



# Britannica Concise Encyclopaedia

*It's a top-notch ready-reference tool—and it's online and free*



By Péter Jacsó

The name Britannica is synonymous with knowledge. That may be one of the reasons that Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. decided to use that brand name on a concise encyclopedia.

Actually, in the print world it is known as the *Merriam Webster Collegiate Encyclopedia*, which was published in 2000. The Merriam Webster name also has a very good ring to it, but it is not as universally recognized as Britannica. The formal reason for using the Britannica name is that the Merriam Webster Collegiate Encyclopedia is said to be based on the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Interestingly, the Britannica Concise online database [<http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/>] is offered neither by Merriam Webster, nor by Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., but by a third party, Yahoo! Inc., which decided to name it Britannica Concise, avoiding the British spelling which may intimidate the primary target audience, American college and high school students.

Yahoo! Inc. licensed the content both for Yahoo! and Yahoologans! It rounds out its Reference Tools collection, which features the *American Heritage Dictionary*, *Roget's Thesaurus*, *The CIA World Fact Book*, *Gray's Anatomy*, the 1914 Oxford edition of all Shakespearean works, and *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*. These are all hosted (and very well aggregated and integrated) by Bartleby, which also features the unabridged Columbia Encyclopedia.

Yahoo! could have also chosen the excellent Columbia Encyclopedia, but obviously it wanted to stand out from the crowd of those who already carry the Columbia Encyclopedia (Bartleby.com, Information Please Almanac, and The Electric Library). This was a good decision, otherwise the Yahoo! Reference Tools section would not have offered anything in addition to Bartleby, which also carries a number of very good ready-reference and literary works.

## Clear and Concise

It was also a good idea from another perspective. For the primary target audience, the Columbia Encyclopedia may have been an overkill. The Britannica Concise, averaging articles of 100 words, is perfect for the attention span of most high school and

college students, who often just want instant gratification in less than 2 minutes.

The Britannica Concise certainly meets that expectation without any compromise in the content. It strikes a good balance with this gem of 25,000 articles. It is in the same league as the single volume Oxford Paperback Encyclopedia and the Macmillan Encyclopedia 2001, both of which are available online in the excellent free reference collection offered by Xrefer.com [<http://www.xrefer.com>].

The free subset of the online Encarta Encyclopedia (also known as Concise Encarta) also belongs to this league, although with a double twist. Concise Encarta in many cases shows the same article and illustrations as Encarta Online Deluxe (which is free for those who have one of the qualifying Encarta CD or DVD encyclopedias), but in other cases displays only the lead-in sentence from the article and only one or two of the illustrations, if any. The articles in Britannica Concise are clear and succinct, providing instant gratification, which is essential for the primary target audience:

### *anthrax*

Infectious disease of warm-blooded animals, caused by *Bacillus anthracis*, a bacterium that, in spore form, can retain its virulence in contaminated soil or other material for many years. A disease chiefly of herbivores, the infection may be acquired by persons handling the wool, hair, hides, bones, or carcasses of affected animals. Infection may lead to death from respiratory or cardiac complications (within 1-2 days if acute), or the animal may recover. In humans, anthrax

occurs as a cutaneous, pulmonary, or intestinal infection. The most common type, which occurs as an infection of the skin, may lead to fatal septicemia (blood poisoning). The pulmonary form of the disease is usually fatal. Sanitary working environments for susceptible workers are critical to preventing anthrax; early diagnosis and treatment are also of great importance. In recent decades, various countries have attempted to develop anthrax as a weapon of biological warfare; many factors, incl. its extreme potency (vastly greater than any chemical-warfare agent), make it the preferred biological-warfare agent.

Quite often Britannica Concise offers a perfect definition in a main entry when its competitors do not. Looking for information about the Pashtuns, it brings up a main entry which leaves even some unabridged encyclopedias in the dust:

### *Pashtuns*

Pashto-speaking people of SE Afghanistan and NW Pakistan. The Pashtuns, who number about 7.5 million in Afghanistan and 14 million in Pakistan, constitute the majority of the population of Afghanistan. Their origins are unclear: Pashtun tradition asserts that they are descended from Afghana, grandson of King Saul of Israel, but most scholars believe that they arose from an intermingling of ancient Aryans from the north or west with subsequent invaders. Each Pashtun tribe is divided into clans, subclans, and patriarchal families. Disputes among the Pashtun

over property, women, and personal injury often result in blood feuds between families and whole clans. Most tribesmen are sedentary farmers; some are migratory herdsmen and caravaners. Large numbers of the Pashtun have always been attracted to military service.

The Macmillan Encyclopedia 2001 has a good definition under the main entry for Pathans, and so does the Oxford Paperback Encyclopedia under the main entry on the Pashto language. The unabridged Columbia Encyclopedia merely has a passing mention of these people in its article about Afghanistan. However, none of them are as informative as the definition in Britannica Concise.

Occasionally, the other concise encyclopedias and even the unabridged Columbia Encyclopedia draw a blank for a term such as for hula, the Hawaiian dance, which has a main entry and a good definition in Britannica Concise. In case these definitions would not suffice, you are offered a 14-day free trial period for Encyclopaedia Britannica. At \$7.95 a month (after the trial period) and especially at \$50 a year, it is an excellent deal for those who crave the breadth of the full Britannica.

## Current Events

There were only a few subjects where Britannica Concise came up empty-handed. Most of these have to do with the fact that Britannica Concise (as opposed to the full Britannica, Encarta, and the Bartleby implementation of the unabridged Columbia Encyclopedia) is not updated.

The article about Afghanistan ends with the statement that the Taliban took over the country in 1996. You would remain unaware of the facts that the president of South Korea, Kim Dae Young, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000. On the other hand, important events up to mid-2000 are reflected in the articles. Some of the other concise encyclopedias are less current.

While the lack of information about important events in the past 2 years is a deficiency, it is a relatively minor one, especially with the abundance of high-quality reference information resources about current events.



## Illustrations

There are photographs, drawings, portraits, charts, tables and maps—to the tune of about 1,300. While they are useful even in black and white, the primary target audience, which grew up on Kodachrome, certainly would like color and other multimedia. The maps are in color (and are very good, though often overcrowded with names of towns). A few of the reproductions of famous paintings are very good, but most of them are too small to really appreciate their beauty. Then again, most of the concise encyclopedias do not have any illustrations.

## Browsing and Searching

Yahoo! offers essential software features, such as limited and unlimited truncation, or exact phrase searching. Space between two words implies an AND operation. There is no Boolean AND, OR and NOT operators. If you use these operators they will be searched as a normal character string, not as the OR, AND or NOT command. While *cat* finds 75 articles and *dog* finds 168, the query *cat OR dog* will retrieve only 8 articles, ones which include both terms and the word *OR*. There is no distinction between lower- or uppercase, such as aids versus AIDS, which is the typical solution.

There are two browsing options, one by the lead word of the title of articles, the other by the captions of the illustrations. The former may be somewhat cumbersome, as there are several thousand main entries under some of the letters of the alphabet.

Browsing the Illustrations Index is more fun, because once you select a name range, such as Pershing to Potter, Beatrix, images in a matrix appear. To see the article related to the illustration, you will need to click once more. Considering the average length of the articles, the image and the text could be brought up at once after the first click on the thumbnail.

Some entries are incorrectly filed in the alphabet, and some don't have the first name, like Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau.

Some have in place of a first name a prefix, like the Hungarian-born John von Neumann, who invented the word cybernetics, led the construction of the first computer, and developed the game theory, among many other achievements. He is filed under the letter 'v' instead of the letter 'N' and his portrait appears next to Vesta and the Vestal virgins, which certainly would have amused him, but is definitely an error, not only by bibliographic standards, but also by common sense. Walther von der Vogelweide, the medieval German poet, is not filed under von, or der, but under Walther. The editors did not realize that Walther is a first name. I wonder where Walter Matthau would have been filed if the editors had not dropped his first name.

In spite of some glitches, Britannica Concise is a top-notch free ready-reference tool. It can be a perfect starting point, and often it can deliver information that suffices for most users—except on topics that have been affected by some important current event. ♦

# BOOK REVIEW



## How to Be a Word Wizard on the Web

By Thomas Pack

*Web Word Wizardry: A Guide to Writing for the Web and Intranet*

By Rachel McAlpine

Ten Speed Press

December 2001

Paperback, 264 pages including index

\$11.95

"If the words on a Web site are wrong, there's precious little point in having a Web site at all," says Rachel McAlpine, a trainer and consultant in online content.

"Until recently, design and technology overshadowed written content on the Web," she says. "Even today, written content is likely to fall through the gaps. Consequently, the Web is jam-packed with empty, incoherent, ill-organized, meaningless, repetitive pages. Gunk. Spam. Junk. Crap. It gives the Web a bad name."

McAlpine's book, *Web Word Wizardry: A Guide to Writing for the Web and Intranet*, not only explains the importance of getting online words right, it shows you how to write them. In 20 chapters, she covers how to make online content readable, findable, and credible. She addresses everything from keywords to page titles, e-zines to intranets, and metatags to global English.

### Think Web

To write successfully for the Web, you'll need "to travel far beyond the rules for effective business writing," according to McAlpine. "You need to switch from 'think paper' mode to 'think Web' mode," she explains. "'Thinking Web' means being aware of the specific demands and opportunities of the Web, which are quite different from those of the old media."

To think Web, she adds, there are several things to keep in mind:

- ◆ **Think Web culture:** "The same person who will benignly peruse your handwritten letter at leisure becomes a monster of impatience on the Web," McAlpine points out. "Did you bore her for two seconds? She's gone!"
- ◆ **Think Context:** When you read words printed on paper, the form of the medium is solid. "You can feel it, you can smell it, you can even lick it if you're inclined that way." But on the Web the form is much more ephemeral, so the "text of every page should start by signaling its context and purpose. Don't rely on the logo: Many people never look at that."
- ◆ **Think Screen:** Until high-definition screens or digital paper become common, keep in mind that people may be reading your words with eyestrain or even a migraine.
- ◆ **Think Skim-Reading:** People usually don't read word by word on a Web page.

"Instead, they skate over the surface, grabbing for clues about the content." That means writers "must shape all Web content to accommodate readers who simply scan the page." (The book includes a whole chapter on how to do this—for example, you should use explanatory headings, hyperlinks that work like headings, and bullet points. You also should use the inverted pyramid style of writing.)

- ◆ **Think Fluid Format:** The format of a paper document conveys much of its information, but because the Web is a more fluid medium, "you have to use other means to impose structure."
- ◆ **Think Keyword:** "The Web writer must enter the mind of the site's target visitors and second-guess their choice of vocabulary," McAlpine points out. "This requires an acrobatic mind-flip out of your own familiar world. Text for the Web must be rich in keywords...."
- ◆ **Think Search Engines:** You should tailor your Web writing so search engines will pick it up. (Again, the book includes a whole chapter on how to do this.)
- ◆ **Think Interaction:** To attract and retain visitors with your site, you need to provide interactive elements with the text. "If you tend to think of Web sites as parking space for information, you haven't got the hang of the Web. Not at all."
- ◆ **Think International:** Because your site visitors can come from anywhere, McAlpine includes a chapter called "Write for the World," in which she offers several tips for meeting the needs of a global audience. You should, for example, use short sentences in the active voice, put main ideas first, and use simple, common, concrete words.

### Writing Microcontent

McAlpine makes it clear that the Web writer's job is more than just putting a few paragraphs on the home page: "I strongly recommend that a specialist Web writer is responsible not only for body copy but also for microcontent, including titles, alt-text [the alternative text provided for nontext elements on a Web page], and metadescription and keyword tags."

She explains in detail how search engines rank sites according to their keywords. "Choose the right keywords and you can create a rush to your Web site," she says. "Choose the wrong keywords and wave your traffic goodbye—you're buried deep, deep—you're totally invisible as search result number 90,001. (Actually, even number 31 doesn't stand much of a chance.)"

McAlpine offers multiple examples of how to use keywords effectively. An excellent aspect of the book is it often offers very specific advice. For example, if you're going

to repeat keywords in the meta keyword tag, "Don't start repeating until after you have written seven keywords. And don't repeat keywords more than three times."

She also devotes a chapter to the specific needs of writing e-zines. "The typical e-zine article is weak," she says. "Typically, a new e-zine starts with a fanfare, and then it fizzles out. An e-zine with truly original, interesting, and authoritative content is very rare. The e-zines that survive have consistently high-quality content, specifically written for delivery by e-mail to a highly targeted readership."

In the chapter on preparing prose for intranets, McAlpine compares and contrasts the processes of writing private Web pages with writing public ones, and she explains how to develop an in-house style guide for intranet content.

### Creating Credibility

The author addresses the critical topic of creating credibility for a Web site in a chapter called "How to Make People Trust You." Building on the results of credibility studies, she offers several suggestions that can help you build confidence in your online offerings, which include these points:

- ◆ Provide easy, intuitive navigation.
- ◆ Publish expert content.
- ◆ Use appropriate, user-friendly design.
- ◆ On every page, include the identity of the organization behind the site.
- ◆ Create a real sense of the people in the organization.
- ◆ Provide genuine testimonials from happy customers.
- ◆ Supply secure order forms.
- ◆ Offer a money-back guarantee.
- ◆ Include a privacy policy.
- ◆ Provide links to other Web sites.

The book also covers how to write online forms and how to format digital text. In appendices, McAlpine supplies a glossary of Web terms, a short list of URLs that may be helpful to Web writers, and numerous checklists covering all the issues she brings up.

Throughout the bulk of the book, McAlpine mostly addresses the needs of writers working on commercial Web sites, but the last chapter, called "Joy of Web," explores how other types of writers can make use of the medium. McAlpine calls it "a wonderful playground for journalists, poets, novelists, biographers, corporate communicators, and philosophers. In fact, all writers without exception have been given a brand-new toy—the Web."

Summing up the basics of good writing, McAlpine says, "To communicate successfully you (nearly) always need plain language, logical organization of ideas, correct spelling and usage, and a strong sense of purpose and audience. And regardless of the medium, even a hint of personality behind the words is a big plus."

She practices what she preaches, and her book reflects all those guidelines. It's a must-read not only for Web writers and editors but also for designers, developers, marketers, executives, and anyone else who needs to understand how powerful prose—tailored to the unique characteristics of the online world—can be the key to a Web site's success. ♦