

February 2011

Dear Friend,

A few months ago, a writer friend suggested I devote one of these issues to the topic of research. The more I thought about it, I realized what a great idea that was! In fact, it ties in perfectly with the series of articles I'm writing for *The Write Stuff* . . . on how to write articles that will help you improve your own content marketing.

Over the past 15 years, the way research is done has changed dramatically. Back in high school, it was simple. I just took the J streetcar from my neighborhood in San Francisco's Upper Noe Valley all the way down Market Street, then walked a few blocks to the huge main library in Civic Center. Everything I needed was there, and the way to find that information was in the card catalogs – rows and rows of drawers filled with little Dewey decimal cards. (Yes, that was before we even had computers to help us find the books we needed!)

Nowadays, research is fast. But not necessarily easier. While researching information for this month's issue, I discovered lots of resources for online research, but *NONE* on the regular old-fashioned type of research. Probably because everyone already knows how to look up stuff in dictionaries, atlases, and encyclopedias. What people really need help with these days is figuring out where to find information online – and the most reliable sources of that information.

That's why this issue is devoted to online research only. I'll try to keep it as simple as possible, and point you in the direction of resources that can help you learn even more about this subject.

Navigating the 'Nooks and Crannies' of the Internet

by Chris Wilson

QUESTION: *How is the Internet like an English muffin?*

ANSWER: *They both have nooks and crannies that make the "taste" experience much more fun and surprising.*

This comparison was something I came across while starting to research this topic, in a book by Randolph Hock for "extreme searchers" of the Internet. (See **Resources** below.)

In his book, Hock talks about search engines, directories, forums, reference tools, and the best resources for late-breaking news. Listed below are brief descriptions and examples of each of these:

SEARCH ENGINES - Online "card catalogs" that make it possible to find relevant information very quickly. Complicated software programs that access and organize data using three tools: spiders, indexes, and ranking and relevancy programs. Some of the most familiar ones are: [Google](#), [AltaVista](#), [Yahoo](#), and [Bing](#).

WEB DIRECTORIES - Websites that selectively catalog and categorize the sites available on the Web. Easily browsed since they're organized by category, but tend to only index the main pages of sites, which means databases are much smaller than those of search engines. Examples include: [Yahoo Directory](#), [Open Directory Project](#), and [About.com](#).

FORUMS - Interactive discussion groups allowing people to communicate with others on just about any topic you can think of. Resources for locating groups like this include: [Google Groups Search](#), [Yahoo Groups](#), and [Delphi Forums](#). You can also use a search engine by typing in the topic you're interested in and then the word "forum."

REFERENCE TOOLS - Online versions of dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias, almanacs, and other resources. Great tools for finding brief answers quickly. Some are better than others, though. [HighBeam Encyclopedia](#) has everything the print version does *PLUS* a lot more. [Encyclopedia Britannica](#)'s free online version has *less* content than the print version. Other examples: [yourDictionary.com](#), [Answers.com](#), [The Quotations Page](#), [FindArticles](#), [Lonely Planet](#), and [Expedia.com](#).

NEWS RESOURCES - A huge variety of these, ranging from major news networks and newswire sites to specialized news services focusing on news in just one subject area. Not all resources offer up-to-date information, so it's important to check on that when you do your research. Examples include: [NewsLink](#), [MSNBC](#), [Google News](#), [Technorati](#), and [Yahoo Alerts](#).

Who Can You Trust?

Not everything on the Internet can be trusted. And it's easy to be led astray by interesting bits of information while doing research. So here are some tips on finding the most reliable online resources:

- Clearly define your focus to help you stay on track.
- Remember that not every website mentioned on the first page of your search results is reliable.
- Compare facts and opinions from a variety of sources, including websites.

Once you find a website you think is a solid resource, ask:

1. Who's in charge? Is it clear which company or organization is responsible for the information on the site?
2. Is there a link to an "About Us" page, describing what the company does?
3. Does the company have their physical address displayed on the site?
4. Are all claims clearly substantiated, as in cited (linked) sources?
5. Does the writing seem balanced, or is it biased?

Connect through Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking is research through networking. Using tags (keywords or phrases), you can categorize websites you like and share them. Favorite sites include: [Del.icio.us](#) (great for connecting with others), [Reddit](#) (easy to use), and [StumbleUpon](#) (a very creative way to explore the Web). (Wendy Boswell goes into a lot of detail on these in her book, mentioned under **Resources** below.)

Don't Copy!

This one's obvious: Don't steal someone else's words. Always give credit to your sources, including their names and URLs.

Don't Overdo It

Coincidentally, I received an e-newsletter last week on this same subject. The message was actually a warning about going to extremes with your research: "[Why Researching Articles to Death is a Waste of Time.](#)"

In the article, [Sean D'Souza](#) warns against spending too much time on research. He recommends setting an egg timer for 22 minutes and then adding in your own facts (i.e., from your own experience). The result? A story filled with facts *AND* human interest, that people will want to read.

RESOURCES

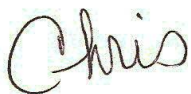
[About.com Guide to Online Research](#), by [Wendy Boswell](#). 2007. Just about everything related to online research is in this book. Very well written and easy to scan, with lots of sidebars and examples.

[The Extreme Searcher's Internet Handbook](#), by [Randolph Hock](#). 2010. Goes into great detail about dozens of websites that can help you find exactly what you need very quickly. As Hock puts it, "This is a treasure trove of tips, techniques, and great resources."

[NoodleTools: Choose the Best Search for Your Information Need](#). This website was started in 2002 by mother and son team [Debbie and Damon Abilock](#), primarily for the use of schools and libraries.

Do you need help creating strong messages to support your own content marketing? Give me a call at **916/801-0480**, or e-mail me at cwilson@worddesign.biz, to set up an appointment for a free, no-obligation hour of consultation. I'll be glad to show you how I can help you get more business!

To your success,



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