Best Free Reference Web Sites

Ninth Annual List

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) contributing members: *James Langan and Margaret Y. Perkins, Co-Chairs; Charles J. Cobine, Christopher S. Dunham, Caroline E. Geck, Rosemary Meszaros*.

Welcome to the ninth annual Best Free Reference Web Sites List. In 1998, the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA) Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) appointed an ad hoc task force to develop a method of recognizing outstanding reference Web sites. The task force became a formal committee at the 2001 ALA Annual Conference. This is the ninth Best Free Reference Web Sites list produced by the group. Past lists and all future lists will be published in each year's fall issue of *Reference & User Services Quarterly*. The annotations also are included in electronic resource records for the sites in the Online Catalog of the Library of Congress. An online version of the list appears on the MARS publications portion of the RUSA Web site along with a new combined index to sites included in previous lists. A subject index is being created; links to it will be included on the Web page in the future.

Because the Web is a changing world, readers should note that the Web sites were as annotated on the date the member reviewed the site. Reviewing previous lists is not part of the charge of the committee.

Once again, the committee considered sites in all subject areas, selecting only free sites that meet the definition of ready reference and that would be of value in all types of libraries. The committee has established the following criteria for nominated Web sites:

- quality, depth, and usefulness of content
- clear statement of the content, including any intended biases
- appropriateness for the intended audience
- appropriate links to other Web sites
- attention to detail; absence of grammatical errors and so on
- ready reference; usefulness for reference to answer specific questions
- may also give a broad perspective of a particular subject
- uniqueness of content
- uniqueness of the resource as a whole; creativity
- useful in a variety of reference settings
- currency of content
- links are kept up to date
- update frequency is appropriate for the subject matter
- authority of producer
- authority and legality clearly stated
- if not easily recognizable, an explanation of the history and purpose of the organization
- ease of use
- user-friendly design; easy navigation
- good search engine

- attractive; graphic design makes a good impression on the user
- easy output (printing or downloading)
- customer service
- contacts are responsive; e-mail addresses are correct
- authority of producer
- authority and legality clearly stated
- if not recognizable, an explanation of the history and purpose of the organization
- efficiency (note: efficiency is affected by the user's method of Internet access—dial-up access, for example, will no doubt be less efficient for all sites—and evaluators endeavored to take such differences into account)
- graphics load quickly or are not so intensive as to seriously degrade access
- any required plug-ins are available for easy download
- reliable, speedy server; information is there when needed
- appropriate use of the Web as a medium
- components are well integrated (audio, video, text, and so on)
- useful information is still available, even if the user does not have all the plug-ins and media components
- effective use of Java, other newer technologies

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, and the process went smoothly, especially as many of the members were returning for a third or fourth year. Each member of the committee nominated five to seven sites using the criteria specified above. The committee members then reviewed the annotated nominations and voted for their favorite sites. Previous years' winners were not eligible for this year's list, but a site that did not win previously could be re-nominated.

Selected sites were notified electronically with a recognition certificate. They are also invited to use the MARS logo and link to the online version of this list, located on the MARS publications portion of the RUSA Web page.

American Hospital Directory, www.ahd.com

Although this site provides a for-fee service for subscribers, it also features an easy-to-use, free hospital look-up tool that links to hospital Web sites and basic statistics. Users also can drill down by state to see statistics that have been gathered from both proprietary and public sources, including Medicare cost reports and claims data. Nonsubscribers can view data on total numbers of beds, discharges, patient days, and gross patient revenue. Users who are researching the healthcare industry or who are themselves healthcare professionals or administrators may require more detailed information that only comes with a subscription. The American Hospital Directory is a well-designed, reliable source for the general public and users who may otherwise not have much luck locating hospital information.
Author/publisher: American Hospital Directory, Inc.
Free/fee-based: Free, with more data access for subscribers
Date reviewed: Feb. 28, 2007

The Bill of Rights Institute, www.billofrightsinstitute.org

The Bill of Rights Institute is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to teach youth "about the words and ideas of America's Founders, the liberties guaranteed in our Founding documents, and how our Founding principles continue to affect and shape a free society." The institute includes a great deal of free information on its Web site.

Teachers (and others) can sign up for newsletters with links to lessons on the topics of Bill of Rights in the news, First Amendment in history, and landmark Supreme Court cases. There also is a link to their Web site for high school students, which includes video and audio clips and a study guide to the Constitution. This site is an excellent resource for both teachers and high school students.
Author/publisher: Bill Of Rights Institute
Free/fee-based: Free (primarily)
Date reviewed: Feb. 24, 2007

Doing Business, www.doingbusiness.org

This free Internet site, first launched in 2003, is a highly successful resource for "comparing business regulations." In-depth data and reports about and rankings of regulations relevant to doing business are supplied for 175 economies, along with tools for comparative analyses. The rankings, data, and reports are derived from quantifiable data that reflect the costs, number of requirements, and time involved in specific business functions and operations. Policymakers, the aid community, and researchers as well as business executives and foreign investors can use this resource effectively.
Author/publisher: World Bank
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

Export.gov, Helping U.S. Companies Export, www.export.gov

Produced by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Export.gov "brings together resources from across the U.S. Government to assist American business in international sales." In this era of globalization, the benefits of exporting are enormous, and this Web resource assists with identifying important exporting opportunities and is an indispensable tool for anyone doing business abroad. The Web site provides trade leads and access to the U.S. Commercial Service's extensive Market Research Library database, which furnishes such documents as country commercial guides, industry overviews, and market updates. Access to most of the materials is free, but requires registration.
Author/publisher: U.S. International Trade Administration
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

Gate2Home, www.gate2home.com

Libraries with diverse user populations will find Gate2Home (a multilingual keyboard emulator) to be an important reference tool and desktop gadget. Created by Israeli Web designer Ilan Bar-Magen to circumvent the administrative or

system settings that can plague public computing environments, Gate2Home gives users instant access to the keyboards of sixty-five languages. Keyboards include all major East and South Asian languages, as well as Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, Roman, and Cyrillic key sets with various diacritics. Originally designed with travelers in mind, this Web tool is equally useful to language learners and immigrant populations.
Author/publisher: Ilan Bar-Magen, Gate2Home.com
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Feb. 12, 2007

Genome.gov, National Human Genome Research Institute, www.genome.gov

This Internet resource, first launched in 1997, is a valuable resource for genomics research. The institute's mission is to "encompass a broad range of studies aimed at understanding the structure and function of the human genome and its role in health and disease." The site supplies information about consumer health and counseling information for genetic disorders as well as in-depth information for medical and scientific professionals, such as grants, policies and ethics, educational resources, and careers and training information.
Author/publisher: National Institutes of Health
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

Gethuman, www.gethuman.com

The gethuman Web site, run by volunteers, is part of a project to improve customer telephone support by companies in the United States. Aimed at consumers, the gethuman database of five hundred companies includes customer service telephone numbers, specific instructions for reaching a human being at each company, and quality of service grades. Users can click on a company name to rate the quality of telephone support. For public companies, a link to Yahoo! Finance displays company profiles. The site also includes a discussion board and information on the telephone support standards developed by the gethuman project. This Web site will be welcomed by all who have ever been frustrated in their attempts to reach a real human being to resolve a problem.
Author/publisher: Paul M. English, gethuman Project
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Feb. 24, 2007

History Channel, http://history.com

While primarily a conduit for information on the current television programs and their schedule, the additional features at The History Channel make it well worth a visit. "This Day in History" provides a snapshot of what happened in a variety of topics (though most relate to modern wars), and "World Timeline" offers brief descriptions of events by year, decade, or century (500 BC to 2005 CE). Discussion lists and resources for classroom teachers abound, and "Speeches & Video" offers more than two thousand multimedia clips. The "Maps" section provides simple geopolitical and thematic (for example, "Growth of the Roman Empire" and "World Tectonic Plates")

maps, and "Games" features a weekly trivia quiz. This site is useful for learning about what happened and when.
Author/publisher: A&E Television Networks
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 17, 2006 (edited Apr. 16, 2007)

Invention Dimension, http://web.mit.edu/invent

Potential inventors and innovators, as well as students of all ages, can use this one-stop informational center. This well-designed, highly informative site advertises awards and opportunities, furnishes an Inventor's Handbook of frequently asked questions (FAQ), and offers additional search options, including a search button at the top of the main page and the ability to browse alphabetically by inventor and invention. The Web site is attractively packaged with value-added content, such as "What's New," the Invention of the Week, games and trivia, and how to apply for a patent for your own invention.
Author/publisher: Lemelson-MIT Award Program
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 3, 2006 (edited Apr. 5, 2007)

Liber8, An economic information portal for librarians and students, http://liber8.stlouisfed.org

Librarians at the Research Division of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis designed this indispensable portal to economic information. This site's goal is to provide information professionals, the academic community, and the public with centralized access to important, free online economic materials, databases, and Web sites. A few valuable in-house databases are offered, such as the International Economic Statistics (IES) database, an important aid in identifying other free Internet resources and sites available for specific countries.
Author/publisher: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

MDBG Chinese-English Dictionary, www.xuezhongwen.net or www.mdbg.net

The impressive Chinese-language learning site Xuezhongwen.net includes this powerful online Chinese-English dictionary, which has a simple, well-designed interface that accepts both English, pinyin (transliterated Roman), and Chinese characters. The dictionary features sound files, radicals, stroke order, and links to online flash cards that users can flip through to learn new characters. The greatest advantage of the dictionary may be a drawback for some users: it has wiki functionality, so the amount of new content may seem overwhelming to students of Chinese who are learning basic vocabulary. As the site expands to include more specialized language as well as idioms and proverbs, it could easily become one of the most important tools for Western students of Chinese on the Web.
Author/publisher: Dennis Vierkant, Information Technology, Library, and Education Department, University of Twente, Netherlands
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Feb. 28, 2007

Migration Information Source, www.migrationinformation.org

For researchers interested in international, national, and local migration issues, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has produced the Migration Information Source, which is chock-full of reports and data. This think tank is funded by an assortment of philanthropy groups in the United States and abroad, and benefactors include the Carnegie Corporation, Ford Foundation, and Danish, Norwegian, and Dutch groups, as well as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The data sources are authoritative and current, and the site is attractive and user-friendly. The Migration Information Source includes U.S. census and Eurostat data, maps, charts that show migration history, country reports, feature stories, and news. The site is a must for anyone researching immigration, asylum, and refugee questions.

Author/publisher: Migration Policy Institute
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 2, 2007

National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov

The site of the National Institute of Mental Health, the major federal agency responsible for conducting research on mental illness and behavioral disorders, provides comprehensive information for the general public on mental health as well as information aimed at researchers seeking funding. In addition to basic data on various disorders, with links to sources of help and to additional resources and relevant research, there are links to related news articles. The Web site includes sections specifically addressing mental health problems in children and adolescents, older adults, men, and women. This well-organized site is a great place to start for anyone researching mental health issues.

Author/publisher: National Institute of Mental Health
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Feb. 24, 2007

NatureServe Explorer, www.natureserve.org

With its colorful Web site and troves of animal, plant, and ecological data, NatureServe, a nonprofit conservation organization, is a superb resource for academics and members of the public. Two separate databases that NatureServe makes available stand out: NatureServe Explorer: An Online Encyclopedia of Life, and InfoNatura. NatureServe Explorer covers the United States and Canada, with information on more than 65,000 plants, animals, and ecosystems, particularly endangered species. InfoNatura focuses on 8,500 birds, mammals, and amphibians of Latin America, from the common to the rare and endangered. NatureServe draws its data from scholarly sources and databases compiled by local and national conservation organizations. NatureServe's detail and presentation will be of value to all users who are gathering biological and ecological data.

Author/publisher: NatureServe
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Feb. 12, 2007

Paralysis.org, www.paralysis.org

This well-organized, easy-to-use portal provides access to a wealth of quality research and insightful information about all aspects of spinal cord injury, including life with such an injury. Major site sections provided are health, rehabilitation, active living, tools and tech, rights and benefits, research, resources, caregivers, and the lending library. Select items are highlighted on the homepage, and relevant Internet resources are showcased on the various section pages. This resource is an important tool for librarians and researchers developing online allied health collections.

Author/publisher: Christopher and Dana Reeve Occupational Resource Center
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 3, 2006 (edited Apr. 12, 2007)

SeatGuru, www.seatguru.com

SeatGuru is "The ultimate source for airplane seating, inflight amenities and airline information." This site provides users with detailed maps of commercial airliners. Included are the locations of the galley, restrooms, exits, and closets. Color codes on the seats indicate uncomfortable or unpopular seats, average seats, and preferred seats. In addition to seating information, SeatGuru provides information about each airline's luggage restrictions, traveling with pets, and in-flight amenities, such as meals and entertainment. Links to each airline's Web page are prominently displayed on the first review page. Web site directions are clear and easy to understand. Casual and frequent flyers will find this site very useful.

Author/publisher: SeatGuru.com Inc.
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 11, 2006 (edited Apr. 16, 2007)

Shodor.org, A national resource for computational science education, www.shodor.org

The Shodor Foundation, a nonprofit education and research corporation, is "dedicated to the advancement of science and math education, specifically through the use of modeling and simulation technologies." Shodor recognized that professional computational science tools, especially graphics and animations, could be adapted for classroom use. The foundation's Web site offers access to a repertoire of software and provides value-added aids, such as curriculum materials sorted by grade and subject, for students, teachers, and parents.

Author/publisher: Shodor Foundation
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

SmallStep.gov, www.smallstep.gov

Many people would like to improve their health but are uncertain where to begin. Created by the U.S Department of Health and Human Services, SmallStep encourages people to make small changes in their diets and lives to achieve their goal of weight loss and to promote physical fitness. Information on the Web site includes how to create a healthy balanced

meal, how to estimate serving size, and how to integrate physical activity into your life easily. Interactive menus help you determine if you are exceeding your daily intake of fats, sodium, cholesterol, or calories.

Author/publisher: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

Smithsonian Institution, www.si.edu

Providing visitors with detailed information about the world's largest museum complex and its exhibits, the Smithsonian Institution's site also includes interactive online exhibits, supplementary information on the physical exhibits, and an impressive collection of interactive, multimedia resources found under the "Explore & Learn" section, divided into three areas: art and design, history and culture, and science and technology. Users also can find information on the Smithsonian Institution's research centers and outreach programs of traveling exhibits and affiliate museums. This site is ideal for museum visitors and interesting for everyone.

Author/publisher: Smithsonian Institution

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Mar. 17, 2006 (edited Apr. 12, 2007)

Son of Citation Machine, http://citationmachine.net

Son of Citation Machine is an "interactive Web tool designed to assist high school, college, and university students, their teachers, and independent researchers in their effort to respect other people's intellectual properties." This tool allows users to enter citation information for various types of print and electronic resources to produce a MLA-, APA-, or Chicago-formatted bibliographic reference and parenthetical citation; the Turabian citation section is under construction. Son of Citation Machine is very simple and straightforward to use. Although advertising appears on the site, a registration and login procedure allows schools to block ads. Teachers and students will appreciate the ability to simplify the citation process.

Author/publisher: David Warlick & The Landmark Project

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Feb. 24, 2007

Trip Advisor, www.tripadvisor.com

Trip Advisor is very useful for anyone planning a trip. The site provides a brief overview of the city you are going to as well as the names and locations of hotels, attractions, and restaurants. Web site users are encouraged to post their experiences, videos, pictures, and advice about visiting the city. Names of hotels and restaurants can be sorted alphabetically or by user popularity. In addition to user reviews, reviews from professional travel organizations, such as Frommers, are available. Although the Web site does not make travel arrangements directly, airplane and hotel reservations can be made through their associates: Expedia.com, Orbitz, and Hotels.com. A helpful search engine allows users to nar-row their searches for information inside the Web site.

Author/publisher: Expedia, Inc

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

United Nations Environment Programme, http://na.unep.net/digital_atlasFeb. google.php

Google Maps drives this environmental atlas produced by the North American Node of the United Nations' Global Resource Information Database group, which is co-located in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, at the USGS EROS Data Center. This group works to leverage such technologies as remote sensing, geographic information systems, and online mapping tools to create an information format to influence environmental policy decision-makers. The atlas highlights sites around the world that have witnessed dramatic environmental changes. Each location is documented by striking satellite images that poignantly illustrate such environmental changes as glacial melt, desertification, deforestation, pollution, and population growth. The site's authors use quality information from scientific sources to produce an impressive online reference tool for geographers, political scientists, and environmental researchers.

Author/publisher: United Nations Environment Programme's Global Resource Information Database

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Feb. 28, 2007

Who's Alive and Who's Dead, www.wa-wd.com

"Welcome to Who's Alive and Who's Dead—the site that helps you keep track of which famous people have died and which are still alive!" The Web site lists each person's dates of birth and death (if applicable) and cause of death (if known). Hyperlinks from the person's name display a *very* brief synopsis of each person's achievements. Categories include actors and actresses, sports, political figures, musicians, and artists. The creator admits that his decision on whom to include is somewhat subjective. Useful for seeing who has died from famous musical groups, or who is still alive from famous TV shows.

Author/publisher: David Carson

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

WorldCat, http://worldcat.org

WorldCat promotes itself as "the world's largest network of library content and services." This wonderful Web resource is basically a megacatalog of more than a billion items from OCLC libraries. Users can add a Worldcat search box to their Web sites and download browser plugins to allow searching from browser toolbars. Librarians and students can use this tool to locate resources in local libraries as well as confirm the existence of resources in libraries around the world.

Author/publisher: Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (OCLC)

Free/fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Mar. 4, 2007

WordReference.com, www.wordreference.com

The WordReference Dictionaries are superior translation dictionaries for French, Italian, and Spanish. Entries include useful links to word definitions and synonyms, discussion forums where users offer human translation help, and links to Google searches for words or phrases used in context. This is especially helpful for users searching for translations of professional language in medicine, law, or business. The English language entries do not originate from a standard dictionary, but from the WordNet lexical dictionary developed at Princeton. The Spanish dictionary is derived from Espasa Calpe's 2005 Diccionario de la lengua española and features 250,000 translations. The French features 250,000 translations; the Italian, nearly 200,000 translations. This site is an excellent resource for students and translators working with Romance languages.

Author/publisher: WordReference.com, Michael Kellogg
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 9, 2006 (edited Apr. 12, 2007)

Zillow.com, www.zillow.com

Zillow.com, a new venture from the founder and former employees of Expedia.com, provides estimates of home values and related data for more than seventy million properties to prospective buyers and sellers. Entering an address will produce a satellite photograph and street map, as well as data on such home features as number of bedrooms. Users can refine the valuation of a home by adding information on renovations and special features and by selecting comparable recent home sales. As a beta site, Zillow.com's data coverage is not completely even, but information is provided on data quantity and accuracy of estimates by state and for various metropolitan areas. Homeowners and buyers will find Zillow.com a quick and useful way to estimate a home's current value.

Author/publisher: Rich Barton and Lloyd Frink
Free/fee-based: Free
Date reviewed: Mar. 11, 2006 (edited Apr. 12, 2007)