



## ▼ ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

# Reference Universe

Date of Review: January 25, 2005

Composite Score:

★★★★ 1/4

Reviewed by: Ellie Dworak (née Laura Hudson)

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### Pricing Options

Pricing is for unlimited users and is based on the type of institution. For academic institutions the price ranges from \$995 per annum (for associate colleges) to \$2,995 for doctoral extensive universities. For public libraries the price ranges from \$1,495 for libraries serving fewer than 250,000 patrons to \$2,995 for libraries serving over one million patrons. The price for special libraries is \$1,495. The publisher is willing to discuss small discounts for consortial purchases.

### Product Description

Reference Universe, published by Paratext, is an index to over 5,100 reference books from over 260 publishers, with approximately 150 titles added per month. The focus is on subject encyclopedias, although bibliographies, dictionaries, and other types of reference material are included. The subject matter is very broad, ranging from Africa to zoology. Publishers include major names such as ABC-CLIO, John Wiley and Sons, Oxford University Press, etc. The product indexes both the article titles and the reference book indexes. The titles go back in time to 1908. At the time of this review 588 of the titles were published in 2003 or 2004. The database can be searched or browsed, though browsing yields only a record for the title, and not a list of contents. This is a tool of interest to both academic and public librarians, as it opens the reference collection up to greater use.

### Critical Evaluation

The objective of this database is to find the reference book with the most relevant material for a specific topic quickly. To this end, Reference Universe allows the user to search over 5,100 reference books from a broad array of subject areas. A title list can be obtained from the publisher (Paratext) or pulled up from within the product, and includes such diverse reference titles as the *Visual Encyclopedia of Nautical Terms Under Sail*, the *Encyclopedia of Ignorance*, and the *Handbook of Mental Health and Aging*.

The materials can be searched by keyword, which includes terms in the article titles and the index entries, or you can search either of these indexes separately. A search on just article titles would yield fewer but more relevant results, while an index search would generate a larger and broader number of items. Searches can be wildcarded with an asterisk, and basic Boolean options are allowed using radio buttons to select "all words" "any word" or "exact phrase" as well as "exact phrase" "plurals" and "variants." Searches can be limited to any number of hits and by publication date. A truly wonderful feature of this product is the ability to limit to materials owned by your library (which is done via a live catalog search, not by loading all of your library materials into their database). The search interface is simple and easy but powerful enough to yield relevant results.

By default, search results are displayed by relevance ranking. You may then sort by year of publication or the name of the reference work in ascending or descending order. Unfortunately, after re-sorting by year or publication title, you cannot go back to a relevance sort without re-doing the search.

Search results are displayed as brief entries, with the name of the reference work, the year of publication and publisher, the call number, and an icon allowing you to pull up a full bibliographic record for the title. Below the short data about the reference book is a line for each of the types of hits (one entry each for article title matches and index entry matches) with the number of results listed. A click on the icon indicating the index entry hits reveals a list of relevant index entries, with keyword matches in red and the relevant volume and page numbers. A click on the icon indicating article hits shows a similar list with article titles, article editor names, and page numbers.

Users can save records from the main search results page, the article results page, or the index entry results page by checking off a Select Record box, then clicking the Save Checked Items button in the left-hand navigation bar. The saved results are most useful at the more detailed levels; saving titles at the main results level returns only the short record for the book, not the book title plus all hits. There are two small frustrations with this feature. First, if the user saves an index or article hit, the book title doesn't display until he downloads the records, which can be confusing. Second, the user must download any saved records before continuing to another screen. On the positive side, the download options include Reference Works and Endnote citation manager options (among others), which will be especially appreciated by faculty and graduate students.

If a reference book is owned by your library, the entry will include an icon that allows you to link to your local library catalog. This feature is very helpful, since it means that instead of keeping a list of items and then searching the local catalog, you can retrieve this information immediately. I am told that OpenURL access (such as SFX linking) is also coming soon.

The bibliographic record for each book includes links to reviews of that book, which is a helpful feature. There are also links for the subject heading for that book, other works by the author of the book, and ISBN information. You can click a link to view this information in MARC format.

A browse mode is also included. You can browse by publisher, by the title of a book, by Library of Congress subject, by Library of Congress call number, or by Reference Universe subject term. This last feature is useful only to see if a particular title, publisher, or topic is included in the database; you cannot pull up a table of contents for the book in question.



## Reference Universe Review Scores Composite: ★★★★★ 1/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

### Content: ★★★★★ 1/2

This is a fabulous idea and a great implementation. Reference librarians have been talking about a product with this functionality for years, and many have created paper files that mimic the functionality of Reference Universe.

### Searchability: ★★★ 1/2

This database is easy to search. The results interface and navigation schema need work, but the publishers listen to user feedback and are making changes.

### Pricing Options: ★★★★★

The pricing seems fair, given the amount that this could increase use of your reference collection, the fact that the database is growing rapidly and steadily, and the responsiveness of the publishers to librarian suggestions for the interface. I like the Carnegie model for academic libraries over an FTE model, as this may more accurately reflect budgetary constraints.

### Contract Options: ★★★★★

Nothing worried me here. The database is IP Authenticated for a site license; the contract is easy to understand and reasonable.

The interface is simple and easy to use, with a few small problems. The icons aren't incredibly illustrative, though they do have "alt" text defined, so you can use your mouse to hover over the icon and see what it means. There are no "back to search results" links included in the navigation schema. These are simple problems, which I am told will be corrected soon.

I always include a few notes on disabled accessibility in my reviews, though a thorough assessment would take a whole review. The Reference Universe database interface is simple enough to be relatively accessible. All of the icons have "alt" text, tables aren't used heavily, and frames not at all. However, navigation buttons need "alt" text, and the pop-up Sort and Download boxes may cause problems for screen readers.

Paratext does provide some basic use statistics. These include the number of queries and hits for bibliographic records, article and index terms, and searches. Paratext is collecting data from its user base and reviewing the Project Counter standards to decide what kinds of statistics to offer in the future.

In summary, I love this product despite a few glitches. The content is incredibly useful and it is easy to find what you need. This is an evol-

ving product and Paratext shows an impressive commitment to listening to feedback and improving the product.

### Contract Provisions

The contract is a model of brevity. The publisher recognized that this is an electronic product, and makes statements such as "distance learners, alumni, and other off-campus affiliates may access Reference Universe if they are authenticated as library patrons ..." and "they may send one copy by e-mail. ..." I saw nothing in the one-page agreement that caused concern.

### Authentication

Reference Universe is IP Authenticated and every subscription includes a site license.

### Author's Selected References

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Gail Golderman and Bruce Connolly. "Review of Reference Universe." *Library Journal*. Jan 2004. 129 (1) p. S26

Jones, M. F. "Review of Reference Universe." *Choice*. Aug 2004. 41 p. 73-74.

Schedner, Sam. "A Researcher Investigates." *Wall Street Journal*. January 19, 2005.

### About the Author

**Ellie Dworak** (née Laura Hudson) is the Electronic Systems and Services Librarian at San Diego State University. She has served on the California State University Electronic Access to Information Resources (EAR) committee. Previously she was a reference and instruction librarian at Ohio University. She received her M.I.L.S. from the University of Michigan in 1996. ■

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