

Safari Books Online

Submitted by John Davey

Safari Books Online is an online database of technical books available on a subscription basis. Safari is a joint venture between technical publishers O'Reilly & Associates and The Pearson Technology Group. Subscribers can search among the books published by these two publishers, plus others, and then read the full text of those works. The current database of books is advertised as totaling over 1300 works. As of the date of this writing, clicking on View All Titles showed 1598 entries. The catalog includes works from Microsoft Press, Addison-Wesley, Alpha, Financial Times Prentice Hall, Cisco Press, New Riders, Peachpit Press, Prentice Hall PTR, Que and Sams publishing houses.

Safari is web-based. There is no software to install. I was provided a review subscription to the service and tested it on a Pentium III system with Windows XP and a cable modem.

The essence of Safari is its search engine and navigation interface. One can easily search for terms across the whole library of books or can restrict a search to specific topics. As an indication of the professional market being targeted, a search can be limited to code fragments only.

The books returned can be viewed in preview mode which just shows the first few paragraphs of chapters. The full text of a book is made available by adding the book to the user's bookshelf. The number of books that can be added to the bookshelf depends on the level of subscription. Each book takes up a certain number of "slots," and the number of slots available on your bookshelf is governed by your subscription. For instance, the Starter size gives you a 5-slot bookshelf for \$9.99 per month or \$109.99 per year. The high-end Large bookshelf has 30 slots for \$29.99 per month or \$329.99 per year. Most books take one slot, but as an example, *HTML Pocket Reference* only takes one half of a slot.

One can swap books in and out of the bookshelf, but a book must remain on the bookshelf for 30 days before it can be removed. It would therefore be possible with a Starter bookshelf, to read 60 books in full in one year.

Reading a book on line has its challenges. The navigation is mouse-oriented. It would be nice to be able to use the page keys to move between pages. The text is in serif type which is not the best for viewing on a monitor. I found it helpful to increase the browser's font size for easier reading.

On the other hand, Safari makes full use of the advantages of the Web. The interface of the site is well thought out, with a tabbed navigation system for accessing one's bookshelf as well as recent searches, recent pages, notes, bookmarks, account information, and an overall My Safari page. The texts have links to other sections

of the book and even to other sites for easy reference.

I turned off my cable modem and tested Safari using a 56k connection, and I found the service it to be surprisingly effective. Pages loaded efficiently, and I would not be reluctant to use Safari with a dial-up service.

Some uses of Safari, though, really need an always-on connection. A prime benefit of the service is having quick access to texts for immediate reference. While there are some books that need to be in your print library, there are some that you might need occasionally or only for a short time. Safari gives you a modifiable reference library at an affordable price. Not surprisingly, they also make it easy to buy a print version.

In fact, Safari dovetails very well with your print library. I have a couple books that now have second editions. Safari lets me review the new editions to see if there is enough new material to buy them. If not, I can still keep the new editions on the Safari bookshelf for reference when I need them. And of course, when looking to buy a book on a subject, Safari lets you search the catalogs of several publishers and read as much of each book as you need to make a decision.

There is an introductory subscription which gives 14 days access to Safari for free. Members of the Web Design SIG should use this special user group URL to sign up for the 14-day trial: <http://www.oreilly.com/safari/ug>. And there is a special user group offer from O'Reilly: Any of our members who sign up for the Safari 14-day free trial can send comments on their experiences, or tips and tricks for how they used Safari, to safari_talk@oreilly.com. Comments need only be two sentences long but may be longer. Please include our user group name, the Philadelphia Area Computer Society Web Design SIG in your e-mail.

Every week someone will be chosen from the tips or comments submitted to receive fun stuff from O'Reilly (T-shirts, book bags, or other surprises). If a member of our user group is selected, our group receives free gifts, too. Whatever the individual member receives, our UG will get one, too. Recipients--and their comments--will be announced in the O'Reilly User Group Newsletter.

Safari is well-worth trying, and professionals in particular will appreciate the broad range of available titles and the effective user interface.

For more information on Safari: <http://safari.oreilly.com/>

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