

Google your Way to Riches (of Information)

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As anti-hero Michael from The Office concluded in a recent TV episode, "Life and business are about human connections. Computers are about trying to murder you in a lake." The first I am wholly in agreement with. The second may be overstated but bears a hint of truth. Computers can literally save your life, or at least enhance it, but using them injudiciously can wreck relationships and even cars, as Michael demonstrated by following onboard, computerized driving instructions too literally and hastily.

I don't think I've ever had a computer that wanted to murder me, but have had reverse fantasies about bricks and monitors and even airborne mechanical parts (die fledermaus?) over my 30 years with these machines. Still, one of the greatest enhancements to my life and career has been the Internet search engine. I even like the term, as it conveys the image of something reaching out and grabbing information needed for my personal use or to meet the needs of our many library customers. My librarian colleagues and I do leave our keyboards from time to time and stroll over to just the right section and hand just the right book to a grateful patron, thus being a "human search engine." For now I will dispense some advice to the readers on using the computerized kind.

Google, of course, comes to mind immediately. In fact the very name of the company has been "verbed," and is now included in the venerable Oxford English Dictionary denoting the use of that search engine to find a "person, place or thing." Even the computer-shy are amazed by its utility. Artists looking for pictures have been greatly pleased when we at the Reference Desk have gone to Google Images, a feature on the main search menu, and typed in key words like "male angel" and pulled up dozens of examples to study for inspiration; a frequently asked question about certain banded snakes using Google Images and the words "king coral snake" retrieves pictorial representations of coral and king snakes, and some of the "ditties" used to remember the way to distinguish them.

Google Earth is a "virtual globe" program that allows one to view not just rivers and lakes, but the Grand Canyon or Mount Kilimanjaro in three dimensions. A good place to start is choosing "Maps" from Google's main page, typing your own address and getting a satellite view of your neighborhood, and quick directions and mapping to other places. Detailed information on all your options can be found from earth.google.com, including popularly viewed locations in 360 cities around the world and even "out of this world" wonders such as the Crab Nebula.

You can set up a free email account on gmail, waste countless hours watching Google videos, set up discussion/support groups on any number of topics, utilize a web page builder, start a web log or diary (aka "blog"), set up photo albums on Picasa, track the stock market in real time (even your own portfolio if you are brave) and shop for bargains on the aptly named Froogle. Google Calendar is invaluable for keeping up with the activities of the Felsted household. These treasures may all be found by going to www.google.com. Look for menu options other than simply typing in a search in the box; some are listed under "Other." Google is the search engine of choice, or default, on many computer browsers now and is included on many library web sites.

Somewhat lesser known but highly useful features for the researcher are Google Reader, for monitoring one's favorite news sites and blogs; Google Scholar for articles in medical, scientific and other journals; and Google Book for viewing "snippets" of published works of fiction and nonfiction and, in some cases, front to back content.

In addition to the "900 pound gorilla" known as Google, other search engines have survived major shakeouts and acquisitions and remain useful. Yahoo comes closest to it in popularity, and is followed by Ask.com (formerly known as Ask Jeeves) and Windows Live. All want to be your portal, or gateway to Internet resources. Each has its strengths and unique offerings, such as Yahoo's Kelley Blue Book for assessing automobile prices. I found so many new features in Google while researching this article that I will have to deal with the other 3 search engines in a future one.