

Britannica® Online School

This review was carried out by Teach Secondary

Review By: John Dabell

When in doubt, look it up.

That's what the Encyclopædia Britannica advert of yesteryear used to say when showcasing the 32 gilded volumes you could buy to display with pride in your best bookcase. Not now though. The "just Google it" generation has put a stop to that, and in 2012 the venerable Encyclopædia Britannica announced that it was going out of print ending its mammoth 244-year run. So Encyclopædia Britannica in printed form is dead... but long live its online successor, Britannica Digital Learning. The bottom line is that a printed encyclopedia is out of date the minute it is printed, whereas a website can be constantly refreshed. Encyclopædia Britannica is now an educational provider and its online database for schools, Britannica School, is a cross-curricular goldmine.

Britannica® School is very easy to access and it presents information in a vibrant and lucid format ideal for collaborative and personalised learning. The informational text selections are written, edited, reviewed and updated regularly by experts, and content is differentiated for foundation, intermediate and advanced level, making it easy to select the portal appropriate to each learner's reading, grade and age level. What makes this database so impressive is that articles are available at three reading levels labelled simply 1, 2, and 3. Once a learner has selected a level, all the articles are presented at that level until the selection is changed. It's effective and discreet. The extensive catalogue of articles, multimedia features, translation and audio options, vocabulary support and adaptive reading levels makes this a resource of quality that can be accessed by a range of learning levels and abilities.

Within 'resources and tools' learners can find lots of resources for their topics and projects including a pre-research planner and a guide to effective researching. There are study guides to explore as well as videos and direct links to 'How To' for writing book reviews, presentations, research papers and science reports. Learners can also check out a 'new and revised articles' section where they can find recently added or updated content.

There is an enormous amount of material to explore and one click leads to another with even more data to unearth thanks to the powerful search function, which offers intuitive suggestions as you type. Once you select the result you are after, you are then offered a comprehensive list of associated articles making research easier and more efficient.

The article pages are a masterpiece. There are different tabs for navigating between multimedia and there are navigation tools that include the option to 'favourite' an article, print, email, easy citations, Google translate, and increase/decrease font size. You can also switch on 'text to speech' on every article, and a double-click dictionary gives instant definitions for any word that's unfamiliar. I also like the 'my workspace' feature, which allows you to save work, create new documents, add images, and upload media files. Teachers can recommend and share articles to colleagues. Not only does Britannica School provide massive research support for students, it offers superb instructional scaffolding for teachers, too, as you are able to digitally plan and deliver lessons using thousands of articles, images and videos plus a pile of other interactive materials. You can select from the library of plans or use the 'lesson plan builder' tool to customise activities and fit your classroom needs.

Encyclopaedia Britannica enjoys an erudite and reliable reputation that has not been affected by Wikipedia. It has a scholarly voice, an editorial process and fact-based, well-written articles by experts. If anything, this stellar database is perfect for the Google generation because it encourages children to think more deeply about research. When you use the database you feel in safe hands because you know you are accessing reliable and valid information. This is so important as many other websites give the appearance of authority but very often are flawed, biased and inaccurate. This in itself is one of the resource's chief selling points as learners will begin to appreciate the importance of consulting dependable sources.



The sheer breadth and depth of the information within the online database far exceeds what a printed encyclopaedia can deliver, so it is easy to see why Britannica ditched their hefty volumes. The bottom line is whether learners will use the resource. On average, owners of the printed version opened their books about twice a year. I can see the online version being accessed multiple times a day simply because its image-rich design has been made thought-provoking, entertaining and mesmerising, making research and learning interactive and enjoyable.

One of my local charity shops had a ten-year-old mint condition set of Encyclopaedia Britannica for sale at £85. If I buy the online consumer version today this will cost me a lot less and I will get a whole lot more for my lolly. Online is a no-brainer all the way (although I still bought the books because they look so damn good). Either way, Britannica School is a teaching tool par excellence that promotes well-rounded research, supports the new National Curriculum and can be used on a variety of internet-enabled devices. It's got enrichment written all over it. Oh, by the way, when a school purchases the school resources to be used through the learning platform, then parents can get access at home too. You can see why it's a must-have resource of the year.

VERDICT: A RICH RESOURCE

Britannica Online is comprehensive, accessible and versatile combining a very stylish, user-friendly interface with high quality, interactive and lively content – making this a top choice for schools.