentation of topics in a way that really brings the subject to life, showing how various factors interrelate, both within the topic and between that topic and others. Possibly, today's encyclopedia's could take the responsibility to provide an up-to-the-date bibliography on a given subject, so that the reader would know exactly where to go for what additional information and understanding. Perhaps, combining some of the best aspects of the earliest encyclopedias, the new ones, if electronically based could even make available the best texts on various subjects. For that matter, they could also include a videodisc based, encyclopedic dictionary.)

check out - the Oxford Junior Encyclopedia (intended for children of 11 upward) - it is systematically arranged. Each of 12 volumes is devoted to a broad subject field: mankind, natural history, the universe, communications, great lives, farming and fisheries, industry and commerce, engineering, recreations, law and order, the home, and the arts. The 13th volume is an index which includes a special section of ready-reference material. The contents of each volume are arranged alphabetically (with cross-references), and there are many illustrations.

check out the Encyclopedia Universalis, owned by the French Book Club and EB. "This work, inspired by the L'Encyclopedie (Diderot), eschews the inclusion of minor items in favor of extensive and very well-illustrated articles on important subjects, and it pays special attention to modern science and technology. Of the 20 volumes planned, volumes 17-19 will constitute a "thesaurus" of fact entries and indes, and volume 20 will be devoted to an exposition of the classificatiosns used in constucting the encyclopedia and to further elaborations."

check out - "The Uses of Encyclopedias; Past, Present, and Future," in the American Behavioural Scientist, 6:3-40 (1962)

check out - in 1969 the Reference and Subscription Books Review Committee of the American Library Association issued "Purchasing a General Encyclopedia": a pamphlet suggesting 12 criteria for evaluating the quality and usefulness of any encyclopedia .