

# Internet Resource Guide Development

## *A Concise Primer for Libraries*

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Since the mid-1990s, Middletown Thrall Library has developed Internet Resource Guides for the benefit of its patrons, staff members, and other libraries and researchers within and beyond the Ramapo Catskill Library System. Based on our ongoing experiences in this vital activity, we have created this guide in hopes of inspiring and assisting our library colleagues in their pursuit of similar activities at their respective libraries.

We encourage everyone to explore our electronic pathfinders (at <http://www.thrall.org/guides>) and to feel free to draw inspiration (and even resources) from these guides. All libraries are welcome and encouraged to link to any of our guides. If anyone has questions, please feel free to contact us through our online Reference service (<http://www.thrall.org/ask>).

### Why Create Guides?

Internet resource guides are an essential part of contemporary collection development practices: just as we actively seek to connect our patrons with excellent reading and reference materials in print, we believe such activity must extend to the Internet, particularly as more patrons turn to the Internet almost exclusively for information, research, or entertainment.

By this we mean not only linking to *licensed databases* but also to free and notable websites, Internet-based resources of exceptional quality, and other online services of potential use to library patrons or library staff members.

We strongly believe library patrons deserve *much* better than what general search engines tend to offer in terms of quantity and quality of search results, and it is also our belief that libraries, drawing on their disciplined and deep experiences in resource cataloging, can and should make it easier for people to locate key points of information online.

We invite all libraries to inspect our own guides to see how we have tried to achieve all of this, thus far, even as we endeavor to refine and expand upon our efforts and offerings.

There can be *numerous issues and benefits* in creating guides. The following list summarizes the central considerations:

### Staffing

As is true with collection development in any other medium, Internet resource guide development requires some staffing, planning, and review. This involves five basic areas:

<b>Planning:</b>	Settling on a topic, purpose, and an overall structure for your guide.
<b>Discovery:</b>	Discovering, discussing, cataloging, and describing websites and Internet resources.
<b>Maintenance:</b>	Designating one or more persons to physically update the guide.
<b>Reviews:</b>	Checking hyperlinks, website content, weeding or replacing broken links or old websites.
<b>Revisions:</b>	Expanding guides, adding or consolidating topics and sections, defining subsections.

### Selecting, Describing, & Organizing Internet Resources

Creating a guide's organizational architecture, selecting websites, and describing them so that *they can be found by those who need them* rank among the central challenges in guide creation. Consider:

<b>Quality:</b>	All standard critical thinking questions apply: is a site current, authoritative, biased, etc. (see our own <b>Web Checklist</b> for ideas: <a href="http://www.thrall.org/docs/webchecklist.pdf">http://www.thrall.org/docs/webchecklist.pdf</a> )
<b>Scope:</b>	How far do you want to go? Just a simple guide or something more comprehensive? Choosing <i>a few excellent websites</i> is often more helpful to patrons than listing <i>everything</i> .
<b>Existing Print Sources:</b>	Can resources <i>complement</i> or <i>supplement</i> existing print or other resources at your library? Your Internet guides can highlight and promote <i>physical items</i> in your library's collections.
<b>Taxonomy &amp; Terminology:</b>	Will you use <i>standardized subject headings</i> (e.g. LCSH) or more <i>user-friendly descriptors</i> ?
<b>Annotations:</b>	How might you describe each resource? Well-chosen keywords ( <i>think metadata</i> ) can make featured resources more findable to patrons who tend to search rather than browse.
<b>Ease &amp; Speed:</b>	Can you <i>break down big topics</i> , making them <i>accessible, easier, and quicker to navigate</i> ?
<b>Cross-referencing:</b>	Consider how you might <i>interlink</i> related topics and provide <i>multiple paths</i> to information.

### Localization Opportunities

One of the many disadvantages of generalized search engines and Web directories is that they usually fail to scope their results to local areas and interests.

Your Internet guides can help patrons (and staff members) encounter more localized and appropriate resources – either at your library or within your local service area. Our **Local Information** guide (<http://www.thrall.org/local>), **Community Organizations Database** (<http://www.thrall.org/corgs>), **Local History** (<http://www.thrall.org/lh>), and **Government Information Department** (<http://www.thrall.org/gov>) pages offer some examples of localized guides.

## Overlap & Duplication

Before creating a guide, there are some questions worth considering in terms of *overlap* and *duplication*:

- Is there a website or guide that already does what we would like to do? Could we *do better*, at least in part?
- Should we establish a direct hyperlink to a third-party's well-developed resource, or should we attempt to develop and maintain something comparable or more attuned to our library's services or interests?
- If we proceed, do we risk *reinventing the wheel*, so to speak? If so, why, and to what end?
- What can our guide do or address that our existing library collections do not (or cannot) address?
- How can we *distinguish* our guides from others available online?
- Can our guide meet the need of patrons of *any age or background*, or should alternate guides be provided in order to facilitate access for other groups of users (e.g. non-English speakers, different age groups)?
- What in our guide would *persuade* patrons or staff members to *prefer it over another guide* or a search engine?
- Are there any opportunities to do something *which has not been done before*? Are there any *creative possibilities* for new thinking and possibly *innovation*?

## Hyperlinking Considerations

Besides deciding whether or not to link to a website, there are physical URLs (Uniform Resource Locators) to consider.

As you know from your own Internet experiences, URLs come in *all shapes and sizes* – from “tiny URLs” to extremely long strings of alphanumeric characters.

Many websites incorporate CMS (“content management systems”), some of which produce some of the longest links imaginable. Depending on what CMS is used at a website, such links might incorporate “session” variables or other ephemeral data and therefore function for only a very brief time. This can lead to broken links in the very near future.

A number of websites incorporate PERL/CGI-produced URLs, which, when copied and pasted into your guides, can contain variables and special characters (such as the ampersand “&” symbol), which can cause your web guides to produce errors when checked in a Web page validator such as the one provided by the **World Wide Web (W3) Consortium**: <http://validator.w3.org>

If a URL contains an “index” file (as in [www.thrall.org/databases/index.html](http://www.thrall.org/databases/index.html)), you might try to see if you can link simply to the subdirectory (“**databases**”) and not the specific index file, so that the URL resembles: [www.thrall.org/databases](http://www.thrall.org/databases)

Why? Because if a website's server or CMS changes, the “index” file could later become something like **index.php**, **index.cgi**, **index.pl**, or **index.asp** (as in [www.thrall.org/databases/index.php](http://www.thrall.org/databases/index.php) or [www.thrall.org/databases/index.cgi](http://www.thrall.org/databases/index.cgi)) which would likely render links in your Internet guide broken.

## Library Guides as Community Outreach Tools

Internet resource guide development can afford your library strong opportunities to provide some much-needed public information service, especially when there is an immediate need for information. Delays and discrepancies between current events and coverage via conventional news outlets, such as newspapers and television networks (along with the sheer volume of information overload) can prevent people from locating essential information in a timely fashion.

Recognizing this is what partly inspired our **Special Coverage Center** (<http://www.thrall.org/special>) and related guides. While press coverage rotates according to “24 / 7” new cycle and “social media” sites erupt with frenzied posts and questions, there can be little coordination and much chaos when it comes to “putting all the facts together” and finding clear and objective paths to information.

As we witnessed through our **Hurricane Katrina** guide (and most recently again with our **Haiti Earthquake** and **Gulf Oil Spill** pathfinders), libraries are very well-situated to bring “informational relief” to seekers of answers. Libraries can lend some sense, structure, and stability to an otherwise disorderly (or possibly disinformed) situation. In dire times, online guides can also help libraries meet information needs even as no relevant print sources might exist.

That online library guides remain available and useful *even when a library is not open for business* also speaks to the lasting public service and outreach value of pathfinders.

## Promoting Libraries & Nurturing Enthusiasm

Advocating access to information *in all its forms* is what libraries do best. More people should realize that!

Resource guides can introduce fresh generations of users to both traditional and new services and programs at your library. In addition to highlighting collections and events, your guides, and your library's website, can work to generate sincere enthusiasm and appreciation for your library's role in your local community.

In our experience, the more energy and interest you are willing to invest in online guides and services, the stronger and more positive the reactions you are likely to experience from both patrons and colleagues.

Guides can also open new lines of inquiry and communication between libraries and patrons and effectively become new entrances to your own library, inviting more persons to see what wonderful services your institution offers.