

# The Basics:

Quick Lookups and Computer Tips

Go ahead, ask me anything. Because that is my job at the local public library: to answer any question that is asked of me, as factually and completely as I can.

You can imagine how tough this was before the age of the internet. We librarians would flip through card catalogs or volumes of indexes, year by year, to find citations for books or magazine articles. We then followed these pointers to the shelf, where we paged through books or journals to see if they held the needed information. Bingo? We would scratch the result on a piece of paper.

We librarians keep a shelf of books near our desk labeled "Ready Reference." These are books that offer quick answers to frequently asked questions: dictionaries, maps, encyclopedias, phone books, and almanacs.

Today, the Ready Reference bookshelf gathers dust, because when someone comes into the library and asks me a question, I almost always swivel to my computer to look it up. When I find the answer, often in seconds, I send it to the laser printer and then hand the printout to my satisfied customer. Next question?

Librarians have favorite websites that we use all the time to quickly answer patron questions. First among them, of course, is Google.

There's a reason that Google became a verb: It makes the vast web usable. Here are some tips to make it work even better.

#### Google

www.google.com

When those clever Stanford boys, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, found a better way to trap relevant search results on the internet, the World Wide Web beat a path to their door. Now, their invention has grown so clever that it even compensates for typing errors and completes our questions, like a spouse.

Still, librarians know that Google can work even better with a couple of tweaks. My favorite is to clump a search phrase together with quotation marks. For example, sometimes I remember one line of a poem and want to know the rest of it. So I go to Google and type, "I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth." (I put it in quotes so that Google searches the phrase as a piece.) Sure enough, when I click the search button, up pops the poem "High Flight" by John Gillespie Magee Jr.

If you use Google but are not getting the results that you want, try using its Advanced Search page (www.google.com/advanced\_search). Here you can restrict your query to specific sites (like YouTube) or leave unwanted words out of a query. For instance, if you want to know more about cats called jaguars, you can ask Google to refrain from searching for car model Jaguar.

## Words

Google can also work as a dictionary. When I don't know the meaning of a word, I sometimes go to Google and type *define*: and then the term. I get a list of definitions from various sources.

Here are a few specialized online dictionaries, including one from Google.

#### **Merriam-Webster Online**

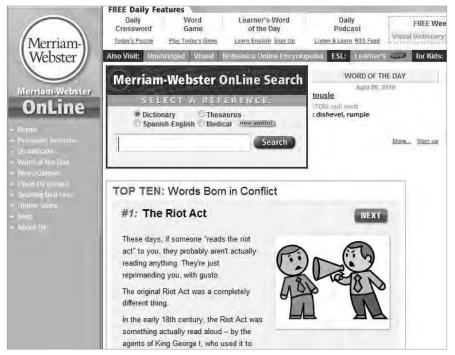
www.merriam-webster.com

All of the most necessary writing and reading tools are here: your plain vanilla English dictionary, a thesaurus, a Spanish-English dictionary, and one that defines medical terms and then pronounces them aloud. I keep Merriam-Webster in all my internet shortcut lists for easy access.

## **Urban Dictionary**

www.urbandictionary.com

Conan O'Brien recently described someone as "crunked up." Crunk? What does that mean? Search the Urban Dictionary to find the definition of slang terms. In this case, *crunk* is a combination



Merriam-Webster Online

of the words *crazy* and *drunk*. Be aware that this is one of the *least* vulgar definitions in the Urban Dictionary.

#### **Google Language Tools**

www.google.com/language\_tools

Here's Google again, this time with tools for translating text. Need to understand a French web page? Want to know how to say something in Spanish? Just want to know what a "Buchladen" is? Google Language Tools offers a machine translation on the fly. The translated prose isn't always smooth, but it is usually clear enough to make out the meaning. It even translates Chinese!

# People

Who uses telephone books anymore? If a person owns property, has a listed land line phone, or has a presence on the web, it is easy to find him or her using these free tools.

## The Official WhitePages

www.whitepages.com

Find listed phone numbers for people and businesses in the U.S. The WhitePages also does reverse searches with phone numbers and addresses. When I entered my address, I got my name, my number, and a map to my house!

#### Infobel

www.infobel.com

Calling Europe? India? Search telephone directories across the globe through this site.

## 123people.com

www.123people.com

This site not only searches phone books and property records, but also Facebook and MySpace. It finds email addresses and mentions of a person's name in blogs and news stories. 123people.com can find obscure references on the web, but the correct results are often mixed with lots of false hits. I found several women with my exact name across the nation.

## Ancestors

To find evidence of ancestors is to feel a deep link with your family across time. Although many genealogical databases charge for searching their records, there is much information that is available for free. Here are some starting points for building your family tree.

## **Social Security Death Index**

ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com

This site finds birth and death dates for those who collected payments from Social Security and then passed on.

## **FamilySearch**

www.familysearch.org

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints runs this search site that pulls biographical information from their church files as well as the Social Security Death Index.

## Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation

www.ellisisland.org

Did your ancestors come to America via the Port of New York between 1892 and 1924? In return for free registration, find their entry records on this free database.

## Cyndi's List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet

www.cyndislist.com

Do you want to delve deeply into your family's history? Start with Cyndi's List, a directory of links to genealogical databases. Browse her categories (everything from "England" to "Baptist") or just search her site by word. If you are unsure how to begin, start with Cyndi's "Beginners" guide (www.cyndislist.com/beginner.htm).



FamilySearch

# Maps

Where am I? How do I get where I'm going? It's easy to find out with these tools.

## **Google Maps**

maps.google.com

It's hard to beat Google Maps for plotting a journey. Get directions for driving, walking, biking, or even taking public transit. Google Maps shows views from the satellite and the street. It even gives information about real-time traffic problems. Download the free Google Earth program (earth.google.com) for even more dramatic mapping possibilities. Use Google Maps on your Android, BlackBerry, Nokia, or iPhone with a free app (www.google.com/mobile/maps).

#### Bing Maps

www.bing.com/maps

Bing, owned by Microsoft, offers driving and walking directions along with satellite and street views. Install the "3D" software to get a topographic view of your journey, similar to that in Google Earth.

## Movies

Get your movie and TV trivia questions answered here!

#### **IMDb: The Internet Movie Database**

www.imdb.com

What else has that actor been in? Who directed that film? What was that funny line in that Monty Python movie? Your questions about movies, television, and actors are answered free at IMDb.

#### **Rotten Tomatoes**

www.rottentomatoes.com

Here's a movie review aggregator with the marinara metaphor. A good review gets a fresh tomato. Bad reviews equal rotten tomatoes. When a film receives more than 60 percent positive reviews, it is rated "fresh." Otherwise, it goes into the compost. "Certified Fresh" films have been positively reviewed by at least 75 percent of 40 or more critics; the wisdom of crowds implies that these movies are worth seeing. Track box office here, too, and find showtimes. Or, publish your own thoughts about movies on The Vine. This is a great all-around movie website.

## Books

If you love to read, you will adore these sites designed to help you get your hands on your next good book.

#### Amazon.com

www.amazon.com

At the library reference desk, we use Amazon.com as a kind of *Books in Print*. It not only gives publication information, but also book reviews from reputable sources along with those from the general public. Find new releases and best sellers here, along with subject category lists (e.g., "Science" or "Crafts"). My favorite thing about Amazon is its search engine. It is very forgiving of misspellings.

#### WorldCat

www.worldcat.org

Why buy when you can borrow? If an item is held in any of more than 10,000 libraries around the globe, it will appear in the WorldCat online library catalog. Search for a book or a movie and then punch in your ZIP code. WorldCat will list the libraries near you that own the item and then link you through to the library catalog of your choice. Once you've pulled up your local library catalog, explore all that's available to you there, which often includes full-text magazine or newspaper articles in addition to book listings.

Use WorldCat on your mobile phone browser (www.worldcat. org/m). Android smart phone users can download the free WorldCat app from this site. iPhone owners can scan a book barcode (in the store, for example) with the 99-cent RedLaser app, which will use WorldCat data to find that same book in a nearby library.

#### BookFinder.com

www.bookfinder.com

Do you want to buy an old book that is no longer in print? Or perhaps you want to find the value of a book in your collection. Search the used book sellers on this site to see what your book is going for. There are textbooks for sale here, too.

## **Facts**

"A little fact is worth a whole limbo of dreams," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. The web is that limbo, populated with fantasies as well as facts. Know which is which with these sites.

## Snopes.com

snopes.com

Hmm, I just got an email that says that the Olive Garden restaurant chain is giving away \$100 gift certificates for becoming a fan of its Facebook page. Can this be true? I'll look it up on Snopes.com. David and Barbara Mikkelson are the California couple who turned their myth-busting hobby into this trusted fact-checking site. They debunk chain letters and offer links to back up their claims. Sadly, they confirm that the Olive Garden rumor is false.

## FactCheck.org

www.factcheck.org

When the political races are on, the rhetoric heats up. The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania separates truth from fiction on this site. No computer handy? Get your facts on your web-enabled cell phone (m.factcheck.org).

#### **PolitiFact**

www.politifact.com

Did a politician make a sweeping pronouncement that sounds kind of fishy? The reporters from the *St. Petersburg Times* will research it and slap it up on their "Truth-O-Meter." See whether a statement is true, half true, or simply a "pants on fire" blatant lie.

## Law

Do you need to hire professional help for a family legal matter? Here are sites that can help you to answer that question and to find an attorney, if necessary.

## **Nolo: Free Legal Information and Solutions**

www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia

Need help with a common legal problem? Nolo Press publishes books that explain the law in clear, everyday language. Visit this site to find hundreds of free articles about legal situations. Topics include wills, bankruptcy, and traffic tickets.

### Lawyers.com

www.lawyers.com

Find a lawyer fast at Lawyers.com. The site also offers short articles about family law.

## Tax Forms

When it's that time of year again, turn to these sites to find your tax forms.

#### **IRS**

www.irs.gov

Find federal tax forms and instructions at the site of Internal Revenue Service. You may be able to file electronically for free using this site, too.

# **Louisiana State University Government Documents and Microforms: Tax Forms**

www.lib.lsu.edu/govdocs/taxes.html

Find tax forms for your state by clicking through the directory at the bottom of the page, hosted by the libraries at Louisiana State University.

# Apps

More and more of our computing is moving off of the desktop and onto the cell phone in the form of little programs called "apps." There are tens of thousands of them with more coming The Basics 11

out all the time. Here are sites to help you decide which ones will work for you.

#### **New York Times Gadgetwise**

gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/apps

This online *New York Times* column reviews apps as they come out.

#### **CNet Mobile Downloads**

download.cnet.com/mobile-downloads

CNet's Download.com is a great place to find free software. It also reviews programs designed for smart phones. Select your mobile platform (iPhone, Android, etc.), and CNet will show you reviews of apps designed for your phone.

## Wall Street Journal Blogs: Digits

blogs.wsj.com/digits/tag/app-watch

The Wall Street Journal selectively covers emerging apps.

# Windows-Based Computer Tools

Linux and Apple computers are great, but most people own the cheaper (and clunkier) Windows-based computers. That is why they are such targets for hackers! Here are three free programs that PC owners can use to help a Windows-based computer run smoothly.

## PC Decrapifier

www.pcdecrapifier.com

When you first buy a Windows-based computer, it often comes loaded with sample programs that you don't want. Before you start using your new PC, remove those irritating space hogs with this program, which is free for personal use.



PC Decrapifier

## **SUPERAntiSpyware**

www.superantispyware.com/portablescanner.html

You've installed the usual anti-virus software on your PC, and yet it is acting funny. Download this program to a burnable CD or a flash drive, and run it to make sure that you don't have any rogue viruses.

#### **CCleaner**

www.piriform.com/ccleaner

Here is a program that deletes files you no longer use and makes your system run faster. It's like dental floss for your Windowsbased computer.

# At the Ready

I hope that these sites help you to find the information that you need quickly and easily. With the internet, help is just a click away! Still, if you can't find what you are looking for, feel free to call your local public librarian. It's our job to look things up for you!