
Best Free Reference Web Sites

Eighth Annual List

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS)

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Welcome to the eighth annual Best Free Reference Web Sites List. In 1998, the Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) 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 American Library Association's (ALA) 2001 Annual Conference. This is the eighth Best Free Reference Web Sites list produced by the group. The list is 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 Library of Congress Online Catalog. An online version of the list appears on the MARS publications portion of the RUSA Web page, www.ala.org/MARSTemplate.cfm?Section=marspubs, 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 committee's charge.

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:

1. Quality, depth, and usefulness of content
 - clear statement of the content, including any intended biases;
 - appropriate for the intended audience;
 - provide appropriate links to other Web sites; and
 - attention to detail, such as absence of grammatical errors.
2. Ready reference; usefulness for reference to answer specific questions
 - may also give a broad perspective of a particular subject.
3. Uniqueness of content
 - uniqueness of the resource as a whole, creativity, and useful in a variety of reference settings.

4. Currency of content

- links are kept up-to-date; and
- update frequency is appropriate for the subject matter.

5. Authority of producer

- authority and legality clearly stated; and
- if not easily recognizable, an explanation of the history and purpose of the organization.

6. Ease of use

- user-friendly design, easy navigation;
- good search engine;
- attractive; graphic design leaves a good impression on the user; and
- easy output (printing or downloading).

7. Customer service

- contacts are responsive, e-mail addresses are correct;
- authority of producer;
- authority and legality clearly stated; and
- if not recognizable, an explanation of the history and purpose of the organization.

8. 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—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; and
- reliable, speedy server; information is there when needed.

9. Appropriate use of the Web as a medium

- components are well-integrated (audio, video, text);
- useful information is still available, even if the user does not have all the plug-ins and media components; and
- effective use of Java, other newer technologies.

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, and the process went smoothly, especially since many of the members were returning for a fifth, sixth, or seventh 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 winners were not eligible for this year's list, but a site that did not win previously could be renominated.

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.

AF: Acronym Finder, www.acronymfinder.com, Mountain Data Systems. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

Developed by Mountain Data Systems, in cooperation with several other groups, AF: Acronym Finder describes itself as "The world's largest and most accurate human-edited dictionary of acronyms, abbreviations, and initialisms." It currently contains more than 475,000 entries covering fields such as information technology, business and finance, slang and pop culture, military and government, organizations and schools, and science and medicine. Both searching by acronym and browsing by broad subjects are available. It is possible to expand your search to Acronym Attic, containing almost three million entries. However, these have not been edited. This is a very useful resource for anyone trying to discover what particular acronyms represent.

American Rhetoric, www.americanrhetoric.com, Michael E. Eidenmuller. Reviewed: March 8, 2006.

American Rhetoric combines the Online Speech Bank and The Top 100 Speeches into one easy-to-use, searchable reference database for all ages. According to the Web site, the online speech bank is an index to and growing database of more than five thousand full-text, audio, and video (streaming) versions of public speeches, sermons, legal proceedings, lectures, debates, interviews, and other recorded media events. There are approximately 604 active links arranged alphabetically by first name and checked for errors at least once every two weeks. According to leading scholars of American public address, the top one hundred speeches in this Web site are an index to and partial database of full-text transcriptions of the one hundred most significant American political speeches of the twentieth century.

Art & Architecture Thesaurus Online (AATO), www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/aat, Paul Getty Trust. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

AATO contains more than 125,000 terms covering "fine art, architecture, decorative arts, archival materials, and material culture" and is more than a thesaurus, including brief definitions (the searchable "notes" field) and an impressive, easily navigable hierarchical tree. Extensive and still growing, it includes historic and contemporary terms. Any concept can list numerous variants (for example, alternate spellings, plural form, synonyms) and may include brief citations for bibliographic sources and contributors. Every page includes a link to generate a printer-friendly version; a thorough help page is always available. AATO's sister databases from Getty, Union List of Artist Names Online (www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/ulan) (220,000+ terms) and Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names Online (www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/tgn) (1,000,000+ terms),

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are similarly designed. This comprehensive Web resource offers an excellent introduction to art terms.

BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, BBC News. Reviewed: March 5, 2006.

BBC News is the largest news broadcaster in the world, with more than two thousand journalists in forty-eight bureaus around the globe. Visitors to this site will find extensive, in-depth coverage of the world's news that strives to be "impartial, fair, and accurate," offering an alternate perspective to that of American-based news media. Sections of the site focus on world regions, business, health, science and nature, technology, and entertainment. Articles are well illustrated, and often supplemented by links to audio and video coverage. Articles are also accompanied by links to older, related reports furthering understanding of complex issues. News is available in thirty-three languages. Users can download a desktop-alert application, and can subscribe to e-mail updates and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds.

The Big Cartoon Database, www.bcdb.com, Dave Koch, The Big Cartoon Database (bcdb.com). Reviewed: February 22, 2006; revised May 1, 2006.

Produced since 1998, the Big Cartoon Database currently features 70,298 cartoons from film and television, 4,965 series, 26,294 registered users, and 4,210 reviews. Cartoons can be accessed by studio, an Academy Award-winning classic-cartoon link, or by a basic or advanced keyword-search area. Detailed entries include a brief history of the cartoon, a synopsis, cast and crew, production notes, user reviews, and a cartoon forum for registered users to discuss a particular cartoon. Although it does provide a cartoon pictures link, original cartoons, however, are not available for viewing or downloading on this Web site. The Big Cartoon Database is the definitive Web compendium for anyone interested in the history of animation.

Constitution Finder, <http://confinder.richmond.edu/index.php>, University of Richmond. Reviewed March 17, 2006.

Easy to use and up-to-date, "this database offers constitutions, charters, amendments, and other related documents. Nations of the world are linked to their constitutional text posted somewhere on the Internet." Constitution Finder's simply designed Web site features a well-placed pull-down index to more than two hundred countries ranging from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Constitutions are offered in original languages and English (and sometimes Spanish) translations. Though not exhaustive, historical constitutions and related documents are also available.

Crash Course in Copyright, www.utsystem.edu/ogc/Intellectualproperty/cprtindx.htm, University of Texas System, Georgia K. Harper. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

Created by Georgia K. Harper, lawyer and copyright expert for the University of Texas System, this very comprehensive site covers copyright and fair use as well as the broader area of intellectual property for creators and users.

Content includes the background of fair use, using multimedia, digital content in libraries, copyright management, licensing resources, online presentations, a copyright tutorial, and links to additional information available elsewhere. Although focused in the academic area and for University of Texas students, faculty, and staff in particular, the content is useful for anyone with questions pertaining to copyright, fair use, and intellectual property.

Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu>, University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Reviewed: March 9, 2006.

Documenting the American South is a large-scale, digital publishing initiative that features primary resources in history for the study of the history, literature, and culture of the American South. It is an indispensable resource for study of the Civil War and the antebellum South, African-American history, and Southern literature. It includes public-domain full-text books, pamphlets, personal correspondence, slave narratives, diaries, and oral histories. Documenting the American South remains an essential electronic-research tool for anyone seeking original and scholarly documentation about this region.

E-how, www.ehow.com, E-how. Reviewed: March 12, 2006.

Providing "clear instructions on how to do (just about) anything," the E-how Web site boasts of receiving more than "four million visitors each month." Its popularity is not difficult to understand. The Web site's instructions are easy to understand and follow. E-how covers a very wide variety of subjects including how to play the kazoo, kiss on a date, create a tile mosaic, and fix your car. E-how's users are encouraged to submit their suggestions on how to do anything via its wiki site (<http://wiki.ehow.com>). The site is funded in part by advertisements via Google that are related to the subject being researched. E-how is recommended for anyone who has felt that with just a little knowledge and a little courage, "I could do that myself."

Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago, www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org, The Chicago History Museum, The Newberry Library and Northwestern University. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

This online counterpart to the print *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, published in 2004 by the University of Chicago Press, is a major reference resource for the history of the city of Chicago. The site takes advantage of the features of Web publishing to enhance the presentation of this vast body of information. For instance, the extensive Entries index features thousands of clickable links to such topics as the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, Chicago Architecture, Al Capone, and the White Sox. The Web site also includes essays, maps, city plans, and topical galleries. Navigation is easy and fun. Contributors include many high-profile Chicago-area scholars. Ultimately, this electronic treasure is invaluable for anyone interested in Chicago or Midwest history.

Eternal Egypt, www.eternaegypt.org, Egyptian Center for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage. Reviewed: March 14, 2006.

Exploring more than “five thousand years of Egyptian civilization,” this multimedia presentation offers cultural highlights, maps, timelines, and libraries and museums of information. Because of a partnership with IBM, the site is composed of “animations, virtual environments, remote cameras, three-dimensional models, and more.” Richly colored, this easy-to-navigate site includes clear contact information, and is a uniquely complete resource. The Guided Tour, though it opens in a separate window, is an excellent introduction to all of the treasures in this site.

globalEDGE, <http://globaledge.msu.edu>, Center for International Business Education and Research, Michigan State University. Reviewed: March 3, 2006.

This international business and country studies information portal, from the Center for International Business Education and Research, Michigan State University, provides access to more than five thousand Internet resources with annotations. Searchers can quickly locate country profiles by using the country drop-down menu or the visual region selection tool and can easily browse well-organized Web bibliographies from the Resource Desk. The site is loaded with additional valuable features, including the ability to register and to be part of a network of eighteen thousand business professionals.

How Products Are Made, www.madehow.com, Thomson Gale. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

The seven-volume print set, *How Products Are Made*, published by Thomson Gale from 1994 through 2002, now has an electronic counterpart. The user can search by keyword, browse each volume individually, or browse an alphabetical list of all entries from Accordion to Zirconium. Each entry includes understated advertising links related to the product, a background, perhaps a history, diagrams, the raw materials needed, the manufacturing process, quality control, the future of the product, and a short bibliography titled “Where To Learn More.” The last section of each entry is “User Contributions,” where users may submit comments about the article or additional information. This resource should be useful to all age levels needing information and diagrams about how things are made.

In the First Person: An Index to Letters, Diaries, Oral Histories, and Other Personal Narratives, www.inthefirstperson.com, Alexander Street Pr. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

The In the First Person Web site describes itself as an “In-depth index of more than 3,350 collections of personal narratives in English from around the world. It lets you keyword search more than 650,000 pages of full-text by more than 15,000 individuals from all walks of life. It also contains pointers to some 3,500 audio and video files and 30,000

bibliographic records.” What makes this resource particularly useful is the depth of indexing, allowing searches by personal characteristics, time frame, even witnesses to particular events. About 25 percent of the full-text content is restricted to paid subscribers but it also pulls together content from hundreds of authoritative free sites.

The Library of Congress (LOC), www.loc.gov, the Library of Congress. Reviewed: March 3, 2006.

Besides providing library catalogs and bibliographic information for books and resources held in worldwide libraries, this site serves as a portal to the Library of Congress’ (LC’s) unique digitized collections and Web-resource directories. Important resources accessible from the top of the LC home page include: the American Memory and Exhibitions historic collections, the Global Gateway to multicultural information, and Thomas, which provides legislative information. This information-rich and well-designed home page also showcases “Highlights from the Library,” such as the Song of America Tour, and Today in History, as well as webcasts and noteworthy library news and events.

Merriam-Webster Online, www.m-w.com, Merriam-Webster. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

This searchable and browseable online dictionary and thesaurus for English are interconnected, offering audio pronunciation, etymologies, and occasional illustrations. Merriam-Webster Online also has free premium access (after viewing a brief ad) to electronic versions of their popular Collegiate series dictionary, thesaurus, and encyclopedia; the *Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*; French-English and Spanish-English dictionaries; an atlas; a style guide; and a medical dictionary. Basic access provides access to the “Word of the Day” and “Word for the Wise” features, word games and crossword puzzles, and “Learner’s Word of the Day” (for non-English speakers) and “Daily Buzzword” (for children). This Web site is a great place for finding and using words.

Metacritic, www.metacritic.com, CNET. Reviewed: March 13, 2006.

Metacritic is a searchable database of individual reviews of film, video and DVD, television, music, books, and games. The database can be searched by the title of a specific work, the name of an individual involved, a genre, or by “metascore,” a number derived by Metacritic from a weighted formulation of rankings by individual reviewers. Metacritic takes into account the prestige of individual critics and publications in calculating weighted averages. Metascores are color-coded green (favorable), yellow (mixed or average), or red (unfavorable). Added features in the site allow easy determination of new releases with the most favorable reviews. Coverage of individual works includes a synopsis; information about its creator, publisher, distributor, or producer; technical information such as running time or number of pages; and excerpts from individual reviews.

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National Atlas, www.nationalatlas.gov, United States Department of the Interior. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

The National Atlas Web site is well organized and easy to navigate, placing maps by region as well as type. In addition to political/geographic maps, it includes maps based on biology and wildlife, environment, agriculture, weather, and history. Also included are a mapmaker, printable maps, and dynamic maps—such as the history of the invasive Zebra Mussel in the United States. The site contains encyclopedia-style articles on map-making and the information contained in maps. The National Atlas is an outstanding example of a government Web site that places a large volume of knowledge at the user's fingertips.

National Institutes of Health (NIH), www.nih.gov, National Institutes of Health (NIH), U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. Reviewed: March 3, 2006.

This quality portal offers access to the combined medical information and scientific advances of NIH's twenty-seven highly regarded institutes and centers, including the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the National Human Genome Institute. Visitors can use this handy online medical reference to quickly access information by age groups, topics, and body locations and systems, as well as by institutes. Unique features accessible from the main site are the Talking Glossary of Genetic Terms, providing text, audio, and explanatory diagrams; and the Household Products Database, furnishing information about the composition and safety of household items. Additional Web resources and news items are provided throughout the portal's pages.

National Weather Service, www.nws.noaa.gov, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Reviewed: March 12, 2006.

In addition to providing severe-weather warnings, the National Weather Service provides detailed weather forecasts for cities, counties, and states in the U.S. as well as marine and aviation forecasts. Forecasts can be displayed in a number of different formats (text, digital, and graphical). The Web site includes Doppler radar, satellite images, and air quality, river flooding, climate, and forecast maps. Travelers as well as those just curious about tomorrow's weather will find this site useful.

Peterson's Planner, www.petersons.com, Thomson Peterson. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

The Peterson's Planner Web site is a searchable guide for choosing schools, from K–12 to college and from graduate schools to continuing-education programs, even summer camps. Admission-test preparation and financial-aid planning are important elements available for both students and parents, along with information on study-abroad programs and help for international students. Easy to navigate, the site offers program descriptions, school profiles, faculty and student information, and often links to the school's own Web site, admission application, and newspaper. This Web

resource offers one-stop shopping for educational choices and the steps needed to attend.

POTUS: Presidents of the United States, www.ipl.org/div/potus, Internet Public Library and School of Information University of Michigan. Reviewed: March 16, 2006.

The POTUS site is part of the Internet Public Library and is a quick biography source for all the U.S. presidents. Individual links to the different presidents provide basic biographical information, election results, cabinet-member biographies, and notable events that occurred in each administration. Additional links are provided for resources dealing with particular presidents and historical events that occurred during particular presidencies. This site is good for librarians in all settings that need to find fast information on U.S. presidents.

The Pulitzer Prizes, www.pulitzer.org, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. Reviewed: March 14, 2006.

Beginning in 1917, and continuing to the present day, the Pulitzer Prize is generally awarded in twenty-one different areas of journalism and photography, including published books and music. Users can search or browse each year's winners using the timeline at the top of each page, discover how the Prize winners are determined, and learn about the influential creator of the Prizes, Mr. Joseph Pulitzer. The home page is divided into four categories: Resources (with contact information), Archive (of winners and finalists), History, and Forms (guidelines and entry forms). This well-designed page is useful for anyone interested in the Prizes or winners.

Radio-Locator, www.radio-locator.com, Theodric Technologies LLC. Reviewed: March 11, 2006.

The "most comprehensive radio-station search engine on the Internet," Radio-Locator links to Web sites of more than ten thousand radio stations throughout the world, as well as to streaming audio from more than twenty-five hundred of those stations. This attractive site is useful for anyone seeking stations from specific locations or with specific formats. Basic searches can be conducted by city, state or province, country, zip code, call letters, or format (Asian, college, jazz, news, public radio). Advanced searches allow sorting and include additional criteria such as frequency and license status. Results are presented in a table, including call sign, frequency, signal strength, city, format, and audio-stream availability. From the results table, users can easily link to stations' Web sites and streams.

Recalls.gov, www.recalls.gov, The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. Reviewed: February 20, 2006

Recalls.gov was created as a joint venture between the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Food and Drug Administration, the Food Safety and Inspection Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency. Its purpose is "to provide better service in alerting the Ameri-

can people to unsafe, hazardous, or defective products.” The simply designed Web site features six buttons on the following topics: Consumer Products, Motor Vehicles, Boats, Food, Medicine, and Cosmetics and Environmental Products. Each button takes the user to the particular government agency responsible for reporting recalls on that subject area. Users can also search for recalls by keyword or recent recalls. Ultimately, Recalls.gov remains the most comprehensive one-stop resource for locating recalls.

SchoolMatters, www.schoolmatters.com, Standard and Poors, a division of The McGraw-Hill Companies. Reviewed: March 11, 2006.

The SchoolMatters site allows “parents, educators, and leaders to research information about public schools.” The site provides a simple-to-use interface to search for information and compare schools at the local, state, and national level. The results include tables and colorful graphs of school performance, staffing, and safety information as well as community demographics. Also included is a benchmarking tool called Better Performers, which “allows you to find schools or districts in the state with higher performance than your school or district in the subject, grade level, and among the group of students you specify.” A particular strength is the inclusion of numerous visually appealing graphs. This is an excellent place to start for anyone interested in comparing schools and communities.

SkyscraperPage, <http://skyscraperpage.com>, Skyscraper Page.com. Reviewed: March 11, 2006.

Beautiful architectural drawings of thousands of tall buildings around the globe, contributed by members of the SkyscraperPage Illustrators Association, can be found on this site. Users can browse by city, country, or continent, or can use the sophisticated search form. Among the available search criteria are height, construction year, location, structure type, and status. Results can be sorted by multiple criteria. The site includes completed buildings, as well as those proposed, under construction, canceled, or destroyed. Drawings are initially displayed with basic building data. By clicking on

a drawing, detailed information is displayed, such as style, materials, floor area, cost, and building use. A lively discussion forum is also provided. Anyone interested in architecture will find this site addictive.

Urban Legends Reference Pages, www.snopes.com, Barbara and David P. Mikkelson. Reviewed: March 17, 2006.

This searchable archive and repository offers insight to urban legends, “common fallacies, misinformation, old wives’ tales, strange news stories, rumors, celebrity gossip, and similar items.” Access is via a broad variety of topical headings or by basic keyword searching. Records include detailed descriptions of the item’s origin (sometimes including original text and images), its status (for example, true, false, multiple, undetermined), and an evaluation. A brief bibliography is usually included with entries for support. Free access is also available to the site’s message boards. The site is fun to browse and great for checking the hoax status of many a forwarded e-mail message.

WebMD Health, www.webmd.com, WebMD. Reviewed: March 9, 2006.

Although this site requires a free registration, and can be a bit overwhelming to navigate, it is still considered a leading authority reference resource for all things related to health. According to the Web site, WebMD Health is a primary public portal created for consumers to help them take an active role in managing their health by providing objective healthcare and lifestyle information. Content offerings include access to health-and-wellness news articles and features, and decision-support services that help consumers make better-informed decisions about treatment options, health risks, and healthcare providers. The site provides access to detailed information on a particular disease or condition and symptoms. Consumers can locate physicians, store individual healthcare information, receive periodic e-newsletters on topics of individual interest, enroll in interactive courses, and participate in online communities with peers. A keyword search box is available, as well as a topics guide for the top twelve health-related FAQs.