

**CCL-EAR Committee Review of
CRC Handbook of Chemistry and Physics Online
December 2004**

In December of 2004, selected members of the California Council of Chief Librarians, Electronic Access and Resources Committee (CCL-EAR), undertook a "hands-on" review of the CRC Handbook online (85th edition).

Selected members of the CCL-EAR Committee, independently or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staffs, reviewed and evaluated The CRC Handbook. Though other staff may have helped in the review process, completion of the form was by the CCL-EAR committee member(s) only and not transferred to others. Ratings were based upon the potential value of the proposal to the California Community Colleges as a whole and not solely on the needs of any specific campus. Attributes of the information resources were assessed on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 representing the "least value" and 4 representing the "most value." The following attributes were examined:

INFORMATION DATABASE

Consider its functionality, the appropriateness of format (bibliographic/full-text), the content of the information, the adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and its value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

SEARCH INTERFACE

Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

USER SUPPORT SERVICES

If documentation is required for successful use of product, is it available, comprehensive, and well written? Is online help adequate and user friendly? Does vendor supply training if it is needed? Is a telephone help line available?

COST

If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE

Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate?

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

#1 ---- No Support

#2 ---- No Support at this time. Future support conditional upon enhancements noted below in Comments Section.

#3 ---- Support and Recommend proposal be forwarded to California Community College libraries for their acceptance or rejection.
Would like to see enhancements in product noted below in Comments Section.

#4 ---- Outstanding offer and opportunity. Recommend proposal be forwarded to California Community College campus libraries or their acceptance or rejection.

Following are the results of the CCL-EAR Committee's review as well as comments taken from the individual Review Reply Forms.

Information Database 3

The CRC Handbook is one of the core works for any science reference collection. Indispensable for chemistry, as well as, most other physical science disciplines, the Handbook provides a wealth of information on the physical properties of organic and inorganic compounds. This resource would have potential use for all students taking courses in the pure sciences, engineering, applied sciences and technology. This review covers the online version of the 85th ed., 2004-2005. For all intents and purposes, this database functions as an electronic book, with several added features not available in the print version.

Search Interface 2.5

When the Handbook is opened online, the table of contents appears on the left hand side. Each section can be further expanded, displaying individual sub-sections identical to the print volume. Each of these sub-sections can be accessed as a pdf file. The tables in the Handbook can be accessed in one of two ways: either as pdf files or as Excel spreadsheets. The spreadsheet versions allow the user to sort, filter, hide particular columns or rows, view chemical structures, print tables, and export data.

In addition to the table of contents, there are two other ways to access the content of the Handbook: either via a "substance/property search" or a "text search." The "substance/property search" allows the user to search by the "Name of Substance," "Molecular Formula," "CAS Registry No.," "Common Formula," or "Molecular Weight." Results from this search can then be e-mailed.

The "text search" allows for full-text searching. Truncation and wildcards can be in this search mode. Results found in pdf files have the search term highlighted; those found in Excel spreadsheets are not. Results from this search can also be e-mailed.

The Handbook was tested on both Windows and Mac platforms. For Windows, Internet Explorer 6.0, Netscape 7.2 and Mozilla FireFox 1.0 were the browsers used; on the Mac side, Internet Explorer 5.2, Netscape 7.1 and Safari 1.2.4 were used. In general, the pdf files opened easily with all browsers and both platforms (after an upgrade to Adobe 6.0). Opening the Excel files requires a Java plug-in and that turned out to be much more problematic. In fact, the spreadsheets were only successfully opened with regularity using Internet Explorer and Mozilla FireFox on the Windows side and Safari on the Mac side. On the Windows side, Netscape did not work well at first, but on subsequent attempts performed well. The online help file indicated that Java Run-time Environment SE v1.4.0 needs to be downloaded to view the spreadsheets, and that the first time one was selected, the plug-in would download automatically. Unfortunately, this automatic download did not happen with the Internet Explorer and Netscape on the Mac side. E-mailed search results also need to be launched in a browser to be accessible. In addition, I was unsuccessful in utilizing the option to view chemical structures in any browser. The fact that the Handbook may not work well in several browsers is a major concern. If this database is to be accessed remotely, I would be particularly concerned with whether or not users' computers are likely to meet the technical requirements of this database.

User Support Services 3

The online help page is very useful. It does a good job of explaining how to use the substance/property search, which at first (to a non-science person) seemed a little confusing. Truncation and wild card searching is also covered.

Also included is technical information regarding browsers, the Java plug-in and Adobe Acrobat. There are phone, fax and e-mail contacts listed for further support; however, hours of availability are not listed. When I called with a question, the phone was answered immediately and the support person was polite and helpful. He could not answer my question, but put me through to another person who did.

Cost 2

The subscription charge is \$995 per year for unlimited access via IP authentication. This is significantly higher than the print volume, which is \$139.95. The sales representative indicated that there are consortial discounts available (10% discount for 5 schools; 15% for 10 schools).

Accessibility of Service 2

According to the technical support contact off-campus access is available via proxy server and IP authentication. Password access is not available (although originally it had been stated that it was). This lack of password access is likely to limit the utility of this database for many community colleges.

Response time when the first Excel file is opened in a particular session can be quite slow. Also, as discussed earlier, the spreadsheets do not open in all browsers.

Overall Assessment 2

This version does improve upon the print version of the Handbook with the addition of the interactive spreadsheets. However, this benefit must be weighed against the subscription price of the database as compared to the print (\$139.95). Additionally, the problems utilizing the Excel files with various browsers is a major issue. For a community college, it is my opinion that the print version is probably sufficient at this time—with possibly several copies purchased: one for the library and a couple for labs.

Other reviews of this database:

McBride, Matthew. "Sci-Tech Print-Alternative Offerings." Searcher Feb. 2004: 30-32.
(note: this review actually covers the CD-ROM version of the Handbook, but is still very useful)