

President's Corner: July, 2014
Effective Web Searching
By Eric Moore

At the June meeting of CUGG, Don Wiegel and I tag-teamed on a short presentation on how to effectively search the web for the information you need. It was the beginning portion of a two-part series. This month we will cover more advanced techniques for finding what you need. For the benefit of those who missed the June meeting, I thought I would review the recommendations we gave (as best I remember them).

Short Phrases: Well-worded short phrases will usually suffice in finding what you need. Don's recommendation is to use not more than three words, while I usually aim for not more than five. You best not use articles (*a, an, the*), prepositions, or conjunctions, as they usually don't improve the results, and may have special meanings that you do not intend.

An example would be a search for the POP3 settings required to read your Gmail messages using Thunderbird: *Thunderbird POP3 Gmail settings*. When searching for how-to instructions, try a short sentence fragment with a subject, verb, and object: *change PowerMac wallpaper*. If you are interested in the difference between two TV technologies, you may find what you need with *LCD versus plasma*.

Long Phrases: An exception to using short phrases is when you are searching for error messages. For example, if Outlook reports, "Could not complete the operation. One or more parameter values are not valid." when attempting to send email, enter at least a portion of the phrase in your search engine: *Outlook send could not complete the operation*.

Synonyms: If you are not finding what you need, try changing the phrase, such as replacing a word with a synonym or adding additional words to narrow down the results. Web searching is an art, so it may take some practice to narrow down what you need.

Contextualization: Some words such as *Windows, wallpaper, mouse, and virus* can have multiple meanings depending on the context. Adding specifics can help to filter out unwanted results. For example, if you need to know how to change the wallpaper of your Windows 8 computer, try searching for: *change Windows 8 wallpaper*. If you encountered a printing problem that is specific to using a Canon printer with Microsoft Word 2010, try something like: *Word 2010 crashes when printing Canon*. The more specific you are, the better.

Get to Know Your Search Engine's Language: Search engines have advanced features for narrowing down your results. In the case of Google, using double quotes around a phrase narrows down the search results to those where the words are in close proximity of each other. For example when searching for information about Louisa May Alcott's novel, searching for "*little women*" may give better results than merely searching for *women little*.

Google also supports conjunctions for Boolean searches. When using *and*, the results will be restricted to those that contain both words, such as *little and women*, whereas using *or* allows for results that contain one or the other but not necessarily both, such as *little or women*. A plus sign functions the same as *and*, for instance: *little +women*. A hyphen means don't include pages that contain the indicated word, as in *windows -microsoft*, when searching for a glazier.

For more information, try searching for *Engine search tips*, where you substitute the name of your favorite search engine in the place of “Engine.”