



# Sarah Wernick

## Medical Writer and Internet Devotee

Sarah Wernick is a freelance writer with a Ph.D. in sociology and a repetitive strain injury in her right hand from spending way too much time online. In a previous life, Sarah taught sociology at, among other places, Washington University and Northeastern University. She abandoned academia in 1978 to write professionally, starting with articles in a local tabloid throwaway and eventually graduating to *Woman's Day*, *Working Mother*, *Smithsonian*, the *New York Times*, and other national publications. She's served as contributing editor at *Working Mother* and *Chocolate News*. Among her article awards is the 1997 American Medical Association President's Prize for excellence in tobacco reporting for "The Silent Killer," published in *Ladies' Home Journal*. This was the first feature article about lung cancer to appear in a major women's magazine.

These days, Sarah focuses on writing books. She's currently finishing *Lung Cancer: Myths, Facts, Choices—and Hope* for Norton, co-authored with Claudia Henschke, M.D., of Cornell University and Peggy McCarthy, founder of the Alliance for Lung Cancer Advocacy, Support, and Education. Previous projects include three bestsellers about strength training for mature women, all written with Miriam Nelson of Tufts University: *Strong Women Stay Young* (Bantam, 1997 and 2000), *Strong Women Stay Slim* (Bantam, 1998), and *Strong Women, Strong Bones* (Putnam, 2000), which was a Books for a Better Life award winner in 2000. Sarah's other co-authored book, *The Emotional Problems of Normal Children* (Bantam, 1994), a collaboration with Stanley Turecki, M.D., was honored by *Child* magazine as one of the best parenting books of 1994.

Sarah is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Authors Guild, and the National Writers Union. She's based in the Boston area of Massachusetts and can be enticed to leave her computer by chocolate or opportunities to speak on book proposals, collaborative writing, and Internet research.

[sarah@sarahwernick.com](mailto:sarah@sarahwernick.com)

[www.sarahwernick.com](http://www.sarahwernick.com)

## **What part has online research played in your writing, both books and articles?**

I use the Internet constantly, not only for research but also for connecting with colleagues, reaching people to interview, marketing my work, shopping, not to mention goofing off. At this point, I no longer remember how I worked before I was online. When a nonfiction writer tells me, “Oh yeah, the Internet is pretty good, but I don’t find it all that useful,” I figure this person hasn’t yet discovered what’s out there.

There’s never been a resource like this in the history of the world. Every major institution—governments, businesses, universities, libraries, museums, organizations, newspapers, magazines, TV, and radio stations—has an online presence, often with extensive information. On top of that, hundreds of thousands of individuals share their expertise with extraordinary generosity. The best library in the world can’t compare, not only because the Internet is so much larger, but also because it’s so readily searched. And everything is instantly available, right at your desk, any time of day or night.

## **How did you get started?**

In 1983 I bought a Kaypro computer. The operating system came with twenty-five mimeographed pages of unintelligible nerd-speak. In desperation, I joined the Boston Computer Society’s Kaypro User Group, which had a terrific online forum. When we ran into trouble, we could crank up our modems, dial in, and get advice. I still remember one frantic message from an unfortunate journalist on deadline: “Help!!! I just ran the spellcheck program, and it turned my article into an alphabetized list of words.”

In the early 1990s, I joined CompuServe and started using its resources for article research. For example, I was asked to write an article for *Woman’s Day* about mothers who were secretly disappointed in their child. Normally I’d interview friends or mothers I met at my children’s school. But how could I walk up to a

woman and ask, “Hey, are you bummed out because your kid is a loser?” I left a tactfully worded message on a CompuServe parenting forum and several members offered to speak with me.

During this period, I was writing a monthly health news column for *Working Mother* magazine. Practically all my leads came from CompuServe’s Executive News Service, which screens major wire services and press releases for stories containing any keywords you specify.

These days I use the Internet rather than CompuServe; they’ve dropped most of their research services and their forums have shrunk. However, Executive News Service is still very valuable for keeping up with news of interest. I often get word on new studies before my expert co-authors spot them in medical journals.

## **Where did you turn for information about lung cancer?**

The best starting point for online research on lung cancer is a remarkable Web site called Lung Cancer Online [151, see Appendix], set up by a patient. Karen Parles, who’s a professional research librarian, was diagnosed three years ago at age thirty-eight. She provides a terrific collection of links to authoritative information, beautifully organized and clearly annotated. Doctors use it too.

For background information, I’ve tapped general medical resources like Medscape [162], which provides access to Medline’s vast store of medical citations and abstracts, and the *Merck Manual Home Edition*, the full text of which is online [163]. I’ve also relied on cancer-specific sources, such as the National Cancer Institute [170], Oncolink from the University of Pennsylvania [188], the American Cancer Society [19], the Association for Cancer Online Resources [29], which has superb patient discussion groups, and CancerBACUP [49] in the U.K., which I probably never would have seen without the Internet.

They have wonderful resources, such as a compassionate booklet for parents with cancer called *What Do I Tell the Children?*

Steve Dunn's Cancer Guide [238] is another outstanding patient site. Steve was diagnosed with advanced kidney cancer in 1989. He saved his life by researching his disease and finding a new treatment, which was then in clinical trials. He offers excellent how-to advice about online medical research plus savvy suggestions for people interested in joining clinical trials.

## **Can you really rely on medical information from patients? That seems risky.**

Good patient sites carefully avoid giving specific medical advice. They link to reliable resources; they urge readers to talk with their doctor. Patients are often the best source for nitty-gritty practical suggestions. If I want tips on coping with hair loss during chemotherapy, I'm not going to find them in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Much of what's available online comes from the same trustworthy sources I'd use at the Harvard Medical School Library. Of course, there's also a lot of crap out there. You have to consider the source and use common sense. But that's true of medical information in any medium. I'm annoyed by dire warnings—usually from people who haven't a clue about all the great stuff online—implying that the Internet is uniquely unreliable. Apparently these folks have never watched an infomercial or read the claims on supplement labels in a health food store.

When I was researching the lung cancer book, I came across sites with testimonials for various "cures," such as an herbal brew whose recipe was given to a Canadian nurse by an ancient Indian medicine man. In the book, we suggest that readers talk to their doctor about claims like this or check them out on Quack Watch [209], a health-related anti-scam site.

## **What's your favorite search engine—the one you go to instinctively?**

I don't go to one search engine instinctively; I go to the one that seems best suited to the particular search I'm doing. This is something I've learned—and that I'm still learning—by lots of practice.

The search engine I use most is Google [104]. Another good one is FAST [93], but I have a Google toolbar, available free from their Web site, installed in my browser, so I'm always ready to run a Google search. Google is best for finding the leading sites on a particular topic. The pages they list first are the ones that other sites link to most often. So, in effect, all the people who create Web site links are helping to determine Google's rankings. Another advantage of Google is that it caches, or stores, Web pages. This lets me see expired pages, which normally aren't available.

But Google isn't best for everything. For example, when I needed to find a hotel in Lenox, Massachusetts, I used Yahoo! [277], because Yahoo! indexes pages by topic, so it gave me a tidy list of links to hotels in Lenox. If I were trying to find an article about Al Gore that was written after the election, I'd use HotBot [115], which lets me specify date limits like "in the last 6 months." Otherwise I'd be swamped with irrelevant pre-election hits.

Northern Light [185] and Vivisimo [262] subdivide hits by subtopics. That's very useful for search terms that have multiple meanings. For example, one of the patients I interviewed for the lung cancer book told me about a play called *Wit*, and I wanted to learn more about it. I used Northern Light for that search, because I figured it would be easier to focus on relevant hits. Sure enough, the search results included a "Theater and performing arts" category. When I clicked on that, I found the play immediately.

If I strike out with Google, I try one of the metasearch engines, like Dogpile [76] or Ask Jeeves [27]. These give results from multiple search engines, so they often return too many irrelevant hits. But they're perfect when I want broad coverage. A couple of years ago I wanted to send a funny cheering-up gift to a colleague who'd been through a bad experience. I had seen a T-shirt

decorated with pictures of bird droppings, which seemed exactly right. So I surfed over to Ask Jeeves, which lets you type in your question in plain English, and wrote: “Where can I buy a bird shit T-shirt?” In less than a minute I’d found the Web site of a nature store on Cape Cod that carried the shirt.

No search engine covers everything that’s online. With obscure topics, a specialized search engine might be best. There’s an extraordinary list of specialty search engines at Leiden University [142]. A less complete but also less overwhelming option is Search IQ [230]. When I see these lists, I realize how much I still don’t know. But I try to keep up with new developments by occasionally checking the Search Engine Watch Web site [229]. Mostly, though, I’ve learned by experimenting and paying attention to what works best.

## **Do you use online reference sources like dictionaries, encyclopedias, thesauri, or quotation finders?**

Yes, but only occasionally. I have Microsoft Bookshelf on CD-ROM, whose dictionary and thesaurus I consult often. For the lung cancer book, I sometimes used the online version of Encarta [84] or the Encyclopaedia Britannica [85] for basic scientific background.

I find online reference sources particularly handy when I need a tidbit from a reference work I’d never buy, such as a dictionary of symbols [242] or a dictionary of Australian slang [31]. I’ve learned about available reference materials from two sites in particular: Reference Desk [217] provides extensive links to reference materials available online, and Your Dictionary [281] has a large collection of links to online dictionaries of all kinds, including many medical dictionaries.

Speaking of dictionaries, I can’t resist mentioning the amazing list of hundreds of ways to say “vomit” (e.g., “talking to Ralph on the big white telephone”) I found at LaughNet [141].

Back to more serious business, now that telephone directory assistance is so expensive—and unreliable—I always check phone numbers online. Online directories also provide addresses and more flexibility about searching. For example, if I have a phone number, I can search a reverse directory for the name and address. The directory I use most is AnyWho [23].

Online discussion groups sometimes develop excellent FAQs—answers to Frequently Asked Questions. I was once asked to put together a proposal about roller coasters. I found everything I needed from an FAQ [224]. Of course, the groups are also a way to find people to interview. A good discussion group resource is the Usenet Archive [260], formerly Deja.com, which lets you search actual discussions for specific text; and the searchable FAQ Index [92].

## **How do you find newspaper and magazine articles online? Or do you go to the library for those?**

I just about never go to the library for an article anymore. Usually I can find what I need online. I may start by looking at Find Articles [98], which provides full text free for about 300 publications, including both popular magazines and medical journals. I may also look at ELibrary [82], which gives subscribers access to the full text of many magazines and newspapers, as well as radio and TV transcripts. Subscriptions are \$60 per year. Before I signed up, I tried some searches, which are free, and took their free trial. Northern Light is another site that indexes both free and for-pay articles. Searching is always free.

You can also go directly to individual magazine or newspaper sites, which can be found via links at the *American Journalism Review* [20] site. Some magazines post only the table of contents; others post some or all of the current issue, and maybe old issues too. In general, newspaper articles are free on the day of publication and for a week or so afterwards; archived material usually

is not free. But there are many exceptions, and policies change, so it always pays to check.

Medline [162] is the most useful citation index for medical articles. Leading medical journals have Web sites, which are easy to find with a search engine. Google works well for this. Almost all journals provide article abstracts for free, but they often charge to read full text. If I need the full text, I email the author to request a reprint; most oblige.

## **Do you ever check to see if your own articles are posted online?**

Yes, from time to time, I plug my name into a search engine to see what turns up. I also check article databases, as well as magazine and newspaper sites. A few years ago I found fourteen ancient articles of mine in the *Boston Globe* archives, where they had no right to be. I sent a letter to the *Globe* and they took them down.

## **How big a role does email play in your career as a writer?**

Huge! I'm a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, which has very active and supportive online communities. I'm in touch with fellow writers via these forums and by email, so I never feel isolated in my home office.

I often send manuscripts to colleagues for comments. Sometimes small groups of us discuss the draft of an article or book chapter via email. When I was working on the early chapters of the lung cancer book, my writer friends told me what was too technical or hard to follow. My expert collaborators couldn't do that, because they know the material too well.

Because email speeds and simplifies communication, new possibilities open. Even if I'm on deadline, I can send a manuscript to a writer friend in Jerusalem for comments. When I was researching smoking cessation methods for the lung cancer book, I read a fascinating article by an Australian anthropologist

describing a quitting ceremony performed by elders of a Fiji village. I wanted to ask him a question. In the old days, this would have taken so long that I wouldn't have bothered. But with email, I had his answer the next day.

Email is spontaneous, like conversation—but the words are recorded. I try to remember that when I write. Salon.com published a marvelous article about the “Freudian send” [101], in which the slip of a finger sends your email to exactly the wrong person. I once received such a message. I'd written to a lawyer friend asking if his company could handle a contract matter for me; he passed my message to his boss. By mistake, his boss sent me a copy of his reply, which said that although they didn't have the necessary expertise, they wanted to snare me as a customer. I knew my friend, who's scrupulously honest, would be mortified. So I sent him the Salon article for consolation, with a message: “Tell your boss to reset the defaults on his email software.”

Speaking of email precautions: I always check the urban legends page of About.com [4] before I pass along email virus warnings, petitions, and the like. Nearly always, the warnings are hoaxes and the petitions are worthless. But the About.com explanations are invariably fascinating.

## **Do you subscribe to any electronic newsletters?**

I subscribe to lots of them. Some are related to lung cancer or other medical subjects; I also receive e-publications about computers, travel, theater, and consumer affairs. Because all this would clutter up my in-box, I use a free Hotmail [117] account for most of these newsletters.

I find several particularly useful for my writing: Newswise [177] allows journalists to register for email digests of news releases, mostly from universities and academic journals, on science, medicine, business, or life in general. It's a great source for story leads and medical news. Publisher's Lunch [205] has a terrific daily newsletter about book publishing, and a weekly newsletter about recent book deals. The daily mailing often includes links to newspaper articles I might otherwise miss. This

week, for example, it mentioned a charming *Washington Post* essay by Dana Milbank, called “It Only Hurts When They Throw Things,” about his reactions when his book was panned in the *New York Times*. I saved it in case I ever need to console someone who’s gotten a bad review. Publishers Weekly [206] has a daily newsletter aimed at booksellers, with material of interest to authors, too.

## **What other writing-oriented Web sites do you use?**

That depends on what I need at the moment. The premier online resource for books is Bookwire [42], which links to Publishers Weekly and many other industry resources. John Kremer, who’s author of the superb *1001 Ways to Market Your Books*, has a Web site [40] with tons of free book-marketing advice and many links to other good resources.

Nolo Press [184] publishes excellent legal self-help books. Its Web site offers numerous articles on topics of interest to writers. I went there recently to get authoritative information on fair use of copyrighted material.

The Guide to Literary Agents [108] helped me last October when I was putting together a book panel for a writers’ conference. I wanted to invite a top agent who was receptive to new clients—and I found one. While I was there, I explored the Guide’s list of links to agent Web sites. Some of these sites include valuable articles for would-be authors and clients, which made for interesting browsing.

Jim Romenesko’s MediaNews [160] has irresistible media gossip, mostly about newspapers and magazines. It’s published weekdays on his Web site.

## **Are you one of those writers who constantly checks her Amazon.com rankings?**

I try to keep it under control, but sometimes I can’t resist. We had a very strong launch for *Strong Women, Strong Bones*. During

one thrilling weekend, when we were ahead of Harry Potter and John Grisham at Amazon, I checked every five minutes. It was fun while it lasted. Most of the time I rely on a free, automated rank monitoring service available from Books and Writers [41]. You give them ISBNs and they automatically email updates hourly, daily, or weekly. I track my own books, and also some competing books, daily.

## **I see you have a Web site; do you think it's important for writers to have an online presence?**

Definitely! At a minimum, it's like having a business card with a portfolio of writing samples attached. But there's potential for a lot more. When Miriam Nelson and I published our first book, *Strong Women Stay Young*, we put up a Web site [239] and started a free monthly e-newsletter to promote it. Our URL was on the book jacket, and we heard from thousands of readers. We loved the "strength training changed my life" letters; reader questions helped guide our revision of *Strong Women Stay Young* in 2000. One of the women featured in our second book—a nurse who weighed over 300 pounds—came to us via the Web site. We joined Amazon's associates program and put links on our site so visitors could easily buy our books—plus, we earned commissions on any sales.

A reader newsletter is a lot of work, but it's a great way to publicize books. We used Mail-list.com [153], which costs \$10 a month; their service is excellent and they don't insert ads the way free mailing list services like Yahoo! Groups [278] do.

By the time our second *Strong Women* book came out, we had a mailing list of more than 5,000 readers; the list was over 10,000 for our third book. This gave us big initial sales boosts. I'm no longer involved with the site or the newsletter, but Miriam continues to use them very effectively.

## **How did you go about designing your personal Web site?**

I thought about hiring a designer, but decided I'd rather do it myself. It's like an arts-and-crafts project: Instead of sitting in a rocking chair and knitting an afghan, I sit at my computer and fiddle with HTML tags.

Before I started, I browsed through other author sites to get ideas. The American Society of Journalists and Authors [21] and the Authors Guild [32] have lists of links to members' sites; I also looked at sites on the Random House list [213]. There are many design tutorials online. My favorite is one that teaches good Web design by showing examples of bad Web design; it's called Web Pages That Suck [268].

I used one of the web page templates in Microsoft Word, which I tweaked with an HTML editing program called Arachnophilia [25]. Arachnophilia is "careware," as in "do something positive in the world." As the author explains: "Here is my deal: Stop whining for an hour, a day, a week, your choice, and you will have earned your copy of Arachnophilia." What a deal!

## **What's your hardware setup? Do you have high-speed Internet access?**

My computer is a Dell Pentium II, running Windows 98. Two years ago it was state-of-the-art; now it's an antique. I haven't upgraded because the reports I've seen on Windows 2000 and associated software aren't great, and I'm satisfied with my system. I installed high-speed Internet access—DSL—a year and a half ago. I found good advice about DSL on DSL Reports [80]. My service isn't perfect; there are outages every few weeks and sometimes it slows down. But when it's working properly, I love the speed and the convenience of being connected all the time.

One recently acquired accessory that I find very helpful is a Microsoft Internet keyboard. It has nineteen special buttons across the top that let me navigate online even more easily. For

example, I can hit a button to refresh the screen. Another button, and a handy calculator pops up.

## **What Internet software do you use?**

For browsing I use Microsoft Internet Explorer. I have a huge list of “Favorites” that’s subdivided into categories so I can easily find useful Web pages again.

All browsers let you select a start page—the page that appears first when you open the program. I use the Yahoo! start page [280], which can be customized in various ways. My personal version gives me health news headlines from Reuters and the AP, as well as general news headlines. If I click on a headline, I get not only the whole wire service story, but, in many cases, links to related stories elsewhere. My start page also has a calendar, search boxes for Yahoo! and for two online telephone directories, links to the local weather report, and links to the package tracking pages of FedEx and Airborne. Yahoo! makes it very easy to select components and arrange them on the screen. For example, by clicking on simple menu options, I put the health news at the top of my page and the package tracking at the very bottom, since I seldom use it.

Another program I rely on is Infoselect [120], a powerful and flexible information manager that lets me save Web pages or other documents and organize them by topics in an outline. When I was researching the lung cancer book, I stashed useful materials in Infoselect, categorizing them by book chapters. The program makes it very easy to move items from one part of the outline to another. When I tinkered with the outline, everything remained in the right subcategory. One of the best features is a super-fast search tool for finding words in saved material. I’ve begun filing all kinds of easy-to-forget information in Infoselect, such as instructions for dubbing a tape—I do this about once a year and can never remember how. Unfortunately, the documentation for Infoselect leaves a lot to be desired. I haven’t had time to wade through it, so I’m not using the program as well as I could. Even so, I find it very valuable.

I wish I were the kind of person who's scrupulous about backing up, but I'm not. Because I keep so much information on my computer, backups are essential. So I subscribe to a service called Connected [61], which automatically backs up most of my hard drive daily in the middle of the night, whether I remember or not. I learned about Connected from Walt Mossberg's personal technology column in the *Wall Street Journal*; the archives are available free online [263]. I love his credo: "You're not a 'dummy,' no matter what those computer books claim. The real dummies are the people who, though technically expert, could not design hardware and software that's usable by normal consumers if their lives depended upon it."

## **You mentioned that you use the Internet for shopping. Can you give some examples?**

Online shopping provides the convenience of catalog shopping, but without all the clutter. Plus, I can compare prices and get terrific deals. An outstanding source of consumer information is Consumer World [62]; some of my best bargains have come via advice and links I found there. For example, Consumer World alerted me to the cheapest magazine subscriptions I've ever seen, many for just \$5.95 per year, at a discount magazines site [74]. It also told me about Amazing Bargains [17], a site that gives you the discount codes for zillions of promotions from online stores. I always check there before I buy to see if the store has a special. Sometimes I can get free shipping. If I'm lucky, I'll find a 20 percent-off deal.

Online resources are unbeatable if you're looking for out-of-print or used books. Advanced Book Exchange [9] is a huge network of used book dealers. Last year a friend unexpectedly became the guardian of two teenagers after their parents died. I remembered reading years ago that Kurt Vonnegut's family had lived through a similar experience and that his then-wife had written a book about it. I wanted to buy this book for my friend, but I didn't know the title and I was sure it was out of print. No

problem! I went to Google and searched on Kurt Vonnegut; almost immediately, I found a Vonnegut site with a biography that provided his ex-wife's name, Jane Vonnegut. I searched on her name at Abebooks.com, found the book, and ordered it from a bookseller in Virginia. If anyone is curious, it's *Angels Without Wings: A Courageous Family's Triumph Over Tragedy*, by Jane Vonnegut Yarmolinsky, Houghton Mifflin, 1987. All this took less than five minutes. Can you imagine completing such a search without the Internet?

Half.com [111] is like a flea market. The book sellers are mostly individuals; they aren't as scrupulous as dealers in describing the condition of books. Still, it's a great place to pick up bestsellers from a couple of years ago.

This isn't exactly shopping, but I use several inexpensive—sometimes free—Internet-based office services: Big Zoo [36] offers a very cheap prepaid telephone card. I pay less than three cents a minute for calls within the United States; the international rates are similarly low. Tellme [244] is a free information service that's especially handy when traveling. I can dial in toll-free from any location and follow very simple voice menus to get connected to a wide variety of useful numbers: local weather reports and news headlines, taxi services, restaurants, airlines, driving directions, and much more.

Excite [88] offers a free email service with helpful extras. People can send me faxes at a toll-free number and I can view them as graphics files via my Excite email box. I was delighted to have this service recently when my regular fax was broken.

Faxaway [94] lets me send faxes via email. I simply type the message and send it to the ten-digit fax number, whatever it is, @faxaway.com. When one of my book collaborators was in Australia and didn't have email access, I sent her updates via Faxaway; the cost was only about twenty-five cents per page. When I'm traveling with my laptop and staying at a hotel that doesn't have a printer, I sometimes email a fax to myself as a way of printing out a file.

## Speaking of travel—do you use the Internet for that too?

The Internet is great for travel information—and travel bargains. Even if I'm planning to buy a guide book or use a travel agent, which I find better for European trips, I do preliminary research online. For example, when my husband and I visited our younger son who was living in Paris, we wanted to stay in his neighborhood. I found a lovely, inexpensive place on a Web site that lists Paris hotels by Metro stop [196]. I thought it would be fun to take a cooking class in Paris. A little Internet exploration turned up the Cordon Bleu site [67]; I made reservations by email to attend a demonstration. That's where I learned the secret of French pastry: vast amounts of butter.

I use lots of other travel sites for various purposes. Consumer World [62] has excellent links for travel bargains. For example, I learned from Consumer World how to sign up for weekly emails with super-low last-minute fares available only online. When I'm looking for a hotel, I go to Quikbook [210] and Hotel Discounts [116], which usually have good rates. But I also check the hotel's own Web site for specials. On my last trip to New York, I saved \$20 per night that way. For restaurant reviews in major cities, I check Zagat [282].

For driving directions and maps, I use Mapblast [154] or MapQuest [155]. They draw a map and estimate how long the drive will take. One lesson I learned the hard way is to download driving directions for the return trip, too. I once got lost in Colorado because I relied on Denver-to-Boulder directions when I was driving from Boulder to Denver.

When I'm planning a trip, I often consult the online sites of guidebook series such as Frommer's [102]. Travel magazines are useful too, of course; Concierge.com [60] features material from Conde Nast Traveler. The travel sections of the *New York Times* [182] and the *Washington Post* [265] are particularly good. A wonderful site for women travelers is Journey Woman [137]. I've learned how to stuff a week's wardrobe into a carry-on from the

brilliant Travelite FAQ by Lani Teshima [252]. I also subscribe to her free newsletter. My favorite quirky travel site—the kind of thing you’d find only online—is The Budget Traveller’s [sic] Guide to Sleeping in Airports [47], with a mind-boggling 1,200-plus listings.

## **What do you suggest for writers who are just getting started with online research?**

Just plunge in. Look around and keep trying new things. Don’t expect to become an online research expert in a day; remember how many years it took to develop library research skills. Begin by browsing the indexes at Yahoo!. Or enter a search term—whatever you happen to be working on—at Google. Once you’re familiar with those, you can branch out to other search engines.

If you’d rather take a lesson, go to the terrific tutorial put together by librarians at the University of California at Berkeley [257]. They walk you through it: when they suggest a site, they provide a link.

Another good way to learn what’s available is to click your way through a good list of links for writers. John Makulowich’s excellent compilation is commonly known as The Awesome Journalism List, and for good reason: Officially, it’s the Journalism section of the WWW Virtual Library [275]. The *New York Times* also has a superb list of links for reporters [181].

But I believe the best way to learn is to waste time online. Call it background research. You’ll find Web sites on almost any subject you can imagine and plenty—trust me—that you’d never think of. For example, I was once discussing urban legends with my kids, and one of them told me, a little hesitantly, that he’d heard what he thought was an urban legend. Suffice it to say that this legend involved Richard Gere, gerbils, and a hospital emergency room visit. Curious, I went online and typed “Gere” and “gerbils” into a search engine. Up popped hundreds of hits. One of them was the astonishing Rectal Foreign Bodies page [216]. Who knew?

The more you explore, the more skilled you'll become at finding what you need. Also—and this is essential—you'll gain a better sense of the extraordinary breadth and depth of available resources. If you don't think to look, you'll never discover the treasures that are at your fingertips.

## **Super Searcher Power Tips**

- I have a Google toolbar installed in my browser, so I'm always ready to run a Google search. Google is best for finding the leading sites on a particular topic.
  
- When I needed to find a hotel in Lenox, Massachusetts, I used Yahoo—because it indexes pages by topic; it gave me a tidy list of links to hotels in Lenox.
  
- There's an extraordinary list of specialty search engines at the Leiden University Web site. A less complete but also less overwhelming option is Search IQ.
  
- I find online reference sources particularly handy when I need a tidbit from a reference work I'd never buy, such as a dictionary of symbols or a dictionary of Australian slang.
  
- I just about never go to the library for an article any more. Usually I can find what I need online. Find Articles provides full text free for about 300 publications, including both popular magazines and medical journals.

- I often send manuscripts to colleagues for comments. Sometimes small groups of us discuss the draft of an article or book chapter via email.
- I subscribe to lots of e-newsletters. Because all this would clutter up my in-box, I use a free Hotmail account for most of them.
- When I'm traveling with my laptop and staying at a hotel that doesn't have a printer, I sometimes email a fax to myself as a way of printing out a file.
- For a writer, having your own Web site is, at minimum, like having a business card with a portfolio of writing samples attached.
- The best way to learn is to waste time online. Call it background research. You'll find Web sites on almost any subject you can imagine and plenty—trust me—that you'd never think of.

