

# Bits and Bytes

Arkansas' Premier Computer Club

August 2006

Volume 8, Issue 8

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Welcome to the August, 2006 Bits and Bytes. It has been a while since we had an issue, so I thought I would touch on some of the most common questions new users have. The Internet is a wonderful thing, but it can be confusing trying to find your way along the Information Superhighway. Sometimes there are speed bumps, and lots of construction (sort of like driving around Northwest Arkansas!).

**Common Internet Terms** - Like everything else, the Internet has its own language, and for the uninitiated, it can be confusing. Below are a few of the common terms you will see when people talk about the Internet.

**Blog** - This is a specific type of web page (short for “web log”) where someone keeps a personal journal that is accessible for the world to see. They are often very informal, and people share all sorts of information (even the types of things my grandmother would never discuss in polite company). They are also used by some professionals, such as stock and news analysts, to give a more “informal” means of talking to their audience.

**Spam** - This is the term for unsolicited e-mail that seems to flood everyone’s mailbox. The origins of the term is open to some debate (<http://www.pcwebopedia.com/TERM/s/spam.html>) but most people agree on what spam is, and that it is annoying. By some estimates, spam makes up 80% - 85% of all e-mail that is sent. The problem is that it costs almost nothing to send spam.

The cost of sending one million spam e-mails is little different from the cost of sending one thousand spam e-mails. In the “real world” there is an incremental cost of sending a catalog (printing, postage, labor) to someone, but there is no equivalent cost in the digital world.

You can often tell spam by the use of words to obfuscate the message content. Instead of using the term “Sale”, they might type “5ale”. The reason they do this is to “fool” spam filters, which look for keywords in spam messages. It is an ongoing battle, as some spammers send 15-18 million spam messages A DAY.

**Wikipedia** - This is the largest free, on-line encyclopedia in the world. It is unique in that all the articles are collaboratively written. That means one person can write an article (say on FDR) and others can log on and make modifications/changes to the article. (For example, here is the article on FDR, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin\\_D.\\_Roosevelt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklin_D._Roosevelt)). The idea that the encyclopedia is free and accessible by all is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. There have been some cases where people changed an article to reflect a particular political or social position. Being free, it is a situation where you might say, “you get what you pay for”. However, it is worth a visit just to see the scale of information contained within it.

### **Using E-Mail**

One of the first and most important tools that people discover is e-mail. The ability to send information around the world with a touch of a button makes communication so much easier. One of the first things

most new computer users discover about the Internet is the joys of e-mail. The ability to find old friends, make new ones, and to instantly communicate with these folks is one of the great advantages of the Internet. However, there is the issue of e-mail etiquette. There are a few rules of the road that new users need to learn when using e-mail. These are, by and large, informal rules, but adhering to them will make for a more enjoyable on-line experience, and make you look like a season pro in no time.

1. Don't type in all caps. Messages that LOOK LIKE THIS are hard to read, and it is considered by many to be "shouting" in an e-mail.

2. Try to avoid being sarcastic in an e-mail. Unlike face to face communication, which vocal inflection and physical gestures, sarcasm does not translate well, and can be easily misunderstood.

3. Don't send an e-mail when angry. The instant nature of e-mail (just write and click send) does not lend itself well to rash actions. If you write an angry e-mail, wait three hours before sending it, and you might be surprised at how little of that e-mail you want to send.

4. Be careful what you say and to whom you send an e-mail. The digital nature of an e-mail is such that once you send a sensitive e-mail, it can be forwarded countless times, and you will never know.

5. Be careful what you say in discussion groups (discussion groups are e-mail lists that you join to talk about a particular topic). I run a discussion list on WWII. If you would like to join my WWII list, send me an e-mail at [drew@elmtreerd.com](mailto:drew@elmtreerd.com). The software used to manage this list keeps an archive of all messages so that people can search them later on. I have done a web search of my name and have been amazed to see websites with messages that I sent two, three, or four years ago.

6. When forwarding an e-mail, be sure to edit out all the addresses and extraneous information at the top of the e-mail. Nothing is more annoying than having to scroll through three pages of addresses to get to a two line joke.

7. Think carefully before sending that e-mail joke you received to all 127 friends in your address book. Chances are most people have heard the joke already.

8. Be very careful of "hoax" e-mails. A common one going around is that Bill Gates will pay money to everyone who forwards an e-mail. It is a hoax. Bill Gates did not get rich writing checks. These warnings and hoaxes often start with, "My brother (or cousin, or sister-in-law) knows someone that this happened to." Before sending on a warning, Internet rumor or get rich quick scheme e-mail, check it out to make sure it is valid. A great place to search is [www.truthorfiction.com](http://www.truthorfiction.com). An excellent source for information on virus hoaxes is [www.symantec.com/enterprise/security\\_response/threatexplorer/risks/hoaxes.jsp](http://www.symantec.com/enterprise/security_response/threatexplorer/risks/hoaxes.jsp). Both of these sites are updated daily. Helen Weeks sent out a warning that after being checked, was true. It concerned using cruise control in slippery (like snow and ice) road conditions. You can read about it at [www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/c/cruisecontrol.htm](http://www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/c/cruisecontrol.htm). E-mail can be a useful tool to share valid information, but always be sure to check the source.

9. Beware of "flamers". These are people that you will (unfortunately) meet in your travels on the Internet. In short, these are people who like to start "flame wars". They will start a series of e-mails on a subject (who is the best first baseman in history, or who make the best chili) and the exchange often devolves into personal attacks. Some people, for whatever reason, seem to like to do e-mail in order to engage in this sort of behavior. Don't rise to the bait. If you belong to a discussion list, there is often a list owner (I am the list owner of my WWII list) that this should be reported to. Most discussion lists have

rules of conduct, and if someone is engaging in a "flame war" then they are breaking the rules of conduct.

As a side rule, when you join a discussion list, spend the first few days just following the exchanges. You will get a good feel for who knows what they are talking about, and who is send e-mails just to see their name.

10. Use the subject line of the e-mail to clearly identify the message. Some people sort (and filter) their e-mail based on the subject line.

11. E-mail shorthand. Since e-mail is an instant medium of communication, people have developed a number of shorthand terms that might prove useful when you get these e-mails, and their judicious use will make you look like a veteran e-mailer. Some of the more common ones are:

AFAIK -- As far as I know

BRB -- Be right back

BTW -- By the way

FAQ -- Frequently asked questions

FWIW -- For what its worth

HTH -- Hope that helps

IMHO -- In my humble opinion

IMO -- In my opinion

IOW -- In other words

FYA -- for your amusement

LMK -- Let me know

LOL -- Laugh out loud

OT -- Off-topic

ROF -- Rolling on the floor

ROFL -- Rolling on the floor laughing

TIA -- Thanks in advance

TTYL -- Talk to you later

WRT -- With respect to

A similar form of communication is the emoticon (emotion icon)

:-) smiling face

<g> or <G> grin

;-) smile with a wink

:-^) tongue-in-cheek

:-( frown

:-# my lips are sealed

:-D laughing

:-o surprised

:-O shocked

8-) smile

:-] blockhead

:-@ screaming

:-& tongue-tied

%-) brain-dead

## Buying A Car On-Line

### Using the Internet to Purchase a Car

One of the nice things about the Internet is that it provides so many resources for purchasing a new or used (or as they say now, "pre-owned") car. The Internet can help you in every step of the car purchase marathon, and can help you get through some of the hoops.

### New Cars

When looking for a new car, one of the first places to start is the manufacturer's web page. This will not only give you specifications, but will sometimes even let you configure a car to see what it will look like, see different color options and the like. Ford's web page is a good example of this

<http://www.ford.com/en/vehicles/vehicleShowroom/default.htm>

Here you can choose a car type, look at color options, prices, and configurations. Many of these sites also have a 360 degree view option, which let you see the car from all angles. All the major car makers offer some sort of virtual showroom.

Many of the manufacturer's sites also offer financing options, such as GM's finance calculator. You can go to <http://www.chevrolet.com/>, click on Financial Tools and there you will find an Affordability Calculator, a Payment Calculator, and on-line GMAC Credit Application.

You can also go to two excellent web sites for researching cars, [www.carpaint.com](http://www.carpaint.com) and <http://cars.yahoo.com/>. Both sites give a treasure trove of information on financing, insurance, options and the like. You can also go to [www.lendingtree.com](http://www.lendingtree.com) which will give you a variety of options for financing a vehicle.

To look at a vehicle's safety record, you can go to [www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/cars) and see crash rating, recall information and the like. For a yearly fee, you can also go to [www.consumerreports.org](http://www.consumerreports.org) and look at their car safety information. Consumer Reports also offers a car pricing service, which will give you information on the prices that car dealers really pay for the cars they sell.

### Used Cars

It used to be that buying a used car was a real toss of the dice, but the quality of cars, in general, have improved and there are many on-line tools that allow you to filter out the vehicles that are more prone to be lemons. The Consumer Reports site mentioned above also offers a reliability rating of used cars, and makes recommendations on which cars make the best used cars.

When looking for a used vehicle, two of the biggest concerns are; has the car has been in an accident, and is it showing its real mileage. One service is <http://www.carfax.com>, which lets you look up a vehicle based on its VIN number. This will show you if it has been in an accident, who the owners were and the like. Carfax also offers a safety and recall report for the vehicle you are considering. If you are serious about buying a car, it is worth the \$24.99 to research the car. I used Carfax when I bought a used pickup truck in 2002.

There is also a "midway" option between new and used cars, and this is "dealer certified" used cars. One

example is Lexus, which has a site (<http://www.lexus.com/cpo>) where you can buy one of their used cars through the dealership. The appeal of these cars is that they will be low-mileage, and will retain warranties. Another option, if one is daring, is to go to E-Bay's car section <http://pages.ebay.com/ebaymotors> and look at the cars they offer there. The problem with E-Bay is that the cars are nationwide, so you might find that dream car, but it may be in Olympia, Washington.

Now, if anyone is feeling like buying me a car, I would not say no to one of these. :-)

<http://www.prewarcar.com/searchresults.asp?make=Duesenberg>

## **Financial Information**

### Financial and Investment Web Sites

Now that you have (hopefully) finished dealing with filing and paying your income taxes, it is time to start looking at some finance web sites available on-line. The Internet is a great resource for financial and investment information.

If you are looking for financial information on the stock market, three very good sites are:

<http://www.bloomberg.com>

<http://money.cnn.com>

<http://cbs.marketwatch.com>

These sites provide very good stock market information, although the data is delayed 20 minutes. These sites, and others like them, give more detail on the stock market than just market numbers, like you will see on a web site like <http://www.msnbc.com> or [www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com).

If you are looking for investment advice, there are some very good web sites that give more insight into the stock market. One of the most popular sites is the Motley Fool, at <http://www.fool.com>. Some other advice sites are:

<http://www.fundadvice.com>

<http://armchairmillionaire.blogs.com/>

This is also the point in the article where it is important to understand that the term caveat emptor comes into play. Be very careful with the investment advice you find on the web. A lot of people have web sites that offer investment advice. You need to look carefully at the advice being given and to do your own research!

If you are looking for a site to do on-line trading, some of the more popular ones on the Internet are:

<http://www.tdameritrade.com/>

<http://www.etrade.com>

<http://moneycentral.msn.com>

<http://www.fidelity.com>

These sites allow you to buy and sell stocks on-line. Some of them even give you the ability to see real time quotes, as opposed to the 20 minute delay of stock quotes you would see at a regular news site. The

only drawback is that if you want to do this sort of on-line trading, you are going to need a broadband connection, such as a cable modem or DSL. A dial-up connection may simply be too slow in order to effectively carry out your trades in a timely manner.

Many popular software packages, such as Quicken and Microsoft Money also have their own web sites that are tied into the programs. With these programs and an Internet connection, you can get a real time quotes for the value of the stocks in your portfolio.

A most sincere "Thank You" to Drew Halevy for authoring this issue of Bits and Bytes.