

Best Free Reference Websites

The Fourteenth Annual List

MARS: Emerging Technologies in Reference Section, a section of ALA's RUSA division

MARS Contributing members: *Erica Swenson Danowitz and Donna Scanlon Co-Chairs, Georgia Baugh, Deborah Gaspar, Sarah Lehmann, Rosemary Meszaros, Clare Miller, Clark Nall, Ashley Rosener, Jennifer Schwartz, Colleen Seale, Virginia Sojdehei, and Janice Wilson.*

Welcome to the fourteenth annual “Best Free Reference Websites” list. It is hard to believe that this project has been around since the late 1990s. In 1998, the Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) of RUSA appointed an ad hoc task force to develop a method of recognizing outstanding reference websites. The task force became a formal committee at the 2001 ALA Annual Conference, and is appropriately named the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee.

As in the past, the 2012 list of winning sites will appear in this Fall issue of *RUSQ*. A link to this year's list of winners can also be found on the MARS webpage along with a link to the “Best Free Reference Websites Combined Index,” which provides, in alphabetical order, all entries from the current and previous thirteen lists. Succinct and insightful annotations for the Best Free Reference Websites List entries were written by committee members in the years the particular websites were selected for the lists. These annotations provide guidance for using the websites as reference tools. Once again, the committee considered free websites in all subject areas useful for ready reference and of value in most types of libraries.

The committee has established the following criteria for nominations:

- Quality, depth, and usefulness of content
- Ready reference
- Uniqueness of content
- Currency of content
- Authority of producer
- Ease of use
- Customer service
- Efficiency
- Appropriate use of the web as a medium

More detailed explanation of the criteria can be found on the MARS webpage (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestrefcriteria.cfm).

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, using e-mail and the online bookmarking site Diigo (www.diigo.com). Each member nominated five to seven websites using the criteria specified above and then wrote brief annotations that would assist fellow committee members with reviewing and voting for their favorite nominated websites. The goal of this year's committee was to produce a final list with approximately twenty-five to thirty high-quality reference websites. It was an excellent year in terms of nominations. Over 70 websites were nominated and voting for the best ones was challenging. After careful review, the committee

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members recognized twenty-six new Best Free Reference Websites for 2012.

Winning sites were notified electronically with a letter of recognition from the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee, and they were invited to link to the online version of this list. The annotations for winning websites were also edited by the co-chairs to ensure that they are of optimal use to librarians and fit the criteria listed above

BEST WEB WINNERS 2012

AdViews: A Digital Archive of Vintage Television Commercials—Duke Libraries, <http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adviews>

“The AdViews digital collection provides access to thousands of historic commercials created for clients or acquired by the D’Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles (DMB&B) advertising agency or its predecessor during the 1950s—1980s.” This collection may be searched by keyword or browsed under the headings of company, title, or subject. The site includes a ten-question quiz about television advertising from the 50s, 60s, and 70s along with expert video interviews discussing the AdViews project, television commercials, and the DMB&B agency. From this Duke University libraries site, there is access to their additional extensive digital collections.

Author/Publisher: AdViews is a collaborative project between the Digital Collections Program and the Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History, as well as a number of other groups, at Duke University.

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 23, 2012

Art Project / Google, www.googleartproject.com

Prepare to be amazed! The Art Project, powered by Google, currently links to more than 1,000 works of art at 17 major art museums around the world, including four from the United States. Choose a museum from the homepage and then use Street View technology to virtually explore the museum or click on specific works of art and zoom in to view them in high resolution. Basic information is provided for the featured artwork and, if available, you may also click on links to Media (a YouTube video), Viewing Notes, Tags, Artwork History, Artist Information, More Works by the Artist, and More Works in the Museum (sortable by artwork or artist). Create your own personalized collection and share it. Navigation tools make the site easy to use. This site is a visual masterpiece.

Author/Publisher: Google

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 23, 2012

Charity Navigator, <http://charitynavigator.org>

This Web site has rated over 5,000 charities using evaluation criteria based on financial health, accountability, and transparency. By looking at the record for an individual charity, users can see the full list of metrics and how the charity

scored. The full record also provides financial data including an income statement and the compensation of the charity’s top leaders, a list of similar charities, and links to related news stories. The site is easily navigated—users can search for an individual charity, browse an A-Z list, or browse by category. From the home page users can select from categories including featured charities, hot topics, top ten lists, and the Charity Navigator blog. Updated frequently, these groups change according to the season and current events. At the time of this review (March), the featured charities fell under the heading “Music in Our Schools Month.” The blog featured stories including “Charities Respond to Midwest Tornadoes” and “March 1st Ratings Update.”

Author/Creator: Charity Navigator

Free/Fee-based: Free, but registration required to view some info (e.g., historical data)

Review date: March 1, 2012

CitationFox, <http://library.albany.edu/usered/cite/index.html>

CitationFox APA, <http://library.albany.edu/cfox>

CitationFox MLA, <http://library.albany.edu/cfox?type=mla>

Still in “Beta,” these guides for APA & MLA styles have numerous examples for all types of resources, from a chapter/essay in an anthology, to a blog posting, to scholarly articles with a DOI. Examples for government and legal materials can be found under the heading “Misc. Print and Online.” Examples are enhanced by providing the general form, and in many cases, numerous examples for each type. Helpful notes and examples are also included.

Author/Creator: University at Albany, State University of New York

Free/Fee-based: Free

Review date: February 23, 2012

Common Sense Media, www.common sense media.org

Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization whose mission is to provide trustworthy information to children and their families, provides a database of reviews for all types of media (movies, books, games, websites, apps, music, and TV). The site “is dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a world of media and technology.” It proposes an age appropriate target audience for various media, and rates titles based on a range of criteria including: educational value, violence, language, consumerism, security/privacy, and more. Using this information readers/users are able to judge the appropriateness of the media for their own purposes. Extensive staff reviews are posted, and viewers can post their own reviews as well. The site explains their criteria and lists the Board of Advisors so that readers can understand the perspective of the reviews. The reviewers come from diverse fields and include journalists, teachers, librarians, and academics.

Author/Publisher: Common Sense Media, Inc.

Free/Fee-Based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

Encyclopedia of Earth, www.eoearth.org

The Encyclopedia of Earth (EoE) is a free, online encyclopedia “about the Earth, its natural environments, and their interaction with society.” The EoE’s nearly 7,000 articles are reviewed and written by “scholars, professionals, educators, practitioners and other experts who collaborate and review each other’s work.” The intended audience is the general public. Navigation is fairly intuitive, content is keyword searchable and may also be browsed via broad subject categories. Articles are generally substantial and well-written providing useful intra-site links and a list of further resources. This website would be a good alternative to Wikipedia for environmental topics.

Author/publisher: Encyclopedia of Earth

Free/fee based: Free

Reviewed: February 24, 2012

Encyclopedia of Life, <http://eol.org>

“Global access to knowledge about life on Earth.” In 2007 the Encyclopedia of Life (EOL) began with a vision of providing global access to knowledge about life on Earth. As a project dedicated to serving diverse users, EOL embraces a governance model that includes the participation of people and organizations around the world that support EOL’s vision and share a desire to contribute to its mission. Participation is encouraged through registration allowing users to become EOL members with the ability to contribute content and utilize additional interactive features. Search boxes are located on almost every page of the encyclopedia. Creation of customized EOL field guides requires separate registration. The site also provides information on BioBlitz which is “a snapshot—a limited-time, limited-space species inventory of the organisms that live in an area.”

Author/Publisher: Encyclopedia of Life

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

FBI Records—The Vault, <http://vault.fbi.gov>

This web site serves as an online “vault” to thousands of declassified FBI documents and spans many decades. Visitors can search or browse the collection to find digital copies of scanned FBI files including memos, reports and other materials. Some information is still blacked out to protect identities or sensitive information, but you will still find many documents related to civil rights, gangsters, popular culture, and violent crime. The scanned resources can reveal handwritten and other documents issued internally by the FBI during the bygone days of the typewriter. In addition to well-known and lesser-known criminals, you will find dossiers on Steve Jobs, Elizabeth Taylor, George Steinbrenner and even the pop group the Monkees.

Author/Publisher: FBI Headquarters- Washington, DC

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 23, 2012

Follow the Money, www.followthemoney.org

The National Institute on Money in State Politics states it is the only nonpartisan, nonprofit organization revealing the

influence of campaign money on state-level elections and public policy in all 50 states. The comprehensive and verifiable campaign-finance database and relevant issue analyses are available for free. The site aims to encourage transparency and promote independent investigations of state-level campaign contributions by journalists, academic researchers, public-interest groups, government agencies, policymakers, students, and the public at large. This site can be searched by address or browsed by state, or use the advanced search to narrow the results by state(s), year(s), or economic interest. The blog, *The Money Tale*, also includes postings of interest and states it is “Nonpartisan. Timely. Transparent.”

Author/Publisher: National Institute on Money in State Politics

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 24, 2012

Forvo: All the words in the world. Pronounced, www.forvo.com

Have you ever puzzled over the pronunciation of a foreign word? Forvo, described as “the largest word pronunciation dictionary in the world,” is here to help with audio playback clips of word pronunciations by native speakers in over 280 languages. The database was launched in 2008 and now contains over 1,250,000 pronunciations of nearly 1,200,000 words. Forvo’s goal is to include all words in all languages but does limit entries to those that can be found in a dictionary. Idioms, short phrases and titles are also included. Choose a language or search for a word to find pronunciations. A Google map of the language and accents used is also provided. Pronunciations are provided by volunteers and they are reviewed by a team of volunteer editors for accuracy. A different language is featured daily with top pronunciations requested. The website can be viewed in several languages including French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, Japanese among others.

Author/Publisher: Forvo Media SL, from San Sebastián (Spain).

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 23, 2012

Healthy Children.org, www.healthychildren.org

Powered by pediatricians and trusted by parents is an accurate description of this website that addresses a vast number of topics related to the physical and mental health of children ranging from pre-natal to young adult. There are several subtopics: ages and stages, health living, safety and prevention, family life, health issues, tips and tools, etc. Providing access to factual and objective information, as well as guidance and opinions on subjective topics, such as ‘do babies need pacifiers?’; a modern day Dr. Spock’s guide, with much much more!

Author/Publisher: American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)

Free/Fee: Free

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

The Holocaust—Yad Vashem, www.yadvashem.org

“As the Jewish people’s living memorial to the Holocaust,

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

Yad Vashem safeguards the memory of the past and imparts its meaning for future generations. Established in 1953, as the world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem is today a dynamic and vital place of intergenerational and international encounter.” The Holocaust Resource Center provides in-depth information about the Holocaust and includes various Holocaust-era documentation (letters and diaries) provided in English and originally written by Jews during the Holocaust. The Holocaust Resource Center serves as a repository for a collection of testimonies from Holocaust survivors and excerpts from memoirs. In addition to the Holocaust Resource Center you will find other digital collections on the site including an Online Film Database, Online Exhibitions, Museum overview and a virtual tour, and so much more. The collection is searchable by supplied keywords or by media type, or may be browsed by main topic headings. It includes a central database of Shoah victims searchable by name, geography, or chronology, along with first-hand accounts of Holocaust experiences.

Author/Publisher: Created by the International School for Holocaust Studies, with the aid of the various divisions of Yad Vashem

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

Kaiser State Health Facts, www.statehealthfacts.org

Kaiser State Health Facts provides health-related data and statistics for all 50 states. The data comes from the Census Bureau's 2010 and 2011 Current Population Surveys. Users can look at individual state profiles or compare data by state. The intended audience is the general public, and the content would be especially useful for students, researchers, and interested members of the public. The site is easy to browse, and presents the data in easy-to-understand ways, such as through interactive maps or well-designed graphs. The data can be downloaded, and the sources for each set of data are clearly indicated. This is an excellent resource for health-related statistical information.

Author/Publisher: The Kaiser Family Foundation

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 24, 2012

The Khan Academy, www.khanacademy.org

The Khan Academy offers free educational content for subjects such as K-12 math (algebra, geometry, statistics, calculus, and more), science (biology, chemistry and physics, computer science, etc.) finance, history, and the humanities (art history) through an extensive video library, practice exercises, and assessments all available to anyone with Internet access. It already has 123,716,666 (and counting) lessons delivered. Begin by searching for a video or topic. The over 2600 videos provided on the website were designed to view on a computer and developed to deliver information in digestible (roughly 10-minute) segments. The practice exercises allow you to jump in at any level and work at your own pace; problems can also be broken

down into steps. Users can login with a Google or Facebook account or create an account to save and track progress with tools for users, teachers, and coaches (personal information is kept private). Students can even earn badges and points for mastery of problems and topics.

Author/Publisher: Khan Academy

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 23, 2012

MapLight, <http://maplight.org>

MapLight is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that “connects data on campaign contributions, politicians, votes, industries, companies, and more to show patterns of influence that could never be seen before.” The result is visual, easy-to-understand data that shows how campaign contributions influence voting patterns in the US Congress. The intended audience is American taxpayers and consumers, as well as students, researchers, and journalists. Users can view the data in various ways: by bill, by legislator, by company, and by interest groups. Contributions data comes from the Center for Responsive Politics. The site is well-designed and easy-to-use, and is an excellent resource for researching the influence of campaign contributions and promoting government transparency and accountability. The video tour of how the website works is worth checking out: <http://maplight.org/us-congress/guide/video-tour>. There's also Maplight California, Maplight Wisconsin, and Maplight Los Angeles.

Author/Publisher: Maplight.org

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

Merck Manuals, www.merckmanuals.com

The freely available, online versions of the *Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy* for professionals, the *Merck Manual Home Health Handbook* for laymen, and the *Merck Veterinary Manual* are available on this site. You may browse by topic or use the A to Z index to locate reliable information about specific medical terms, conditions, and diseases. These manuals are especially helpful for accessing authoritative information about medical disorders such as symptoms and how the disorders and diseases included are diagnosed and treated. Prevention strategies are included in the *Home Health Handbook*.

Author/Publisher: Merck and Company

Free/Fee-Based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 15, 2012

MIT OpenCourseWare, <http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>

MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW), is “a web-based publication of virtually all MIT course content. OCW is open and available to the world and is a permanent MIT activity.” This is a great resource for self-improvement and for college students who would like extra guidance through courses at their own institutions. Many students like the reinforcement of studying lecture notes and materials from parallel courses. The content is amazingly rich and can include online textbooks, exams, images, and sometimes video or audio clips.

Author/Publisher: Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

National Jukebox, www.loc.gov/jukebox

This site contains over 10,000 recordings made by the Victor Talking Machine Company between 1901 and 1925. Playlists can be created that allows users to compile and listen to their favorite songs or recordings. There are also playlists compiled by Library of Congress staff and guest experts. Compilations include Ragtime recordings, Civil War music, and George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin songs. Each recording provides details about the record, when and where it was recorded and who composed and sang the song. Since most of these recordings are original they tend to be a bit scratchy—but that’s part of their charm. A “Victrola Book of the Opera” which dates from 1919 is also included and provides interesting information on over 100 different operas. This online book also includes photos and audio clips.

Author/Publisher: Library of Congress
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 7, 2012

NewspaperCat, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/hnccoll>

Large numbers of historical newspapers are digitized every year by libraries, archives, historical societies, and other organizations but they remain under-utilized because they are virtually buried in the web. NewspaperCat, the Catalog of Digital Historical Newspapers, was developed to improve access to this rich primary resource material through one searchable database. The Catalog currently links to over 1,700 freely available digital historical newspapers from across the United States and the Caribbean with the goal of including as many North American newspapers as possible. Search the catalog by keyword, title, or location (city, county, or state) to locate links to these digitized newspapers and a treasure trove of information.

Author/Publisher: University of Florida; George A. Smathers Libraries
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 17, 2012

Newspaper Map <http://newspapermap.com>

In the Newspaper Map you can find newspapers from all over the world, most of them translatable to and from many languages with one click. With over 10,000 newspapers available from around the world this site is a great place to search for recent news events or to locate local newspapers in a specific geographical area. Search by newspaper or place (city, state, country, etc.). You may also filter your search by language. Other tools available allow you to limit by major newspapers or historical newspapers (a new beta feature). A note of caution: this site may be addicting!

Author/Publisher: Great Name; Gothenburg, Sweden
Free/Fee-based: Free (donations are accepted & appreciated)
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

Oyez Project at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law | A multimedia archive of the Supreme Court of the United States, www.oyez.org

Devoted to the work of the United States Supreme Court, Oyez primarily aims to provide an audio record of the Supreme Court from 1955 to the present. Despite the emphasis on recent years, each year of the Court receives attention, back to 1792. Photos or portraits of each justice are included, along with birth and death dates, their lengths of service, and opinions they may have written. Information on each case includes an overview, the names of the advocates, tally of votes for and against a decision, the docket number, dates, and relevant issues. Media, when available, can be downloaded to an MP3 player, and a cite-this-page accompanies each page.

Author/Publisher: Chicago-Kent College of Law, Illinois Institute of Technology
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 23, 2012

PLoL: Public Library of Law, www.plol.org/Pages/Search.aspx

PLoL, the Public Library of Law, brings together a virtual library of case law, regulatory, and other legal information into one searchable database. It provides free access to state Supreme and Appellate Court cases from 1997 to the present. It also includes statutes, constitutions, and court rules for all 50 states and regulations and administrative codes from selected states. At the federal level the PLoL offers all Supreme Court cases, all federal circuit court cases from 1950 forward, the US Code, the Code of Federal Regulations, and Federal Court Rules, as well as additional legal materials. The case law is made available through Fastcase; other resources are linked back to state or federal websites for access and where relevant, links are also provided to subscription-based content hosted by Fastcase. Initial registration is required to view cases. A user guide and tutorials are available to assist researchers.

Author/Publisher: Fastcase
Free/Fee-based: Free but may link to content requiring payment.
Date Reviewed: February 22, 2012

State Agency Database, http://wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/State_Agency_Databases

“In every US State and the District of Columbia, agencies are creating databases of useful information—information on businesses, licensed professionals, plots of land, even dates of fish stocking.” Some of the information found here is available on search engines, but much of it is part of the invisible web and not so easy to find. Since July 2007, librarians and other government information specialists have identified and annotated these databases and put them in one place. Fifty state web sites can be searched in one resource.

Author/Publisher: Government Documents Round Table (GODORT)/ALA
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

Taking the Mystery out of Retirement Planning, www.dol.gov/ebsa/publications/nearretirement.html

This site is a comprehensive guide to retirement planning that includes interactive worksheets that you complete as you read each chapter. It is an informative companion for exploring what is often a stressful subject. Users can find information about Social Security, investing, and budgeting in retirement. An excellent list of links to other free websites is also included.

Author/Publisher: Department of Labor

Free/Fee-based: Free.

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012

The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database, www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces

Emory University provides an accessible database of 35,000 slaving voyages. Ten million Africans were shipped and this site “offers researchers, students, and the general public a chance to rediscover the reality of one of the largest forced movements of peoples in world history.” Information for each voyage includes names of ships, captains, origin, and destination. The maps section includes information on trade, crops, and ocean currents in addition to the track of the voyages. Information on known Africans includes age, height, and gender, cross-referenced with the ship. Ship’s logs

and images, slave portraits, and vintage maps complete the story. Downloadable lesson plans are linked to learning standards and tailored to grade levels. Supporting web sources are linked for educators.

Author/Publisher: Emory University

Free/Fee-based: Free.

Date Reviewed: February 17, 2012

Worldatabank, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>

This site provides a wealth of statistics from databases maintained by the World Bank such as World Development Indicators and Global Development Finance. World Development Indicators (WDI) provides data across many categories such as education, the environment, health, and poverty. Global Development Finance (GDF) provides statistics about the economic and financial health of countries. The site is easy to navigate as it guides the user to select the database, the country or countries, the statistics of interest, and the years needed. The results are presented in a nicely formatted report to which a title and footer can be added and the whole exported. This site is invaluable for access to statistics by country and time period.

Author/Publisher: World Bank

Free/Fee-Based: Free

Date Reviewed: February 24, 2012