

REACH FOR REFERENCE



CultureGrams™ and StateGrams™:

Making Places and People Relevant to Elementary Students

by Barbara Ripp Safford

A year and a half ago, our son-in-law sent a real-life question about offering greetings and toasts in one of the former Soviet states. My husband and I searched diligently (a combined sixty-five years or so of librarianship here, never mind incredible Web-searching skills) and we never found his answer. This summer, one of the University of Northern Iowa reference librarians, noting that it was a reference-class term, asked why my master list of reference tools didn't include *CultureGrams*™, as the staff uses it often. So I picked it up, and immediately found the answer to Bill's question—now, of course, much too late. This high school/adult edition of a source that comes in two levels, gives the usual kinds of cultural information, but also includes such practical topics as attitudes, appearance, greetings, gestures, dating, and family life. Transportation, health, and education also are covered. It really is embarrassing to find sources I should have known all along, especially after looking at a couple of thousand items for a reference bibliography. On the off-chance that some of you may have missed this interesting series too, here is an overview of the product line from Axiom Press, with special emphasis on two of its products for elementary libraries.

The basic high school/adult series is the *World Edition* which includes 177 country/cultural reports. The *2003 Kids Edition* has sixty-five country/cultural reports, and *StateGrams*™ *Kids Edition* includes all fifty states and Washington, DC. The four-

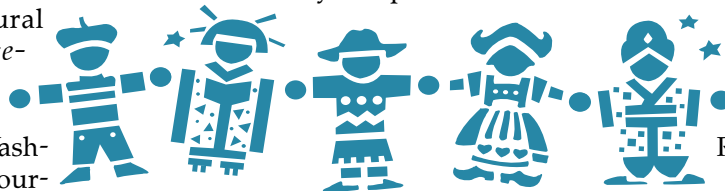
page reports are available in loose-leaf bound (spiral in the case of *Kids* and *States*, in four volumes for *World*), CD-ROM (free single-user included with paper copies), online (with access to all three editions with audio features, and optional recipes and photo tours), or individual countries downloadable in PDF versions, with pricing for multiple copies (so one could order a class set for Israel or Ohio, for example). Site licenses and package deals are available. There are also editions about the United States for the foreign traveler in Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, which might be of interest to American school foreign language classes. Finally, there are *InfoGrams*—brief reports on traveling abroad, international laws that might affect travelers, moving abroad, and experiencing culture shock upon returning to the United States. Axiom Press is located in Lindon, Utah, and is affiliated with Brigham Young University. More information about their products, free demos, and price estimates can be found online (<http://www.culturegrams.com> and <http://www.axiompres.com>) or by calling 1-800-528-6279.

The *CultureGrams*™ *Kids Edition*, which has the same appearance in all formats, is graphically interesting with clip art, photographs, timelines, maps, and charts. The illustrations, however, do not interfere with the information presentation or overwhelm the user. Each country

report is four pages or several linked electronic pages; the CD-ROM and Web ver-

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Barbara Ripp Safford is Associate Professor at the School Library Media Studies, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls. She has been a middle school and elementary school library media specialist in Maryland, a high school media specialist in Ohio, and a public library director in Pennsylvania.



sions replicate the paper copy when converted to PDF for printing. The information includes encyclopedic data—the flag, a map, and typical headings, i.e., land and climate, population, and so on. But these reports are written with elementary students in mind, and the vocabulary and tone are definitely not encyclopedic. Countries often are described so as to build on American children’s experiences: Armenia is “just a little smaller than Maryland.” Canada’s provinces and territories are “similar to states.” “It would take only a few hours to drive” across the width of Chile. “One hundred million [Chinese] workers travel from place to place for short-term work. That’s [as if] half the population of the United States” were moving around. Less emphasis is placed on political or economic data, giving only the kind of information that affects people’s lives. One of the first entries is a world map with the country being described highlighted. The large country map that accompanies each report (interactive electronically) is enhanced with intriguing facts about the highest, lowest, hottest, coldest, largest, longest, or deadliest—a veritable *Guinness* built in to the reports. In addition to the map and flag, the name of the country in its own language is at the head of the report. History sections do not avoid recent or current controversy and are accompanied by a timeline. There are many features about each culture to attract a student’s attention, offered either in boxes or under regular headings. One box shows the language and pronunciation of “hello, good-bye, please, thank you, yes, and no.” Another box discusses games and sports, while another tells about the lives of kids in each culture. Headings such as Schools, Food, and Holidays also offer information that makes the culture more meaningful to students. While the headings are most often parallel in each report, making comparisons easy, there are also headings unique to the specific country and culture. The population information is not only about size, but also about race and cultural practice, and there is a separate heading for language, and a bar graph that shows the religions in the country. The last page of the print version (and the beginning of each Web version) has a box of appealing facts about the country. There is a list of places to find more information about each country, including embassies and tourist offices with mailing addresses, phone numbers, and websites.

The reports are perfect for adding the kinds of meaningful details that will make the culture seem more real than pages in a text or encyclopedia. Needless to say they are good for ready reference as well. Note that there are only sixty-five countries at the present, although the set is updated and new countries have been added. The

countries are selected to represent cultures by continent, so it is not a complete reference set right now. No listings for Afghanistan, Iraq, the Czech Republic, or Poland appear in the *2003 Kids Edition*, although such countries can be accessed via the formats of the *World Edition*. Of course it would be a great assignment to use the existing countries as samples, and assign students to use this model to do their own reports for countries that are not in the current set. Just think of the possibilities here: book and Web searching, keypals, finding speakers of the language in the community to interview and record, and the computer skills it would require students to learn in order to create their own presentation versions.

StateGrams™ Kids Edition looks much like the *CultureGrams™ Kids Edition* with attractive four-page reports. Here the introductory map shows the state location highlighted in a U. S. map, the state’s official nickname, and date and order of admission to the United States. The first full entry is under the Climate heading. (Iowa does not do well, here with “dangerous and powerful weather... damaging floods... heavy humidity... cold and snowy [winters],” but accuracy does seem to be important...) Again there is a history section with a timeline and a fact box of famous people. There has been an obvious attempt to be inclusive in the listings of famous people, as most states include individuals of color and women, as well as historical and contemporary figures. There are also sports and entertainment figures whom students will recognize. The fact boxes, “Did you know?” could be the basis for student-created trivia games and the Cultural Note boxes vary in subject from food to sport to fine art to literature, depending upon the state. The bar chart in this set shows racial mix rather than religion, and there is a section with state symbols and political facts. State tourism or visitor centers are listed, with post office and e-mail addresses and phone numbers. The inviting reports are full of basic facts and interesting details that should bury the state notebook assignment forever. The organization allows for comparisons among states in terms of population, ethnicity, history, and cultural contribution. These comparisons can, in turn, lead to the significant questions of why one state or region developed differently from others. Because this is a complete set, its use as a library reference tool is essential, and Axiom Press’s flexible pricing and formats make it a necessity for classroom access in both social studies and cross-discipline units.

CultureGrams™ have been around in one form or other, from one publisher or other since 1974. It only took me thirty years to discover them. Don’t let it take you another minute. 