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Web Reviews: Astronomy Star Gazing Tools

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Web Reviews

Lisa R. Johnston



Reviews of web resources of interest to *SciTech News* readers.

Astronomy Star Gazing Tools

Spring is here. And when this arrives at your email doorstep, summer will be around the corner! What this means, in the SciTech library, is recreational astronomers appear looking for answers. So next time an astro-newbie is attempting to check out a reference book on Deep-Space NGC Objects (when all they really want to know is what that bright star above the garage is each night), you can smile and say, "Let me show you some great online tools that will help find out which star, or planet, that is." All of these web applets are freely available and easy to use. When possible I have included information on their portability away from the computer, out to the night sky. Of course, mobile phones make portability a snap and development of mobile sky apps will be the subject of a later column.

Astronomy Magazine's Star Dome

<http://www.astronomy.com/asy/stardome/default.aspx>

This interactive star chart displays RA/Dec coordinates for displayed objects. The tiny cursor must be directly over a star or planet, but the information, including object name and exact coordinates, are invaluable to enter into your motorized or equatorial telescope mount. On the downside it seems that you are unable to switch to full-screen of the tool. Also, StarDome Plus features are only available with the magazine subscription, including planet orbits and Jupiter and Saturn moon tools (each of which is freely available elsewhere...read on!).

Portability: Printing option is an enlarged version of the current sky view.

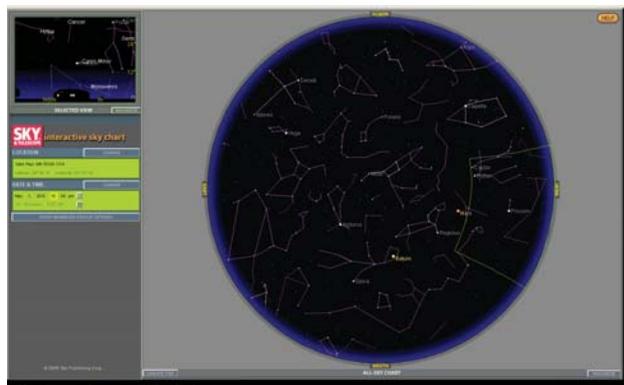


Sky & Telescope's Interactive Sky Chart

<http://www.skyandtelescope.com/observing/skychart>

A quick and painless (Free!) registration allows you to log in and save your location to begin using this easy web-application. The Interactive Sky Chart features labels for constellations, bright stars, major objects, and planets. Try also other free S&T tools like the Moons of Jupiter app. The zoom function, however, is cumbersome as it projects a separate, albeit upright, view in the top left screen.

Portability: Generates a PDF version to print. The java will not display on most mobile phones.

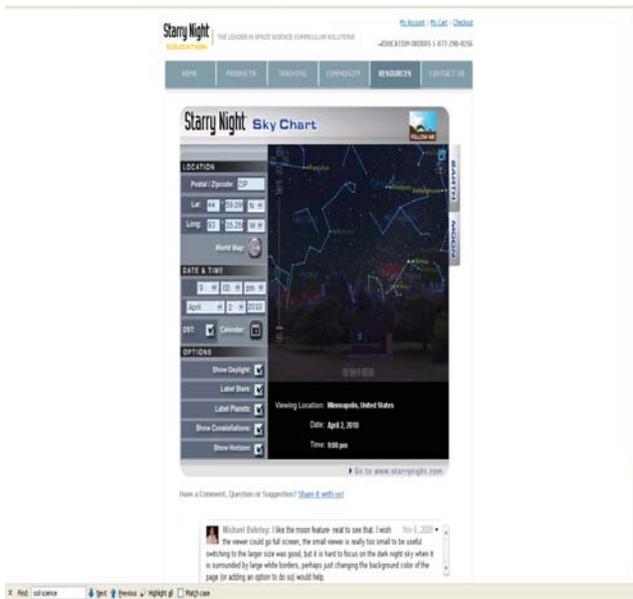


Starry Night Sky Chart

<http://www.starrynighteducation.com/skychart>

This tool has a very nice zoom feature allowing you to view the sky at less than 1 degree field of view (out of a potential 180 degree field of view). Also the display options and input fields for data, time, and location are larger and clearer than in other tools. Overall, Starry Night's Sky Chart is high functionality with low complexity. I also liked the view of the sky from the moon. A stumbling block might be the functionality issues with the interface. The field of view on the chart does not pan unless the user clicks the arrow navigation.

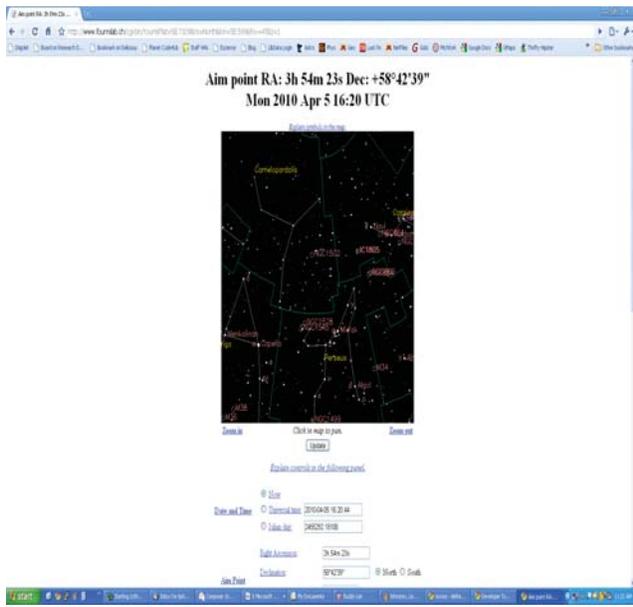
Portability: No printable sky chart.



Your Sky,
<http://www.fourmilab.ch/yoursky>

This application is one of the many tools created by John Walker and hosted on his Fourmilab site since the early 1990s. Your Sky was last updated in 2003, so needless to say Web 2.0 is not enabled. But if you can forgive the screen refresh each time you zoom or change a parameter, this tool's detailed search functionality is timeless. Also try the cool calendar converter tool (<http://www.fourmilab.ch/documents/calendar/>).

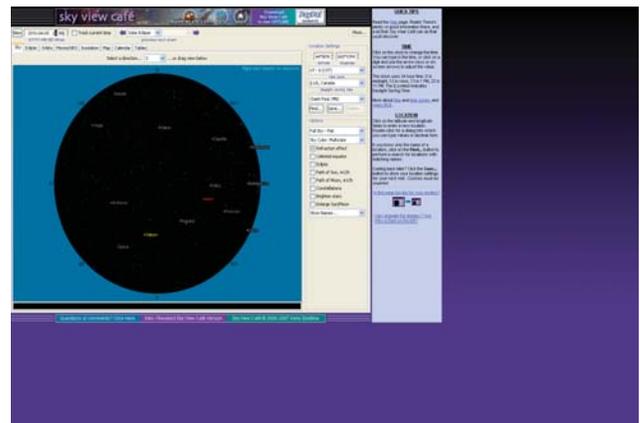
Portability: The tool will function on most web-enabled phones, but there is no easy way to switch between the horizon view and the Zoom-in feature. There are no printing features.



Sky View Café
<http://www.skyviewcafe.com/skyview.php>

Here is another tool that might not look too pretty to a novice star gazer, but the functions it boasts are an experienced user's dream. These advanced features (looking very similar to Astronomy Magazine's tools) include elliptic views, solar system orbital positions, moons of Saturn and Jupiter, Earth daylight/night map and a Moon phase calendar. This is all in addition to the countless data tables and ephemeris that the tool can generate (the next lunar eclipse date for example). My favorite feature: the sky chart will track the current time and update itself!

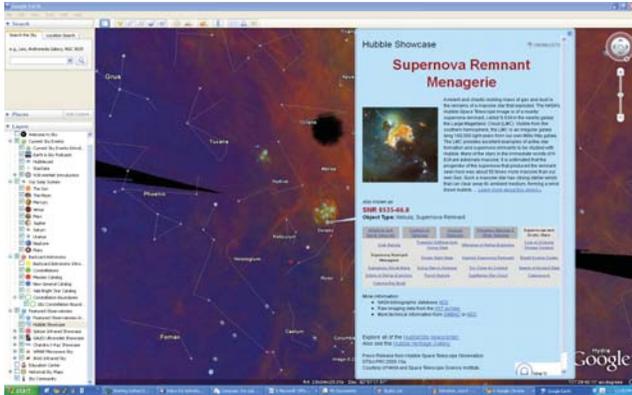
Portability: Java will not run on most mobile phones; however you can print a portable star chart for any date and time.



Google Earth and Google Sky
<http://earth.google.com>

This is not a recommended star chart, but with so much information packed into one application, it's hard not to mention the Sky view in Google Earth. This desktop program is freely available for download, and can be a fun interactive way to navigate the earth with maps and satellite imagery. The Sky feature in Google Earth is rather hidden and must be selected by clicking View < Explore and selecting Sky from the toolbar. Once there the sky is navigated by keyword or by panning and zooming across the heavens. Features include "layers" that display information like objects of interest, telescope images, embedded news stories, user photos, Wikipedia entries, podcasts, the list goes on! As a start chart, this tool will be confusing and not functional. However, on those cloudy nights, you can easily spend hours exploring this virtual sky.

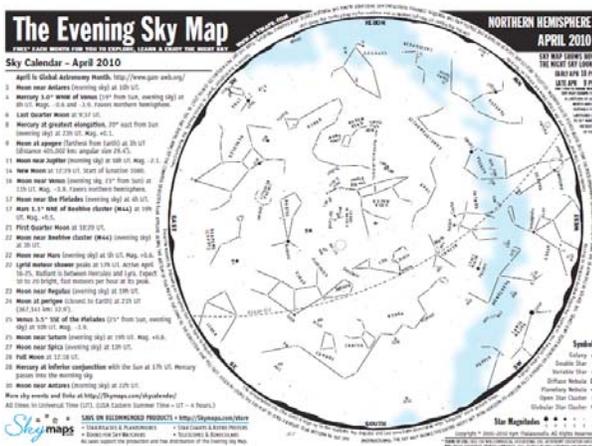
Also try Google Sky (<http://www.google.com/sky/>), a web-based version of Sky that feels a lot like Google Maps. Here you can navigate and search for telescope images in several wavelengths including visual, microwave, and infrared.



Sky Maps

<http://www.skymaps.com/downloads.html>

No bells, no whistles, just a really nice pdf handout of the night sky for the current month. Why is this note worthy? The service allows for distribution of up to 300 non-commercial use copies to the public and the handout is available in Spanish, French, Portuguese, Turkish, Italian, and German. Print-out portability, again is the feature here.



Weather Underground Interactive Star Chart

<http://www.wunderground.com/sky/index.asp>

If this was the only online astronomy tool on the web, you would be better off drawing the constellations and planet names yourself. Seriously, whatever you come up with will look better – both in functionality and visual presentation. I'm happy to review them if you send yours in!

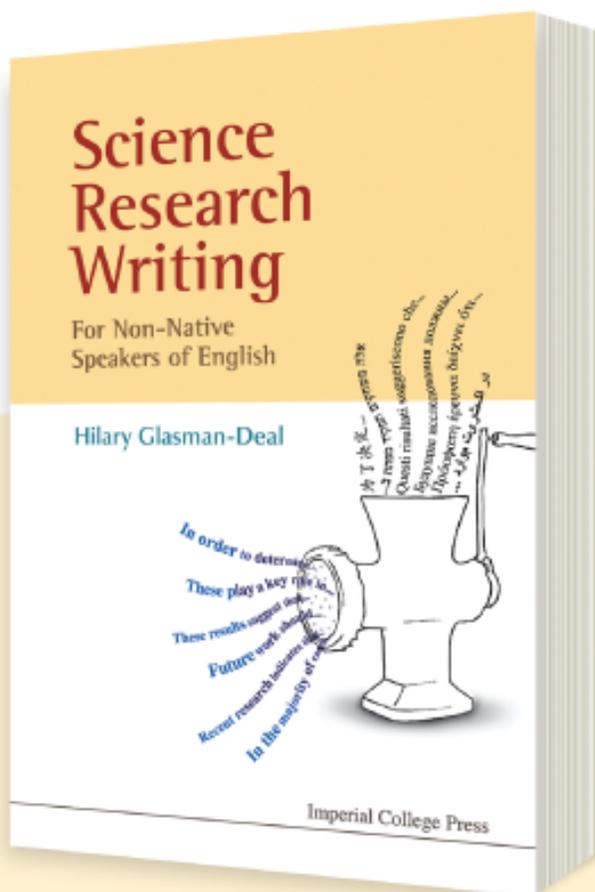




Science Research Writing

For Non-Native Speakers of English

Hilary Glasman-Deal (*Imperial College London, UK*)



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This book is designed to enable non-native English speakers to write science research for publication in English. It can also be used by English speakers and is a practical, user-friendly book intended as a fast, do-it-yourself guide for those whose English language proficiency is above intermediate.

Science writing is much easier than it looks because the structure and language are conventional. The aim of this book is to help the reader discover a template or model for science research writing and then to provide the grammar and vocabulary tools needed to operate that model. There are five units: Introduction, Methodology, Results, Discussion/Conclusion and Abstract. The reader develops a model for each section of the research article through sample texts and exercises; this is followed by a Grammar and Writing Skills section designed to respond to frequently-asked questions as well as a Vocabulary list including examples of how the words and phrases are to be used.

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