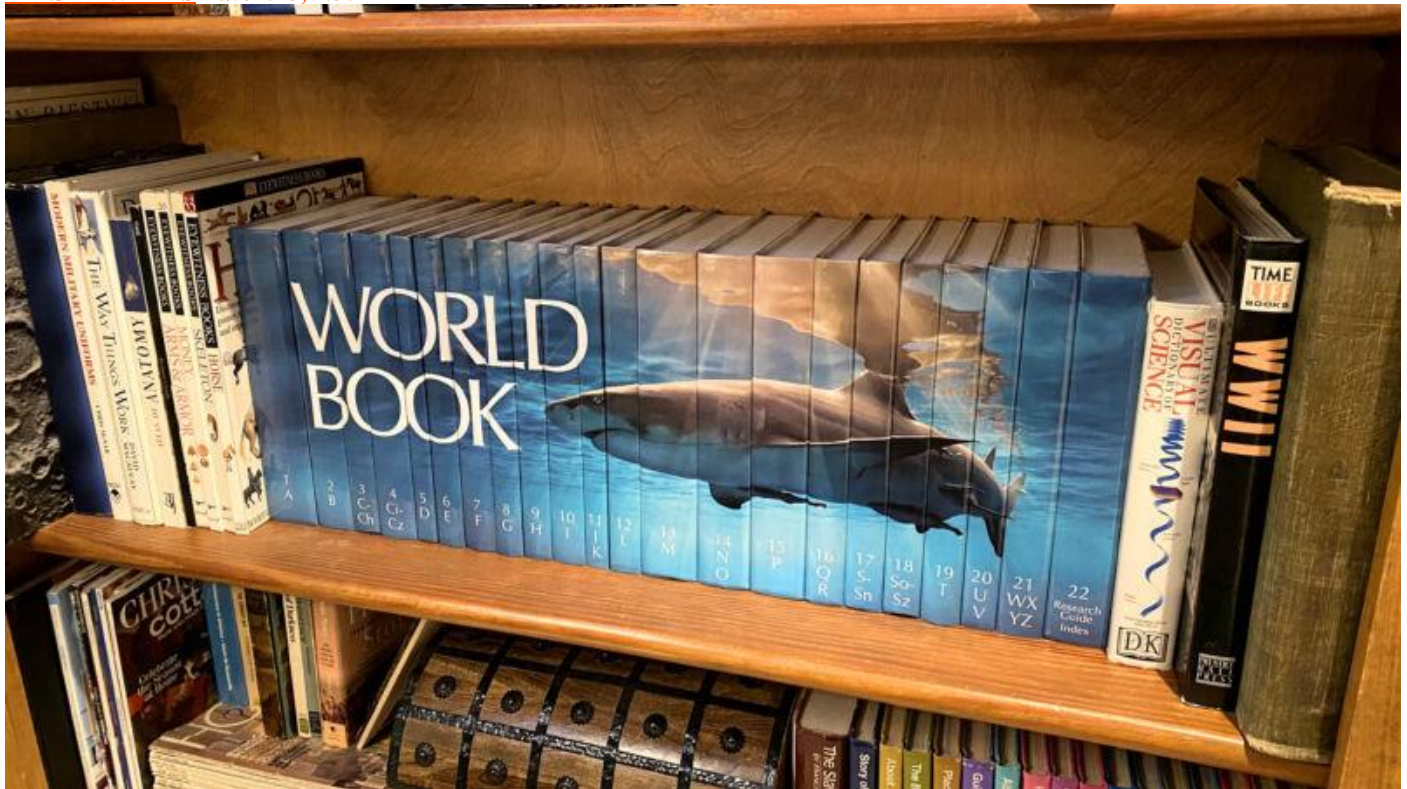


I just bought the only physical encyclopedia still in print, and I regret nothing

The still-updated World Book Encyclopedia is my antidote to the information apocalypse.

BENJ EDWARDS - 6/9/2023, 9:30 PM



[Enlarge](#) / A photo of the 2023 edition of the World Book Encyclopedia on the author's family room shelf.

Benj Edwards

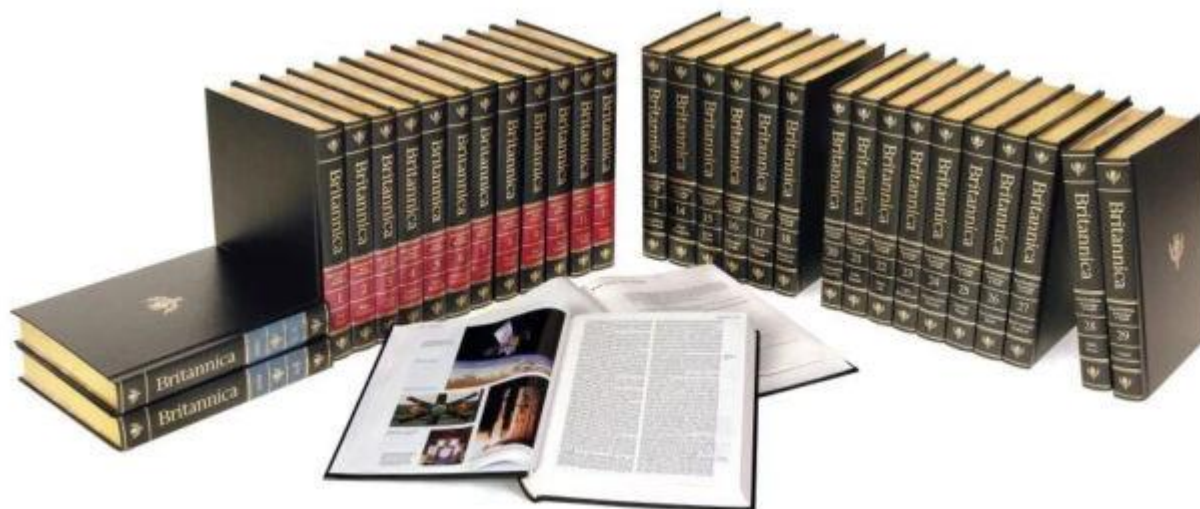
These days, many of us live online, where machine-generated content has begun to [pollute](#) the Internet with misinformation and noise. At a time when it's hard to know what information to trust, I felt delight when I recently learned that World Book [still prints](#) an up-to-date book encyclopedia in 2023. Although the term "encyclopedia" is now almost synonymous with [Wikipedia](#), it's refreshing to see such a sizable reference printed on paper. So I [bought one](#), and I'll tell you why.

Based in Chicago, World Book, Inc. first published an encyclopedia in 1917, and it has released a new edition almost every year since 1925. The company, a subsidiary of Warren Buffett's [Berkshire Hathaway](#), claims that its encyclopedia is "the only general reference encyclopedia still published today." My research seems to back up this claim, at least in English; it's possibly true even for languages. Its fiercest competitor of yore, The Encyclopedia Britannica, [ended its print run](#) in 2012 after 244 years in print.

In a nod to our present digital age, World Book also offers its encyclopedia as a [subscription service](#) through the web. Yet it's the print version that mystifies and attracts my fascination. Why does it still exist?

"Because there is still a demand!" Tom Evans, World Book's editor-in-chief, told Ars over email.

Today, up-to-date information flows freely thanks to the Internet. It's only a Google search away. Many people rely on Wikipedia, which is a nonprofit collaborative resource, for reference purposes. Despite that, some people and organizations apparently still buy paper encyclopedias. Evans said that sales of the print edition are "in the thousands" and that World Book always prints just enough copies to satisfy demand.



[Enlarge](#) / The Encyclopedia Britannica, a competitor of World Book, ended its print run in 2012.

Encyclopedia Britannica

A World Book rep [told Quartz](#) in 2019 that the print encyclopedia sold mostly to schools, public libraries, and homeschooling families. Today, Evans says that public and school libraries are still the company's primary customers. "World Book has a loyal following of librarians who understand the importance of a general reference encyclopedia in print form, accessible to all."

As a kid, our family owned a 1968 edition of World Book that I relied on for school reports and projects all the way until my high school graduation in 1999, although I briefly used [Microsoft Encarta](#) on CD-ROM and a [CompuServe encyclopedia](#) in the 1990s. At the time, even with electronic references, instantaneous, up-to-date information didn't seem as important. We were still largely operating at the speed of paper. While that concept seems foreign to us in our current world, there was a certain kind of comfort in that slowness.

Speaking of slow, a paper encyclopedia set certainly can't run away from you. Back in the day, our family's encyclopedia set took up a large dedicated shelf in our family room. Just like my old 1968 edition, the new print edition of World Book is a physically hefty reference. The 2023 version spans 17,000 articles spread over 14,000 pages in 22 volumes. The company says it features over 25,000 photographs, illustrations, diagrams, and maps.

All this paper-bound content can't possibly come cheap, you might think. And, of course, you're right. At a time when most information comes to us for free online (with [strings attached](#), of course), it's easy to have sticker shock at the \$1,199 retail price for the 2023 edition of World Book, although shoppers might occasionally find it for as low as \$799 on Amazon (to compare, the online subscription costs [\\$250 per year](#)). Earlier editions are available for much lower prices.

I know it may seem weird to prefer the print edition since you can get the same content in the online version in a space-saving and portable format. But with the paper version, the World Book will always be yours. It can't be edited stealthily or taken down if the company needs the server space or goes out of business.

So I took the plunge.

Why I bought an encyclopedia



[Enlarge](#) / Unboxing a print encyclopedia in 2023 is a somewhat surreal experience for a tech writer.

Benj Edwards

First, I'll be honest: The existence of an up-to-date print encyclopedia in 2023 took me by surprise. I experienced a range of emotions, from glee to confusion to sadness over the past. "The last of the dinosaurs" metaphor sprung to mind. But then I suddenly felt that I had to have it, and that's when the rationalizations kicked in. I have two kids, 10 and 13, and maybe the kids could use it for school, just like I did? Or maybe they could use it as a steady source of offline information in a world where unreliable information seems to be coming at them from all sides?

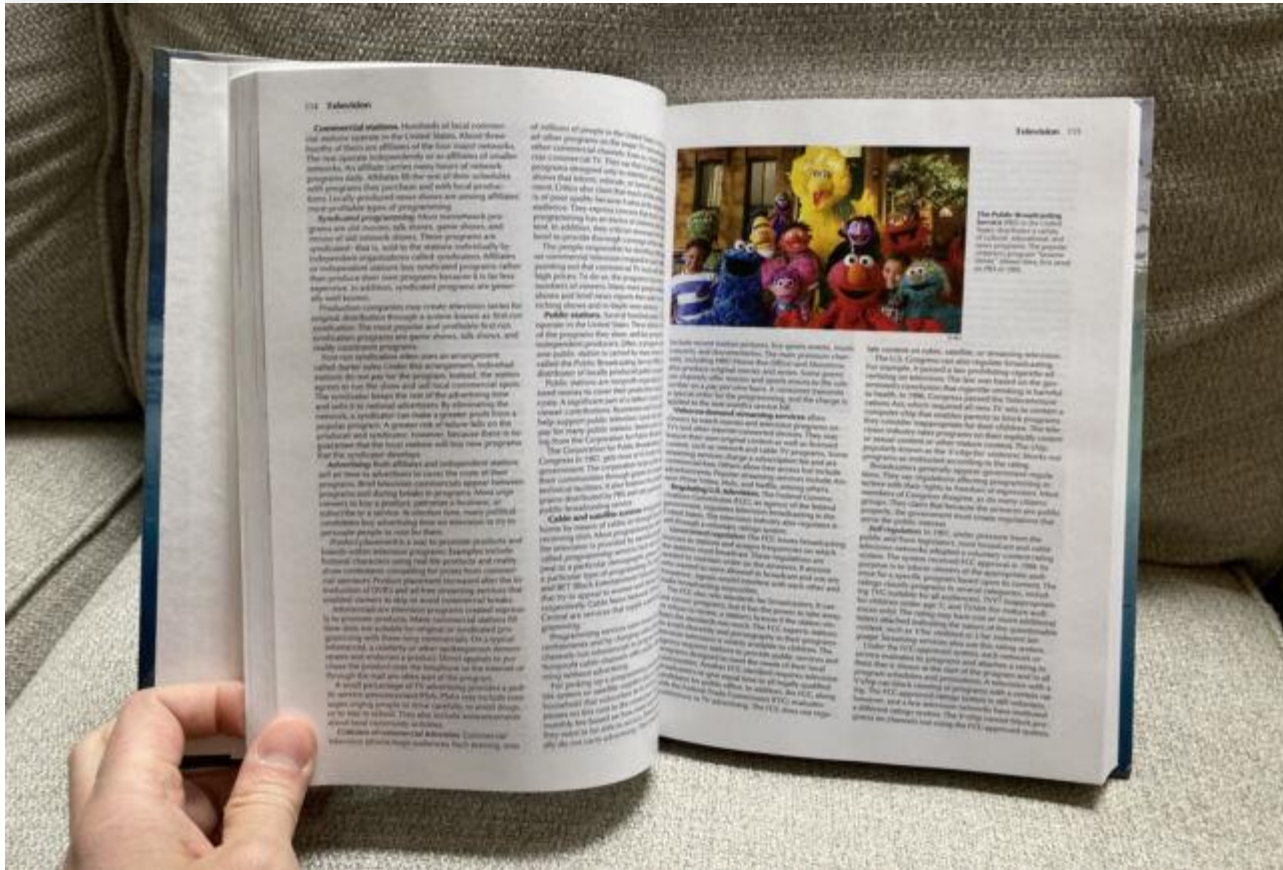
I'm an [AI reporter](#) for Ars Technica, and I often write about generative AI tools that could potentially pollute our online spaces (and our [historical records](#)) with very convincing fake information. Some people think these tools may destabilize society. At best, they may merely [decrease the signal-to-noise ratio](#) of online information. Years ago, [The Guardian](#) and [BuzzFeed](#) called this presumed coming age, where true and false information are almost impossible to distinguish, "the Information apocalypse." Never one to shy away from the chance to coin a term, I've [called it](#) the "cultural singularity."

Although I've [warned about](#) AI-generated misinformation on Ars Technica as well, I'm still optimistic that people who are cognizant of these issues can get through the coming decade with factual electronic knowledge at hand. But just in case I'm wrong, a little voice in the back of my head reasoned that it would be nice to have a good summary of human knowledge in print, vetted by professionals and fixed in a form

where it can't be tampered with after the fact—whether by humans, AI, or mere [link rot](#). That's appealing to me.

So I pulled the trigger and bought the 2023 edition. A week or so later, the entire encyclopedia set arrived in a single box that looked small but was massively heavy. Each volume came individually shrink-wrapped. It may sound silly, but as I carefully pulled them out of the box one by one, I enjoyed feeling the weight of the information in my hands. It felt like stepping back onto dry land after a long boat ride. It's hard to put a name on that emotion.

Advertisement



[Enlarge](#) / An example of The World Book 2023 Encyclopedia, turned to the entry on "Television."

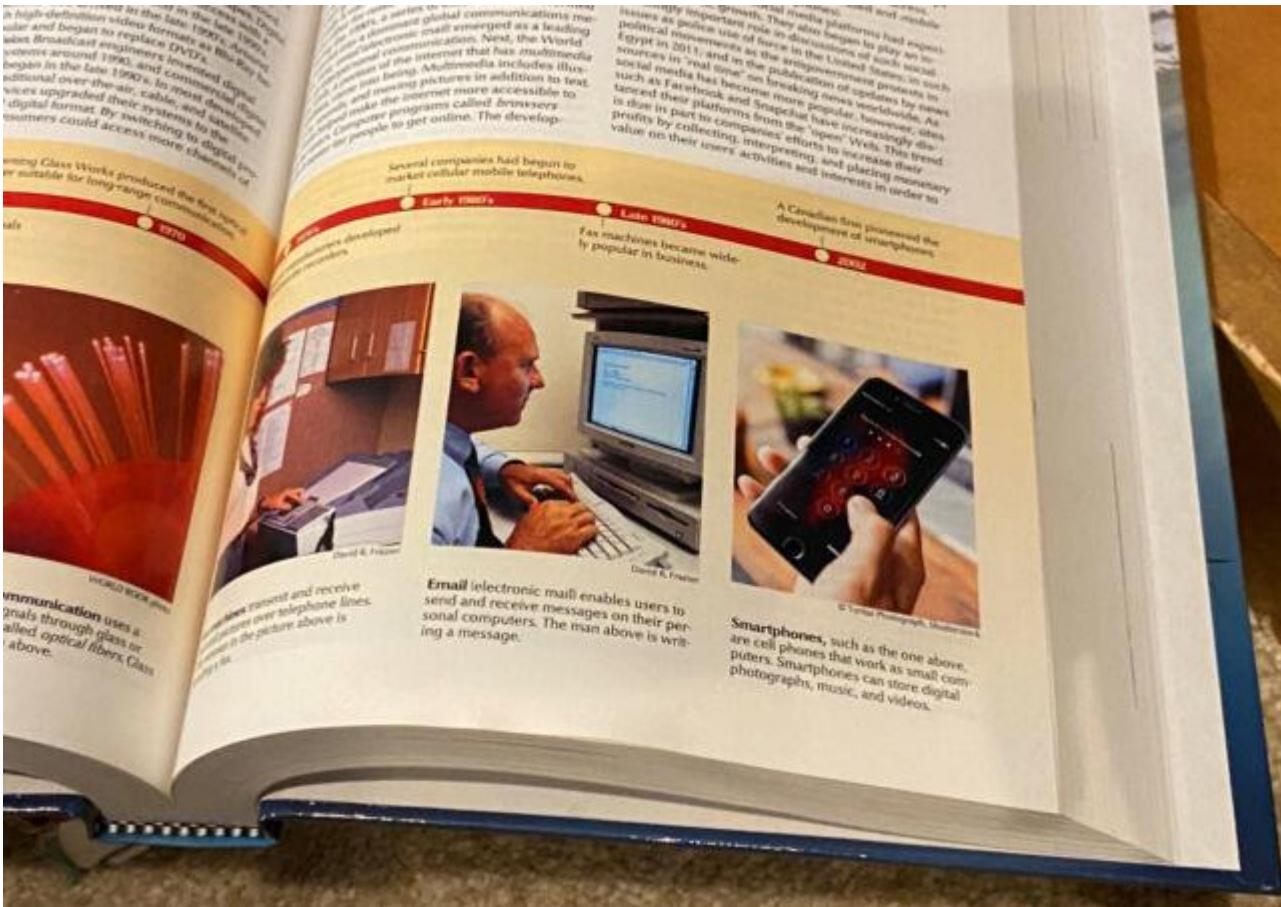
Benj Edwards

Opening up a volume of the World Book took me back in time. Memories of school libraries and book reports came flooding back. Notably, each volume has nothing to distract you from reading. No pop-ups, no requests for donations, no ads. It's just you and the information, curated by World Book's editors.

As for its content, the 2023 edition doesn't shy away from the contemporary. New biographies of notable figures such as snowboarder Chloe Kim, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and Ketanji Brown Jackson, the first Black woman to serve on the US Supreme Court, find their place alongside hundreds of article updates on topics varying from homeschooling and indigenous peoples of the Americas to space exploration and television.

To test its accuracy, I looked up articles on subjects I'm knowledgeable about, including "Artificial Intelligence," "Computer," "Video Games," "Internet," and "Communication," eagerly checking for updates and additions to the 1968 edition I had as a kid. It's surreal to open up a reference book familiar to me from

my childhood and read (in the familiar World Book typeface) an up-to-date article that mentions Instagram and Snapchat and includes a photo of a smartphone.



Enlarge / Smartphones appear in the 2023 edition. That feels weird when the last time you looked at a World Book was in the 1990s.

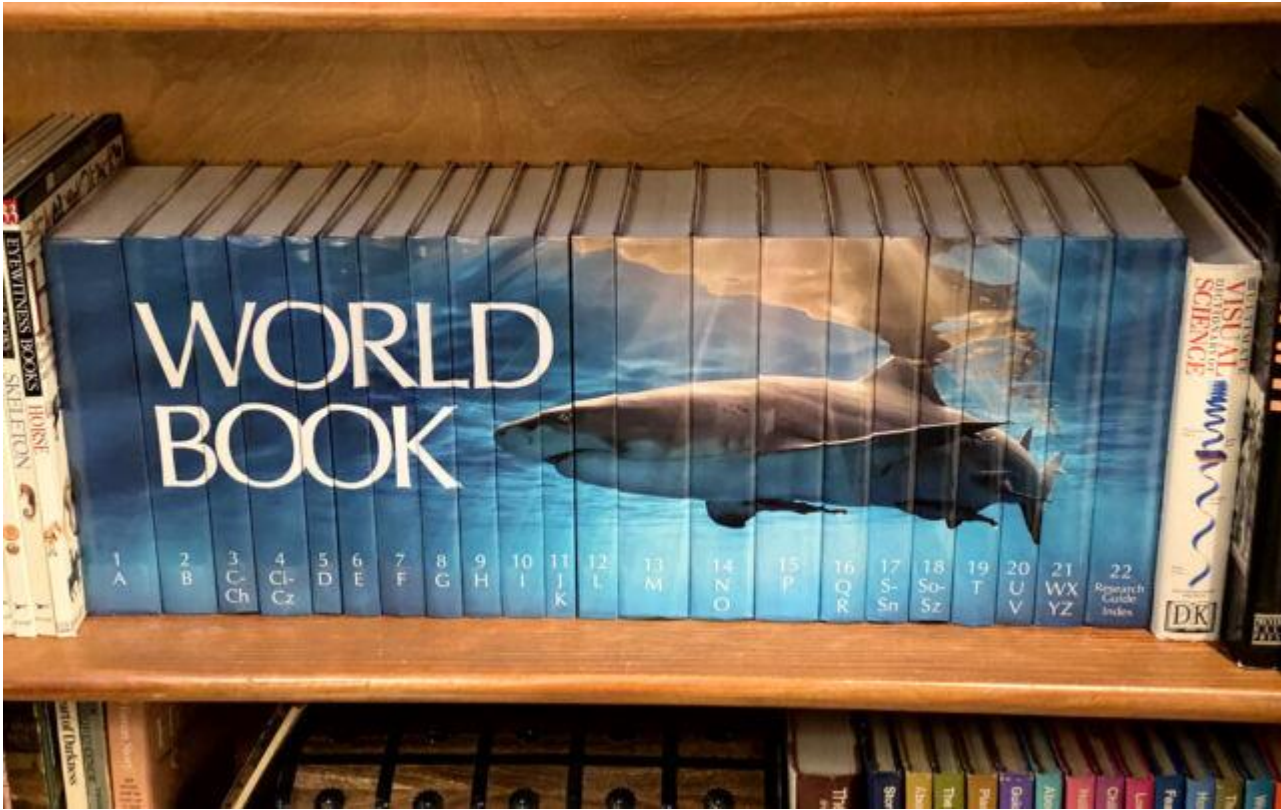
Benj Edwards

World Book's authoritative, neutral tone feels refreshing. For example, the 2023 edition pulls no punches regarding its concise analysis of our previous US president's legacy, but it doesn't go out of the way to attack him, either. Every article I've read so far is accurate and well-written.

It hasn't been a perfect product, however. The 2023 edition of World Book that I purchased includes a binding error that replaces the first 60 pages of the "G" volume with pages from the "U" volume. Judging by a review from an Amazon customer who noticed the same thing, it's possible that defect is present in the entire (likely small) print run.

When I told Evans about the print error, he replied, "We were recently made aware of that manufacturing problem. The printer has assured us that it is an issue for only a very small number of sets." World Book offered to replace the faulty volume for free.

Reaction from my family



[Enlarge](#) / The shark photo on the World Book 2023 spines didn't win fans in my household.

Benj Edwards

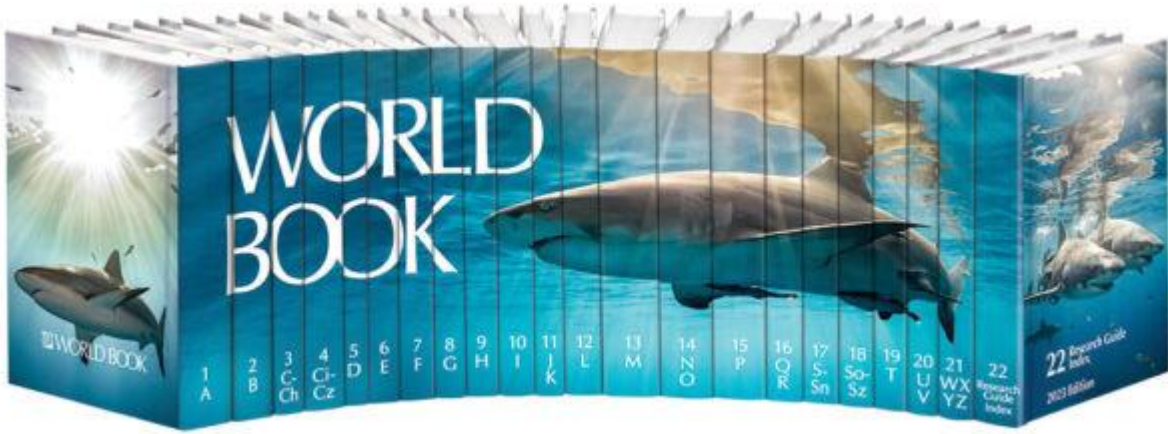
After I ordered the encyclopedia, I kept it a secret from my family until it arrived because I wanted to surprise my wife and kids. Who would expect an encyclopedia set to show up on the doorstep in 2023?

Upon first telling my wife that I bought an encyclopedia, she was confused, then excited. She, too, recalled the thrill of researching projects in encyclopedias as a kid. But that's where the fun ended. While she wasn't looking, I placed the set on a prominent bookshelf in the family room of my house, then unveiled it to her. When she saw the large photo of a shark spread across the spines of the 22 volumes, she frowned and said, "I don't want to see a big-ass shark every day when I walk in the room."

(I have since moved the set to a new shelf.)

According to the [press release](#) announcing the 2023 edition, World Book selected the shark photo (which it calls a "Spinescape®") because sharks are "a high-interest topic to students K-12 and World Book has a desire to support shark conservation." It's not a bad photo—it's just not the handsome set of formal reference volumes that my wife was apparently expecting.

Later, I introduced the encyclopedia to my kids. They had never used a print encyclopedia, and they looked at me like I was an alien, almost as if I were speaking a different language (such a trite expression, but man, is it accurate). I had hoped they could use the encyclopedia as an old-fashioned reference, but so far, they have completely and utterly rejected it, not even expressing interest or opening it once. That aspect of my plans for the encyclopedia has been a big failure.



[Enlarge](#) / A promotional photo of The World Book Encyclopedia 2023 edition, complete with shark.

World Book

My family's reaction was disappointing, but I don't mind that the encyclopedia set is just for me. Every morning as I wait for the kids to get ready for school, I pull out a random volume and browse. I've refreshed my knowledge on many subjects and enjoy the deliberate stability of the information experience. I feel confident using it as an occasional personal reference as the online world slides further into AI-augmented noise. And it's definitely [more accurate](#) than an AI large language model at the moment.

Aside from the shark photo and the print error, I am genuinely proud to own a modern World Book Encyclopedia. And I say that freely, having purchased the set out of pocket myself. In fact, World Book did not respond to my initial request to provide a sample volume to examine. Who knows—maybe they had to print out my email and physically mail it to Warren Buffett for approval first. I may eventually get a reply next year by steamship. But that's the comfortable, slow speed I'd expect from the world's last general-subject print encyclopedia.

For now, I was happy to chat with World Book's Tom Evans via tempered electrons, who says his employer's commitment to the print edition is ongoing. "We will continue to produce the print edition of The World Book Encyclopedia while there is still a demand. We believe in supporting teachers, librarians, and students and are committed to supplying content to them in whatever form is required," he said.

I'm no information prepper, but I'm glad that no matter what happens online, the information inside my World Book set will never change. Sometimes it's nice not to always be magically up to date.

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Benj Edwards is an AI and Machine Learning Reporter for Ars Technica. In his free time, he writes and records music, collects vintage computers, and enjoys nature. He lives in Raleigh, NC.