The Penn Library has added the Encyclopaedia Britannica to its PennLIN collection of databases. With both the Britannica and the Oxford English Dictionary now available in digital format, the Penn community has ready access to networked, graphical versions of the two most famous reference sources in the English language. The OED defines an encyclopedia first as “the circle of learning; a general course of instruction.” The OED’s second definition lists the more familiar “literary work containing extensive information on all branches of knowledge.” For centuries, encyclopedias have served readers as the educational resource par excellence, offering both an organized summary of current knowledge and a handy, fast look-up tool. The online version of the Britannica promises to re-engineer the “circle of learning” into a dense network of hyperlinks whose goal is still to outline the entirety of human knowledge. Britannica Online’s contents, although expanded beyond the current print version, do not differ radically from its printed predecessors: What the digital format has revolutionized are the ways in which those contents may be accessed, linked, and manipulated.

Although the rise of the Internet has created access to enormous amounts of information, users quickly discover that they need to be able to glean from this mass of data only what is most relevant and authoritative. Using such well-known Internet tools as Yahoo or Webcrawler, one can search for a word or phrase throughout cyberspace, but the results are often truly bewildering. News reports, rumors, casual opinions, images, and scholarly treatises all co-exist on the Net without distinction. With over 44 million words, Britannica Online is one of the largest coherently structured text files on the Internet, offering users concise, authoritative information in all fields.

The database contains not only the complete text of the latest 32-volume edition of the encyclopedia, but also the Britannica “yearbooks” for 1994 and 1995, which summarize each year’s key events; Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary; and several other files that users may find less familiar but well worth exploring. One of these, the Propaedia, is a systematic arrangement of subjects and topics—a sort of “table of contents” to human knowledge. This file is available as a separate search option and can also be accessed at the end of many articles. Penn’s access to Britannica Online is through the Library’s PennLIN Resources Web page (http://www.library.upenn.edu or telnet://library.upenn.edu). As a World Wide Web database, it is best viewed with one of the graphical Web browsers such as Netscape or Mosaic.

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**Files available in Britannica Online**


- **Britannica Book of the Year**. Text of the 1994 and 1995 editions, covering the events of 1993 and 1994. In addition to being directly searchable, this file can be browsed through a table of contents.

- **Britannica Classics**. A selection of articles from past editions of the Britannica based on their historical value, enduring significance, or continuing interest.

- **Nations of the World**. An almanac-style file of basic data on each country with hotlinks to statistical summaries, flags, maps, and relevant articles in the EB and the Book of the Year.

- **Propaedia**. A topical outline of knowledge and guide to the contents of the EB. This powerful browsing tool provides a systematic arrangement of subjects and topics—in effect, a browsable table-of-contents to human knowledge.

How to use Britannica Online

Britannica Online offers a searching option from its Web home page, as well as from buttons available on each subsequent Web page. To begin a search, type a word, phrase, or question into the search box. Searches can be structured with boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT, ADJ—all in capital letters) or with natural language using questions in ordinary English. Running a search generates a “Search Results” page with a list of articles arranged in descending order of relevancy to your query as determined by the Britannica’s search engine. A “relevancy” score is given to articles based on the number of search terms they contain and whether or not a search term appears in the title. Searches retrieve singular and plural forms, so that a search for “cats” will result in hits on “cat,” and vice versa. The natural language search engine looks for combinations of words in Britannica articles. If you type “why is the sky blue,” for example, the engine finds articles containing the words “sky” and “blue.”

Making a selection from the Search Results page brings up the text of an article. Lengthy articles include a table-of-contents option that allows you to orient yourself within the text and immediately link to any section of the article. The article text also contains many hypertext links (hotlinks) to other parts of the encyclopedia, to the yearbooks, to illustrations, and even to World Wide Web sites outside Britannica Online.

Online help with the details of searching is available from Britannica Online. You can learn how to restrict your search to article titles or how to search for complete phrases using the adjacency (ADJ) command. Britannica Online also features a built-in search “demo” and a FAQ (frequently asked questions) document.

Encyclopedias: the end or the beginning?

Many people have speculated that the age of encyclopedias may be coming to an end. As printed books they are too expensive to buy, too large to store, and too quickly dated to be useful. Their aim—to be authoritative compendia of important human knowledge—seemed to some laudable but impossible. However, with the advent of digital technology and its hypertext capabilities, many of the constraints of the print-based text are disappearing. Large-scale, complexly organized works such as encyclopedias may only now be coming into their own.

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