The Wordchipper ℠

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Start an electronic notebook

I bought my first computer about 25 years ago—wow—has it been that long? It has and, today, I couldn't imagine life without my desktop PC and laptop. When I wonder about nearly *anything*, I simply ask Google or Microsoft's Bing. And I can inquire of these "search engines" straightaway, giving very little thought to how I phrase it.

Recently, my wife wanted to know what kind of glue one would use to repair a break in a plastic sprayer inside our dishwasher. Your *wife* repairs dishwashers? How macho is that for you, Mr. "man of the house?" Hey, I am able to run the computer and I entered that the question about the glue in Google's search box. Shazam! Back came the answer: use a *silicon*-based sealer. And just now, I wanted to know the proper spelling of "shazam," as Microsoft Word is telling me it's misspelled. So I went to Google and entered the word the *wrong* way. In a flash, back came several references to the *right* way. Bing did the same.

I also put that word in what has been my favorite online dictionary; back came something I hadn't been confronted with before: this dictionary wanted me to sign-up for a "free trial" because *shazam* was apparently a bit exotic. Nope. I usually use Google anyway for spelling, whether it's the name of a celebrity or any of those words or terms I have difficulty writing correctly. If I confuse Google, it comes back asking me "did you mean?" and spells the word correctly.

There's another valuable computer capability I use when I'm writing this column: for the past quarter-century, I've been storing favorite quotes, items of interest from the news, ideas, and snippets of things I've read or heard, in a "database." This collection has been a wonderful resource, whether I'm looking for a memorable something, from a joke to a quotation for a eulogy.

Although handier in a number of ways, you don't *have* to use a bona fide database program or even Microsoft's fairly recent and feature-packed "OneNote" program to construct an electronic notebook. The latter even saves web pages complete with graphics.

But there's an easy and inexpensive way to build a searchable storehouse of *text* and it's probably on your computer right now: simply open a Microsoft Word document and start writing. Your entries can be paragraphs, sentences or however you want to set it up. Keep adding to this Word document, one entry after another, for hundreds, even a thousand pages or more. Add a *key word* or term to your entry, like "joke," if it happens to be that, or "wellness" or whatever.

Be sure to save a copy of this file on an external hard drive and/or USB stick, and, periodically, burn a back-up CD or DVD. Then, when you want to find whatever you've entered on, say, "leadership" or all your "jokes," just use Word's "find" command (Ctrl + F) and type in the term you want to locate and all references will come up, highlighted, one after another.

When I speak to college students in communications, I advise them to start an electronic "clip file" or notebook as soon as possible and keep adding to it throughout their career and life. No doubt it will be a lifesaver when doing any kind of writing or speaking project; mine continues to be that for me.

By the way, if you don't have Microsoft Word on your computer, you can buy the *Home & Student Edition* for around $100+ and that will put four excellent programs on your machine: Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote. The small business version of the same suite of programs costs a bit more.

If you don't want to spend any money, you can get a free copy of the office-type suite available at **www.OpenOffice.org**. This package was created and is updated by volunteers. It offers a word processing program called "Writer," along with spreadsheet and presentation programs. The public library or any good bookstore, new or used, will very likely have books on how to use OpenOffice programs. Personally, I recommend spending the money and buying the Microsoft suite. I think it's worth it.

Whatever you do, if you're interested in retrieving thoughts well expressed, make it a goal to start and keep up an electronic notebook or clip file. You'll be glad you did the next time you face a blank white page on your computer screen.