Untangling the Web
by Karen A. Chace © 2004

We've all been there, sitting in front of our computers, researching until our eyes glaze over. The minutes turn into hours with no results. Frustrated, we curse the keyboard, shut down the computer and vow never to enter the labyrinth of "The Web" again! Sound familiar? Yes, web research can be exasperating and time consuming, but it can also be fun and rewarding.

I begin all of my computer workshops by saying, "Researching on the Internet is like digging for buried treasure, you never know what jewels you will find," and with a few basic tips and tools you will be striking gold in no time as well.

Half a Loaf is Better Than None
You have several choices of research tools on the web. The trick is to know which one best suits your needs.

A Web Directory is constructed along the same lines as a library subject catalogue. It is very user friendly but offers only two ways to search: subject heading or keyword dialog box. If your search fits neatly into an obvious subject or category then use a Web Directory like <u>Yahoo.com</u>.

Search Engines enable you to seek out specific words or phrases and locate them in documents all over the web. I find them far more useful and efficient than Web Directories. There are many different search engines available on the web but <u>Google.com</u> offers some unique features (see below.)

If Web Directories and regular Search Engines don't do the trick, you can always kick it up a notch and try a Metasearch Engine such as Dogpile.com, which accesses several search engines and directories at the same time. Metasearch Engines attempt to extract the most relevant hits from all of the above. However, your query must be translated into the specific language that each search engine speaks, which can be a problem. In addition, Metasearch Engines offer only a portion of the results from each individual search engine. Personally, my experience with them has not convinced me to abandon regular search engines.

The Tortoise and the Hare
One of the most overlooked errors in web research can be as simple as misspelling a word. Some search engines will ask if your query is spelled correctly, but what do you do when even your corrected efforts don't yield any results?
- Look at the information in a different and unique way.
- Is there a synonym you could use in your search?
- Is there another search engine which might hold the information?
- What other items, ideas or details are associated with your search?
- New combinations of words may supply more useful information.

Sometimes patience is the key and "slow and steady wins the race."

The Princess and the Pea

Have you ever felt that all of your search efforts were just mounting up, one on top of the other, higher and higher, yet getting you nowhere? Time is short for all of us these days, so here are some tips to help you "find the pea."

I find that Google.com is often the most effective search engine.

- It dispenses with "recommended" or "popular" sites and jumps directly to a comprehensive search results page.
- It checks for spelling errors in your search string.
- It uses bold text to highlight matching words.
- It translates some foreign language pages into English.
- It offers a "cached" file.

What is a cached file? Meet your new best friend! How many times have you found a website only to click on the link and receive a message that the site is no longer available? The most unique feature offered by Google.com is its cached file. Here's how it works. Google takes a picture of the first page when the website is originally listed. Later, if the site disappears, you can click on the word "cached," which appears at the end of the Google.com synopsis search page and still access the first page of the lost site.

In addition, when you go to the cached page, the words you used in your search string will be highlighted in various colors. This makes it quick and easy to find the information within the document. If you are using a search engine which does not have this feature, hold down your control key and letter F at the same time. A box will appear on your screen. Type in the word you wish to locate, hit the "find" key in the box and it will take you directly to the word within the document.

One + One = The Story

By using a set of simple arithmetic symbols known as Boolean Math, you can expedite your search efforts even further. For example, let's imagine you are searching for a Native American legend but don't know its name. First, always type your words in lower case so that the search engine will look for both upper and lower case matches. If you simply type "native american legend" you will receive millions and millions of "hits" which are impossible to navigate. You need to narrow down your search. What do you know about the story? Perhaps you recall that strawberries were featured prominently in the legend. Add this detail to your query so it now reads: native american legend +strawberries. Note: there must not be any space between the plus sign and the word strawberries. Conversely, if you want to eliminate something that is muddying up your focus, simply use a minus sign immediately before the word you wish to remove. For example: cinderella –disney.

This information can also be used when accessing a cached file. Granted, it is a particularly valuable feature if the information is housed entirely on the first page of the site. However, even

the first page can lead you to the rest of the document. I was researching a story for another teller. She needed a Texas folktale about a woman and the devil, but she couldn't remember the name of the story. With some specific story details I found a site synopsis on the web, but when I went to the site the file was gone. I clicked on the cached file and found the story. To my dismay it was only the first of five pages. I couldn't access the rest of it via the cached file. But now that I had the title, I could return to my search window, type in the name of the story, and by typing +page 2, +page 3, etcetera; I was able to reconstruct the entire folktale.

The Man Who Had No Luck
   Too many hits
- You probably typed a common term.
- Think of some synonyms.
- Try adding at least two more specific terms to your string.

   Too few hits
- You are searching in the wrong place or your search is too narrow.
- You didn't configure your search correctly.
- Try omitting some of your search terms.
- Try your search on another engine, metasearcher or directory
- 404-file Not Found This message tells you that the file you seek has been moved, removed, or renamed.
- Go back to the search engine and do a phrase search or a field search on the title.
- Try shortening the URL address to see if the file might still be on the same server.
- Try your search on Google.com and look for cached copies of pages.

   Remember, one search engine or directory cannot cover the entire Internet universe and each one does not necessarily respond to the same search criteria. Be flexible; use more than one if necessary, and read the individual help pages to learn what search tools you can and cannot use.

   Once you have found your folktale, legend or myth, remember to verify the accuracy and authority of the information. Just as we must authenticate information from books and other resources, we must also follow through when using details found on the Internet. There are several ways in which to do so but that, as they say, is another story.

Karen Chace is a professional storyteller and author of the CD-ROM Researching Stories on the Internet: A Webliography of Storytelling Resources. She has presented her computer workshop, Untangling the Web, at the Northlands Storytelling Conference, Sharing the Fire and the National Storytelling Conference. Karen is also the co-publisher of Working smARTS, an international e-magazine for performing artists and writes a regular column, Stor E Telling, for the national Storytelling Magazine. She can be reached at TeachingTales@aol.com or Storybug@aol.com.