Dictionaries, encyclopaedias, study guides and stats books

Sources of information provide the content of an essay. During the course of writing an assignment, you are recommended to consult dictionaries to assist in understanding what you read, and to help articulate your ideas. You may also want to use an encyclopaedia to find a more detailed description of something. If writing up a practical report you may consult a book on report-writing and some statistics textbooks. I classify all these as study support materials, rather than sources.

They will only become sources if you actually find something in them which you will use to advance your argument. E.g.

- if you quote a definition from a dictionary in order to define the focus of an essay
- if you find a description of an experiment in an encyclopaedia, which you will use to support your conclusion
- if you statistics book describes an obscure and unusual technique which you need to justify your analysis in an experimental report

If you want to use a dictionary or encyclopedia as a source, you must ask the same questions as for other sources. Most particularly, you must ask whether the author is an expert in the field, and whether the book has been written for university-level students. In addition, is this really the best source of information you can come up with? Even a dictionary of psychology will only have very short definitions in it, and is unlikely to provide you with the type of definition which you can use for the basis of discussion in an essay. In the Reference section of the library there are some encyclopaedias covering specialist areas of psychology, with each article written by an expert. Encyclopaedias like this can be suitable for finding very short reviews of an area and may make acceptable sources to inform peripheral parts of an essay, but your lecturers will be expecting you to use more detailed sources to inform your work.