



My grandma used to tell me that a decent family should have at least a single volume encyclopedia, a dictionary, an almanac, an atlas, and maybe a quotations dictionary and a thesaurus.

These are also the sources that you will find at arm's reach from the reference librarian in any library. They serve as a first (and often last) point of reference in answering a question and have been enormously popular in the home and office as well.

Microsoft published Bookshelf, the first combination of such reference publications on CD-ROM for the first time nearly 10 years ago. It has been the most widely sold CD-ROM for several years. It is somewhat surprising that competing CD-ROM products popped up only recently. Mindscape (formerly known as Software Toolworks) released its Complete Reference Library (CRL) in March, and Corel launched its Bookcase in mid-1995. Though some of the sources are identical or seemingly identical (Figure 1), the differences between these reference collections are very significant.

**Bookshelf '95**

After shelving the Bookshelf project in the late 1980s but not updating it for many years, Microsoft became committed and has been regularly releasing a new edition every year. Not only is the content updated every year, but also the software, which brings the best out of the venerable and very current ready reference sources. It is the hands-down winner in this category.

The top-notch Concise Columbia Encyclopedia of 17,000 entries is enhanced by 1,700 images, 25 animation flicks, and about 100 musical samples. The American Heritage Dictionary with 350,000 entries is almost in the league of the few unabridged dic-

# Ready Reference Collections on CD-ROM

*A review of three products that were not all created equal.*

By Péter Jacsó

tionaries. It has distinguished itself in the print version by ever-improving usage notes, and good quality illustrations. Microsoft added to these its own—sometimes color—illustrations, and musical instrument samples. These are shared between the encyclopedia and the dictionary.

Eighty thousand of the words are also pronounced. For biographical entries only, the pronunciation of the last name is shown and—sometimes—heard. As opposed to the pictorial and music illustrations, you will not see and hear the pronunciation in the encyclopedia even if it is available in the dictionary. This would be quite useful as in the case of Alexis-Charles-Henri Clérel de Tocqueville or Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. Word etymologies, the illustrative quotes, and the usage notes are excellent. The Original Roget's Thesaurus that contains 250,000 words is also impressively current.

Though Bartlett's Familiar Quotations is not available anymore in Bookshelf, the Columbia Dictionary of Quotations is an ex-

cellent compilation of 18,000 entries from 1,500 authors covering 1,500 subjects. It is absolutely current and refreshingly varied, with quotes ranging from Shakespeare to well-known columnists such as George F. Will, P.J. O'Rourke, and Barbara Ehrenreich. The 57 quotes from Camille Paglia seem to be a tad excessive, even in light of the 180 quotes from or about George Bernard Shaw. (Just this source alone on a floppy from Apex costs \$40!)

The World Almanac and Book Facts is up to date with events as of October, 1994, and is a gold mine for statistics and trivia. The tables are displayed and printed adequately (which cannot be said about the competition). The computer glossary of the Almanac complements the dictionary by giving terse explanations for such jargon as emoticons, smiley, fire wall, flame, groupware, vaporware, etc.

The Hammond Intermediate World Atlas is somewhat disappointing. Instead of individual and detailed country maps, you'll find maps that combine three to five coun-

tries (e.g., Czech Republic, Austria, and Hungary). Though there are 230 countries listed (also showing their flags), the number of maps is only 50. The Atlas includes 180 national anthems, but as they are in MIDI format, you are unlikely to stand up and pledge allegiance when playing them.

There is a national 5-Digit ZIP Code and Post Office Directory that may be invoked from word processor, spreadsheet, and database programs.

The interface and the search engine are top-notch, perfectly combining both ease and power of use, including even proximity operators. The Advanced Find option allows you to execute the search across the sources to be selected by the user and to limit the search to those items that have picture, sound, animation, and/or video.

The search engine is intelligent enough to find the article about Graham Greene, even when spelled as Graham Green. Sometimes, however, the search engine is more permissive than you may have bargained for. For example, the search for computer also retrieves articles with the word computation, and they may be irrelevant. The hot buttons for "see also" references, printing, copying, and navigating are highly functional and well placed. The screen layout (Figure 2) is superb.

**Complete Reference Library**

Mindscape's product is not nearly as good as Microsoft's for two reasons. One is the lack of currency of some of its sources, and the other has to do with the software itself. The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia is not as current as that in Bookshelf (and Bookcase), and the 1994 Information Please Almanac is also outdated in light of the 1995 almanacs of the competition.

This is hardly acceptable, as CRL was issued about the same time as Bookshelf (in March 1995). Also, the Simpson's Contemporary Quotations Dictionary is not only a far cry from the Columbia Quotations in terms of volume and variety, it is also far less contemporary: the most recent quote is from 1988.

The Eureka maps are more detailed than the Hammond ones, though much less artistic. There are no flags and national anthems. The Roget name (like Webster) is not copyrighted, and does not mean much. This Roget's Thesaurus is smaller than the one in Bookshelf, but to its credit it lists antonyms. The Reader's Companion to American History provides details about historic events beyond the limits of the one-volume Columbia Encyclopedia. Wall Street Words is a useful dictionary of business terms with substantial explanations. This cannot be said about the Legal Word Book that seems completely useless to me (and I am a lawyer by my first degree). It merely shows syllabification. Why bother?

The 2,000 pictures are excellent, often better and larger than in Bookshelf. The 25 animation and 50 video flicks that illustrate concepts and processes of communications (TV, amplified sound, radar), energy production, and natural phenomena (seasons, solar system, thunderstorm) are also impressive both in quality and quantity. The

	Microsoft Bookshelf '95	Complete Reference Library	Corel Bookcase
Encyclopedia	Concise Columbia	Concise Columbia	Concise Columbia
Dictionary	American Heritage	American Heritage	Webster's Riverside
General Almanac	World Almanac	Information Please	Information Please
Quotations	Columbia Dictionary	Simpson's Contemporary	Simpson's Contemporary
Thesaurus	Original Roget's	Enhanced Roget's	
Atlas	Hammond Intermediate	Eureka	
Other sources			
People's Chronology	●		
National Scg: ZIP Codes	●		
Wall Street Words		●	
Reader's Companion to U.S. History		●	
Written Word III		●	
Legal Word Book		●	
Information Please Business Almanac			●
Information Please Sports Almanac			●

Figure 1

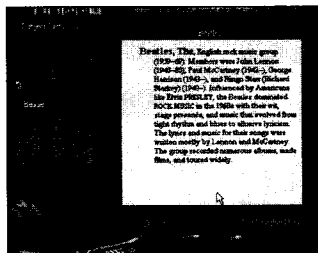


Figure 3

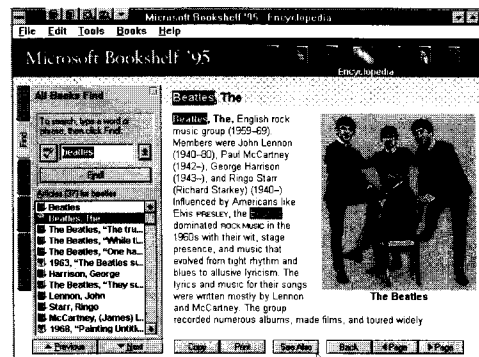


Figure 2

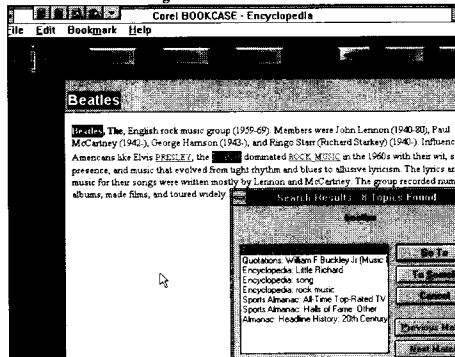


Figure 4



100 MIDI sound illustrations for musical instruments and genre are comparable to those in Bookshelf. It is regrettable that the excellent multimedia elements are not indicated in the text, and even if they figure out how to check the presence of a picture, sound clip, or a map, users are likely to find the procedure awkward.

The screen layout is not perfect: the textual and multimedia elements cannot be displayed simultaneously. Figure 3 shows the Beatles article that also has a nice picture—if you move the mouse over the camera symbol and click it.

The software interface is attractive, but the search engine has serious deficiencies, and there are disappointing design features. The dictionary index, for example, is broken down into hundreds of word pairs to indicate the range of terms under that primary index entry. Much too often a pair, such as gym-gyve, has only two or three words (gymnastics and gypsy), and term look up is considerably slowed down.

In the multimedia indexes there are too many categories, and often these categories have only one or two items. In the video section, for example, there are only two entries under Mammals: Polar Bear and Dian Fossey. There are other weird and sloppy "features" in the indexes. In the picture section, there are two categories: a Miscellaneous and a Misc. This latter one has a single item. In the World Countries category there are 18 countries listed, even if many more have pictures, and Greenland is hardly a country. It is weird that personal names are sorted by first name in all the indexes.

Personal names in the dictionary are never pronounced. While pictures, animations, and video flicks are shared among the encyclopedia, the dictionary, and the almanac, pronunciation is not. So even though euthanasia is both in the dictionary and the encyclopedia, it is pronounced only in the former. The search cannot be qualified by multimedia elements as in Bookshelf. There is no automatic pluralization as in Bookshelf. Truncation is not possible in Full Text Search mode but only in Quick Search mode when merely article titles and header words are searched. Proximity operation is not available and that often results in many false hits (because of the too loose default AND operator), though at least exact phrase searching ("New Mexico") is possible.

A programming glitch prevents you from searching the thesaurus. You may only look up headwords through the index, negating the advantage of a computerized thesaurus. In the printouts, the pronunciation script is useless because the needed special fonts of AHD are not supplied. The careless formatting of tables makes you believe that Albert von Nagrapolt Szent-Györgyi (the first to isolate vitamin C) got the literature Nobel prize. Why? Because whenever two or more persons shared a Nobel Prize in a category (as was the case that year), the rest of the entries shift.

#### Bookcase

This collection is part of the larger collection (Office Companion) of Corel. The choice of reference sources is not as good

as in the competition, and the overall implementation is rather poor. The two additional Information Please Almanacs for business and sports may be an overkill. The 9,000 quotations in Simpson's Contemporary Quotations cannot compete with Bookshelf's Columbia Dictionary of Quotations, and Webster's New Riverside Dictionary is mediocre both in terms of entries (less than 60,000) and particularly in content.

There are no illustrations and multimedia elements. The search software is an earlier version of Microsoft Viewer, but it

does not offer the perfect interface and feature list of Bookshelf, which uses a much enriched version of that Viewer software, known as Multimedia Viewer Publishing Toolkit. Neither are such essential enhancements available as the "Related Articles" or "Outline" feature in Bookshelf.

It looks like Bookshelf three years ago, minus the rich illustrations and the thesaurus (see Figure 4). The pronunciation keys are as much messed up in the printout as in the Complete Reference Library. The tables are handled even worse than in CRL. Yitzhak Rabin seems to have won the No-

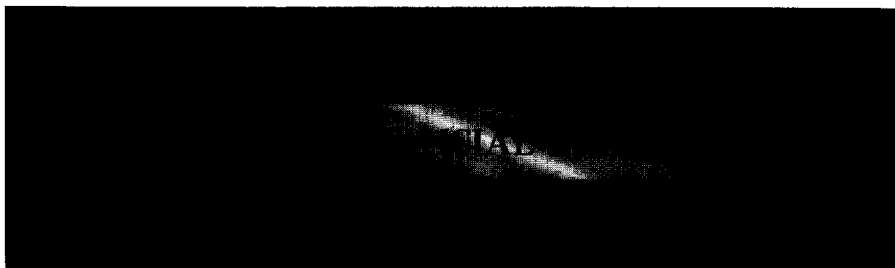
bel prize in chemistry and there seem to be four persons to share the literature Nobel prize, one with only a last name. This product is not up to the standards of Corel. If you buy the Office Companion for the other components, Bookcase may be useful, but it is certainly not "the authoritative source for reference information," as the cover jacket of the CD-ROM claims.

My grandma was right, as always. Today she would approve and be pleased with Microsoft Bookshelf, and perhaps would send back the other two to the drawing board. ♦

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