

firstfind.info 



easy to find ..... easy to use websites ..... in plain & simple English

**Office for Literacy and Outreach Services**  
**American Library Association**  
Chicago and London 2003

firstfind.info is a project of the Westchester Library System, with support from the Brooklyn Public Library, New York Public Library, Queens Borough Public Library and the American Library Association. This product was supported by Federal Library Services and Technology Act funds, awarded to the New York State Library by the Federal Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Compiled by Beatrice Calvin

Published by the American Library Association  
Office for Literacy and Outreach Services  
50 East Huron Street  
Chicago, IL 60611

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992. 8

Copyright © 2003 by the American Library Association. All rights reserved except those which may be granted by Sections 107 and 108 of the Copyright Revision Act of 1976.

Printed in the United States of America.

04 03 2 1



# Contents

---

<b>Foreword</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<i>By Dale Lipschultz</i>	
<b>Project Participants</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction to firstfind.info</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<i>By Bruce Carmel</i>	
<b>The Evolution and Future of firstfind.info</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<i>By Robin Osborne</i>	
<b>Development of Evaluative Criteria for firstfind.info</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<i>By Maureen O'Connor</i>	
<b>Website Review Form</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Writing for the Web</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<i>By Catherine Jones</i>	
<b>Annotation Exercises</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Designing the firstfind.info Website</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<i>By Jian Ren</i>	
<b>Suggested Readings</b> .....	<b>25</b>



## Foreword

---

*By Dale Lipschultz, Literacy Officer, American Library Association (ALA), Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS)*

The Office for Literacy and Outreach Services of the American Library Association is charged with providing services, resources, training, and support to librarians serving traditionally underserved populations. The service and information needs and demands of this diverse group of library patrons and potential library users present a growing challenge to America's public librarians and public libraries. OLOS is constantly seeking new strategies and tools to help public librarians in their effort to provide full and equal access to traditionally underserved populations.

[www.firstfind.info](http://www.firstfind.info) (firstfind) responds to this service and information challenge and helps OLOS move closer to addressing its charge. firstfind.info is a virtual library that provides general and local information to low-level readers and adults with limited English skills. Although firstfind is a virtual library without bricks, mortar, shelves, or stacks, it is managed and staffed by real librarians. The very fact that librarians are involved in every aspect of firstfind ensures that the information on the website has been critically evaluated, carefully annotated, and systematically organized.

Several core principles guided the development of firstfind. Adults, regardless of their reading level and language proficiency, need and want information on a full range of subjects. And while all subjects may interest adults with low level reading skills and limited English proficiency, there are key topic areas that are of special interest to this target population. These topic areas include health, education, employment, parenting, and citizenship. The core collection of firstfind addresses these topic areas.

Librarians are not alone in their determination to provide meaningful resources to adults with low level reading skills and limited English proficiency. In October 2002, I participated in a Leadership Summit convened by the National Center for Outreach (NCO), a fledgling organization seeking community engagement through public television. Representatives from twelve (12) national service organizations attended the session. Each organization was committed to providing services, resources, and information to underserved populations. Additionally, they were committed to working together to develop strategies, tools, and collaborations that would ultimately recast outreach. I was overwhelmed and energized by the potential power and reach of this small group. Participating in this session helped me fully understand firstfind. I understand its potential, its power, and its place in this new world of outreach.

This series of articles, written by the project participants, documents the growth, development, and implementation of firstfind. Significantly, these observations and experiences also detail how a group of librarians and literacy educators used their professional skills and personal experiences to build a virtual library that can be used by everyone.



## Project Participants

---

### ***From Westchester Library System (WLS) and its member libraries***

Robin Osborne (WLS)

Jian Ren (WLS)

Linda Kirk (Field Library/Peekskill)

Tata Canuelas (White Plains Public Library)

Yaw Fia (Yonkers Public Library)

Annick Rodriguez (New Rochelle Public Library)

Mary Ayers (Mount Kisco Public Library)

Stacey Harris (Greenburgh Public Library)

### ***From New York Public Library***

Catherine Jones

Dorota Socha

Forest Turner

Alexandra Gomez

Sharon Jarvis

Kristopher Tracy

### ***From Brooklyn Public Library***

Margaret Pas

Peter Emery

Sheryl Katzin

Jerome Meyers

Alla Makeeva

Stephanie Brueckel

Erna Golden

Jeanne Lambert

### ***From Queensborough Public Library***

Maureen O'Connor

Natalie McDonough

Bruce Carmel

Matthew Thomas

Patricia Stachiw

Kyung-mi Lee

Leslie Dann

Venus Curva

Deborah Peters

Silvana Mazo

### ***From the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services of ALA***

Dale Lipschultz

***Project Consultants***

David J. Rosen  
Director, Adult Literacy Research Institute

Dinah Smith O'Brien  
Director of Community Resources  
Plymouth, MA

Susan Cowles  
Antarctic Explorer  
Corvallis, OR

Maura Donnelly  
Multi-tasking Specialist  
New York, NY



## Introduction to firstfind.info

---

*By Bruce Carmel, Director of Adult Learning Centers, Queens Borough Public Library*

The purpose of firstfind.info (firstfind) is to provide useful and often critical information and resources to adults who have limited literacy.

When Robin Osborne first tried to explain this to me, I didn't quite understand. Robin was talking about creating a collection of websites for people who didn't read very well or who had limited proficiency in English. I work at the Queens Library in the Adult Learner Program. Computer-assisted instruction is a big part of our program. A whole library of instructional websites sounded pretty promising.

"That would be great," I said, "There are many good websites that can help people learn to read or learn English. I can give you a list of the ones I like best—"

"That's not what it's for," said Robin.

I didn't understand. We went around and around for a few more minutes. By the time the conversation ended, only one thing was clear to me: I didn't know what Robin was talking about. Maybe it's worth noting that I am teacher, not a librarian. I do work in a library, but sometimes it takes me a little while to catch on to a librarian's point of view.

Now I get it. Not only do I understand what firstfind is, I understand why it is important. The main purpose of firstfind is *not* to teach people how to read and write or how to speak English. The main purpose of firstfind is to help the estimated 90 million American adults with limited literacy skills get the information they need. 90 million—that's a lot of people.

To understand firstfind, it helps to know a little bit about Adult Literacy in America. Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) were published in 1993. A new survey is being prepared at the National Institute for Literacy, but for now, NALS will have to do. NALS estimated that 90 million Americans have limited literacy skills. That's how many adults are in the lowest two levels of literacy. That is close to half of the adults in America. Of those 90 million people, most can read simple texts with simple layouts, but have trouble when reading gets more complex.

Level 1 is the lowest level of NALS. 40 million people were estimated to be in that lowest level. 8 million of those could read nothing or very, very little. About 32 million other people were just above them in skill level, and could read and write to some degree:

- They could usually find one piece of information in a simple article.*
- They could find the expiration date on a driver's license.*
- They could write their names.*

About 50 million people were estimated to be in level 2, the second lowest level. They could do a little better:

- They could find two pieces of information in a simple article
- They could find an intersection on a street map
- They could do some simple addition using information from an order form

So most of the people in levels 1 and 2 can definitely read, but they cannot read everything. They couldn't read instructions on an appliance warranty. They couldn't use a sign-out sheet. They couldn't read a fairly complicated table of information.

The NALS standards were a useful guide for us in the creation of the firstfind library. NALS helped the firstfind team understand just how many people who might be lost on the Internet or in a library could make good use of firstfind.

In a way, it is easy to define literacy: "the ability to read and write." (Central Intelligence Agency, 2001). That sounds simple enough until that definition is applied to actual library users. No one can read *everything*. Very few adults are able to read *nothing*. Literacy is sometimes seen as an all-or-nothing proposition: People can either read everything including Shakespeare, legal documents, and medical journals; or they are confounded by S-T-O-P written on a red octagon, and M-E-N on a bathroom door. In reality, just about everyone falls somewhere in between.

Much has been written about this. Tom Sticht says, "People are not literate or illiterate, but are rather more or less literate..." (Sticht, 1998, p. 13). That idea of a spectrum leads to a more complicated idea of literacy than the commonly held concept of a literacy/illiteracy split. Andrew Sledd states that there may really be no such thing as "literacy," but

only shifting constellations of forms and degrees of literacy, shifting and turning as history rearranges the social formations in which they are embedded. Pieties about Literacy with a capital L ought to be scrutinized: Which literacy? Whose literacy? Literacy for What?" (Sledd, 1988, p. 499).

The 8 million people who really can't read probably can't use firstfind without a lot of help. The other 82 million in those two lower levels should fare much better. That is who firstfind is for.

Everyone needs information. Not being able to find or comprehend the information you need can be frustrating. That's where firstfind can help: We want to provide access to reliable, relevant, accessible answers to important questions. Information and resources on topics such as family, jobs, legal issues, education, and health are important to many people, not just people who can't read well. We hope lots of people will use firstfind. It's a library for everyone, whether they can read well or not, but for almost half of the adults in America, it may be the best or only choice they have.

Central Intelligence Agency. (2001, October) [The world factbook 2001](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html). Retrieved October 31, 2001 on the World Wide Web: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>.

National Institute of Literacy (2001) [Frequently Asked Questions: How literate is the adult population?](http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#literacy%20rates) Retrieved October 30, 2001 on the World Wide Web: [http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#literacy rates](http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html#literacy%20rates).

National Institute of Literacy (2000) Fast Facts on Literacy. Retrieved June 10, 2000 on the World Wide Web: <http://www.nifl.gov/newworld/FASTFACT.HTM>.

Sledd, A. (1988). "Readin' no riotin': The politics of literacy". College English, 50. 495-508.

Sticht, Thomas G. (1998). Beyond 2000: Future Directions for Adult Education. Report by U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy.



# The Evolution and Future of firstfind.info

---

By Robin Osborne, Adult and Outreach Services Consultant, Westchester Library System (WLS)

Public libraries are often the first point of contact for individuals seeking access to information technology. A report commissioned by the Gates Foundation confirms that role with “substantial evidence... that public libraries provide an important source of computer access for disenfranchised citizens, including the poor, the less educated, the unemployed, and various minority groups.”<sup>1</sup> These library computers are most frequently used to access the Internet.

We know that access to physical machines is not necessarily the same as access to online information. Many library users are daunted by the Internet. They encounter many barriers to obtaining online information that they can understand. These barriers include site design, navigation, vocabulary, etc. In 2000 The Children's Partnership (TCP) released a report that demonstrated that low-income and other underserved communities would only benefit fully from the digital revolution when they had access to the content they wanted and needed.<sup>2</sup> This content would include (1) employment, education, business development and other information; and (2) information that can be clearly understood by limited-literacy users. This groundbreaking report was especially relevant to the library profession in its conclusion that “access to useful Internet content was as important as access to computers and Internet connections.”

We hope that firstfind will break new ground in public libraries' role in bridging the digital divide – one that can highlight the importance of the library profession in providing access to appropriate and relevant content for a much broader audience. This is the story of how the project was conceived, its objectives achieved, and its future envisioned.

In 1999, WLS was a partner in a pilot project funded by the U.S. Department of Education to develop models for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction that used curriculum grounded in civics content. In partnership with a local school district and a multi-service agency serving immigrants in the county, two comprehensive resource centers for immigrants were established in library settings. The library role in the partnership was to demonstrate how library services can support the educational environment for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students and instructors in concrete and creative ways.

In one component of the project, librarians worked with ESOL instructors to develop bibliographies of easy to read resources – including websites - to support curriculum themes. Finding appropriate high interest, low reading level sites for adults was not easy – but there were many more sites than we originally thought. A web guide was created for students in the program, which introduced students to social infrastructures of the U.S. – how public schools work, how to obtain health information and health care, how to find a variety of services to help the students and their families succeed in their new life.

This web guide (or library) was used by students for the same reasons that others use web guides: sites are reviewed and organized; the information is condensed and many people can

---

<sup>1</sup> Linda Heuertz et al. *Public Libraries and the Digital Divide: How Libraries Help*. Seattle: U of Washington, July 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Wendy Lazarus and Francisco Mora. *Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans: The Digital Divide's New Frontier*. Los Angeles: The Children's Partnership, 2002.

access it simultaneously. Students used this particular library because the sites provided an introduction to important ideas and information that were easy to find and easy to use.

The success and challenges of creating this web guide were discussed with other library outreach and literacy staff in the New York metropolitan area, an especially diverse and complex universe. As Bruce stated in his introduction, almost half of the adults in the U.S. have limited literacy skills. The numbers are much higher in our region – up to 79% in the Bronx. It is important to remember that these figures are based on the 1990 Census. The increase in immigrant populations in the region dramatically affects the demand for accessible information for local residents to navigate the spheres of work and family.

Each of the four library systems – WLS, New York Public Library (NYPL), Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) and Queens Borough Public Library (QBPL) – provides services and resources for low-level readers, immigrants, and other adults with special information needs, including online resources. QBPL, serving the most diverse county in the U.S., is a pioneer in offering multilingual online services to its users, including access to the library website in five languages other than English. NYPL offers *Click on @ the Library*, “training in information literacy to expand the public’s abilities to use technology to identify, locate and evaluate information; and outreach to educate individuals and organizations about the technology and resources available in the Library.”

Administrators from the four systems discussed ways to expand the depth and range of those efforts by sharing staff expertise, experience and numbers. We agreed to submit an LSTA grant proposal to the New York State Library that would address library users in need of basic information resources in plain English by creating a virtual library of high interest websites for those users. We also asked the American Library Association’s (ALA’s) Office of Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) to collaborate on the project as a national forum and network for all libraries serving the target population.

The grant proposal was successful and project partners got down to work. A planning committee included three adult education specialists, five librarians, a web designer, and the Literacy Officer of ALA. Over the course of six months we developed the structure for a training workshop designed to provide insights into the information needs of the target population, and skills in evaluating websites to meet those needs.

The training institute was conducted on March 21 and 22, 2002. A total of twenty-nine (29) librarians attended, along with members of the planning committee and two outside presenters. Topics covered in the workshop included an overview of the target population, studies on web content and low level readers, how to evaluate websites for the target population, searching tips, organization of the site and writing annotations. Primary subject areas for the library were identified, e.g., education, employment, health, etc. and each librarian was assigned to research an area.

For the next five months project participants searched for and evaluated hundreds of websites. They submitted evaluation forms for recommended sites, complete with annotations and notes. Some of the sites submitted did not necessarily meet the evaluative criteria, but provided important information not available elsewhere. The planning committee agreed, after much discussion, to include such sites. One site was the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, published annually by the U.S. Department of Labor.

As librarians submitted sites, other project partners worked to create a structure in which to organize them that would be easy to use. The organization of the hundreds of reviewed sites

was especially challenging. In content, we found that many sites were relevant to several subject areas. In the cataloging process, an item can have a main subject entry as well as others, but will be assigned only one Dewey or LC classification number. The Internet, on the other hand, can provide access points to a site from a variety of places. Sites about lead poisoning, for example, are included in the health, family and housing categories in firstfind. Scope notes for categories and subcategories were included to aid the user in finding information.

We also wanted to provide assistive tools, such as help screens and an online dictionary, for the end user. Maura Donnelly, adult educator and web designer, created some great screens to help novice web users, as well as to assist in navigating the website. She also created a help screen to explain how to use the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* site.

And then came the Final Frontier – how to combine all these parts and design a website that is accessible to the target population? We needed to create a product that would meet the same criteria used to select sites for the library. Considerations included scrolling, vocabulary, using browser/keyword searching, using pull-down menus, etc. What became clear was that we needed to use navigation tools that were intuitive.

Guided by the expertise and patience of Jian Ren, the site design evolved. We decided to use a frame structure to offer the user constant access to the help screens, an online dictionary, and a return to the list of topics. We used breadcrumbs, common to Yahoo and many web guides and browsers, to create a visual reminder of where the user started and progressed in his or her search. We limited the number of links on a page to ten to reduce the necessity of scrolling (when there were more than ten links we created another subcategory). We used a lot of scope notes to describe what a user would find in a category or subcategory. We did not include keyword searching – the possibilities of misspellings, not choosing the appropriate search term, etc. could lead to many frustrations and negative responses to the product.

There were several drafts before final decisions were made – and by and large the design has proved successful. You can learn more about the ideas and processes that spanned building the firstfind library from other articles in this booklet. You can also visit [www.firstfind.info](http://www.firstfind.info) to browse the content – more than 650 sites, organized into fourteen subject categories – and infrastructure that resulted from our efforts.

The firstfind collaboration continued into a second year, thanks to the support of another LSTA grant from the New York State Library. The objectives of the second year are to test and revise the product with representatives of the target population and provide training and demonstrations of the product to librarians, government and educational agencies, community-based organizations and to users in our libraries.

News about firstfind has been posted in a variety of media. Several other sites provide an annotated link to the site, including the Literacy Assistance Center in New York City and the Health Literacy Studies Program at the Harvard School for Public Health. The library is visited frequently, and users link from categories to subcategories to specific sites. The most popular topics are education, technology, health and government. Some users took advantage of the *Help Us Improve* feature to offer suggestions on other topics to include in the firstfind library – e.g., how to find and choose childcare, the history of Halloween, how to get a nursing license.

Training workshops for public librarians in the New York metropolitan area received positive feedback. Participants gained new perspective when looking for a website, looking at a website, and even when designing the websites that they create for their agencies. Several public

libraries in the area now provide a link to firstfind on their home pages. There is a small logo available as a visual tag for websites. This logo is available by e-mail to upon request of libraries.

Some agencies already use firstfind on an ongoing basis. Julie Hodorowski of the National Cancer Institute uses firstfind as a tool to teach seniors to find information on the Internet. A community technology center in Yonkers features firstfind as an important resource for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren. An ESL instructor in Washington wrote, "I hope to use it with students who are researching topics while doing web quests. The fact that the language level has been assessed in advance gives me the indication that students will find the sources more accessible than doing a general search for information."

In early December 2002, a software consultant conducted field-testing of user interface and interaction with firstfind with users around the New York metropolitan area. The results from interviews and observations of these users were both affirmative and informative. Users are able to navigate the site fairly well; the site organization and use of descriptive notes assist the user in locating information. We were also reminded that users do not have a uniform way of framing an information query. For example, if asked to find information about Head Start, one person may first look in *Education*, another may start in *Government Programs*, another in *Family*, and still another in *Local Information*. Using these insights, WLS staff will develop a database structure to organize links and descriptive notes, which can then be retrieved by the user from a variety of access points. **See also** notes will be added to lead the user to related information.

User testing and responses from staff of community agencies also reinforced the experience of any reference librarian at a public library: people want local information as they seek services to help them in various pursuits. Many websites are published by local government and community agencies. Since most of them do not meet the evaluative criteria used for firstfind, very few local resources are available on firstfind at this point.

All public libraries have information about local resources within their collections. How can we transfer that same information to an online environment in a format that is accessible to users with limited literacy skills?

The enormous capabilities of telecommunications provide an opportunity to meld a library's standard service of local information delivery with the accessibility criteria of firstfind. WLS staff is working on a pilot project to create access to geographically relevant information. Using the section *Computers and Technology*, and subsection *Find a Computer Class in Your Community*, they created database structure for organizing information by state and locality. State library agencies in New York, Florida and Massachusetts requested information from local libraries about computer instruction in their service areas. Agency name, contact information, descriptions of services, etc. were submitted via an online submission form. Responses were transferred to a database, and posted in that section of firstfind.

We hope that this process can be refined and replicated so that libraries from around the U.S. will be able to identify and compile resources that would benefit users in their service areas, and submit that information to be posted on firstfind. This is a very ambitious idea – stay tuned to news from ALA/OLOS about its progress.

To be successful in a venture like this, administrators and staff of public libraries must be more aware of the skills and knowledge of the range of community members we serve – and about the skills required to effectively use many current services or resources that we offer. The

skills required to obtain, process and understand information from online databases – much less some of our library websites – may pose an information access *barrier* for users. It is in the best interests of our mandate and services to scrutinize the content and design of the technology we offer to make information available and relevant to everyone. firstfind highlights the unique ways that librarians can make that happen and bridge the digital divide.



## Development of Evaluative Criteria

---

*By Maureen O'Connor, Director of Programs and Services, Queens Borough Public Library*

It sounded easy enough. The purpose of firstfind was well defined: 1) to train librarians to identify and evaluate informational websites appropriate for adults learning English and acquiring basic skills proficiency and 2) to construct a virtual library of these websites, organized by subject areas. There was a steering committee that included librarians with varied specializations in adult reference and online searching skills. Adult educators were also part of the mix and ALA was documenting the experience. Developing evaluative criteria for librarians to use when selecting sites for firstfind was crucial to the project but didn't seem difficult and developing a rating form was strictly a housekeeping detail. Many drafts, conference calls and meetings later, demonstrated how wrong that notion proved to be.

Initial drafts of the rating criteria were formal and relied on weighted scales for scoring each section. Originally there were fifteen criteria including: relevance for adult learners, accuracy, easy to navigate, easy to read, clear statement of authorship, lack of bias, recognized as a low-literacy website. After scoring the site, the evaluator was asked to recommend the site for use "as is", "in the following ways" or not at all. Further iterations dropped the criteria to nine including several new ones, ease in loading and lack of advertising being two.

Few, if any, of the criteria received universal approval but all led to healthy discussions with librarians learning from adult educators and vice versa. While librarians were concerned with content, adult educators explained how important ease in navigation and good design were to our intended audience. These are some of the topics of discussion.

- Adult educators were concerned that the sites be "relevant" for adult learners. Librarians responded that adult learners have the same range of information interests and needs as any other group. We agreed to discard the notion of "relevance" and focus on the need to search for high interest subject areas.
- Initial criteria required adults to be the intended audience. However, some children's or young adult sites provided good information, especially in areas of high interest such as government and history. We agreed that these sites could be included if thoroughly examined. Graphics and illustrations also had to be checked carefully and sites were rejected if text was appropriate for adults but illustrations were clearly aimed at a young audience.
- Some of the best sites in terms of menus and graphics were, not surprisingly, very commercial, with lots of pop-up advertisements. We discussed the inclusion of commercial sites as a whole. In the end we avoided sites filled with advertising or bias, but did include sites with corporate sponsorship.

- Locating specific easy to read content in areas of high need and interest wasn't always possible. The GED exam was the best example of this. The best website that included registration information was produced by the state but did not fit the established criteria for reading and comprehension level. Knowing that GED information would be important to many in the target audience, we agreed to include this site. At that moment the "override" was born. When we knew that there would be a high demand for important information, need would override all other criteria. Unfortunately, too often the sites produced by various government entities did not meet our criteria.
- Some sites had very useful pages within them but to start at the home page could be very frustrating for the user. The steering committee agreed and stressed to project librarians the need to evaluate at the "deepest" level of the site, e.g. *Legal Issues* does not link to the Plain English Law Centers, but rather to many articles contained in different categories such as Family Law, Employment Law, etc.

All of these discussions contributed to the final evaluation form that we used to build the firstfind library. The form was accessed, completed and submitted online. The final version of the review form was simple and included fields for the URL, a checklist for type of site, a brief description, annotation and comments. In reality, once librarians had used the review form enough to feel comfortable with their ability to evaluate sites, many reviewers would just email the project leader a URL with a brief annotation.

Our experience with evaluative criteria was proof positive that we were on the right track and there was a need for firstfind. Easy to read and comprehend websites are scarce and were more difficult to find than we'd originally anticipated. If skilled librarians had difficulties locating information, how would the adult new reader fare using the Internet or even asking for help at the reference desk?



# Website Review Form

---

**Reviewer:**

**Date reviewed:**

**Subject Category:**

**Website Title:**

**URL:** <http://www.>

**Website Publisher or Sponsor:**

**Kind of Website:** check best choice(s):

- electronic journal, newspaper or magazine
- news source
- directory (searchable or static such as phone directory, map, or train or bus schedule)
- organization or association home pages
- city, state or federal government pages
- community information pages
- education/learning (history, science, literature, arts, etc.)
- web pages designed by adult educators for adult learners/new readers
- instruction, training, or how-to learning
- other (please describe)

**Description:** (The audience for this is the project administrator. If only part of the site is relevant, note specifically which part(s). If the site needs adaptation or special use, explain what that is. Note if site requires plug-ins (Flash, RealAudio etc.) Note if site requires user to register and remember an I.D. and password to log-in. Describe any other special features.

**Rating:**

Rating directions: for each criterion below, rate it 0 if unsatisfactory, 1 if satisfactory, 2 if excellent in column A, then multiply by number given in column B. Total across and at the bottom of the Total column for rating.

Rating Criteria	A		B		Total
	0-2	x	=		
1. has content which is of <b>high interest and suitable for adults</b>	1.		2		
2. provides <b>accurate, complete, reliable, current information</b> (authority is recognized and suitable; there is a clear statement of authorship, ownership or responsibility for content; it includes publication or completion date or date last updated)	2.		2		
3. is <b>easy and efficient to navigate</b> (organized with clear, simple menus, intuitive or logical connections between pages; navigation bars, and home icon at end of each section; requires minimal scrolling; buttons make clear where they take you; includes good site map or index)	3.		2		
4. is <b>easy to read</b> , at a low-intermediate (“4 <sup>th</sup> - 6 <sup>th</sup> grade”) level, characterized by short sentences, simple vocabulary or words defined within context, plain English, assumption of little or no background knowledge, relatively little text per screen, background and text working well together. It may include Q&A format or bulleted text)	4.		2		
5. has <b>good graphic design for adults</b> ( straightforward layout, lots of space between text, no clutter, no unnecessary “bells and whistles” advertising, flashing banners, appealing, includes adult-appropriate graphic images or illustrations)	5.		2		
6. makes its <b>bias clear</b> if it has one, <b>or is fair</b> in presentation of points of view	7.		1		
7. does not have as its primary purpose advertising commercial products	8.		1		
8. <b>loads reasonably fast</b> (under 30 seconds per page)	9.		1		
9. takes into consideration the <b>needs of differently-abled students</b> (e.g. non-frames version. Alt tags under images, and other considerations which make text-to-speech possible.) It may be “Bobby Approved” or in other ways be recognized as a suitable Website for adults with reading learning differences or disabilities	10.		1		
<b>TOTAL out of possible 24 points</b>					/24

Does the site include local information?                    \_\_\_yes                    \_\_\_no

Is the information printable?                    \_\_\_yes                    \_\_\_no

**Recommendation:**

\_\_\_\_\_ I recommend this website to be used as it is

\_\_\_\_\_ I recommend this website to be used in the following way(s)

\_\_\_\_\_ I would recommend this website **IF**..... (Tell us what needs to be changed, so that we can contact the publisher about revising or altering the site.

**Annotation:** (25 words or fewer. *Write with the end user in mind.* Mention an audience in your annotation only if specialized (i.e. new mothers). Focus on content and describing what the site “does.”



# Writing for the Web

---

*By Catherine Jones, Web Coordinator, Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library*

You've just spent hours, maybe days, searching, tracking, and evaluating websites for firstfind. Now it's time to write up a short description for the links you've selected. This is the easy part, right? Well not so fast.

Reading on the web is challenging, and not just for beginning readers. We know that most people scan the text on a website. They do this for many reasons: our eyes are tired from reading low-resolution text against a glowing computer monitor; we sit in uncomfortable chairs while popup ads flash by, blinking text appears and vanishes, and accidental mouse clicks take us places we never meant to go!

So what does this mean for how we, as site editors, write for the web? We have to commit to writing short, user-centered descriptions that are free from jargon and marketing language and that link to meaningful content.

## **User-centered**

Just as flipping through a book or magazine, or listening to a sample track on a CD helps you determine if you'll buy the item, a good annotation helps a user decide if she or he will invest the time in clicking on a link and waiting for a new page to load. A good annotation describes the content so precisely that if it's not what the user was looking for, the link doesn't need to be followed. Above all, a good annotation will describe what the site does, thereby minimizing surprises.

## **Short**

All librarians learn how to write annotations in graduate school. In these paragraph-long annotations we summarize content, describe our evaluative criteria (we like this site because it is updated frequently, it is Bobby-compliant, we can see who the author is, and so on), and make recommendations. Forget all of this. Remember the user.

Take any first draft of your web content and cut it in half. If you need more words to describe a site start adding words back in, one at a time. Every word must be grilled before it is added back into a paragraph.

Another way to keep an annotation short is to take out transitional phrases. A description does not need to begin "This website contains great recipes" when we know, of course, that what we are linking to is a website. The entire firstfind site is a collection of links to websites! Other gratuitous phrases to avoid: "and more!", "just a mouse-click away", "hot list of cool sites", and "for your viewing pleasure."

Learn and practice the techniques of plain English -- "a language that the intended audience can understand and act upon for a single reading." Visit <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>.

## Jargon Free

We made every effort to purge our writing of library - or industry -specific jargon, acronyms, and marketing language. This can slip in when you cut and paste from a site's own description of itself. Consider this annotation from the Internet Public Library: "[XYZ site] is an innovative health website hosted by some of the leading medical consultants in the United Kingdom, providing a comprehensive health information website written by recognized experts in their particular field of medicine." Yikes.

## Deep Linking

A final comment: use your annotations as diagnostic tools. If it takes two paragraphs to summarize the content for a user, the content you are linking to may be too dense. One way to deal with this is deep linking. Don't be shy about breaking up a great, but large site, into separate links, each with their own annotation.

For a website to be successful it must build a relationship with its readers, after all there are millions of websites for people to choose from. If our audience likes and trusts our content, they will be back to use the site again. But like any relationship, trust is key.

We have promised our visitors good [librarian-approved] links, in plain and simple to read language. Our success hinges on living up to that promise. Great content, sleek design, architecture and navigation won't save a poorly written website.

It's hard to go wrong when you focus on the end-user. This keeps marketing, jargon, long-windedness and a condescending tone in check. Finally, take the time to test for usability, and incorporate comments as you go.



## Annotation Exercises

---

---

<b>BEFORE</b>	<b>and AFTER</b>
<p><u><a href="#">ZIP Code Look-Up and Address Information</a></u> <u><a href="http://www.usps.gov/ncsc/lookups/lookup_zip+4.html">http://www.usps.gov/ncsc/lookups/lookup_zip+4.html</a></u></p> <p>The ZIP Code Look-Up and City/State/ZIP Code Association are free services provided by the USPS to assist the public with their addressing needs.</p>	<p><u>Example</u> New Title: Find a Zip Code New Annotation: Type in an address and we'll show you the correct zip code.</p> <p>----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----</p>
<p><u><a href="#">National First Ladies' Library Home Page</a></u> <u><a href="http://www.firstladies.org">http://www.firstladies.org</a></u></p> <p>Online biographical and bibliographical information about the First Ladies of the United States. The website contains descriptions of over 40,000 books, articles, letters, manuscripts by and about U.S. presidents' wives, from Martha Washington to Hillary Clinton.</p>	<p>----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----</p>
<p><b><u>FirstGov.gov</u></b> <u><a href="http://www.firstgov.gov">http://www.firstgov.gov</a></u></p> <p>This website is jam-packed with useful facts.</p>	<p>----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----</p>

BEFORE	and AFTER
<p><u>Healthfinder</u>  <a href="http://www.healthfinder.org">http://www.healthfinder.org</a></p> <p>A gateway to consumer health and human services information from the United States government. Selected online publications, clearinghouses, databases, websites, support and self-help groups, as well as the government agencies and not-for-profit organizations that produce reliable information for the public.</p>	<p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
<p><i>Alternative Medicine Home Page</i>  <a href="http://www.pitt.edu/~cbw/altm.html">http://www.pitt.edu/~cbw/altm.html</a></p> <p>Check here for links.</p>	<p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>
<p><u>Metropolitan Transit Authority</u>  <a href="http://www.mta.info">http://www.mta.info</a></p> <p>Overall, this isn't a difficult site to navigate, considering the breadth of coverage; anyone who can find their way around NYC with a bus or subway map and knows how to use a mouse will be able to navigate; useful site to keep in mind when maps are out of stock at the reference desk.</p>	<p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p> <p>-----</p>



# Designing the firstfind.info Website

---

By Jian Ren, Web Administrator, Westchester Library System

Robin introduced the idea of firstfind when she hired me as a technical specialist for Westchester Library System. I thought it would be great for low-literate adults as well as new immigrants like myself. But I didn't have the slightest idea how these users were going to retrieve information. Using computers and mastering Internet technology can be difficult for adults with limited literacy and language skills. Being a part of the design team was a great learning experience for me.

The description on the homepage “easy to find, easy to use websites in plain and simple English” summarizes the purpose of firstfind. It also provided the guidelines for designing the website.

## Navigation

What we are most proud of —and what we struggled most on— is the navigation system of firstfind. We worked hard to make it intuitive and easy to use for our target audience. Instead of linking users to a massive website, overloaded with information, they are immediately directed to the exact information they need. That's why we chose to use framesets throughout the site.

A frameset is simply a Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) document that tells the browser to divide the screen into split windows. HTML frames allow us to present documents in multiple views, which may be independent windows or subwindows. Multiple views offer a way to keep some information visible, while other views are scrolled or replaced. The top frame (the *menu* frame) displays a navigation menu with the firstfind logo and four buttons that link to a list of topics, an online dictionary, some help screens and a feedback form. The lower frame (the *main* frame) displays the content of the link chosen by the user. This content will change according to the actions of the user (e.g., scrolling down, linking to other information, returning to the list of topics, etc.)

Framesets provide an easy way of navigating around the site, and avoids 'dead ends'. The use of framesets also creates challenges. For example, the user is unable to bookmark a particular link. In spite of this, we concluded that it was most important to give our users the constancy of the menu frame as a guide to the site.

The user can get to any other page on firstfind with a few mouse clicks. To help the user do this, we used *Breadcrumbs* (a trail) within the main frame. This method creates the text for a type of navigation bar (like you see at Yahoo!); for example:

Topic > Family > Parenting

The navigational links are always visible and provide a reminder of the search path used. Breadcrumbs on every screen let the user know where s/he is and where s/he has been. Any of the "steps" is a link that can take the user back to that particular location, rather than having to back up page by page. Always providing a link back to the homepage (*Topics*) insures that users do not get lost.

We know that most users prefer not to scroll to find the information they seek. Therefore we tried to make most or all of the information in the various main frames appear within a single screen on the monitor. There are fourteen (14) topics (e.g., Local Information, Education, and Health etc.) currently covered on firstfind, with several subcategories within each. Once a subcategory has ten (10) or more links, we create another subcategory or sub-subcategories underneath it. Because of this structure the site has a cleaner layout and better organization. This layering system creates a sense of depth of the firstfind library, a sense that the user can look for more information in other subcategories. Our goal is to get the user to stay on firstfind as long as possible and to return to the site frequently.

### **Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) Coding**

In order to make firstfind efficient and responsive for our target users, we designed the homepage to be not only visually attractive but also quick to download. As we developed firstfind.info, we kept in mind that a frustrated visitor probably won't be a visitor for long. For fast loading, we minimized the use of images. We didn't use any animated gif files because these files take a long time to load and can be very irritating. Instead of using big, bulky images, we used simple and small icons that add a little color and draw the attention of the visitor. We have used small icons to highlight the main sections of our site.

The HTML table model is a method used to arrange data -- text, preformatted text, images, links, forms, form fields, etc. -- into rows and columns of cells. We got some great looking designs by using tables creatively. While tables are not visible to the user, this coding technique enables web pages to load quickly.

We wanted all users to have the best possible experience when visiting our site. To assist people with visual impairments, we made sure that there is strong contrast between the background and foreground text or graphics. We used blues and yellows rather than reds and greens in the design. We used bright colors to minimize problems for those who may be colorblind. We used the *ALT* attribute to provide descriptive text to image tags. We provided underline, arrows or icons to indicate when text is a link.

We were very careful in choosing font type and font size. The font size is large enough to make all pages easy to read and easy to understand. We tried not to make the site too cluttered with text and images so as to make the pages appear on one screen as much as possible. Users can enter the site and see everything on a screen without having to scroll up and down.

Not everyone has the same browser and different browsers might interpret things differently. Some older browsers are more efficient if the proper HTML code is used. Also many people browse without loading images (because of the faster download times). For these reasons, we utilized HTML standards so that the web pages we developed could be displayed for the widest range of browsers and devices. The organization that coordinates HTML standards is the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). Their website has the best and most authoritative source for HTML standards ([www.w3c.org](http://www.w3c.org)).

## Quality Assurance

We wanted firstfind to be accessible to the widest possible audience. Because we also knew that not everybody has the same browser, with the same graphics settings, or the same operating system, we tested the site using a variety of browsers and settings.

We tested the pages on the oldest personal computer we could find. We tested them on different versions of web browsers to see how they looked with different sized screens, different color resolution or different browsers with minimal feature sets.

We schedule a link check every Friday to make sure that all external links work and that the firstfind site is working properly. It is very important that users are not frustrated when using the site.

Finally, the *Help Us Improve* link on the menu frame is the best platform for quality assurance. We hope to receive many comments and suggestions to help us improve firstfind on an ongoing basis.



## Suggested Readings

---

These materials provided theoretical and practical support for firstfind project staff.

### Literacy

*The State of Literacy in America: Estimates at the Local, State, and National Levels.* Published by the National Institute for Literacy and available at <http://www.nifl.gov/readers/intro.htm>.

A brief introduction to the findings of the 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey.

Kirsch, I., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L. & Kolstad, A. *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey* Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education, 1993.

### Plain Language

*In Plain Language* (video), produced by Dr. Rima Rudd and Dr. William DeJong of the Health Literacy Studies Program at the Harvard School of Public Health. Ordering information at <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/healthliteracy/video.html>

This 15-minute video/DVD was developed for healthcare professionals who are interested in learning about adult literacy in the US and implications for medicine and for public health. It is a good tool for initiating discussion on communication issues.

There is a Canadian website, *PlainTrain: the Plain Language Online Training Program* (<http://www.web.net/~plain/PlainTrain/index.html>) that provides a good introduction to communication models that begin with the needs of the reader.

### Access to Relevant and Useable Content

Wendy Lazarus and Francisco Mora. *Online Content for Low-Income and Underserved Americans: The Digital Divide's New Frontier.* Los Angeles: The Children's Partnership, 2000. Available at [http://www.childrepartnership.org/pub/low\\_income/](http://www.childrepartnership.org/pub/low_income/)

An update of this landmark study was published in 2002, and is available at <http://www.contentbank.org/TCP-OnlineContent.pdf>



A project of the Westchester Library System, with support from the Brooklyn Public Library, New York Public Library, Queens Borough Public Library and the American Library Association

---

---

**Office for Literacy and Outreach Services  
American Library Association**