

Best Free Reference Websites

Seventeenth Annual List

Emerging Technologies Section (ETS)

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

As in the past, the 2015 list of winning sites will appear in this year’s Fall issue of RUSQ. A link to this year’s list of winners can also be found on the ETS webpage along with a link to the “Best Free Reference Websites Combined Index,” which provides, in alphabetical order, all entries from the current and previous sixteen lists. Succinct and insightful annotations for the Best Free Reference Websites List entries were written by committee members in the years the particular websites were selected for the lists. These annotations provide guidance for using the websites as reference tools. Once again, the committee considered free websites in all subject areas useful for ready reference and of value in most types of libraries.

The committee has established the following criteria for nominations:

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

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

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, using email and the online bookmarking site Diigo (www.diigo.com). Each member nominated five to seven websites using the criteria specified above and then wrote brief annotations that would assist fellow committee members with reviewing and voting for their favorite nominated websites. The goal of this year’s committee was to produce a final list with approximately fifteen to twenty high-quality reference websites. It was a good year in terms of nominations. Over 50 websites were

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nominated and voting for the best ones was challenging. After careful review, the committee members recognized seventeen new Best Free Reference Websites for 2015.

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

BEST WEBSITE WINNERS 2015

Open States: Discover Politics in Your State, <http://openstates.org>

Open States allows users the opportunity to find information on politics happening in each state. The user can search by their address or browse by state. State political information includes the demographics and information on legislators, current and past bills, and committees. Searching for upcoming legislation and tracking bill progress is made easy with the bills page providing filters that can be applied by the user to narrow their results. On the legislator page, the user can find information on the legislator's committee memberships, bills they sponsored, recent votes, and contact information. Whether you are a voter or student looking for research, this website is a must for researching politics in your state. The website works with all widely used browsers.

Author/Publisher: Sunlight Foundation

Date reviewed: March 5, 2015

Crime Statistics, www.fbi.gov/stats-services/crimestats

The FBI Website gives access to Uniform Crime Reports of interest to citizens. The site claims that the Crime in the US publication "is the most comprehensive analysis of violent crime and property crime in the nation." The report also includes arrest and clearance data. Another useful publication is Hate Crime Statistics which includes information on the number of incidents, offenses, victims and offenders. The publication of Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted provides data for officers assaulted or feloniously/accidentally killed in the line of duty. Finally, there's the National Incident-Based Reporting System which includes information from state law enforcement agencies. Information includes aspects such as age, race, sex, relationship, location, time of day, type of weapons used, and more. This publication also has sections on statistics for schools and colleges, measurement of white collar crime, the structure of family violence and more information on victims and offenders.

Author/Publisher: Federal Bureau of Investigation

Date Reviewed: March 16, 2015

Travelers' Health, wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel

The CDC's Travelers' Health website provides information and health recommendations for US residents who are planning to travel abroad. The site helps travelers understand

the risks involved with traveling to certain parts of the world. Visitors start by selecting the country they want to travel to, as well as select extra options about their health or who they're traveling with (traveling with children, etc.), and next receive a customized report containing things they need to know. The traveler is first briefed about any health warnings that may be issued for that country (whether serious or not). Further information includes diseases travelers should be most concerned about and what types of precautions (vaccinations, sanitation recommendations, etc.) need to be taken either before or during their travel. There are also educational sections on how to keep safe while in the country (eating and drinking safety tips, germs, medical care, transportation, personal security, etc.). There's even a Packing List to recommend what to bring on your trip. The CDC site has a great deal of useful information for travelers.

Author/Publisher: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Date Reviewed: March 16, 2015

Famous Trials, UMKC School of Law, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/ftrials.htm>

"The Web's largest and most visited collection of materials relating to famous trials, from Socrates to Clinton. The site includes original essays, images, primary documents, maps, transcript excerpts, chronologies, video clips, court decisions, and other materials to aid readers in understanding the significance of historic trials."

While suitable for a general audience, this site is particularly useful for high-school and college-age history or criminal justice students. The look of the website is dated, but there is an abundance of information, including primary source documents and extensive bibliographies and links, that more than make up for the site's appearance. The site is revised frequently with additional trials added, the most recent of which is the George Zimmerman trial.

Author/Publisher: Douglas Linder, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law

Date reviewed: March 16, 2015

Country Statistics, www.unicef.org/statistics/index_countrystats.html

The world's leading advocate for children's rights and health allows access to a wealth of statistical information on these topics. Visitor's start by selecting the country they're interested in and get statistics on such topics as child mortality rates, nutrition, health, education, demographics, protection, disparities and much more. The main statistics page also gives access to UNICEF's flagship publication called The State of the World's Children. Each year's report focuses on a key issue affecting children around the world (children with disabilities, child rights, etc.). Anyone needing information or statistics on the state of children internationally will find useful information on UNICEF's Website.

Author/Publisher: UNICEF

Date Reviewed: March 16, 2015

In Motion: The African-American Migration Experience, www.inmotionaame.org/sionid=f8303293501426480205999

“The website is organized around thirteen defining migrations that have formed and transformed African America and the nation. Each migration is presented through five units: a narrative, about 100 illustrations with captions and bibliographical information, from twenty to forty research resources consisting of essays, books, book chapters, articles, and manuscripts, maps, and lesson plans.” There is extensive material covering all migrations of African Americans from the initial transatlantic slave trade through the return south migration, along with African immigration. All in-text cited articles appear to offer full-text accessibility. The site can be viewed in non-flash version and is fully searchable.

Author/Publisher: New York Public Library, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Date Reviewed: March 16, 2015

360 Degrees of Financial Literacy, www.360financialliteracy.org

“360 Degrees of Financial literacy is a national volunteer effort of the nation’s Certified Public Accountants to help Americans understand their personal finances and develop money management skills. It focuses on financial education as a lifelong endeavor—from children learning about the value of money to adults reaching a secure retirement.” Advice is available according to your choice of individual life stages or specific financial topics. Questions may be posted to the Money Doctor and are answered by volunteer CPAs. The option is also offered to create individual accounts which will display a personalized dashboard of tips and targeted financial information.

Author/Publisher: American Institute of Certified Public Accountants

Date Reviewed: March 16, 2015

VideoETA, <http://videoeta.com>

VideoETA allows users to find “DVD and Blu-ray release dates for upcoming movies.” VideoETA posts release dates once the studio has given its Official Consumer Announce Date (OCAD) which is the exact release date of the item. With a sleek design users are able to narrow searches by type (Blu-Ray or DVD), timeframe (weekly or monthly) and by genre (action, comedy, documentary etc.). VideoETA is a customer friendly and in-depth resource.

Author/Publisher: VideoETA

Date reviewed: March 12, 2015

Index of Economic Freedom, www.heritage.org/index

This site provides an annual guide to raise awareness of economic freedom and opportunity in countries worldwide based on ten measures or “freedoms:” Business, Trade, Fiscal, Monetary, Investment, Financial, Property, Freedom from Corruption, and Government Spending. Features include a heat map to show how countries stack up with each

other, a highlighted list of countries with the highest overall rank along with a link to the entire list in rank order, along with a graphing feature to see data for up to three countries and one indicator from 1995 to present. A world average is shown for additional comparison. This site is useful for students, scholars, and the general public—anyone who is concerned about the fundamental right to control his or her own labor and property.

Author/Publisher: The Heritage Foundation in partnership with the Wall Street Journal

Date Reviewed: March 11, 2015

Woodall’s North American Campground Directory, www.woodalls.com

Also known as Good Sam RV Travel Guide and Directory, this website features descriptions and ratings of campgrounds with an emphasis on travel by RV (recreational vehicles). The facilities rated include RV parks, resorts, and rentals in addition to private tent campgrounds. The directory can be searched by location or name or browsed. It is an excellent resource for families or retired people planning vacations or extended winter travel. Each entry has detailed information about the facility, sites, nearby recreation, and other amenities. Includes National Forest and National Park campgrounds as well with detailed information about fees and facilities.

Author/Publisher: Good Sam RV Travel Guide and Campground Directory

Date reviewed: February 23, 2015

State Tax Forms and Filing Options, www.taxadmin.org/fta/link/default.php?lnk=2

This site provides links to all 50 states’ websites for income tax forms and filing sites. Clicking on the state on the United States map or on the name of the state opens a list of links to that state’s current year tax forms, filing options, and main tax or revenue department. It is useful for anyone who needs forms and filing information for particular states. Since all state-level tax agencies are members of the Federation of Tax Administrators, this site provides an authoritative and up-to-date source for quickly locating state tax forms and filing options for all fifty states.

Author/Publisher: Federation of Tax Administrators

Date Reviewed: March 7, 2015

Constitute, www.constituteproject.org

Subtitled “The World’s Constitutions to Read, Search, and Compare,” this site provides constitutions in force as of September 2013 from most of the world’s independent states. Constitutions are updated as they are amended. A user can browse using an alphabetical list, read in html, download in pdf, search by keyword or phrase, see where specific topics occur in each constitution, and select two to eight constitutions to compare side-by-side on a particular topic. The site has a clean, uncluttered design, with date of the constitution in effect and date of last amendment shown next to each

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country's name. It is appropriate for students, scholars, and anyone interested in this topic. Constitute is an outstanding source for learning about and comparing the constitutions of most countries of the world.

Author/Publisher: Comparative Constitutions Project, University of Texas

Date Reviewed: March 8, 2015

Copyright Tools, www.ala.org/advocacy/copyright-tools

The five copyright tools presented on this site are useful for anyone who uses copyrighted materials in his or her work, education, or leisure activities. Two of the tools, Public Domain Slider and Copyright Genie, help determine whether a work is in the Public Domain. The Fair Use Evaluator and Exceptions for Instructors e-Tool help teachers and others determine whether use of a particular copyrighted work may fall under fair use or one of the other educational exceptions to the rights of the copyright owner. The Section 108 Spinner helps libraries and archives decide whether, under certain circumstances, they can make reproductions of copyrighted materials. Overall these tools will help anyone become more comfortable reusing copyrighted works. Only by using the valuable exceptions to a copyright holder's rights, can "we strengthen copyright's primary purpose-" to promote the progress of science and useful arts" (U. S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 8, Clause 8)."

Author/Publisher: American Library Association, Office for Information Technology Policy

Date Reviewed: March 7, 2015

Internet Bird Collection, <http://ibc.lynxeds.com>

The Internet Bird Collection contains videos, photographs, and sound recordings of all the birds of the world. The IBC is the YouTube of birds and contains more than 200,000 files and is constantly growing. The site's goal is to post at least one video or photo per species and eventually include material offering a variety of biological information (feeding, breeding, etc.) for every species. Users can perform a species search, geographic search, and global search for particular birds. Each bird record available on the site provides a map, taxonomy and geographic information, videos, photos, and bird sounds.

Author/Publisher: Lynx Edicions

Date reviewed: March 5, 2015

Open Culture: The Best Free Cultural & Educational Media on the Web, www.openculture.com

Open Culture is an online information portal that brings together freely available cultural and educational materials

on the web. Resources on the site include links to online courses, certificate courses like MOOCs, movies, audio-books, language learning tools, ebooks, and educational resources for children. The content on the site is keyword searchable or browsed via categorized links at the top of the page. Additional links on the right-hand side of the homepage provide access to the site's most popular content. Also included is a blog of cultural topics on subjects including art, music, literature, anthropology, science, and more. Overall, the site offers a wealth of information compiled in one place that otherwise would need to be searched for individually.

Author/Publisher: Open Culture

Date reviewed: February 27, 2015

AFI Catalog of Feature Films, www.afi.com/catalog

The AFI Catalog of Feature films is a research database providing access to information "on every feature-length film produced in America or financed by American production companies" from 1893 to 2011. Basic and Advanced search functions allow users to locate information about the cast, crew, plot, production dates, music, subjects, genres, historical notes, and review sources for each film. Also included as a part of the AFI site are the American Film Institute's Award honorees from 2000 through 2014 and the Institute's top 100 films in twelve categories.

Author/Publisher: American Film Institute (AFI)

Date reviewed: February 27, 2015

WikiArt: Visual Art Encyclopedia, www.wikiart.org

WikiArt is an ongoing project to create a free online repository of art images, from the classical to modern periods. Images in the collection are of works in both the public domain and those protected by copyright. A copyright notice warns users that protected images are for instructional purposes only and should not be copied or downloaded. Artists can be browsed by alphabet, art movement, school or group, genre, nationality, or century. Artworks can be browsed by style, genre, or technique. Artist pages include brief biographical information, a link to a Wikipedia article (when available), and links to individual artworks. Pages for individual artworks include the name of the artist, the completion date, style, and genre.

Author/Publisher: WikiArt

Date reviewed: February 26, 2015