

Best Free Reference Websites

Eleventh Annual List

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) contributing members: Amy W. Boykin and Caroline E. Geck, Co-Chairs; Vicki Bloom; Charles Cobine; Kay Cunningham; Leah Dodd; Christopher S. Dunham; Kelsy Peterson; and Colleen Seale.

Welcome to the eleventh 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 it is now appropriately named the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee.

Like previous lists, the 2009 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 (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/sections/mars) along with a link to the “Best Free Reference Websites Combined Index,” which provides in alphabetical order all entries in the current and previous ten lists. Succinct and insightful annotations for these 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 these 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
 - 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

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

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
- 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

- 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, mainly by e-mail. The process went smoothly, especially given that many of the committee members have served on the committee for several years. Each member nominated seven to ten 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, committee members decided to recognize twenty-nine new Best Free Reference Websites for 2009.

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.

The American Presidency Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu
Established in 1999, this site is valuable for its extensive

coverage of both historical and current information on United States presidencies and is easy to navigate. It provides a searchable database of more than eighty-five thousand documents, such as speeches, official papers, executive orders, proclamations, news conferences, and press briefings. Various retrieval options are available, including by keywords, dates, document type, and presidents. Additional in-depth analyses are offered on topics that may be challenging to locate by other means, such as presidential relations with Congress. Lastly, QuickTime videos of important presidential election moments, addresses, and speeches are provided.

Author/Publisher: University of California, Santa Barbara—John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, Collaborators

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

Arbor Day Foundation, www.arborday.org

While involvement and donations are desired by the Arbor Day Foundation, the “learn” section garners this site’s win. Packed with tree identification, regional hardiness zone recommendations, tips on planting and care, and youth education for all ages (and educators), the site links to additional resources, including state foresters and extension services information. Searchable, the site offers detailed tree guides by species with size, shape, growth rate, and hardiness data; sun, soil, and moisture preferences; as well as a description and information on its attributes, wildlife value, and history and lore. This site is intended especially for homeowners, but is useful for anyone interested in trees.

Author/Publisher: Arbor Day Foundation

Free/Fee-based: Free; memberships and products available

Date Reviewed: Mar. 1, 2009

BBC News—Country Profiles, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm

This site supplies information on the history, economy, and politics of countries and territories. Each profile includes an overview, map, facts, and current leaders. A media overview provides information on the press, television, radio, news agencies, and number of Internet users. Links provided on the side of the profile connect to the latest news and key stories, BBC links, background articles, related Internet sites, video and audio clips from the BBC archives, recent news links, and timelines. Information on more than twenty key international organizations is also included.

Author/Publisher: Compiled by BBC Monitoring

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

Blue Letter Bible, www.blueletterbible.org

Containing fourteen searchable versions of the Holy Bible, Blue Letter Bible offers an extensive insight into one of the world’s most popular books. Passages can be changed from version to version for easy comparison and various tools (an encyclopedia, a dictionary, twenty-three text commentaries, and thirty audio/video commentaries) help users explore

chapter and verse. Additional resources, including charts, outlines, timelines, and maps, plus four streaming audio versions, are available from each passage's page. When appropriate for the passage, more than 2,700 hymns are also available (lyrics are shown with a link to a MIDI file to play music). This Web resource is useful for anyone interested in biblical study and especially notable for comparing Bible versions.

Author/Publisher: Sowing Circle

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date reviewed: Mar. 1, 2009

BookFinder.com, www.bookfinder.com

BookFinder.com is a "one-stop ecommerce search engine" that indexes more than 150 million books for sale from the catalogs of more than 150 million sellers in 50 countries. Included are new, used, rare, and out-of-print titles. With its huge inventory, users can compare prices and selections quickly, particularly for hard-to-find items. It is easy to use and flexible. There are many ways to locate items: author, title, ISBN, first or signed copies, binding, price, language, and whether new or used. While Amazon is a gold mine, BookFinder.com is definitely a gem!

Author/Publisher: Launched by Anirvan Chatterjee; now an independent subsidiary of AbeBooks

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, www.business-humanrights.org

This site is one of the fastest ways to find information about the exploitive practices of four thousand businesses worldwide, which would be difficult to locate by other means. Users can begin searching by company name, issue, country, or topic. Balanced coverage is provided via news, announcements, and special resources while providing responses from the accused companies. By making negative enterprise behavior more transparent, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre may help stop companies' human rights abuses.

Author/Publisher: Business and Human Rights Resource Centre

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 17, 2009

CareerOneStop, www.careeronestop.org

CareerOneStop is a U.S. Department of Labor-sponsored portal that provides career resources and workforce information. With its occupation and industry information, salary data, self-assessment tools, and career exploration assistance, this rich resource will help those exploring career opportunities to make informed choices. It also has useful information for job seekers, students, and career counselors, such as where to file unemployment insurance, locations of career centers, resume advice, and relocating options. This thorough site even has a special section devoted to military transition. Fulfilling its promise to be a one-stop shop, CareerOneStop

includes links to state job banks, the online version of *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (U.S. Labor Department, 2008), and other useful resources.

Author/Publisher: CareerOneStop

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2009

Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>

Sponsored jointly by the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP), this site provides select digital access to American newspapers from 1880 to 1910 and from mainly ten states. Additionally, access to an invaluable directory of newspapers published in the United States from 1690 to the present is available. The directory can be browsed by title or searched by state, county and city, date, keyword, frequency, language, or type of newspaper. The directory usually offers comprehensive information, such as titles, alternative titles, publication places, geographic coverage, persistent links, publishers, dates of publication, descriptions, frequencies, languages, subjects, general notes, LCCN, OCLC numbers, succeeding titles, and links to holdings.

Author/Publisher: Library of Congress

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 20, 2009

English Short Title Catalogue, <http://estc.bl.uk>

This resource for advanced research in the humanities indexes works published in the British Isles and North America between 1473 and 1800. Basic and advanced search options are available as well as a browsing feature. Bibliographic data includes imprints and physical descriptions of each item. Because many of these works can be found in the Early English Books Online and the 18th Century Collection Online, this site also lists libraries holding physical copies and gives microfilm collection reel numbers. Finally, the site supplies information if the resources are available electronically or on the Web.

Author/Publisher: British Library

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 22, 2009

ePodunk, www.epodunk.com

Detailed, easily browsable profiles of cities and counties across the United States are the specialty of ePodunk, which has grown to include data on airports, cemeteries, museums, and other institutions as well. Profiles include historical postcard images from the Making of America project and all imaginable statistics at the city and county level, including income, educational level, economic, crime. Not only does the site link to useful municipal and county government and chamber of commerce sites, but it also displays or links to harder-to-find information like local media outlets, community organizations, political reports, historical weather information, support for libraries, a "gay index" based on the

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

Gay and Lesbian Atlas, films shot in the area, and celebrity residents.

Author/Publisher: ePodunk

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

FamilyDoctor.com, <http://familydoctor.org>

The homepage of the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) delivers “health information for the whole family.” There are many medical websites out there, but FamilyDoctor.com stands out for its ease of use. Visitors to the site can view it in English or Spanish, and the site contains a prominent link to make the text bigger. An impressive list of health tools—including dictionaries, an AAFP physician directory, calculators, immunization schedules, and more—complements a browsable list of symptoms and conditions by age and gender. In addition to information on diseases, the site also contains recommendations for healthy living.

Author/Publisher: American Academy of Family Physicians

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 17, 2009

FastWeb: Scholarships, Financial Aid and Colleges, www.fastweb.monster.com

Students fill out a detailed questionnaire about academic achievement, future plans, interests, and awards and then receive information on scholarships and internships for which they are eligible. The beauty of this site rests in its organizational features. Students can set up e-mail reminders about application due dates, mark favorites or delete entries from their lists, e-mail descriptions to friends, and add personal notes about a scholarship. The site also contains advice on test preparation, navigating the admissions process, and transitioning to college. FastWeb boasts that their database searches “1.3 million scholarships worth over \$3 billion,” making this a valuable resource for busy students.

Author/Publisher: Monster

Free/Fee-based: Free registration required

Date Reviewed: Feb. 17, 2009

Genetics Home Reference, <http://ghr.nlm.nih.gov>

This valuable resource targeting health consumers describes itself as “Your Guide to Understanding Genetic Conditions.” The homepage presents a clean look and features six main sections in a centralized table: “Genetic Conditions,” “Genes,” “Chromosomes,” “Handbook,” “Glossary,” and “Resources.” The left-hand area of the homepage provides quick access to timely and frequently requested information packaged under the headings “What’s New,” “Newborn Screening,” and “In the Spotlight.” The site also addresses the important question, “How can I find a genetics professional in my area?”

Author/Publisher: U.S. National Library of Medicine

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 17, 2009

Google Maps, <http://maps.google.com>

Ah, finally—a map system that does it all. This free service offers detailed street and terrain maps; robust locator tools to find addresses, businesses, and places; and a route planner for traveling by car, public transport, or walking. Live traffic conditions for several cities are available as well. For those who need visual cues, Google Maps provides that too. Its fascinating “Street View” shows 360° panoramic street-level views, inviting users to virtually walk and explore the area. This is available in many U.S. cities and in several countries abroad. There also is a feature for those wanting to create their own maps. No more fumbling with folding paper maps—just click on this great site.

Author/Publisher: Google

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

Lexicool.com, www.lexicool.com

This website provides a searchable directory to more than six thousand freely available online bilingual and multilingual dictionaries and glossaries. Searches may be entered by language(s), subject, or title/keyword. Search results provide the number of entries and links to the online dictionaries. The site also provides a directory of translation and interpreting courses, a listing of translator and interpreter associations worldwide, language resources, freeware to download, and links to sites for currency conversion, text analysis, and language identification. Language-related software and products may be purchased at the website.

Author/Publisher: The site is run by an international team of linguists and IT specialists based in France, headed by Sebastian Abbo.

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

Local Harvest, www.localharvest.org

The LocalHarvest website offers a nationwide directory of farmers’ markets, small family farms, and organic food sources. Visitors to the site can find local farms, markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, and food-related events searching by zip code or state, or by using the interactive map. The site also offers a monthly newsletter, recipes, and blogs written by LocalHarvest members. This is a definitive resource for anyone interested in buying local and/or organic food and produce.

Author/Publisher: LocalHarvest

Free/Fee-Based: Free

Date Reviewed: Mar. 1, 2009

LocalHikes, www.localhikes.com

LocalHikes “provides information on local hiking opportunities near both large and small metropolitan areas in the United States.” It’s possible to search the site for suggested hikes or walks nearest you by drilling down by geography, hike “content,” or through a quick zip code search. Profiles of each hiking destination include highlights, a one-to-four-star

ranking, hike time, elevation gain, and links to other useful content like a topographic map images and photos.

Author/Publisher: LocalHikes, Inc.

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

National Gardening Association, www.garden.org

The National Gardening Association (NGA) offers a wide array of useful gardening content for consumers and educators. Gardeners can consult the weed and pest libraries, food gardening and plant care guides, regional reports, and how-to articles. They can also browse the useful Q&A database and the buyer's guide. The most impressive feature is the NGA Plant Finder, searchable by plant type, hardiness, light, flower color, and more. In addition, there is a special "Kids Gardening" section loaded with activities and classroom projects. For those who prefer to view gardens rather than dig in the dirt, there is a public garden locator. Two green thumbs up!

Author/Publisher: National Gardening Association

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2009

NOAA's National Ocean Service, <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov>

The National Ocean Service (NOS) studies, monitors, and protects coastal and marine areas in the United States. The NOS website offers detailed information about the agency's activities, including access to educational videos and weekly podcasts on various coastal science topics. The site also hosts more than one thousand up-to-date nautical charts, tide level data updated every ten minutes, and beautiful photography in an image gallery. Teachers will find games, activity suggestions, and lesson plan ideas for students in grades 3–12. This site is an excellent resource for students, teachers, mariners, and anyone interested in America's coastal ecology.

Author/Publisher: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Mar. 1, 2009

OnlineConversion.com, <http://onlineconversion.com>

This site boasts that one can "convert just about anything to anything else." And with fifty thousand conversions and five thousand units, it has an impressive range. Sure, it has the popular conversions: length, temperature, speed, volume, weight, cooking, area, fuel economy, and currency. But it also contains measurements for women's clothing sizes between countries, light-years, density, torque, horse height, meeting room size needed for attendees, gauge and much more. There is even a "Fun Stuff" category that is practically addictive where users can find their age in dog years, convert their names into Morse code, determine their weight on Mars, and verify how many days until retirement! Indispensable.

Author/Publisher: Robert Fogt

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2009

PDRHealth, <http://pdrhealth.com>

Drawing on the trusted *Physicians' Desk Reference* (published annually by Thomson Reuters), this site provides information for prescriptions drugs, over-the-counter medications, and herbals and supplements. Included are recommended dosage, side effects, possible food and drug reactions, and in many cases pictures to assist with drug identification. But PDRHealth extends far beyond drug information. It also offers excellent overviews of numerous diseases and conditions, from kidney stones and migraines to teething and Cushing's Syndrome. There is even a list of clinical trials, searchable by region and illness, for those living with cancer or rare diseases. This well-organized, authoritative, and attractive site is a must-have for anyone needing drug information.

Author/Publisher: Thomson Reuters

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2009

PubChem Project, <http://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>

PubChem is a search tool for chemical information, divided into three areas: Compounds, Substances, and BioAssays. Full entries provide detailed information with the most basic information—a general description, the molecular weight and formula, the structure, plus a table of contents for the full entry—all easily found "above the fold." Use the table of contents or scroll down to retrieve more advanced information, such as bioactivity results, synonyms, chemical actions, detailed properties, and more. Each module is fully interlinked with the other sections of PubChem as well as resources in ToxNet and PubMed, providing full access to toxicology resources and the medical literature as well as allowing users access to as much or as little of the chemical information as they need.

Author/Publisher: National Center for Biotechnology Information, National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 16, 2009

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

The Writing Lab at Purdue houses two hundred free writing resources and instructional materials for students, teachers, and trainers. Included are formatting and style guides, grammar and mechanics, Internet literacy, ESL, job search and technical writing, and research. There are sections geared to writing for specific disciplines (e.g., experimental report writing in psychology) and forms (e.g., writing about poetry). This site provides the nuts and bolts needed to jump start any writing project.

Author/Publisher: The Online Writing Lab, English Department, Purdue University

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

Sports Reference, www.sports-reference.com

Sports fans, rejoice! This valuable resource provides statistics for four major sports: baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, and each section is browsable and searchable in many ways. Baseball aficionados will find regular-season box scores back to 1957 along with minor league stats back to 1992. Football lovers can look up draft picks and review single-season and career leaders in passing, rushing, and kicking. Basketball devotees can find the top performers and award winners of the NBA and WNBA. Hockey enthusiasts will be able to find all players who wore the sweater number 25. With all of this and an additional section focused on Olympics history, Sports Reference hits the ball out of the park!

Author/Publisher: Sports Reference, LLC.

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 25, 2009

Traffic.com, www.traffic.com

Traffic.com provides “free, real-time traffic information for your daily drives” and features real-time traffic and road condition information with drive time estimates. Selected metro areas feature a profile page with a NAVTEQ traffic map, a traffic summary with current incidents affecting traffic flow, events, and ongoing roadwork. Main roadways are highlighted as “hotspots” with a numerical ranking on a 1–10 scale in which 1 is “clear” and 10 is “jammed.” Free registration allows users to receive newsletters and daily traffic alerts via e-mail.

Author/Publisher: Traffic.com, Inc.

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

United States Environmental Protection Agency, www.epa.gov

Well organized, very interactive, and full of information for all, the EPA website offers news, local information, teacher resources, multimedia (videos, photos, audio), resources, and even a trivia quiz, all accessible from the homepage. The “For Youth” section includes tabs for elementary, middle, and high school students while “Work with Us” offers career, grant, and contract information. The site shows lots of depth, too, with navigation tabs for “Learn the Issues,” “Science and Technology,” “Laws and Regulations,” “Newsroom,” and “About EPA”; each is a treasure trove of information in itself, adding to the usefulness and comprehensiveness of the site.

Author/Publisher: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Mar. 8, 2009

UrbanRail.Net, www.urbanrail.net

This site is a resource that has grown over the course of fifteen years from a site focusing on the metro system in Barcelona, to a site called “metroPlanet,” to its current incarnation with an international scope and convenient, easy-to-use maps of urban railway systems in the world’s largest cities on six continents. Users will mainly appreciate UrbanRail.Net for its quick, simple maps, but the site put together by a Berlin public transportation enthusiast and historian also features practical information such as transit pricing, links, and time-lines of transportation history for each rail service or line.

Author/Publisher: Robert Schwandl

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Feb. 26, 2009

The White House, www.whitehouse.gov

With prominent links to the President’s Weekly Address, the National Budget, and the economic recovery plan, the searchable site also provides links for both current news (“The Briefing Room”), the administration’s “Agenda” (nicely narrowed by topic), and ways to learn about “Our Government,” especially the Executive Branch. “The Administration” lists the President, First Lady, Cabinet members, White House Staff, and even the Vice-President and his wife; “About the White House” tours the building itself and its former residents, Air Force One, and Camp David.

Author/Publisher: The White House

Free/Fee-based: Free

Date Reviewed: Mar. 8, 2009

World Health Organization, www.who.int/en

The website of the World Health Organization (WHO) tracks current international health emergencies and disease outbreaks, and offers extensive information on diseases and health issues affecting the global population. Visitors to the site will find an interactive Global Health Atlas with mapping interface, statistical databases covering the health status of each WHO member country, and full-text access to WHO’s publications, including journals, reports, and bulletins. The website’s Fact Sheets provide excellent overviews of various international health topics and are an ideal resource for high school and college students beginning their research.

Author/Publisher: World Health Organization

Free/Fee-Based: Free

Date Reviewed: Mar. 1, 2009