



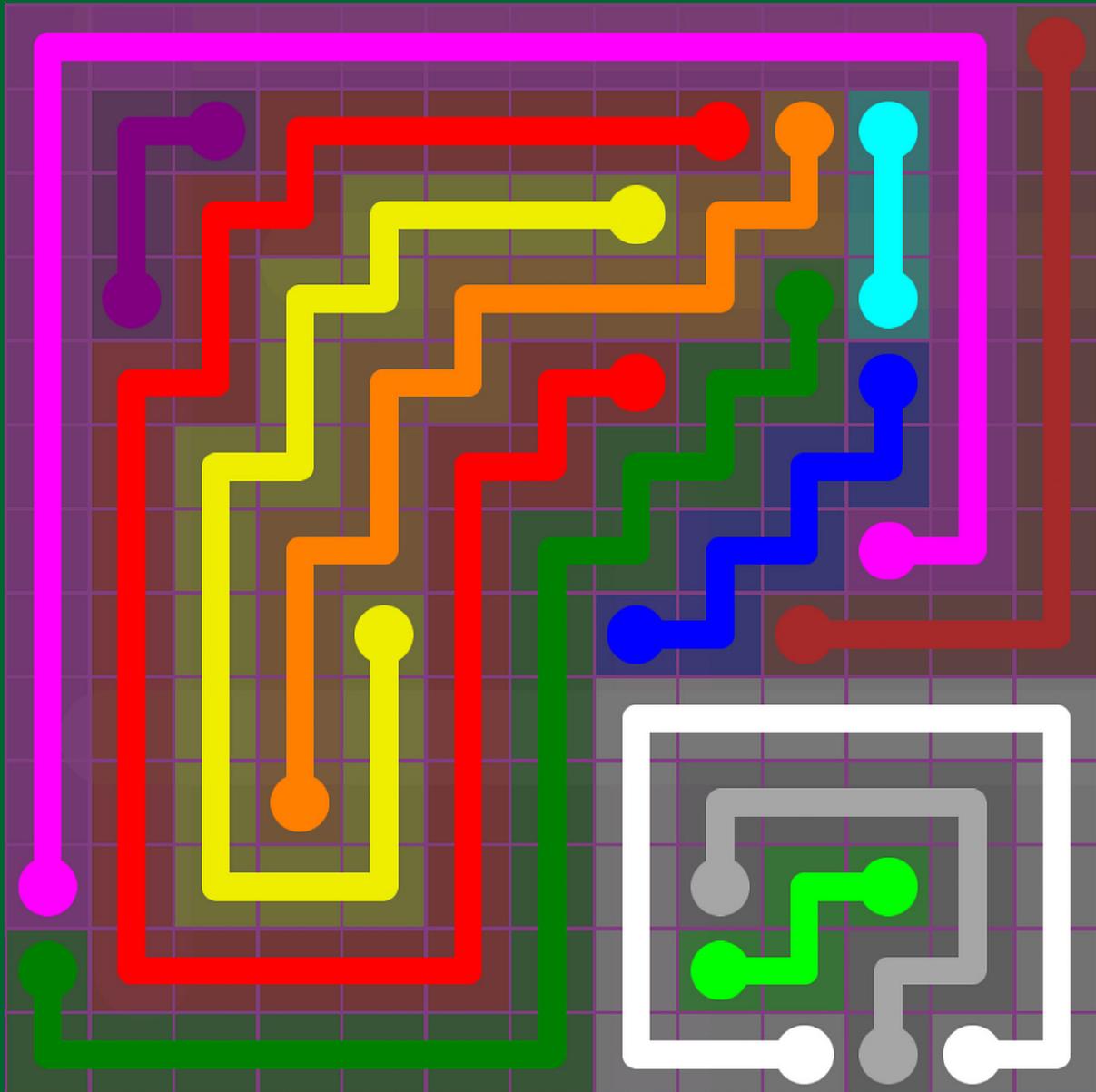
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# NoCOUG

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## YesSQL!

*With Stéphane Faroult  
See page 4.*

## Raiders of the Data Dictionary

*By Lothar Flatz.  
See page 13.*

## Fourth International NoCOUG SQL Challenge

*We have a winner!  
See page 19.*

***Much more inside . . .***

# Safari Books Online

A Review by Brian Hitchcock

## Summary

**Overall review:** Safari, provided by my employer, is a good resource, but I wouldn't pay for it myself.

**Target audience:** Anyone who uses Oracle and other enterprise software.

**Would you recommend Safari to others?:** Only if their employer pays for it.

**Who will get the most out of Safari?:** Anyone needing to learn about recent enterprise software and development products.

**Is Safari platform specific?:** No. I used it on a Windows laptop and PC as well as an iPad.

**Why did I review Safari?:** NoCOUG asked me to review it.

## Overall Review

Safari provides online access to a large number of technical books covering many topics, including Oracle and other database technologies as well as many software development topics. The interface to read a book online is very good, with minor irritations. It is easy to get the information you need from the books that Safari provides. Safari appears to be very up to date with books as recent as a few months from their publication date. If you have access to Safari through your employer, there is no reason not to make use of it. If you are considering paying for Safari on your own, you need to make sure you will use it enough to make it worth the expense.

**Editor's Note:** *San Jose Public Library and San Francisco Public Library offer free access to Safari Books Online. San Jose Public Library also offers free access to Books24x7. Residents of California are entitled to become members of both libraries.*

## Introduction

Technical books have been very expensive for many years. They also were already out of date by the time they were printed because it takes so long to get a hard copy book produced. The number of bookstores—physical brick-and-mortar stores where you can look at technical books—has also been greatly reduced. It is easier than ever to order almost any book online, but you don't get to look at the book very thoroughly before you buy.

All of these issues would be addressed if you could look at a good selection of technical books online for a reasonable fee. Safari, [safaribooksonline.com](http://safaribooksonline.com), does this. But does it work and does it work well enough to really be useful for working professionals?

## How to Get Started

I work for Oracle and through my employer I was able to create a Safari account at no cost to me. If you don't have access through your employer, Safari offers three plans: Pro, Teams, and Enterprise. The Pro plan is priced at \$39/month or \$399/year for a single user. Teams pricing starts at \$399/year per user and is billed annually. You have to contact Safari for Enterprise pricing.

All three plans offer unlimited books, video courses, audio books, and support, along with an iOS app. They also offer an app for Android and BlackBerry. After that, the only additional feature of the Teams plan is some billing options. The Enterprise plan has additional features, but they all relate to account management options, usage reporting, and options to reassign licenses. I made sure my login worked on my Windows laptop and on my iPad.

## Initial Reaction

I started by connecting to Safari using Chrome on my Windows laptop. When I logged in, I saw My Dashboard, which showed the following: Last Viewed in: All Recent Pages, and 35 Tokens (0 Expire Soon). I don't know what tokens are but we'll get to that. I also saw that My Account had 44,051 titles and a button for STATS. Along the left side there were links for Books and Browse Categories. The Featured Categories were Java, Oracle, Solaris, and Oracle Press. Since I signed up for Safari as an Oracle employee, I assume this caused these categories to be featured. You might see different categories if you access Safari as an employee of another company. Below this I had categories for Business, Math & Science, and many others. I could choose Browse Publishers as well.

- ▶ **Last Viewed in:** This didn't link to anything, but I hadn't looked at anything yet. After I accessed some books, this linked to the last page I had looked at.
- ▶ **All Recent Pages:** When I clicked on this, I got a page that displayed the 20 most recent books and videos I viewed, including a thumbnail of the book cover and the date of the last access.
- ▶ **35 Tokens (0 Expire Soon):** When I clicked on this, I was told that I had 35 tokens that could be redeemed for downloads. I'm not sure if these get renewed at some point (perhaps annually?) or not. Nor am I clear on what downloading means. Can I download a whole book for one token?
- ▶ **Browse Publishers:** Clicking this link brought up an extensive list of publishers. There were the familiar ones: O'Reilly,

Apress, and Oracle Press, and many that I didn't recognize: dpunkt, for example.

In the center of the screen was Featured Video, which showed a rotating set of videos. I noticed that none of them were database or Oracle related.

There were also sections labeled Java Titles, Oracle Titles, and What's New. I assume that these sections would be different if you connected as an employee of a company other than Oracle.

## Ease of Use

I had selected two books, and when I logged in again these titles appeared in Last Viewed and All Recent Pages. When I clicked on the WebLogic Server 12c Admin title, I saw the cover artwork; the author and publisher information; and tabs for Overview, Table of Contents, Notes & Tags, Bookmarks, and Search This Book. In the upper right there was a large button labeled "Start Reading." Clicking this button brought up the cover of the book, almost filling the browser window. Down the left side there were items for Notes, Bookmarks, Search, and Contents. There were multiple options for viewing the page, including going full screen or displaying a grid of thumbnails of the pages. In the upper right were the arrow buttons to move forward or back through the pages, and for the first few pages, they would shift left and right as I moved along, making it more difficult to click on them. This went away once I got to the main text of the book.

I hadn't used the Zoom buttons to enlarge the page, but it was very large on my screen and very easy to read—much easier to read than the actual book. Being able to enlarge the pages is a great feature, one advantage that online reading has over reading a physical book.

Another welcome—and unexpected—feature was along the entire left and right edge of the page, where there were narrow columns that I could click to page forward and back. This was great, since I needed to scroll down to read to the bottom of each page, and the buttons at the top of the screen would scroll out of view.

When a page has a photograph, the loading speed is noticeably slower. There aren't many images in this book, but I wonder if this would be more of an issue in a book with images on every page—a book on Photoshop for example.

I noticed that there aren't any page numbers at the bottom of the pages as I was reading. I'm not sure if this is a problem or not, but it seems strange. For example, I was reading Chapter 1 of the WebLogic Server 12c Admin book, and as I got to the end of each page, I didn't know where I was, other than in that chapter. I checked the table of contents on the left of the page and again, no page information. I didn't know if the chapter was 10 or 20 pages long. Again, I'm not sure this is a bad thing, but I did notice the lack of page numbers. I also noticed that there wasn't any sort of graphic or slider or display that showed me where I was within the whole book. I've used apps for reading magazines online that have a bar across the bottom of the window that shows you where you are in the whole magazine. I like this feature and expected to see something similar while reading a book in Safari.

At the bottom left of the browser window I found buttons for creating a bookmark, creating a note, emailing the current page, and printing. Clicking the bookmark button turned that button yellow, which I assumed meant that the current page had been

bookmarked. Clicking this button again removed the bookmark. I didn't see how to look at or use my bookmarks until I exited full-screen mode, and then I could see the Bookmarks link on the left. I also noticed that the upper-left corner of the page now had a yellow triangle, so it looked like that page had been dog-eared. As I bookmarked multiple pages, each of the bookmarks appeared in a list on the left. The date when each page was bookmarked was also shown. I had bookmarked three different pages in the first chapter, but the Bookmarks list only told me the section heading of each page. I didn't know if the bookmarks were from the first chapter or not. I wanted to open the Contents list as well as the Bookmarks list, but I could only have one list open at a time. I haven't used Safari long enough to say that this is a problem, but I would like the list of bookmarks to somehow give me a feel of where they are in the overall book. I think it would be useful to know if most of my bookmarks are in Chapter 1 and to be able to see where my bookmarks are among all of the pages of the book. Perhaps some sort of graphic display of the bookmarks would be helpful.

Clicking the Notes button brings up a separate window to create a note for this page. There is a button to Share This Note, which brings up another window where you can email the note to others. After I created a note for the current page, a yellow tag appeared in the upper left of the page and the note appeared in a list of notes along the left edge of the browser. Clicking the yellow tag, I could edit the note. When I made notes in a physical book, either by attaching a Post-it note and writing on that or by writing on the page itself, I could review the notes in order as I moved through the physical pages. As I saw each note, I knew which chapter it was in. With the list of notes I have in Safari, all I have is a list of the notes and their titles; I don't know where they are in the book.

You can also make notes within each page. You do this by selecting the text on a page. This brings up a window where you can choose Add Note/Tags or Highlight Only. You can create a note that will show up in the list of notes for pages, or you can simply highlight the selected text.

I clicked on the This Book link at the upper left, and it took me back to the page showing the cover art; details about the book; and tabs for Overview, Table of Contents, etc. Clicking on the Table of Contents tab, I could see a listing of the chapters and sections within each chapter. I would like to see my notes and bookmarks integrated with this display.

As I read more of the book, I noticed that when I was not in Full Screen mode, I could see the Table of Contents along the left side of the window. As I moved through the pages, the section of each chapter that I was in was highlighted, and this moved along as I read further. Instead of page numbers, each chapter of the book was broken up into a series of sections. For example, for Chapter 1, while I was reading through the "Upgrading Oracle WebLogic Server" section, it was highlighted. When I got to the next section, "Using the Administration Console," it was highlighted. When I was using Full Screen mode, the Table of Contents was not visible down the left side of the window, so I didn't know where I was in the chapter.

Printing was offered for each page, and when I tried to print the page I was reading, it was sent to my printer. The output looked fine.

I tried several times, and I couldn't find my way back to the first screen I saw when I logged in. This seemed odd, and I

kept trying; I found that if I clicked on the “Safari Books Online” logo at the top of the page, I got back to the first screen.

## Selection

When I first connected, My Account was showing 44,051 titles. When I connected again, a week or so later, there were 44,439 titles. I don’t know if the rate at which new books are added is consistent, but this shows that new books are being added all the time.

In a previous life, I designed antennas for spacecraft so I thought it would be interesting to search for “antenna design.” My impression of Safari was that it was primarily for software topics, and I didn’t expect to find anything about antennas. I was wrong: there are 3310 titles for antenna design. Scrolling through the list of titles, some of them only had the word “antenna” in the description, but many of the titles covered hardcore antenna design and theory. This was a good example of what Safari has that I didn’t expect. Safari covers a lot more topics than I expected.

Safari provides access to many publishers I didn’t know about. When I did have access to bookstores that stocked technical books, I don’t think they had as many books on the shelf for me to look at. The selection of titles available through Safari is much better than any physical bookstore I have seen.

## Quality

I decided to pick two measures of book quality: how recent they are and how a book looks as I read it in the Safari interface.

Looking at Amazon for Oracle Press books, I found that the most recent one was *Oracle Database 12c Security*, which shows a publication date of January 5, 2015. Safari has this title. I wrote this review in early June of 2015. While this is not at all scientific, it appears that Safari is, at most, five months behind the latest publications from Oracle Press. I don’t know if this applies to the other publishers that have books on Safari.

When I first connected, I noticed a button “STATS” but didn’t look at it. It turns out that this leads to a graph showing the number and percentage of titles available to me that were published in each year from 2000 (and earlier) up through 2014. From this graphic, roughly 10% of the titles available are less than a year old, and another 40% are less than 5 years old.

Judging by the ones I looked at, books look great in the Safari interface. I was not aware of any issues when looking at a page in a book or any problems with images.

## Searching

Clicking on the Books link on the left, I got a page with a Featured Book as well as several Latest Book choices. I also saw a message that Safari Books Online has over 41,000 books and that my subscription may not include all the books. I clicked on the VIEW ALL BOOKS link and saw the covers of 20 books, each with information about the book and a synopsis to the right of each one. By default, these are the 20 most popular titles. Scanning these titles I noticed that while there were titles for management, PHP, communication skills, and time management, the most popular topic was Photoshop! If most popular is not to your liking, you can also sort by Insert Date, Pub. Date, and the ever-popular Alphabetical.

I tried Alphabetical and scrolled down looking for “Oracle,” but I didn’t get very far. You can only see 20 titles per screen, and the choices for moving ahead in the list are limited. You can ad-

vance two screens (40 titles) or you can choose Next. This doesn’t seem very useful. I was expecting options to choose letters of the alphabet so I could get close to “Oracle,” but that wasn’t possible.

Next I tried the search box at the top of the page. I searched for “Oracle,” and I got a screen with tabs labeled Books (10285 Results) and Videos (67 Results). On the left I saw a breakdown of the categories for these results: Business, Desktop and Web Applications, Digital Media, and Engineering. At first glance, if 10,000 books have “Oracle” in the title, and I have access to roughly 40,000 titles, this isn’t the level of diversity I was expecting. I’m glad they have so many Oracle titles, but I was expecting Safari to provide titles covering a wide range of technical subjects. I don’t think Oracle books should be one-quarter of all the titles available.

The first 20 titles displayed are mostly Oracle Press titles; they appear to be very recent and cover a wide range of Oracle topics. I can SEARCH WITHIN RESULTS, so I tried “12c” and I got a list of 81 books and 3 videos.

I decided to look at *Oracle WebLogic Server 12c Administration Handbook* and *Oracle Database 12c New Features*. For each title there was a link to ADD TO FAVORITES, and I could view the Table of Contents or click the Start Reading link.

I decided to try one of the videos. I could see that there were 2456 to choose from, but I didn’t see any way to search the videos. I could sort the listings, so I chose to sort by Alphabetical. I scrolled down to the end of the first page of listings and found “A Practical Guide to Learning Phone Skills.” Perhaps it is not too late for me to learn some real job skills? “Acoustic Guitar Miking Techniques” is not something I was looking for, but there it is. Lots of Adobe and Photoshop videos. It took me a lot of clicking to find only two Oracle videos: “11g PL-SQL Fundamentals II” and “12c New Features, Part I.” I decided to try the “12c New Features” video. It ran for a few minutes, describing six separate lessons, each covering a new feature of 12c. At the end of this video, clicking on the right arrow brought up the next, and the various lessons played. The videos loaded quickly and the quality was very good, even when displayed full screen.

I hadn’t started looking at Safari expecting to look at videos, but now that I had, it occurred to me that the videos I watched were much better than the online training I have to suffer through at work. To experience quality audio and video covering training issues makes me realize just how bad the stuff I see at work really is.

I was puzzled that I couldn’t search among the videos, so I decided to try searching using the Entire Site box. Clicking in this box brings up a menu, and choosing Advanced Search allowed me to search for “oracle” among video titles. This showed 23 videos. Much better. Oddly, when I was done looking at videos, I couldn’t figure out how to get back to the main screen and had to log out and back in again.

## Offline Storage

I was able to print a page as previously described. Now I wanted to try using my tokens. Returning to the main screen and clicking on the Tokens link, I found I had to request a download from the Content Reader toolbar. OK, I felt dumb: what and where is the Content Reader toolbar? My tokens will expire in 158 days! I hope that is long enough for me to find the Content Reader toolbar. I looked for about half an hour and then decided to try the Help link. Here I found Frequently Asked Questions,

Offline Reading, and—under Articles—Accessing Content and Offline Reading. Here I was told that some publishers don't allow downloading at all, while some only allow chapters to be downloaded. If downloading is allowed, a button to request downloading will appear when reading the book or looking at the book information. There isn't such a button for the book I'm reading. I'm still a dinosaur, but the reason I couldn't find the download button was because it didn't exist.

I realize this is a touchy issue for publishers and authors. It would have helped me if Safari simply put a note on the book I was reading that downloads were not allowed.

## Platform

I had been using my Windows laptop and Chrome browser to access Safari, but I wanted to try the Safari Apps for iOS. When searching the iOS App Store, you see Safari To Go and Safari Queue. I don't know why there are two apps available, but I downloaded both and, in the end, both installed Safari Online. I guess Safari Queue is an old app? I did this on both my iPhone 5 and my iPad. While I wouldn't suggest you try to read a book on an iPhone, I did access Safari through the web browser (confusing because I needed to access Safari Books Online through the Apple Safari browser) and iOS app. Using the browser on my iPhone, the interface looked identical to the one I see when using my laptop or PC. I was able to see where I had stopped reading the WebLogic 12c Admin book and I was able to search the book for all the occurrences of the phrase "Node Manager." You can find things you need to look up using the iPhone, but I don't think I would do so. Using the Apple Safari browser to access Safari on my iPad was the same as using my Windows laptop and PC.

For both the iPhone and iPad I tried the Safari To Go app, and the interface was different from using the web browser. I saw the books I had been reading, and I was taken to the page where I had stopped reading my current book. In the browser I could click on the left or right edge of the displayed page, whereas in the app I needed to swipe left or right. The screen on the iPhone was just too small, so I didn't keep using it. Continuing with the app on my iPad, the interface was different. Instead of having links down the left side of the screen (when using the web browser) I had icons in the upper right. When I clicked one of these I got an overlay with options. I didn't have to toggle off of full-screen mode to see the table of contents, for example. At the bottom of the screen was a slider that showed me where I was in the whole book. I liked both of these features. I couldn't find any way to make notes in the text using the app. I tried for a while but had no luck. I was assuming the app would offer the same functionality I had seen when using the web browser to access the book, but this wasn't so. This wasn't what I wanted; I wanted to learn one interface, not multiple interfaces.

Given what I saw of the Safari interface using the app on my iPad, I went back to accessing Safari through the web browser. I would not recommend using the iOS Safari app. I don't have an Android or BlackBerry device, so I can't offer any review of those app interfaces.

## Impact on Authors

I don't know how publishers are compensated for their books that are available through Safari, and I don't know how the publishers compensate the authors of those books. Now that I have used Safari, I am less likely to buy an Oracle Press book, because

I know I can access most or all of them for free through my employer-provided Safari subscription. Unless authors are well paid for their books to be available through Safari, I think this must be a reduction in what an author can earn from a technical book. On the other hand, more people may look at an author's book, since access is free. I think what an author gets from being published is changing. In the old days (remember, I'm a dinosaur) a band went on tour to sell albums; the album sales were where the money was. Today, the band effectively gives their music away online to entice listeners to attend their tour, and the money is made selling tickets to the tour events. I think an author of a book that is available through Safari isn't being paid much. I guess the author might get more exposure online, but I'm not sure what the equivalent is for the author to the band selling tickets to the tour events. Are modern authors effectively giving away their books to build a brand that can be monetized in other ways? I'm not sure this is a good thing for authors. Time will tell, and it will be interesting to see how many new books continue to be written if the authors are not compensated in some meaningful way.

## Conclusion

I wonder if Safari is, like all of us, still learning what works best for reading books online. I am not sure I need page numbers while reading a book online, for example, but I was expecting it, and not having them seemed odd. It is possible that many smarter people have thought all about this and come to the conclusion that things like page numbers are not necessary. Maybe most Safari users don't care whether or not they have page numbers, or they prefer reading a book without page numbers.

Reading the same book in Safari is not the same as reading the physical book. This may not be a bad thing, but it is different. I also fully embrace the simple fact that I'm a dinosaur, doomed to remember a time before the Internet, so maybe I've been reading physical books for too long.

Now let's get to the heart of the matter: would I pay \$39/month for Safari? No. Amazon offers Oracle Press books for roughly \$40 for the paperback and about \$38 for the Kindle edition. Assuming I really want to read several Oracle Press books over the next year, it would be cheaper to buy the specific books I want from Amazon versus paying Safari \$39 every month for the next 12 months.

You could pay for Safari and just browse, reading parts of many books, but how many people want to do this for \$39 per month? I don't think many people want to pay that much to look at technical books, but I may well be wrong. Safari clearly provides a wide variety of books covering many technical fields. I don't know how many people working in those technical fields work for employers that pay for Safari. My guess, based on my situation, is that most people using Safari do so because their employer provides it to them at no cost. I don't think most Safari users would pay for the access on their own. ▲

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*Brian Hitchcock worked for Sun Microsystems for 15 years supporting Oracle databases and Oracle Applications. Since Oracle acquired Sun, he has been with Oracle supporting the On Demand refresh group and, most recently, the Federal On Demand DBA group. All of his book reviews and presentations—and his contact information—are available at [www.brianhitchcock.net](http://www.brianhitchcock.net). The statements and opinions expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of Oracle Corporation.* Copyright © 2015, Brian Hitchcock