

# Best Free Reference Websites

## *The Fifteenth Annual List*

### **RUSA MARS: Emerging Technologies in Reference Section**

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Welcome to the fifteenth annual “Best Free Reference Websites” list. This project has existed since the late 1990’s. Fifteen years ago (1998), the Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) of RUSA appointed an ad hoc task force to develop a method of recognizing outstanding reference websites. This 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 2013 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 ([www.ala.org/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestfreewebsites/marsbestref2013](http://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestfreewebsites/marsbestref2013)) along with a link to the “Best Free Reference Websites Combined Index,” which provides, in alphabetical order, all entries from the current and previous fourteen lists. Committee members wrote succinct and insightful annotations for the Best Free Reference Websites List entries 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 for most 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](http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestrefcriteria.cfm)).

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, using email and the online bookmarking site Diigo ([www.diigo.com](http://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 another excellent year in terms of nominations. Over

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70 websites were nominated and committee members were charged to vote for the best ones. After careful review, the committee members recognized twenty-six new Best Free Reference Websites for 2013.

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

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### BEST WEB WINNERS 2013

**Census Bureau: Economic Indicators**,  
[www.census.gov/cgi-bin/briefroom/BriefRm](http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/briefroom/BriefRm)

This Census Bureau website brings together the latest numbers for over a dozen key economic indicators, such as new residential construction, home ownership rates, and U.S. international trade on goods and services. The site's layout is simple and readable. There are links to the current press release about the indicators, links to historical data, and a quick comparison to last month's data.

*Author/Publisher:* Census Bureau  
*Date reviewed:* 2/27/2013

**ChooseMyPlate.gov**, [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)

Whether you are a vegetarian or meat lover, want to lose weight, up your physical activity, or find daily eating-healthy tips, ChooseMyPlate.gov has answers to your questions. Users can set calorie goals, find sample menus and food plans here. MyPlate helps to build a healthy plate of food covering all five food groups. The site includes SuperTracker an online tool to track, plan, and guide food selections. It provides tips on how to increase physical activity. The site has information for consumers of all age groups and also for professionals.

*Author/Publisher:* United States Department of Agriculture  
*Date reviewed:* March 8, 2013

**Citi-Data.com**, [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com)

Citi-Data is the perfect means for researching any city, zip code, or neighborhood, whether for personal reasons or for reports and research. The information is limitless, and includes: home value estimator, geographical data, state profiles, crime data, religions, political contributions, unemployment data, and many other categories.

*Author/Publisher:* Advameg, Inc.  
*Date reviewed:* 2/28/2013

**City Mayors: Mayors Running the World's Cities**,  
[www.citymayors.com/index.html](http://www.citymayors.com/index.html)

"The City Mayors Foundation, an international think tank dedicated to urban affairs, consists of professionals working together in Europe, North and South America, Asia, and Africa to promote strong and prosperous cities as well as good local government. Established in 2003, City Mayors

encourages city leaders from across the world to develop innovative and sustainable solutions to long-standing urban challenges such as governance, society, housing, transport, education and employment." The site offers a worldwide view of major events, politics, ethics, environment, economics, finance, city branding, business, culture, education, security, and other topics.

*Author/Publisher:* City Mayors Foundation  
*Date reviewed:* March 8, 2013

**Codecademy**, [www.codecademy.com](http://www.codecademy.com)

"Learn to code interactively, for free." Codecademy teaches the basics of JavaScript, HTML, Ruby, Python, and more using free interactive web-based lessons. The learner starts coding right from the beginning, and the lessons are contained within the website, so it doesn't require any installation or downloading. Users are asked to register to keep track of their progress. There is also a large and active community of users who provide support and work on projects together.

*Author/Publisher:* Codecademy  
*Date Reviewed:* 1/31/2013

**Compare 50: Comparing Economic Performance Across the United States**, <http://compare50.org>

Compare 50 is an interactive website allowing users to compare economic and demographic data across all 50 states. Users select the type of data they want to see, the date range, and which states they would like included in the chart. The information updates in real time. The website is intuitive, fun to use, and presents the data in an interesting, understandable, and visually appealing way.

*Author/Publisher:* Next 10  
*Date reviewed:* 1/31/2013

**Coursera**, [www.coursera.org](http://www.coursera.org)

Coursera partners with top universities and professors to offer courses online free to anyone. Courses are offered in a wide range of topics (23 categories) including biology, business, computer science, humanities, mathematics, medicine, social sciences and many more. There are over 2.8 million participants and 325 courses offered at 62 participating universities worldwide (four continents & five languages). This site is appropriate for college students or those individuals wishing to continue the pursuit of lifelong learning.

*Author/Publisher:* Coursera—an educational technology company founded by Stanford University computer science professors Andrew Ng and Daphne Koller.  
*Date reviewed:* 2/28/13

**Densho**, <http://densho.org/densho.asp>

Densho is a Japanese term meaning "to pass on to the next generation," or to leave a legacy. The legacy offered here is a history of incarceration during World War II. What began with capturing oral histories from Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII has become a mission to educate, preserve, collaborate, and inspire action for equity. The Archive contains

more than 800 hours of interviews and visual histories as well as over 10,000 images documenting Japanese American history. The site also contains a timeline, links to other useful websites, and recommended printed material. The Learning Center provides multidisciplinary lessons featuring firsthand accounts for upper elementary to undergraduate students.

*Author/Publisher:* Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project

*Date Reviewed:* 3/6/2013

### **Dietary Supplements Labels Database,**

<http://dietarysupplements.nlm.nih.gov/dietary>

Dietary Supplements Labels Database allows users to search “information about label ingredients in more than 7,000 selected brands of dietary supplements” sold in the United States to compare the ingredients in different brands. Users can also browse by brand name, target population (Men, Women, Seniors, Kids/Teens), and ingredient. Supplements include vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and protein boosters, along with many other types of dietary supplements. Each product entry contains Product, Ingredient, and Manufacturer Information tabs. Product Information includes Unit described, Supplement Facts, Other Ingredients, Manufacturer’s Suggested Use, Label Warnings, Claims of Manufacturer, NIH and other Research Center Fact Sheets (if available), and more. An ingredient search or browse retrieves an entry with “direct links to pertinent health information, fact sheets, research findings and on-going clinical studies at the National Institutes of Health (NIH).” This database is a useful tool for locating and comparing dietary supplement information for anyone researching, taking or considering taking dietary supplements since it brings much information about dietary supplements together in one place.

*Author/Publisher:* United States National Library of Medicine based on the Dietary Supplements On-Line Database (DSOL) ©2005–2012 by DeLima Associates

*Date reviewed:* 2/24/2013

### **DOAB: Directory of Open Access Books,** [www.doabooks.org](http://www.doabooks.org)

DOAB’s primary purpose “is to increase discoverability of Open Access books.” To be included in this directory, a book must be “available under an Open Access license (such as a Creative Commons license)” and “subjected to independent and external peer review before publication.” Currently, there are 1,272 academic books from 35 publishers, almost all published within the last 10 years or less. Both a simple keyword search and advanced search are possible. The advanced search allows the user to specify what to search: Title, ISSN/ISBN, Author, Keyword, Abstract, or Publisher. At time of review, titles in this database are in English, German, Italian, Dutch, or Russian. Books can be downloaded in PDF or read online. This is a growing collection of academic books appropriate for students or casual readers interested in having access to reasonably current, freely available ebooks.

*Author/Publisher:* OAPEN Foundation

*Date reviewed:* 2/24/2013

### **Dynamic Periodic Table,** [www.ptable.com](http://www.ptable.com)

This website is an interactive periodic table with “dynamic layouts showing names, electrons, oxidation, trend visualization, orbitals, and isotopes.” There is a search engine where users can search for compounds, formulas, elements, etc. This periodic table can be used as a quick reference or for more in-depth research. The site pulls information from Wikipedia and WebElements and also provides photos, videos, and podcasts for the different elements. The site is easy to navigate, tablet friendly, visually appealing, available in multiple languages, and has a flexible interface.

*Author/Publisher:* Michael Dayah

*Date reviewed:* 2/26/2013

### **Historical Newspapers Online,**

<http://guides.library.upenn.edu/historicalnewspaperonline>

Historical Newspapers Online collects links to historic U.S. newspapers fully accessible in digital archives, collections and libraries on the web. Familiar resources include Chronicling America (Library of Congress) and Google News. This site is organized by state and contains some lesser-known newspaper titles. Coverage includes the late nineteenth and twentieth century.

*Author/Publisher:* University of Pennsylvania Libraries

*Date reviewed:* 3/7/13

### **Holocaust Encyclopedia,** [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)

This multimedia encyclopedia of the Holocaust (Shoah) includes more than 300 articles on the history of the destruction of the Jews of Europe. Each topical or biographical entry deals with one aspect or person and is enhanced by photographs, documents, oral histories, ID cards, artifacts, animated or still maps, historical film footage, music, and/or individual life stories. Major topics covered include the history of the Holocaust, the Aftermath, Anti-Semitism, the Camp System, Children, Einsatzgruppen, Extermination Camps, the Final Solution, Forced Labor, Ghettos, Jewish Resistance, Liberation of Nazi Camps, Mosaic of Victims, Non-Jewish Resistance, Pogroms, Racism, Refugees, Rescue, Third Reich, United States and the Holocaust, War Crimes Trials, Women, and World War II. Encyclopedia articles and materials are available in: English, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Turkish, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Greek, Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu.

*Author/Publisher:* United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

*Date reviewed:* 2/20/2013

### **Human Body Maps,**

[www.healthline.com/human-body-maps](http://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps)

This site allows visitors to explore the human body in 3D. By mousing over the male or female body provided on the landing page, users can learn more about many aspects of human anatomy. Bodies can be rotated around and viewed through different layers such as the circulatory or the lymphatic system. Clicking on the head for example, provides

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images and information on that area of the body from the brain to the muscular structure, to arteries and nerves. All body parts and systems have labels that can be viewed or hidden. A search feature also allows users to look up a particular body part or system. Embedded links to additional resources complement the interactive models.

*Author/Publisher:* Healthline Networks, Inc.

*Date reviewed:* 2/28/13

**Journalist's Resource**, <http://journalistsresource.org>

The Journalist's Resource project is run by staff and graduate students at the Harvard Kennedy School. It offers access to scholarly reports and papers on a wide range of topics of interest to media practitioners, educators, students and others. To be included, research must generally be empirically based, peer-reviewed, published, and the product of a major university, government body, or nonpartisan research organization. The reference section offers information and links to online tutorials on core journalism skills such as interviewing, style, ethics, and more. The site also offers syllabi for educators.

*Author/Publisher:* Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy-Harvard University

*Date reviewed:* 3/6/13

**LibriVox**, <http://librivox.org>

This site provides free access to the audio version of the classics found in the public domain. Most of the texts come from the Project Gutenberg site, and include a variety of authors such as Dickens, Victor Hugo, James Joyce, Mark Twain, and Tolstoy. Volunteers provide the audio to the numerous works found in this resource. Visitors can search the LibriVox Catalog to search a title or author. They can also view recently added titles or browse the entire collection. There are also audiobooks in other languages including German, French, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, and Spanish just to name a few. All audio files can be accessed on a computer or downloaded to any MP3 or portable audio player. They are available in a variety of MP3 or other audio formats. An entire work or individual chapters can be downloaded. This site should also help individuals who want to improve their foreign language and/or reading skills.

*Author/Publisher:* LibriVox

*Date reviewed:* 2/28/13

**Media History Digital Library**, <http://mediahistoryproject.org>

The history of American cinema, broadcasting and recorded sound can be found in trade magazines and other journals. The Media History Digital Library seeks to make these materials in the public domain widely available for free. By digitizing collections of classic media periodicals in the public domain the Media History Digital Library is able to make extensive runs of periodicals available online. The current selection available includes: *Business Screen* (1938–73), *The Film Daily* (1918–36), *International Photographer* (1929–41), *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* (1930–49), *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television*

*Engineers* (1950–54), *The Educational Screen* (1922–62), *Motion Picture* [Magazine] (1914–41), *Moving Picture World* (1907–19), *Photoplay* (1914–40), *Radio Age: Research, Manufacturing, Communications, Broadcasting, Television* (1942–57), *Radio Broadcast* (1922–30). A list of "Select Holdings" is available on the Collections page (<http://mediahistoryproject.org/collections/>). Tip: To access the collection click on the icon/triangle next to the title.

*Author/Publisher:* Media History Digital Library

*Date Reviewed:* 3/6/2013

**MyEnvironment**, [www.epa.gov/myenvironment](http://www.epa.gov/myenvironment)

MyEnvironment allows searching for environmental data and other environmental information by location. Users can search by ZIP code, street address, county name, body of water name, National Park name, or any place name that appears on a roadmap. The results for the area appear by topic: MyMaps allows viewing and downloading of EPA and partner data specific to the area searched; MyAir reports on daily air quality; MyWater provides water quality for surface water such as creeks, rivers, or lakes in the designated area; MyEnergy includes estimates for various types of energy production, consumption, and cost by source and type; MyHealth catalogs air pollutants that are known to cause cancer, birth defects, or serious illness; MyLand lists National Priorities List sites with hazardous substances or contaminants in the ground; MyCommunity provides a way for the user to submit any project or movement in the area that will benefit the environment; and MyEnvironmental Reports provides links to analytical reports prepared by cities, counties, or states related to environmental conditions in the area. This resource also provides code that allows users to add a variety of environment-related search widgets to a website. For anyone who wants an overview of the state of the environment in a particular place, this is the site to use.

*Author/Publisher:* Environmental Protection Agency

*Date reviewed:* 2/24/2013

**National Association of Counties (NACo)**, [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org)

NACo is the only national organization representing the nation's 3,069 counties, parishes, and boroughs. It "researches, publishes, and disseminates a variety of information for and about counties, as part of its mission to increase public understanding of counties." This website is easily navigable and can be searched by keyword. It provides an index to all counties in the United States. Users can search for counties by population, county seat, using a city search, or by using a map. Each record lists elected county officials, the county seat, county website, county population, and links to Census Bureau data.

*Author/Publisher:* National Association of Counties (NACo)

*Date reviewed:* 2/25/2013

**Old Maps Online**, [www.oldmapsonline.org](http://www.oldmapsonline.org)

This site offers digitized versions of old world maps provided by various participating institutions including the British Library's map collection, the Harvard Library, the New

York Public library and other institutions. Users can search for a place or zoom on a particular area using a world map found on the main page of the site. It uses GPS technology to pull up maps that span centuries from 1000 to 2010. Searching or zooming on a particular region produces a list of old maps that can be viewed to the street level. A timeline that allows users to look for historical maps from a set period is also included.

*Author/Publisher:* The Great Britain Historical GIS Project based at The University of Portsmouth, UK and Klokan Technologies GmbH, Switzerland.

*Date reviewed:* 2/26/13

### **Pew Social and Demographic Trends,**

[www.pewsocialtrends.org](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org)

The Social and Demographic Trends project of Pew Research provides reports written from 2005 to the present. The reports cover a broad range of topics. Topics covered range from the 2012 Election through Criminal Justice, Family Roles, Retirement, Teens and Technology, to Work and Employment with many topics in between listed alphabetically. The site is designed with many appealing photographs, charts and graphs illustrating the text. Navigation from one section to another is always available with links in a bar across the top of each page. This resource includes downloadable datasets from which the reports were derived. The site also offers interactive media including videos from 2008 to present, all detailing social and demographic trends in the United States. “The Data Gallery, Our Life in Numbers” section, at the time of this review, shows the percent of married adults in 1960 compared with today (72 percent to 51 percent). This is a well-researched, accessible resource for researchers, students, and the general public interested in “Numbers, Facts and Trends Shaping Your World.”

*Author/Publisher:* Pew Research Center

*Date reviewed:* 2/27/2013

### **SAH Archipedia: Classic Buildings,**

<http://sah-archipedia.org>

The SAH Archipedia is an authoritative online encyclopedia of the building world published by the Society of Architectural Historians and the University of Virginia Press. Within this site users will find histories, photographs, and maps for more than 8,500 structures and places. This site also includes landscapes, monuments, artwork, and more. This content is from the Buildings of the United States (BUS) book series and includes content from 12 of the BUS volumes including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, Virginia, West Virginia, Michigan, Iowa, Colorado, Nevada, and Alaska. This content demonstrates the richness and diversity of architecture and building practices across many centuries. This collection is expected to grow as more of the BUS series is digitized.

*Author/Publisher:* Society of Architectural Historians and the University of Virginia Press

*Date Reviewed:* 3/6/2013

### **STATS: We Check out the Numbers Behind the News,**

[www.stats.org](http://www.stats.org)

This non-partisan, nonprofit site takes major issues and news stories and analyzes them solely from a quantitative and scientific perspective. Hot topics found in the news and society such as alcoholism, obesity, global warming, and addiction are covered in detail and debunk particular claims or stereotypes through hard data. The site also offers a page where statistical terms and particular data tools are described. A blog discusses issues found in current events (such as the Budget Sequester when this reviewer accessed it last) and uses statistical data to comment, support, or disagree with the issue. Links to other statistical resources are also included. This website is a helpful resource for anyone writing argumentative papers, preparing for a debate, or wanting to learn more about statistical analysis.

*Author/Publisher:* Statistical Assessment Service—STATS

*Date reviewed:* 3/2/13

### **VideoLectures.NET, <http://videlectures.net>**

This website promotes science and the exchange of ideas by providing high quality content to both the scientific community and the general public. It offers an “award-winning free and open access educational video lectures repository.” The lectures are given by distinguished scholars and scientists at important occasions such as conferences, summer school programs, workshops, and promotional events. All the lectures, accompanying documents, information and links are systematically selected and classified through an editorial process that takes into account user comments.

*Author/Publisher:* VideoLectures.NET

*Date reviewed:* 3/1/2013

### **Web Gallery of Art, [www.wga.hu/index.html](http://www.wga.hu/index.html)**

This website is a virtual museum and searchable database of European art. It offers information related to art from the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Neoclassicist, Romantic, Realist, and Impressionist periods. It includes over 30,000 images, artist biographies, commentaries, and guided tours. Users can take various “tours” including a European sculptors or an Italian painters tour. Accompanying each thumbnail image is the artist, title, year, medium, and owner (museum) information. Thumbnail images often include links to other works by that particular artist.

*Author/Publisher:* Emil Krén and Dániel Marx

*Date Reviewed:* 3/8/2013

### **World Bank Open Knowledge Repository,**

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org>

Launched in April 2012, the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository provides access to over 9,000 (and growing) research works. Works are primarily from 2005 to the present and include books, World Bank Annual Reports, World Development Reports (1978 to present), journal articles from World-Bank-published journals (2007–11), outlook reports primarily containing data, Policy Research Working Papers

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(2005–present), and more. Since the World Bank collects and disseminates information on the state of world development, the publications cover many aspects related to this issue. This repository also examines worldwide trends such as economics, education, finance, poverty, or water resources by geographic area or country. Users may search across the

entire repository or browse by Collections, Authors, Publication Date, Topics, or Titles. This rich source of facts, data, and reports will interest researchers, students, and the general public.

*Author/Publisher:* World Bank

*Date reviewed:* 2/27/2013