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# Best Free Reference Websites

## *Sixteenth Annual List*

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

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*contributing members: Janice Wilson, Chair, Georgia Baugh, Sarah Lehmann, Rosemary Meszaros, Ashley Rosener, Colleen Seale, Virginia Sojdehei, and Paul Victor, Jr.*

Welcome to the sixteenth annual “Best Free Reference Websites” list. It is hard to believe that this project has been around since the late 1990s. 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 is appropriately named the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee.

A link to this year’s list of winners can be found on the MARS 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 fifteen lists. Committee members wrote succinct and insightful annotations for the Best Free Reference Websites List entries in the years the particular websites were selected for the lists. These annotations provide guidance for using the websites as reference tools. Once again, the committee considered free websites in all subject areas useful for ready reference and of value 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 MARS webpage ([www.ala.org/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestrefcriteria](http://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestrefcriteria)).

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, using e-mail and the online bookmarking site Diigo ([www.diigo.com](http://www.diigo.com)). Each member nominated five to seven websites using the criteria specified above and then wrote brief annotations that would assist fellow committee members with reviewing and voting for their favorite nominated websites. The goal of this year’s committee was to produce a final list with approximately fifteen to twenty high-quality reference websites. It was a good year in terms of nominations. Over forty-five websites were nominated, and voting for the best ones was challenging. After careful review, the committee members recognized fourteen new Best Free Reference Websites for 2014.

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 chair to ensure that they are of optimal use to librarians and fit the criteria listed above

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## BEST FREE REFERENCE WEBSITES 2014

**College Navigator**, <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

The College Navigator allows students and parents to search for colleges and universities of possible interest by a number of characteristics, such as location and distance from home, programs and majors, institution type (public, private, two-year, four-year), institution size, cost, setting (rural, suburban, urban), and more. Special features include the ability to create a My Favorites List to compare schools, a map on which to pinpoint a school's location, a save your search function, and the ability to export results as a spreadsheet. This is a very useful and easy-to-use tool for creating a list of colleges and universities for further investigation and possible attendance.

*Author/Publisher:* National Center for Educational Statistics  
*Date Reviewed:* March 5, 2014

**DinoDirectory**, [www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/dinosaurs-other-extinct-creatures/dino-directory/index.html](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/nature-online/life/dinosaurs-other-extinct-creatures/dino-directory/index.html)

Bone up on dinosaurs with this guide that provides facts, figures, and images for over 300 dinosaurs. Explore them by name, timeline (Triassic, Jurassic, and Cretaceous periods), country, or body shape. Each dinosaur entry has a brief fact file with the phonetic pronunciation and meaning of its name and information on its length, height, weight, teeth, diet, food, how it moved, when it lived, and where it was found. Images, general information, taxonomic details, and links also are provided.

*Author/Publisher:* The Natural History Museum, London  
*Date Reviewed:* February 20, 2014

**Encyclopedia Iranica**, [www.iranicaonline.org](http://www.iranicaonline.org)

"The Encyclopædia Iranica is a comprehensive research tool dedicated to the study of Iranian civilization in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent." Entries are lengthy and in-depth, and contain extensive bibliographies. The content is searchable as well as browseable, and the website is easy-to-navigate. This is a collaborative resource; "entries are solicited through invitation only, and are subjected to peer review to ensure factual reliability, scholarly objectivity, and political independence." A *Choice* Outstanding Title in 2012, this is an excellent resource for information on Iranian history and culture from prehistoric times through the present.

*Author/Publisher:* Encyclopaedia Iranica / Columbia University Center for Iranian Studies  
*Date Reviewed:* January 31, 2014

**Global Edge**, <http://globaledge.msu.edu/>

This website offers a wealth of information about international business. The Global Insights section "provides international business and trade information on over 200 countries, the 50 U.S. states, as well as nearly two dozen industry sectors, and many of the world's trade blocs." The "Reference Desk" provides access to resources on international trade laws and statistical data sources for international business. In the "Tools and Data" section, researchers can access the MPI (Market Potential Index) and DIBS (Database of International Business Statistics) free of charge, as long as it's for academic use (users must register with the website using a .gov or .edu e-mail address).

*Author/Publisher:* Michigan State University  
*Date Reviewed:* March 7, 2014

**Great Websites for Kids**, <http://gws.ala.org/>

"Great Websites for Kids is a compilation of websites geared to children from birth to age 14. Suggested sites are evaluated by the Great Websites for Kids Committee using established selection criteria. The committee is made up of members of the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association." This site allows for keyword searching or browsing through the listed headings of Animals, The Arts, History and Biography, Literature and Languages, Mathematics and Computers, Reference Desk, Sciences, or Social Sciences. Each heading is further subdivided into special interest areas. An additional link leads to recommended sites for parents, caregivers, teachers, and others. There are prominent links to Sites of the Week, Recent Sites, Most Popular, and Top Rated.

*Author/Publisher:* American Library Association, Association for Library Service to Children  
*Date Reviewed:* March 7, 2014

**Practical Money Skills—Financial Literacy for Everyone**, [www.practicalmoneyskills.com](http://www.practicalmoneyskills.com)

"To help consumers and students of all ages learn the essentials of personal finance, Visa has partnered with leading consumer advocates, educators, and financial institutions to develop the Practical Money Skills program. At [practicalmoneyskills.com](http://practicalmoneyskills.com) and [whatsmyscore.org](http://whatsmyscore.org), consumers, educators, parents, students and policymakers can access free educational resources, including personal finance articles, games and lesson plans." Available videos cover Personal Finance, Financial Football and Soccer (covers financial planning, not playing), Khan Academy, and Financial Literacy Summits. Various calculators are offered to help explore options before buying a car, home, taking out a loan, paying for college, or retirement.

*Author/Publisher:* Visa  
*Date Reviewed:* March 7, 2014

## FROM COMMITTEES OF RUSA

**Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics**, [www.albany.edu/sourcebook](http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook)

The online Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics is a treasure trove of criminal justice–related statistics. Among the broad categories of statistics included are criminal justice characteristics; public opinion; crime, victims; arrests, seizures; courts, prosecution, sentencing; and parole, jails, prisons, and the death penalty. Data tables are provided in PDF or spreadsheet CSV formats and updated as new data arrives. An archive of past Sourcebooks is also available.

*Author/Publisher:* University of Albany, Hindelang Criminal Justice Research Center

*Date Reviewed:* February 11, 2014

**State of Working America**, <http://stateofworkingamerica.org>

This website presents a by-the-numbers overview of how the economy affects the living standards of working Americans. It includes data on “family incomes, wages, jobs, unemployment, wealth, and poverty.” The charts, graphs, and data sets are easy to read, and they also contain a very helpful “documentation and methodology” paragraph that explains how the data was gathered and how to make sense of it. Several “Fact Sheets” also provide overviews on subtopics such as women, young workers, collective bargaining, and inequality. This is an extremely well-designed and accessible website with a wealth of valuable information about US workers and the economy.

*Author/Publisher:* Economic Policy Institute

*Date reviewed:* March 7, 2014

**US Department of Veterans Affairs**, [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov)

“The US Department of Veterans Affairs provides patient care and federal benefits to veterans and their dependents.” The VA website offers an abundance of important resources on benefits and services such as compensation, pension, survivor benefits, rehabilitation, employment assistance, education assistance (GI Bill), home loans, and life insurance coverage. Another valuable section includes health care information and resources (including a useful hospital locator) and mental health resources and services (with links to the 24/7 Veteran’s Crisis Line and the National Center for PTSD). Other information includes information for starting a business and end of life resources (burial, etc.).

*Author/Publisher:* US Department of Veteran’s Affairs

*Date reviewed:* February 25, 2014

**Vocabulary.com/Dictionary**, [www.vocabulary.com/dictionary](http://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary)

By no means just a dictionary, this site offers vocabulary lists, a dictionary, and word challenges. They all work together to set a thorough, practical, and fun grounding in learning new words. Vocabulary lists have been created from items such as popular movies, historical documents, just for fun, political speeches, literature, or test prep. The challenge section quizzes you on word meanings, tracks words missed,

and adds them to a list of words being learned. All uses of a word are defined and usage examples given.

Create a free account for personalized vocabulary instruction, charts, and graphs showing progress and other features.

*Author/Publisher:* Thinkmap, Inc.

*Date Reviewed:* March 8, 2014

**What Should I Read Next?** <http://whatshouldireadnext.com>

This simple, user-friendly website provides quick book recommendations. The site allows someone to enter the title of a book they like so that the site can use its large database of readers’ favorite books to make book suggestions related to the topics of the original book title entered. From the results page, one can also browse books by subject.

*Author/Publisher:* Thoughtplay Ltd

*Date Reviewed:* February 24, 2014

**Whichbook**, [www.openingthebook.com/whichbook](http://www.openingthebook.com/whichbook)

Whichbook provides a unique, easy-to-use tool that helps readers choose a book to read based upon a wide variety of factors like mood, emotion, plot shape, type of main character, country the book is set in, and more. Books in this database are fiction or poetry, written or translated into English and published in the last ten years. All titles on Whichbook have been read by one of a changing team of seventy people drawn from libraries and literature organizations.

*Author/Publisher:* Opening the Book

*Date Reviewed:* February, 24 2014

**Wikitravel—The Free Travel Guide**, [http://wikitravel.org/en/Main\\_Page](http://wikitravel.org/en/Main_Page)

Wikitravel is an open source, world-wide travel guide with up-to-date information on attractions, hotels, restaurants, travel tips, and more for many locations. Individuals from around the globe contribute their advice to this guide, inspired by Wikipedia. This site has a comprehensive search feature and nearly 95,000 pages in English.

*Author/Publisher:* Wikitravel.org

*Date Reviewed:* February, 24 2014

**World Public Opinion**, [www.worldpublicopinion.org](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org)

In our growing global environment, this website provides information and analysis about public opinion around the world and serves as a ready reference source for topical information as well as being fully embedded on a research level. “As the world becomes increasingly integrated, problems have become increasingly global, pointing to a greater need for understanding between nations and for elucidating global norms.” The frequency at which the public opinion information is provided is very good for many regions and topics.

*Author/Publisher:* Program on International Policy Attitudes

*Date Reviewed:* March 8, 2014