

Digital Resource

History Through a Cultural Lens

Sharpe Online Reference combines two notable resources

ME Sharpe's two highly regarded history series for young adults, the United States History and Culture Collection and the Global History and Culture Collection, are now available online as Sharpe Online Reference (SOLR). Containing the full text of 18 multi-volume print encyclopedias, this polished reference source includes more than 7,000 signed articles and thousands of illustrations, maps, and primary source documents.

SHARPE ONLINE REFERENCE

www.sharpe-online.com

Grade Level Best suited for high school and undergraduate students.

Cost The sets are pricey, but titles can be purchased individually to suit local needs. Single titles range in price from \$199 to \$399, and savings can be realized with multiple-title or whole series purchases. For example, a single school building or a public library serving a population of less than 50,000 can purchase the 14-title United States History and Culture Collection for \$2,700 rather than the \$3,645 per title price.

ME Sharpe's one-time purchase pricing model is sure to appeal to librarians. Yes, libraries that purchase Sharpe Online Reference own it. There's no annual licensing fee; revisions and annual updates are included in the purchase price. Call (800) 541-6563 for pricing for larger districts and libraries.

The Big Picture Sharpe Online Reference provides access to two series noted for their quality and accessibility. The 14-title United States History and Culture Collection covers people and events from throughout American history, as well as a broad range of cultural, social, economic, and political issues. The four-title Global History and Culture Collection, though briefer, focuses on the major forces and events that have shaped and transformed societies, cultures, and governments around the world over time. This fall, the United States collection will feature new titles on the settlement of America, the Civil War and Reconstruction, culture wars, and sports in America. The Global History collection will include new titles on world terrorism, civilizations and societies, and world monarchies and dynasties. As with most online reference sources, information is not updated on a continuous basis. SOLR still lists Sarah Palin as governor of Alaska.

The scope of SOLR is beautifully broad, yet treatment is thorough. The Encyclopedia of American Social Movements addresses such wildly disparate topics as the eight-hour day movement, the Pan-Indianism movement, religious movements from the 1730s onward, the homeopathy movement, and "Indian mascots and playing Indian." Although 14 of the 18 titles focus on U. S. history and culture, the "culture" emphasis infuses the content with a much wider perspective. The title America in World History is a good example, including such essays as "Bosnia and the Balkan Wars," "The Boston Tea Party and the East India Company," and "Frontier Culture: United States and Australia."

The primary sources collection consists of photographs, audio, and video clips, as well as text. Each item is accompanied by a concise overview that provides context and an indication of historical significance. When appropriate, a transcript is included. I got chills listening to Lyndon Johnson's October 30, 1968 announcement of the cessation of bombing in North Vietnam in which he expresses hopes for peace. The accompanying overview notes that peace did not come until 1973 during the Ford administration.

SOLR's supplemental resources also include a robust set of editorially selected links to websites in American and world history and a very helpful collection of resources for teachers of history

Look and Feel The home page of SOLR is colorful and clear. A cross-collection keyword search resides in the upper right hand corner, and includes an option to search for an exact term. There is also a link to an advanced search page. The main real

estate of the page is divided into two large tabs, one for each collection, containing a vertical list of links to the individual encyclopedia titles. A right navigation bar houses the icons for the Image Gallery, Primary Source Archive, Web Links, and Teacher Resources. Navigation options are plentiful and consistent across the product. Within an individual article, search, browse, and “topic finder” tabs are available for the parent title, as is a row of tabs that lead back to cross-title search options. The text-heavy approach does reflect the volumes’ print origins.

Many articles have no images, others may have one or two scattered between big blocks of text. Text resizing buttons are available on each page. Some navigation elements, however, are a little awkward. Clicking on the image gallery from within a single title retrieves images from that title, which is quite nice.

In contrast, the Primary Source Archive, Web Links, and Teacher Resources icons are not context sensitive. In fairness, only the primary source collection is sufficiently granular to map by topic. Furthermore, these three links open a separate, tiny window that lacks a tool bar. External website links within these subordinate windows either open in a tab back on the primary window or in a new, regular window, depending on the browser.

Primary sources appear under a clickable timeline within their (tiny) subordinate window. They can also be sorted alphabetically, by date, or by type. However, the “type” search is not displayed hierarchically, but rather in a series of thumbnails, one type at a time. If someone is searching for audio of President Kennedy’s inauguration speech, for example, this sorting option would not be the way to do it.

How It Works Users can search by keyword across all library holdings or within individual volumes. Within volumes, they may also use an A-Z browse search or a “topic finder” thematic search (e.g., biographies, everyday life, cities and settlements, etc.). Advanced search options include Boolean searching, exact phrase, specific content type, and specific title. Results lists display content type (article, image, primary source) and the first line of text from each article. It’s possible to search within results and to sort results by type.

Lengthy articles are signed and include a clickable outline. Many contain special features like a timeline or a glossary. Articles also include clickable cross references, lists of selected resources, and citation formats. They can be emailed and printed. Students can create personal accounts for storing bookmarks, notes, and saved searches. My printout of the LBJ speech included the concise overview, a citation, a prompt for questions (with a space for notes), and the full transcript. The save option downloaded a ZIP file that contained an MP3 file of the audio and a tiny HTML file with the overview and citation, but not the transcript.

For Students and Teachers SOLR’s interdisciplinary approach ought to help students (and their teachers) see beyond “report” mode. Interesting juxtapositions arise from this presentation that should encourage deeper thinking and better question formulation. My search on “Chinese immigration” and “United States” yielded 55 articles on topics ranging from legislative history (Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) to social history (Chinese language schools, started in 1886, thriving today).

Many of the titles include an introductory essay that helps frame the content. The Great Depression and the New Deal also opens with a “featured” essay called “The Great Depression and the Recession of the 2000s: A Comparison.” Additional essays that connect historical events to current events would be a welcome addition.

The Teachers’ Resources section of SOLR consists largely of links to some stellar digital collections of primary sources and to several well-established history teaching websites. There are also documents adapted from other sources on history teaching standards and information literacy.

Report Card The strength of SOLR lies in the richness of its content and its interdisciplinary portrayal of U.S. and world history. If only all historical information for young people took the same approach! Some elements of the look and feel of SOLR are annoyances, but they’re not fatal to successful navigation of the product. I give Sharpe Online Reference a solid A.

Frances Jacobson Harris is the librarian at University Laboratory High School at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.