Best Free Reference Websites

Twelfth Annual List

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) contributing members: *Amy W. Boykin and Kay Cunningham, co-chairs, Vicki Bloom, Erica Danowitz, Leah Dodd, Joe Hardenbrook, Matt Lee, Kelsy Peterson, Donna Scanlon, Kristen Shuyler, and Alec Sonsteby.*

W elcome to the twelfth 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, and now it is appropriately named the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee.

Like previous lists, the 2010 list of winning sites is being published in this year's fall issue of *RUSQ* and added to the Library of Congress's online catalog. A link to this year's list is on the MARS webpage along with a link to the Best Free Reference Websites Combined Index, which provides in alphabetical order all entries in the current and previous eleven 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 that can be used for ready reference and that can be of value in most types of libraries.

The committee has established the following criteria for nominations:

1. Quality, depth, and usefulness of content
2. Ready reference
3. Uniqueness of content
4. Currency of content
5. Authority of producer
6. Ease of use
7. Customer service
8. Efficiency
9. Appropriate use of the Web as a medium

A 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 an online bookmarking site called Diigo (www.diigo.com). The process went smoothly, in part because several of the committee members have served on the committee for several years. Each member nominated seven to nine 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. After careful review, the committee members decided to recognize thirty new Best Free Reference Websites for 2010.

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.

Abbreviations.com, www.abbreviations.com.

An extensive collection of hundreds of thousands of acronyms, abbreviations, and initialisms, Abbriviations.com is neatly arranged by broad areas (e.g., Medical, Internet, International, Community). Each area is further broken down into more specific, browsable categories such as Veterinary, Emoticons, or Non-Profit. The International area is multilingual, featuring hundreds of entries in Spanish, German, French, and other languages. Users can contribute abbreviations as well as look them up. In addition to browsing, search options are also available: word to abbreviation, abbreviation to word, and word in definition. There is also a metasearch option that seems to deliver term use in Amazon and Google, but what it actually does is unexplained. Otherwise, this is a great resource.

Author/Publisher: STANDS4
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 24, 2010

Ad*Access, http://library.duke.edu/digitalcollections/adaccess.

This free digital collection from Duke University contains more than seven thousand advertisements from print magazines and newspapers, published from the 1910s to the 1950s, primarily in the United States and Canada. Content focuses on five areas: radio, television, transportation, beauty/hygiene, and World War II. Users can search by keyword or browse the broad focus areas and then narrow results by company, product, subject, or year. Three different browse displays are available—grid, list, or scrolling wall. Individual images can be viewed in three different sizes, can be downloaded, and may be used for research and teaching with attribution. Both black and white and color images are included. Ad*Access is of interest to anyone researching American history, culture, or advertising.

Author/Publisher: Duke University Libraries
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2010

American Time Use Survey, www.bls.gov/tus.

The American Time Use Survey (ATUS) provides statistics and graphical data on the amount of time people in the United States spend on various activities: watching TV, eating, and working in the yard. Use the ATUS tables or charts to find statistics by either demographic characteristic (older Americans or students, for example) or area of activity (such as work, leisure, or sleep). If existing tables and charts are not

sufficient, microdata files from 2003–8 can be freely downloaded for additional analysis. Supporting documentation explains how the data is used by the government. Useful for business or cultural research, the American Time Use Survey provides a snapshot of how Americans spend their days.

Author/Publisher: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 18, 2010

The Association of Religion Data Archives, www.thearda.com.

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) provides statistics on religious bodies—both in the United States and internationally. Data varies by location. Figures for denominations in the United States can be had at the state, county, and zip code level for 1980, 1990, and 2000, while profiles for the entire denomination can include more historic data. Statistics on religious adherents are available for entire countries along with various socioeconomic measures. GIS Maps are available, and it is possible to cross-reference geographies with practices. Downloadable datasets allow users to work with data independently of the site. A research-oriented site, the ARDA includes much information of use to educators, journalists, religious workers, and the general public.

Author/Publisher: Association of Religion Data Archives, Department of Sociology, The Pennsylvania State University
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 12, 2010

The Baby Name Wizard, www.babynamewizard.com .

The Baby Name Wizard helps a parent-to-be to find that perfect name. The Find a Name feature allows users to create a list of potential names by length and letter preference, heritage, and popularity. The Namipedia provides the etymologies, suggests popular sibling pairings, and presents reader-generated information and experiences related to particular names. Registration is required to make contributions. Mapping and graphing features, recently upgraded to Adobe Flash technology, pull data from the Social Security Administration to track name popularity by state or by year, back to the 1880s for the country and to the 1960s for states. Whether browsing for inspiration (or entertainment) or researching a short list, this is an informative and entertaining site with lots of visual appeal.

Author/Publisher: Generation Grownup
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2010

Cars.com, www.cars.com.

Car shoppers should drive over to Cars.com for easy to understand information on what to buy, where to buy, and how much to pay for a new or used auto or truck. It includes comprehensive pricing and financing information, side-by-side comparison tools, photo galleries, videos, unbiased editorial content, and a large selection of new- and used-car inventory. Search for specific makes, models, and years, or

browse current models. Opinions are available from experts and consumers alike. Additional tools include an auto loan calculator and Kelley Blue Book values. Current car owners will also find this an excellent resource for recall data, repair cost estimates, and tax credits.

Author/Publisher: Cars.com, Classified Ventures
Free/Fee Based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 19, 2010

eBooks @ Adelaide, http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au.

The University of Adelaide provides full-text e-books of classic works of literature, philosophy, and history from a variety of countries, most available free online to anyone because the copyright has expired. Users can browse by subject, title, author, or search by keywords. The formatting is attractive and very readable, with fonts and page layout approximate to what the eye is used to seeing in a print book. Titles can be downloaded to eReader devices supporting the ePub standard (such as Sony, BeBook, Bookeen, the Barnes and Noble Nook, or the iPhone). Brief author biographies and links to other resources are provided for each work, as are MARC records. EBooks @ Adelaide is useful for any library seeking an additional source of electronic books.

Author/Publisher: University of Adelaide
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 11, 2010

FedSpending.org, www.fedspending.org.

Launched in 2006, FedSpending.org is a project of OMB Watch, a nongovernmental agency that works to increase government transparency and accountability. All data is collected from United States government sources, with the largest providers being the Federal Procurement Data System for federal contracts and the Federal Assistance Award Data System for federal financial assistance (e.g., grants and loans). With separate tabs for contracts, assistance, and recovery, the user interface is simple and easy to use. Information is available by state, congressional district, contracting agency, product/service, or other options depending on the tab selected. Information on the top one hundred contractors or recipients begins from the year 2000; click dollar amounts for detailed profiles. The site is useful for anyone interested in government.

Author/Publisher: OMB Watch
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 22, 2010

GovTrack.us: Tracking the U.S. Congress, www.govtrack.us.

GovTrack, a nongovernmental resource, is a tool for researching the past and current activity of the U.S. Congress. It offers the status of U.S. federal legislation, voting records for the Senate and House of Representatives, information on members of Congress, district maps, congressional committee memberships, and the text of the Congressional Record. Archival material only dates back to the 1990s, however. For recent congressional history, it is an easy-to-use option.

Various tracking options enable users to follow GovTrack through Facebook, widgets, or RSS feeds; "trackers" are provided throughout the site to assist those who want updated material. Particularly useful for the general user, GovTrack.us simplifies legislative tracing.

Author/Publisher: Civic Impulse
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 11, 2010

Hathi Trust Digital Library, http://catalog.hathitrust.org.

A collaboration between the members of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation and institutions in the University of California system, Hathi Trust is a repository for the archiving and sharing of digitized collections, which can range from nineteenth-century periodicals to historical bicycling to war to hard-to-find government documents and congressional materials. The site's main page allows for general catalog searching as well as browsing collections or searching within the full text of collections. A limit to "Full View Only" retrieves items freely available online. Result lists can be narrowed by many options including subjects, language, and date, while full records include hotlinks on the author and subject and for similar items.

Author/Publisher: Hathi Trust
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2010

Hulu, www.hulu.com.

A site with free television episodes, full-length movies, and video clips may seem like a strange nomination for MARS, but if your library has a bustling media department, this is a good referral for patrons frustrated that Season X of Favorite-Cult-Classic is always checked out. Browse by genre, search for a particular show or movie, or create a free account for notification of new shows. From documentaries to popular series, Hulu's varied collection has something for everyone—just don't cancel cable yet. The downside is that the user's computer must meet many system requirements and requires a high-speed Internet connection; even so, Hulu is a nice alternative to lurking in wait for the DVD shelving cart.

Author/Publisher: Hulu
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2010

ipl2: Information You Can Trust, www.ipl.org.

In 2009 the Internet Public Library (IPL) and the Librarians Internet Index (LII) merged. Both sites had run independently until January 2010 when they launched a new site combining many of the features from both. The new site, ipl2: Information You Can Trust, features a searchable, subject-categorized directory of authoritative websites; links to online texts, newspapers, and magazines; special sections for kids and teens; and ipl2-generated special collections on a variety of topics (literary criticism, hurricane preparedness, Italian ready reference). The Ask an ipl2 Librarian online reference service is also available. With its wealth of reliable

information, ipl2 is great site for all ages.

Author/Publisher: iSchool @ Drexel University, College of Information Science and Technology

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 11, 2010

LIFE photo archive hosted by Google, http://images.google.com/hosted/life.

As amazing a resource as the photos printed in LIFE alone are, the LIFE Photo Archive hosted by Google is even more so. With millions of photos accessible at the click of a mouse, the archive is a rich resource for anyone seeking images relating to U.S. history and world events. Approximately ten million images are available, and because most of the photos were never published, the collection contains many never-before-seen pictures. Users can search by keyword, browse by decade, or explore featured events, people, or places. Names of photographers and the dates that photos were taken are identified. With images ranging from the 1750s to the 2000s, the site will be popular with users wanting images with historical context.

Author/Publisher: LIFE/Google

Free/Fee-based: Free (Framed reproductions offered for sale on selected images)

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2010

The Living Room Candidate: Presidential Campaign Commercials, 1952–2008, www.livingroomcandidate.org.

Video is as much a part of history as text. The Living Room Candidate presents video advertising for presidential candidates—Democrat, Republican, and significant third party, when applicable—from1952 to the present. Accompanying descriptive matter places the ads in context. Transcripts of the ads are included, along with full credits and production information. Numerous commercials are available for each election year, plus text overviews of campaign years, information on party nominees, and election results. Other browse categories are thematic: biographical, ads utilizing fear, featuring children, etc. Useful for researchers and the general public of all ages, the site requires Adobe Flash Player 8 or above and a screen resolution of 1024x768 or higher. Major Web browsers are supported.

Author/Publisher: Museum of the Moving Image

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 15, 2010

Muckety—Exploring the paths of power and influence, http://news.muckety.com.

Muckety is a news site with a difference; taking the news, it charts relationships between players and other persons and events. Search for a celebrity name to see connections on an interactive graph. Categories for News and Politics, Business and Media, and Celebs provide automatically generated relationship maps, or—with registration—users can create their own. From a business perspective, users can see relationships between companies or individuals, then find links to related news articles below the chart. Sources mined for information include government sites, top news providers, and more. Founded by award winning journalists, the site states that it strives for accuracy, timeliness, and objectivity with nonpartisan aims. Adobe Flash is required for the graphs.

Author/Publisher: Muckety. Laurie Bennett, Gary Jacobson and John Decker.

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 12, 2010

NASA Images, www.nasaimages.org.

NASA Images, a free service of the Internet Archive and the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration, provides "access to NASA's image, video, and audio collections." Content is divided into five sections: Universe, Solar System, Earth, Aeronautics, and Astronauts. Users may browse or search for media, some of which is simply spectacular. This site aims to "promote education and facilitate scholarship in the math and sciences at all levels, and to build general interest and excitement around space exploration, aeronautics, and astronomy," and it certainly succeeds.

Author/Publisher: NASA and the Internet Archive

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 23, 2010

Newseum | Today's Front Pages, www.newseum.org/todaysfrontpages.

Each morning, almost eight hundred newspapers from around the globe send the front page of their newspaper to the Newseum, which posts these original, unedited pages online. Newspaper pages can be viewed as a gallery, list, or map, and may be sorted by region or continent, such as North or South America. Daily front pages from previous dates are not available but there is a newspaper archive where newspaper front pages are grouped by "events of historical significance." While some material may be objectionable to viewers, the content is undeniably worldwide in scope.

Author/Publisher: Newseum

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2010

Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, www.lib.utexas.edu/maps.

More than twenty-five thousand maps, most in the public domain, have been digitized at the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas at Austin. Although there is an emphasis on Texas, maps from around the world also are available. Of special interest is the Historical Collection, which contains earlier editions of U.S. Central Intelligence Agency maps, U.S. Army maps, and U.S. Geological Surveys, among others. In the unlikely event that you can't find a suitable map for your project, the site offers advice on searching for specific maps online. These quality images are a delight to view and would enhance any presentation.

Author/Publisher: University of Texas at Austin

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 28, 2010

Petrucci Music Library/IMSLP, http://imslp.org/wiki/Main_Page.

Finally there is a place to find free sheet music online! Petrucci Music Library is a collaborative virtual library of public domain music scores. It currently includes more than twenty thousand works from three thousand composers, with new works added every month. The site boasts the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach in the Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe (1851–99), Ludwig van Beethoven, Frédéric Chopin, Johannes Brahms, Corelli, Faure, Sibelius, Schumann, and a large percentage of Franz Liszt, among others. General keyword and composer name searching is available, as well as browsing by time period, genre, instrumentation, and nationality. Want to find music such as Ave Maria? Need piano solos by Erik Satie? Looking for pieces featuring the tuba? You will find these and much more in this digital repository.

Author/Publisher: Project Petrucci
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 18, 2010

The Poetry Tool, www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poetrytool.html.

This is an excellent resource for finding poems in full text and finding articles about poetry and poets. The Poetry Tool site can be searched or browsed by category, occasion, geographic area, first line, time period, or popularity of a poem. There are articles, hundreds of podcasts, as well as audio versions of poems sometimes read by the author of the poem. College and high school students will find a wealth of information quickly and efficiently.

Author/Publisher: The Poetry Foundation
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Jan. 26, 2010

Special Issues Index, www.hillsearch.org/special_issues.cfm.

The Special Issues Index provides access to special issues from business trade journals and industry associations. Special issues provide key statistics on products, industries, markets, and consumers, and are indispensable for business research. Browse the Special Issues Index by subject or journal, or keyword search across report citations. When you've found a report of interest, use the Get Article drop-down menu at right to check on its availability. Most reports are freely available online, although some of those listed are only index entries to print journals.

Author/Publisher: James J. Hill Reference Library
Free/Fee-based: Free, although optional fee-based document delivery available
Date Reviewed: Feb. 18, 2010

Speech Accent Archive, http://accent.gmu.edu.

The Speech Accent Archive is a teaching and research tool for linguists, ESL teachers, and anyone interested in the accents of various English speakers. It provides short audio recordings of native and non-native speakers of English saying the same English paragraph. Basic demographic information, such as age, place of birth, and languages spoken, are provided for each speaker. Phonetic transcriptions and linguistic analysis of the recordings are available. Users need to download a free Apple QuickTime plug-in to hear the recordings. The Archive is a project of the Linguistics Program in the Department of English, the College of Arts and Science's Technology across the Curriculum Program, and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. This is a helpful site that is easy to use.

Author/Publisher: Steven H. Weinberger, Associate Professor and Director of Linguistics in the Department of English at George Mason University
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 23, 2010

The Supreme Court Database, http://scdb.wustl.edu.

This database includes information about Supreme Court decisions from 1953–2008. Clicking on the Analysis section allows users to search for a specific decision. This database is a "definitive source for researchers, students, journalists, and citizens interested in the U.S. Supreme Court." Examples of information about each case available include "the parties to the suit, the legal provisions considered in the case, and the votes of the Justices." A Getting Started section is helpful to first-time database users.

Author/Publisher: Washington University in St Louis School of Law
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Jan, 26, 2010

Test Reviews Online, http://buros.unl.edu/buros/jsp/search.jsp.

This site helps users identify tests and instruments used in education, business, psychology, etc. Ways to search the Reviews include an alphabetical search, a category search, and a keyword search. The online index provides author, title, purpose of the measure, publisher address and other contact information along with a cross-reference to the volume and page of the review in *Mental Measurements Yearbook* (1985–present). This feature makes the site particularly useful for libraries with print volumes but no online access. Full reviews are available in pay-per-view.

Author/Publisher: Buros Institute of Mental Measurements
Free/Fee-based: Free (index); Fee for reviews
Date Reviewed: Feb. 12, 2010

U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, www.cpsc.gov.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission's website is an essential resource for anyone concerned about the safety and potential health risks of consumer products. One of the most useful features on the site is the Recall and Product Safety News database, which is searchable by date, product type, company, country of manufacture, and more. Visitors to the site will also find information about safety in the home, product safety standards, and a section with kid-friendly articles about safety.

Author/Publisher: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 24, 2010

U.S. Department of State: Travel, www.state.gov/travel.

The State Department's Travel website contains indispensable information for domestic and international travelers. Here, visitors can learn about applying for passports and visas, airport security restrictions (including traveling with liquids), currency exchange rates, and much more. Of particular note is the country-specific list of travel warnings and alerts, which describes potentially dangerous situations for Americans traveling abroad. International travelers will also want to look at the section containing emergency assistance resources for American citizens traveling abroad. Any first-time international traveler (and many seasoned travelers) will want to check out this website.

Author/Publisher: U.S. Department of State
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 24, 2010

U.S. Economy at a Glance, www.bls.gov/eag/eag.us.htm.

For up-to-date statistics and easy access to U.S. economic information, this is a site to bookmark. Users can browse monthly unemployment rates and also track changes in payroll employment, average hourly earnings, and the consumer price index. Statistics are provided by month or quarter, and users can access back data as well. Besides national data, users can narrow results by state, region, or metro area. This site is ideal for users seeking quick information and basic economic data.

Author/Publisher: Bureau of Labor Statistics
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2010

UNdata: A world of information, http://data.un.org.

For international statistics on a broad range of topics, this is the place to go. A collection of statistics and data sets from nearly thirty United Nations databases, UNdata contains more than 60 million records from various UN groups (UNESCO, UNHCR, Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization). Users can use the keyword search, view country profiles, limit results to specific UN organizations, and explore popular topics (population, crime, health). Statistics are presented full-text, and data is downloadable. Updated frequently, this source is helpful for librarians, researchers, and general users.

Author/Publisher: United Nations Statistics Division
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2010

Wordnik: All the Words, www.wordnik.com.

Wordnik is much more than an interactive online dictionary of English. Beyond giving definitions from the 2008 *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* and other sources, Wordnik provides example sentences showing words in context, information about words' frequency and use patterns, related words, and more. It allows users to contribute information, such as recorded pronunciations, tags, and suggestions for new words. Flickr images are used to illustrate some words. This is definitely a site for "anyone who wants to know more about a word than they can find out in a traditional dictionary."

Author/Publisher: CEO and co-founder is Erin McKean, previously editor in chief for American Dictionaries at Oxford University Press.
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 23, 2010

World Digital Library, www.wdl.org.

"The WDL makes it possible to discover, study, and enjoy cultural treasures from around the world on one site, in a variety of ways. These cultural treasures include, but are not limited to, manuscripts, maps, rare books, musical scores, recordings, films, prints, photographs, and architectural drawings." The site was developed by "the U.S. Library of Congress, with contributions by partner institutions in many countries; the support of the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); and the financial support of a number of companies and private foundations." After selecting a region the user is able to narrow the documents by time period, country, topic, type of item, or institution. Ease of use encourages exploration.

Author/Publisher: Hosted by the Library of Congress with the Support of the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: Feb. 15, 2010