

Legal E-mail; Focused Searching

How Legal Is E-mail?

The question arose recently as to whether permission to publish granted via e-mail was a legal document. Is a hard copy with a personal signature required? I posed this question to some other editors for their opinion.

For the most part, the editors did not specifically object to e-mail, but the majority did request a hard copy. The reasoning was that they wanted a signature, something currently not unique in desktop e-mail software. My understanding is that some development is under way to produce unique electronic "signatures", but such encryption is not yet widely available. What do you accept?

My thanks go to Grace Darling, Michael Held, Martha Tacker, Mary Ann Morrissey, Roberta Wilkes, and Keith Ivey for their prompt and thoughtful comments on this issue.

Finding What You Want

Blind searches on the Internet can be time-consuming and unrewarding even when you *know* that what you want is out there. General searches will generate more sites than one will want to access. How to select only the best?

One site where I like to begin a general search is the Top 5% Sites (1). All sites in this index have been graded according to content, presentation, and experience on a scale of 1 to 50. The lists are subgrouped to 2 levels by topic and can be searched by keyword. Although many of the Top 5% Sites are on the World Wide Web, some are elsewhere on the Internet.

For this column, I wanted to identify some sites of interest to biology editors who do not work in the medical field. By choosing the topic Science and Technology, I was led to a list of 17 subtopics addressing different areas of science, including agriculture, anthropology, biology and botany, earth science, and oceanography (2). Keep in mind that I was still working in the Top 5% Sites, so I was going to access specific, well-defined sites of a limited number, not the 500+ sites typical of more general search engines.

Biology and Botany looked promising for

a start. There I found the American Institute of Biological Sciences (3), not a glitzy site but very informative.

Another interesting find is Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture at Cornell University (4). In addition to the lovely yellow lady's slipper on the home page, this site has a resource list, information on botany for youths, and descriptions of chemical-nutrient analyses. The review (5), as is typical for Top 5% Sites, is brief and easy to read but still informative:

Starting with floriculture and ornamental horticultural class offerings and ending with a journey to the campus's A.D. Whitehouse Gardens, this Cornell University site offers plants aplenty. You can read about the school's research and tutorials, visit the Nutrient Analysis Lab, or browse admissions requirements. The information here is accessible and non-technical enough to be enjoyed by the armchair horticulturist. Also here are links to other Cornell University sites—this one springs from the University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

Even with good search engines, dead ends must be expected. When I sought the link for the National Institute of Agricultural Botany, a site that Top 5% Sites promised would provide information about seed varieties and lab services for diseased crops in the United Kingdom and Europe, there was nothing. The site did not exist (or at least not at the linked URL). Links to nowhere are products of the newness of the technology, the rush to

get information online quickly, the changes that take place daily without being recorded in any centralized fashion, and just plain human sloppiness. Try to live with it. This too will pass.

As an afterthought, I linked to the full Lycos databases (from which Top 5% Sites is taken), chose Science and Technology, and searched for "writing" and for "editing". Two sites looked particularly interesting (6,7).

Thank you to everyone who writes to comment on this column. Your perspectives and hints are invaluable. Let's chat. sedwards@ulna.bwh.harvard.edu

References

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"Good communications writing is 5/10 mental discipline, 4/10 willingness to rework first drafts, and 1/10 aptitude."

—Norman G Shidle, *The Art of Successful Communication*