
Best Free Reference Websites

Tenth Annual List

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) contributing members are James Langan and Margaret Y. Perkins, Co-Chairs; Kirsten L. Allen; Vicki Bloom; Amy W. Boykin; Christopher S. Dunham; and Caroline E. Geck.

Welcome to the tenth annual “Best Free Reference Websites List.” 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. This is the tenth “Best Free Reference Websites” list produced by the group. Past lists and all future lists will be published in each year’s Fall issue of *RUSQ*. 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 webpage, 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 webpage in the future.

Since the Web is a changing world, readers should note that the websites 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 websites:

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 websites
 - Attention to detail—e.g., 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
 - Useful in a variety of reference settings
4. Currency of content
 - Links are kept up to date
 - Update frequency is appropriate for the subject matter
5. Authority of producer
 - Authority and legality clearly stated
 - If not easily recognizable, an explanation of the history and purpose of the organization
6. Ease of use
 - User-friendly design—easy navigation

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- Good search engine
 - Attractive—graphic design leaves a good impression on the user
 - Easy output (printing or downloading)
7. 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
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
 - Reliable, speedy server—information is there when needed
9. Appropriate use of the Web as a medium
- Components are well integrated (audio, video, text, etc.)
 - Useful information is still available, even if the user does not have all the plug-ins and media components.
 - Effective use of Java and 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 second or third 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 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 webpage.

Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy, www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm

Avalon Project is a growing collection of documents "relevant to the fields of law, history, economics, politics, diplomacy and government." Aimed at providing primary source content, it includes documents dating back to Ancient Greece. Its emphasis, however, is on European and U.S. history from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries. Searchable by date, subject, author, and title, the Avalon Project includes the texts of significant documents as well as lesser known documents that marked the turning points in the history of law and rights. At the same site is Project Diana, a human rights archive. Students and instructors in European or U.S. history courses will find Avalon's site invaluable when they need to find primary source material.

Author/Publisher: Yale Law School

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/15/08

The BookHive, www.bookhive.org

Subtitled "Your Guide to Children's Literature and Books," the Book Hive's audience encompasses infancy to early adolescence. "Providing reader's advisory service, this site contains hundreds of recommended book reviews in a variety of reading levels and interest areas." Site "users can search for books by author, title, reading level, interest area, number of pages, and even favorite illustrator." Areas of interest include graphic novels, multicultural books, fantasy, history, and sports. This colorful, attractive site has won many awards and is easy to use.

Author/Publisher: Staff of the Public Library of Charlotte-Mecklenburg (N.C.) County

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/16/08; revised: 4/16/08

Child Care and Early Education Research, www.childcare.research.org

This valuable portal to data sets and research for many aspects of child care and early education is a collaboration of four authoritative institutions interested in advancing the body of knowledge available to early childhood educators and policymakers: the National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health; the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; the Child Care Bureau; and the Office of Planning, Research and Education, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Despite the wealth of information provided, navigating to key documents, including citations to peer-reviewed journal articles and select full-text, is straightforward because of the exemplary design of this website.

Author/Publisher: Child Care and Early Childhood Research Connections

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 17, 2008

Cooking Light, www.cookinglight.com

For anyone who has wondered, "What is for dinner?" Cooking light can improve not only your nutrition, but also your life. The Cooking 101 section lists helpful tips in the kitchen, including everything from avocado preparation to Tamaki shaping. The partner website, myrecipes (www.myrecipes.com/recipes), contains more than twenty thousand recipes available online. Nutritional information included in each recipe lists fat content, sodium, protein, and calories. Step-by-step illustrations and a selected video section show meals being prepared. The travel section includes tips on some of the healthiest cities and the best places to eat out when traveling. Exercise and lifestyle guides offer suggestions on how to become active, stay active, or find new activities.

Author/Publisher: Cooking Light Magazine

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/17/08

Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org

This think tank, which describes itself as “A Nonpartisan Resource for Information and Analysis,” assists policymakers, corporations, and citizens of the world to better understand the complex modern issues that affect national security and peace. The webpage enables users to access up-to-date news and analyses by different approaches, including searches by region, by topical issue, and by publication type. The topical issues address a dozen relevant subjects, ranging from Defense and Homeland Security to Terrorism. The Terrorism section is especially detailed and is further subdivided into twelve relevant subheadings. The Publications section supplies daily analyses and offers a one-stop center for a variety of media, such as audio, podcasts, and video.

Author/Publisher: Council on Foreign Relations

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: February 17, 2008

Discovery School, <http://school.discoveryeducation.com>

Comprising a wide range of educational resources, Discovery School is designed to have a positive effect on student learning at the primary and secondary levels. Teachers, students, and parents will find hundreds of lessons, interactive games, and brain boosters, plus a puzzlemaker tool, lesson plan library, gallery of clip art, and science fair central. Kathy Schrock’s Guide for Educators and the classroom materials are especially useful resources for aspiring teachers. Fun, colorful, and simple to use, Discovery School is a curriculum library and student learning center rolled into one.

Author/Publisher: Discovery Education

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/13/08

Education Research Information Center (ERIC), www.eric.ed.gov

This free search interface allows educators and researchers across the United States to search 1.2 million educational documents, providing access to full-text of articles when available. ERIC’s mission “is to provide a comprehensive, easy-to-use, searchable, Internet-based bibliographic and full-text database of education research and information.” Materials relevant to creating lesson plans or developing curriculum can be found using the database. Researchers intent on staying abreast of current education research will find the most up-to-date studies. ERIC is an invaluable source for educators and researchers and is beneficial for both public and academic libraries.

Author/Publisher: Institute of Education Sciences/U.S. Department of Education

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 02/07/08; Revised: 4/15/08

Europa—The European Union at a Glance, http://europa.eu/abc/index_en.htm

The twenty-seven-member European Union, often called by its acronym EU, is one of the United States’ strongest trading partners and the largest donor of world development aid. Europa permits readers to learn quickly about the history of the EU, its current structure, as well as other information relevant to understanding the diversity of cultures that form the EU. The publication, “Europe in 12 Lessons,” is particularly informative for those unfamiliar with the EU’s structure. The site, which offers information on each member country, is an excellent resource for those looking for information on a particular country. Travel information is provided for those who are traveling to a EU state or are interested in visiting Europe.

Author/Publisher: The European Union

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 02/07/08; Revised: 4/16/08

FactCheck, www.FactCheck.org

This authoritative site from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, also referred to as the Annenberg Political FactCheck, “monitors the factual accuracy of what is said by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases.” Original articles analyze and offer commentary about politicians’ claims and statements. Individuals can browse by date or search by keywords to access the last four years of the Ask FactCheck archives. If the answer cannot be found using these archives, individuals can ask their questions directly using the AskFactCheck e-mail form. This site also features vidcasts and a Fact of the Day section.

Author/Publisher: Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/14/08

Fodor’s, www.fodors.com

This publisher, well known for producing well-designed and detailed travel guidebooks, has produced a companion website that is easy to navigate and rich in travel and destination information. For example, the North American section covers twenty-three major cities. The extremely helpful Neighborhoods option offers the top reasons to go to specific neighborhoods and enables searchers to compare up to three neighborhoods with side-by-side descriptions, sightseeing recommendations, and ratings for categories, such as shopping and nightlife. Registered users assist with the creation of the site’s content by having capabilities to submit restaurant and hotel ratings. Forums are also available to chat about traveling and to ask for advice.

Author/Publisher: Fodor’s

Free/Fee-based: Free, with products available from store

Date reviewed: 02/19/2008

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

IIHS-HLDI: Crash Testing and Highway Safety,
www.iihs.org

This authoritative resource from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and the Highway Loss Data Institute is especially useful for its motor vehicle ratings. The ratings are searchable by make, model, type, and size. The site also provides news, research, and statistics, as well as laws and regulations pertaining to automobile and highway safety. Additional information is provided in an extensive FAQ section. Finally, special status reports and videos plus copies of consumer brochures round out this informative site.

Author/Publisher: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and Highway Loss Data Institute

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/16/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

Indeed, www.indeed.com

This site, featuring the motto “one search, all jobs,” was created in 2004 to furnish streamlined access to employment opportunities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The homepage offers a straightforward search engine for job seekers. Visitors can search by job category, geographic location, and keywords. The site also provides a forum for individuals to discuss employment openings and links to Google maps showing job locations, as well as relevant blogs discussing the employment marketplace and trends. Unlike Monster.com, users cannot post their resumes, but links are provided to contact the recruiting organizations directly. Alerts can be set up to be delivered via e-mail.

Author/Publisher: Indeed

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/17/08

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP),
www.iep.utm.edu

This high-quality site is an excellent starting point for beginning philosophical research and accessing overviews of the people and ideas in the discipline of philosophy. It is a peer-reviewed resource that contains articles that “are original contributions by specialized philosophers around the Internet” or public domain articles identified by IEP editors. All the articles are copyrighted, and proper citation guidelines are explained. Because the site permits keyword searching and includes an alphabetical index, searchers will find it easy to use.

Author/Publisher: General Editors, James Fieser and Bradley Dowden

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/16/08

KidsHealth, www.kidshealth.org

KidsHealth is an award-winning resource on children’s health from gestation through adolescence. There are separate areas for kids, teens, and parents, “each with its own design, age-appropriate content, and tone.” Many of the hundreds of signed feature articles are also available in Spanish. Sample

teacher and parental topics include growth and development by age and topic, emotions and behavior, infections, and sexual development. Children, for example, can find information on a range of topics from body functions, feelings, and safety issues to the effects of swallowing gum. Adolescents can explore topics, such as snoozing in class, food and fitness, coping skills, and body image. With its inviting design, clearly written yet authoritative articles, and broad coverage and potential user base, KidsHealth is a valuable resource.

Author/Publisher: Nemours Foundation

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/15/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

Kids.gov, www.kids.gov

As the “official kids’ portal for the U.S. Government,” Kids.gov offers access to more than twelve hundred educational links from the government and other sources. The intended audience includes both teachers and children. The homepage includes a Site of the Month and clearly labeled sections for educators, children in grades K–5, and children in grades 6–8. Within each section there are links to eleven different categories, including Fun Stuff and academic subjects such as math, social studies, government, and careers. Links are tailored to the appropriate age group. Government and nongovernment sites are clearly distinguished. This well-organized and appealing site is an excellent resource for youngsters looking for information and for teachers developing lesson plans.

Author/Publisher: Federal Citizen Information Center, U.S. General Services Administration

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 2/10/08

Kidsreads.com, www.kidsreads.com/series/index.asp

This colorful website offers book reviews and author interviews for children, as well as book-themed games and contests. Children can browse by author, title, keyword, or read reviews of new publications. Also included are reviews of numerous popular series and books recently made into movies. Book club guides, lists of upcoming releases and award-winning books, addresses where children can write to authors, and a newsletter enhance the usefulness and appeal of this site. Additional features, including podcasts, are shown as coming soon. This engaging site would appeal to children, parents, librarians, and teachers.

Author/Publisher: Carol Fitzgerald, Founder/President

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 2/10/08

Maps of War, www.mapsofwar.com

Using Macromedia Flash maps, satellite imaging, and links to secondary websites, Maps of War highlights the history of war. The author, a self-proclaimed history buff, “wanted to create something that showed the ‘Big Picture’ of war instead of the battle-by-battle view we always see through the narrow spyglass of the mainstream media.” The Maps section contains animated presentations on subjects like the

spread of democracy or religion in the world. In the Library section, the website links to other authoritative maps and websites, including Amnesty International's Eyes on Darfur and the BBC's site for mapping violence in Baghdad. Flash software is required.

Author/Publisher: Maps of War

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 02/20/08; *Revised:* 04/16/08

Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism,
www.mipt.org

This think tank, whose motto is "Countering Terrorism with Knowledge," furnishes knowledge databases, best practices, lessons learned, and information for first responders. From the homepage, users can access four main pages of information: the Terrorism Knowledge Base, the Terrorism Information Center, the Responder Knowledge Base, and Lessons Learned Information Sharing. The Terrorism Knowledge Base is especially detailed and provides information about specific groups, leaders, or incidents. This knowledge base also offers analytical tools to study and compare data by various attributes. Some sections of this site require registration to ensure that information does not fall into the wrong hands. Registration is free and will lead to a wealth of targeted information.

Author/Publisher: Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 2/17/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

National Center for Children in Poverty, www.nccp.org

This one-stop center whose goal is "Putting Research to Work for Children and Families" is produced by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and is a valuable resource for streamlined access to research and datasets about children and poverty.

Childcare professionals, such as educators, social workers, and policymakers can use this resource to find quick facts, demographic profiles, and other useful information that may not be readily available by other means.

Author/Publisher: National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 2/17/08

National Public Radio, www.npr.org

This is the official website for National Public Radio, the producer and distributor of noncommercial news, music, radio programming, podcasts, and more. Geared for a general audience, this sprawling resource is especially rich in its international coverage and in-depth look at arts and culture, health, science, books, and music across all spectrums. Also included are interviews, interactive polls, daily news quizzes, local radio schedule information, live audio and music, news feeds, desktop alerts, and searchable program archives. While users may find the sponsored ads and the busyness of the screens somewhat distracting, this hardly detracts from

the unparalleled range of up-to-date, quality news and entertainment offered.

Author/Publisher: National Public Radio

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/14/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

Office of Minority Health (OMH), www.omhrc.gov

This resource from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides health professionals and citizens of the United States with valuable information about improving the health and reducing the risks among prominent ethnic and minority groups in the United States, including African Americans, American Indians, Latinos, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders. To fulfill their mission, this website provides statistics and data relevant to these groups and is a premier site about funding and cultural competencies, best practices, and related health topics. The OMH provides its toll-free telephone number, 1-800-444-6472, at the top of their homepage.

Author/Publisher: Office of Minority Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 2/17/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

The Political Graveyard, <http://politicalgraveyard.com>

The site describes itself as the Internet's most comprehensive source for American political biography, listing 138,150 politicians, living and dead. The site is indexed by people and place names, and includes indexes by age, office or election, special recognition or distinction, occupation, organizational affiliation, and many other categories. This is a fascinating and award-winning site for political trivia junkies and is a useful tool for answering most questions about federal, state, and local politicians.

Author/Publisher: Lawrence Kestenbaum

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/16/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

Rotten Tomatoes, www.rottentomatoes.com

According to the website, "Over 7 million readers each month use RT [Rotten Tomatoes] globally as a dependable, objective resource for [opinions] of movies and DVDs." Good films receive a "fresh" tomato rating and bad movies receive a "rotten" rating. In addition to film reviews, the site features entertainment news, links to celebrity information, and the Weekly Ketchup (a newsy Web column). The site is easy to search and includes well-placed navigation aids, making it an excellent companion to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com).

Author/Publisher: IGN Entertainment

Free/Fee-based: Free

Reviewed: 2/16/08; *Revised:* 4/16/08

ReliefWeb, www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc100?OpenForm

ReliefWeb is an online gateway to a gold mine of information related to humanitarian emergencies and disasters.

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

Created by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in late 1996, the site provides the most up-to-date information regarding humanitarian crises. Information updates are made around the clock and include maps and documents from other UN offices, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, and media outlets. The site also has a searchable database, so users can locate the amount of funding that has been given to a crisis, as well as the amount of funding believed necessary to help those individuals in a crisis area.

Author/Publisher: ReliefWeb/OCHA

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 02/07/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08

Time, www.time.com

Access to current headlines is just the beginning of the site's scope. The ability to view editions from Europe or Asia, lets users see what other people are reading, and lets them compare, side-by-side, alternate editions' covers. The For Kids edition links to its own website and is designed for teachers of children in grades K–6. Various topical blogs are available at the site, and the Multimedia tab leads users to graphics, photos, podcasts, and videos. Articles can be printed, e-mailed, or linked to a variety of Web 2.0 sites such as Del.icio.us, Technorati, and Google. A Sphere link allows users to search for related articles or blogs. Most impressively, the magazine's entire run is full-text searchable and provides cover images as well.

Author/Publisher: *Time*, in partnership with CNN

Free/Fee-based: free

Date reviewed: 02/19/2008 *Revised:* 4/15/08

Transportation Security Administration Area for Travelers, www.tsa.gov/travelers/index.shtm

The Transportation Security Administration's Area for Travelers provides information on almost everything a traveler would need to know about security-related requirements for a trip on public transportation. The primary emphasis is on air travel, but there are also links to information on prohibited items and travel resources for motor coach, rail, maritime, and mass transit passengers. Travelers will find indispensable information such as a detailed description of security screening; lists of items prohibited in carry-on and/or checked baggage, tips for traveling with children, information for travelers with disabilities, and charts of average security checkpoint wait times. This site is an easy-to-use resource for anyone planning to travel in the United States by public transportation.

Author/Publisher: Transportation Security Administration, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: 2/10/08

Visual Dictionary Online, <http://visual.merriam-webster.com>

Visual dictionaries allow users to match images to words. In this stunning online version, six thousand illustrations and twenty-thousand full definitions are included from all aspects of life. Access is provided two ways: Users may browse by broad themes such as food, architecture, machinery, or sports, or they may search using the index search box. Students might search for illustrated science topics like cicadas and plant cells, while homeowners can surf through the House or Gardening sections. With pronunciation audio clips, the dictionary is aimed at English learners and translators. Weaknesses include animated advertising, small typeface, a distracting corporate logo watermark, and difficulty working in older browsers. This dictionary is the place to go for accurately labeled, detailed illustrations of everyday objects from soup to nuts.

Author/Publisher: QA International/Merriam-Webster

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/12/08

Volunteer Match, www.volunteermatch.org

With this site, organizations can find a great volunteer, and volunteers can find a great organization. Search results can be narrowed to as close as five miles from home or expanded to encompass the volunteer's state. Opportunities to volunteer include arts and culture, education, homelessness, immigration, and many others. Understandably, users living near large metropolitan areas will see the greatest number of volunteer opportunities, while searchers living in rural areas may see listings for a few local or virtual organizations.

Author/Publisher: Volunteer Match

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/17/08

Yahoo! Finance, <http://finance.yahoo.com>

Yahoo! Finance provides an extensive range of current and historical financial information for investing and personal finance. Users can access stock quotes, with a fifteen-to twenty-minute delay, as well as historical stock quotes in daily, weekly, or monthly formats. Users can also find company information including financials, Securities and Exchange Commission filings, and insider ownership. Information on industries, bonds, mutual funds, and currency is also provided. Yahoo! Finance allows users to read the very latest news on a company or industry, while finding links to stories from sources like the Wall Street Journal Online, The Motley Fool, and TheStreet.com. Aside from distracting advertisements, the columns on personal finance and the effects of markets and the economy on everyday life broaden the appeal of this excellent, meaty site.

Author/Publisher: Yahoo!

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: 2/12/08; *Revised:* 4/15/08