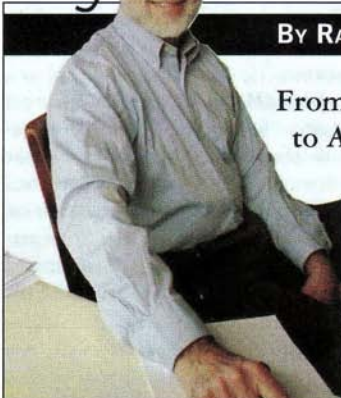


Why I Write...



BY RALPH KEYES

From Scarcity to Abundance: Researching in the Inter- net Era

One reason I write is simple curiosity. Writing gives me license to look into things I'd like to look

into anyway, such as quotations, language use and word origins.

Researching my first book on language two decades ago (*"Nice Guys Finish Seventh": False Phrases, Spurious Sayings and Familiar Misquotations*, HarperCollins, 1992) called for lots of leg work. Letters had to be written, calls made, interviews conducted, repositories of information traveled to. At Warner Bros. studios in Hollywood I found "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" on page 4, Reel 5-A of the dialogue transcript for a 1953 movie called *Trouble Along the Way*. Producer-screenwriter Melville Shavelson told me he got this line from onetime UCLA football coach Red Sanders, whose career antedated that of Vince Lombardi.

In microfilmed news coverage of Berkeley's 1964 Free Speech Movement at the Library of Congress, a demonstrator named Jack Weinberg was quoted as saying "Don't trust anyone over 30." Weinberg confirmed that this generation-defining line originated with him.

Verifying quotations this way was demanding, exhausting, entertaining and enormously satisfying.

A decade later, when I began a new book about quotations (*The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2006), things had changed. With just a few keystrokes, I now could find in minutes what used to take hours. The challenge was to avoid drowning in a rushing river of dubious data while panning for nuggets of gold online. Finding a remark attributed to "Ralph Waldo Emmerson" did not inspire confidence in the Net's many quotation sites.

Nonetheless, the Internet proved to be an extraordinary resource for verifying quotations. Scanned books, magazines and newspapers dating back centuries were especially valuable. Key in "whole nine yards" and within seconds one is reading those words in an 1855 account of shirt making. "Laws + sausage" produces an 1869 article with the observation that "Laws, like sausage, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made." Enter "chattering classes" and one is quickly taken to that phrase in an 1890 issue of *The Chautauquan*.

By the time I started researching a book about "retroterms" (*I Love It When You Talk Retro: Hoochie-Coochie, Double Whammy, Drop a Dime and the Forgotten Origins of American Speech*), a virtual tsunami of data online nearly carried me out to sea. My problem was that I was still working with a mindset of scarcity in a context of abundance.

Finding what I was looking for in this ocean of data at times was so easy that it felt like cheating. Stroking a few keys took me to the original 1812 *Boston Herald* cartoon of a salamander-like congressional district called a "Gerry Mander" (after Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry). Tapping a few more took me to an English museum with pictures of the tenterhooks once used in drying wool. Old ads for Clark Stanley's Snake Oil Liniment were not hard to find online. Ones for Gem Razors that promised to eliminate "five o'clock shadow" turned up on eBay. YouTube had the original TV commercials that spawned "Where's the beef?" and "Cha ching!" Thackeray's 1855 novel *The Newcomes*, with repeated early usage of "skeletons in the closet," was easily accessible online, as was *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* from 1765.

The result of this embarrassment of riches is books on language that are more thorough and accurate. Researching them is more fruitful, but less fun. For those who come from an era of research-as-sport, harvesting data online can feel like fly-fishing in a fish farm. Readers, however, benefit from unparalleled feasts of fascinating information.

Ralph Keyes's most recent book, I Love It When You Talk Retro: Hoochie Coochie, Double Whammy, Drop a Dime, and the Forgotten Origins of American Speech, was published in March by St. Martin's Press.