



## SPECIAL REPORT

### *Premium Writing Begins With Premium Research*

Less than a decade after mass acceptance of the World Wide Web as a news and information resource, one of the most essential technology-based skills in the workplace or in schools is information literacy.

To a far greater degree than many realize, information literacy requires the critical ability to make informed judgments about what we find online: In other words, all of us, but especially authors and researchers, must be able to evaluate the reliability, the accuracy, and the objectivity of Web sources. Ultimately, we should seek to increase our critical thinking skills with the goal of becoming better aware of what exactly are indicators of a credible source.

In a recent set of online seminars entitled, “**Premium Writing Begins with Premium Research,**” information industry guru **George Plosker** joined **Christopher Kenneally**, Director of Author & Creator Relations for Copyright Clearance Center, to explain the critical differences between the “open Web” and “premium content” databases. The free Copyright Clearance Center-sponsored seminars were developed to respond to business-related needs of authors recently identified in a Copyright Clearance Center survey of 200 freelance journalists and academicians.

Using Web-based searches, Plosker demonstrated the tremendous untapped value lying within premium databases, and how authors who proactively seek out such information can raise the value of their own work as a result. Known for a persuasive vision of what is increasingly possible in the growth and amplified usage of library services, including detailed knowledge of the added-value of libraries and the differentiation of library reference and content services vs. the open Web, George Plosker was formerly Vice President of Content Support for the Gale Group, and currently is Principal of George Plosker & Associates. “Regardless of what some members of the Web generation may wish to believe, humankind’s recorded knowledge did not begin in 1998,” Plosker noted.

Indeed, the world of scholarly journals, magazines and so-called “peer reviewed” periodicals, boasts a long and distinguished history of presenting content prepared by insightful and hardworking experts sharing their knowledge with their readership. Of course, such information was first available in print, but it is increasingly accessible via electronic databases.

#### GOING BEYOND GOOGLING

Unhappily, however, all too many of us confuse the information found online in the “open Web” with this

**George Plosker** knows how to get more from online searches.



very high level of information, which we will choose to call “premium” information. How often do we all hear a colleague or friend relate information

about a subject or an individual whom they have just “googled?” According to the research company ComScore Networks, Google’s Web site accounted for about 32 percent of the 4 billion Internet searches conducted in May 2003, compared to about 25 percent from Yahoo, 19 percent through American Online and 15 percent with Microsoft’s MSN service. As a direct result of its greatly deserved success, however, Google gives rise to a false sense of security.

“Searching with Google makes it very easy to think that you’re a terrific researcher,” said Plosker. “There is one simple search box. Google will accept natural language queries of virtually any length. You never get an error message. It always works. And it returns – and this is the best part – reasonable if not excellent results.”

Almost exclusively, Plosker pointed out, Google focuses on the dot-com world, where selling (i.e., commerce) is primary. With premium content, by contrast, the focus is on answers for their own sakes – in other words, simply facts or analysis specifically designed to respond to a question. Perhaps most importantly, subject matter experts compile such information. It is not marketing materials published on a Web site, or fluff contained within a press release.

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With most public library cards, premium research is possible for free.

What will change when your online searches go beyond Google? Frankly, Plosker admitted, there will be fewer answers – fewer “results” – from an online search, but the answers, just as frankly speaking, will be better. “If not the exactly right answers,” he said, “they will be far closer to what information you are looking for than one million “answers,” of which 99.99% miss the mark.

### CLIMBING THE LEARNING CURVE

Searching the premium content databases available online is not quite as simple as the open Web. Who’s your coach or your guru in all this?

“It’s your reference librarian,” replied Plosker, who himself was a business and general reference librarian and bibliographic instruction specialist at San Jose State University. Like premium content itself, he noted, the reference librarian is not a marketing or sales-oriented individual. He or she is typically oriented towards responding to questions.

“When you’re in the library and you’re sitting at a table doing some work, it is never going to happen that a librarian comes over and says, ‘Can I help you?’ Yet that’s not because they don’t want to help you. It’s because they don’t want to disturb you – You really have to go to them,” pointed out Copyright Clearance Center’s Kenneally, author of “The Massachusetts Legacy,” a history of Massachusetts that he researched in dozens of public and private libraries across the state.

“Get your library card out, and take a drive through a premium database near you,” Kenneally urged his writing colleagues. “Once you have an ‘ah-ha’ moment – where there is a precise match between your information needs and a premium content resource – we believe you will never again go back to just using the open Web by itself.”

## COPYRIGHT CLEARANCE CENTER ASKS GEORGE PLOSKER...

### 1. Why conduct research using premium databases? Isn’t Google good enough?

“I am urging authors not to eliminate ‘open Web’ tools like Google and Yahoo, but to broaden their online research skills and to become more aware of a wider range of tools widely available to them at little or no cost.”

### 2. What is the critical difference with premium content databases?

“They are arranged topically – in other words there might be a business database, there might be a biology database, there might be a literature database, and so on. As a result, effective database selection is critical. Once you’re in the correct pool of content, the results that you get back are generally more relevant and richer.”

### 3. What makes premium databases “authoritative”?

“As many authors working with Copyright Clearance Center know, especially those coming from academic disciplines, these databases are cognizant of the body of scholarly knowledge; they are well organized; and they are easy to access in terms of quickly and precisely finding the material that will answer the question within that overall context of a scholarly body of knowledge.”

### 4. Is there any danger to staying with only “open Web” searches, especially if time is short?

“With the open Web, you have to consider a number of important ethical questions. What is the authority of the information I am using? Is there an identified author? Who is responsible for the content? Is contact information provided? What about the legitimacy, or the objectivity, of the person or the organization, such as their credentials? Online domains such ‘.gov’ and ‘.edu’ usually can be relied on as more authoritative than ‘.com’ because they are not selling anything.”

### 5. In premium databases, how do “vocabulary” searches behave?

“In some databases you may have what’s called ‘vocabulary’ searching, which provides for a browse function to view the preferred terms, the preferred subject or company name terms. You can drill down via the vocabulary, and generally vocabulary searching will provide a more precise result. Vocabulary is quite similar, in fact identical to the subject heading in a card catalog, from the old days, or today’s online public access catalog.”