

AOL[®]
FOR
DUMMIES[®]
2ND EDITION

by John Kaufeld

Foreword by Ted Leonsis

Vice Chairman and President AOL Core Service
America Online, Inc.



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Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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AOL® For Dummies®, 2nd Edition

Published by

Wiley Publishing, Inc.

111 River Street

Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774

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Published by Wiley Publishing, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana

Published simultaneously in Canada

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2003114883

ISBN: 0-7645-5811-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

2B/SS/RS/QT/IN



About the Author

John Kaufeld got hooked on computers a long time ago. Somewhere along the way, he discovered that he enjoyed helping people understand how computers worked (a trait that his computer science friends generally considered a character flaw but that everyone else seemed to appreciate). John finally graduated with a B.S. degree in management information systems from Ball State University and became the first PC support technician for what was then Westinghouse, outside Cincinnati, Ohio. He learned about online services in the Dark Ages of Telecommunication (the 1980s) by guessing, failing, and often doing unmentionable things to his modem.

John spent the last 15 years working with normal people who, for one reason or another, were stuck using a “friendly” personal computer. Today, he runs ShipperTools.com (www.shippertools.com), More Than Games (www.morethangames.com), and the ClixCon game convention (www.clixcon.com). Amongst all of that, he designs and develops board and card games, and (to the infinite amusement of his accountant) fights endlessly with QuickBooks. He writes articles and game reviews for Scrye Magazine and various other publications in his copious free moments. Depending on how hard you look, you can also find him playing Mage Knight, HeroClix, and Crimson Skies (from WizKids, www.wizkidsgames.com) or any of the many German board games in his collection at game conventions around the country.

John’s other Wiley titles include *Access 2003 For Dummies*, *Access 2002 For Dummies*, and too many other database books to still qualify him as a normal human. He regularly uses America Online (where he’s known as JKaufeld). He loves getting e-mail and valiantly attempts to answer every message arriving in his mailbox. You can also find an ongoing collection of his thoughts in his AOL Journal (journals.aol.com/jkaufeld/AnUncommon-tary).

John lives with his wife, two children, and (most delightfully) *no* American Eskimo dog, among the rolling hills of Indiana.

Dedication

To Jenny, because you held onto the truth and helped set me free. I love you!

To J.B. and the Pooz, for reminding me that *play* makes *work* go faster.

To my friends and compatriots at John Wiley & Sons (or whatever they call themselves these days), for the opportunity of a lifetime.

Thank you, one and all.

Author's Acknowledgments

I think I finally figured out why book acknowledgments are always kind of philosophical. It's because the author has just spent most of the past two weeks (and particularly the preceding 72 hours) on a constant caffeine high and is now devoting a large portion of his time to preventing his brain from floating off into space.

Luckily, that's not going to happen to me. I put on a hat — and I added a chin strap this year.

First, I want to thank my project editor, Leah Cameron, for a deft touch and the gentle, prodding patience to keep me rolling even on days when my stress level registered on FAA radar. You earned your way into the elite corps of *editors I want to work with again*. May it happen soon! I also want to thank my copy editor, Rebecca Senninger. You utterly blew me away with your near-perfect work. (There's still that matter of the sentence structure in Chapter 5, but I'm willing to let that go.) Thank you *so much* for your help. You're amazing.

Extraordinary thanks also go to my technical reviewer, Rhonda Jacobs, who made sure that vast swaths of the book actually bear some resemblance to reality. Without Rhonda's help, goodness only knows where half the stuff in this book might lead you.

Way out at the other end of the known world, thanks to Steve Hayes (my beloved acquisitions editor) and Andy Cummings (who runs the Acquisitions Department ward, plus several other important — and happy — areas of the Wiley Asylum). Perpetual thanks also go to Diane Steele, who took a chance on me 10 years ago and completely changed my world ever since.

At America Online, extra-special "You're the greatest" thanks to Debbie, who made the mistake of answering my voice mail one day and accidentally turned into my unerring guide through the mazes of AOL. The entire AOL Beta Team, and particularly the intrepid Melissa, who received the bulk of my e-mails, gets super kudos as well. Similarly heart-felt thanks go to the following AOL folks (in alphabetical order) Brad, Cathy, Chris, David, Erin, Jim, Kathy, Laura, Michael, Natalie, Nicholas (congrats on the baby!), Tom, and everybody else whose name I missed. You all collectively rank just below Ben & Jerry's Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Ice Cream in my world (and that's pretty high, believe me).

Finally, a boatload of sincere appreciation to my friends and fellow gamers Tim and Sara, Jon Adam, and Bob and Michelle. You all remind me a little more every day of what community really means. I love you guys! Another round of Chez Geek, Puerto Rico, or Formula De, anyone? ::grins::

Publisher's Acknowledgments

We're proud of this book; please send us your comments through our online registration form located at www.dummies.com/register/.

Some of the people who helped bring this book to market include the following:

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Foreword

America Online started with a simple objective: to make online services more accessible, more convenient, more useful, and more fun for people from all walks of life. That formula has worked well; AOL is now the world's leading interactive online service.

That success has been driven in large part by remaining faithful to our original goal: making online services easy and convenient. In designing the service, we wanted to make it as intuitive as possible, meaning everybody from Fortune 500 executives to elementary school students could visit our many Channels, use our exciting tools and features, and become part of the unique AOL community. We wanted to make the software easy to install and use. As a result, new America Online customers are usually up and running in a matter of minutes. Try doing this with your digital camera!

We've also worked hard to constantly add new services to ensure that we continue to offer our members unparalleled value. Our new AOL 9.0 Optimized is designed to help members get the most from being online by creating a customized online experience every time you sign-on.

New and exciting features include safety and security protections like built-in spam filters that get smarter as you use them and a spam folder where suspected spam is automatically routed for review and deletion, enhanced Parental Controls, and Web pop-up controls. AOL Top Speed™ Technology can help you get to your favorite Web sites faster — saving you time and helping you get the content and information you want.

We've just added new ways to enjoy the online experience, like new 3D animated SuperBuddy™ and new instant messaging personalized expression features that make it more fun to be online and communicate with friends and family through voice, video clips, digital photos, and file sharing.

AOL 9.0 Optimized also has new communications options, such as a new Manage Mail tab for active and advanced mail users and the ability to store up to 20 megabytes of mail on AOL's servers for each of the seven screen names that come with an AOL account, providing up to 140 megabytes of storage.

To maximize your broadband experience, we offer AOL for Broadband, the best source for entertainment and information on the Internet — such as CD-quality radio, and video clips including movie trailers, sports highlights, and live news reports. You'll also find programming and features that are exclusive only to AOL for Broadband members. You can simply add the AOL for Broadband service to any high-speed DSL or cable Internet connection.

AOL offers a wide range of premium services to bring even more power and flexibility to our members' online experience. For example, AOL Call Alert lets members know who is calling while they are online and allows them to handle calls using several message response options. If you are a music fanatic, MusicNet on AOL is designed to give members the best way to find, download, listen to, and burn digital music safely and legally.

For an even safer online experience, we offer McAfee VirusScan Online, which scans your PC system for viruses and repairs and/or removes infected files. For members on the go, AOL by Phone allows them to check their e-mail and access other popular AOL features conveniently through simple, spoken commands, toll-free from any telephone.

In addition, our AOL family of popular Web brands such as Netscape, Moviefone, Mapquest, CompuServe, ICQ, and AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), offers unmatched convenience, choice, and world-class content.

What does all this add up to for you? Incomparable value. And so as we continue to make new improvements to tools, features, and products, AOL will retain our focus on our most important asset — our members. We rely and depend on your feedback, with over 8,000 customer service representatives standing by 24/7/365 to listen to you and learn from your input.

But as hard as we've worked to make the service simple to use, the sheer volume of information available has made the online world akin to trying to tour the Library of Congress in one day. That's where this book, *AOL For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, comes in. Although we think America Online is already "dummy-proof," John's book makes AOL just that much easier to enjoy and navigate.

As you'll discover, America Online is a vibrant and exciting virtual community that bridges the lives of all our members in an engaging, interactive format. Every day, hundreds of thousands of AOL subscribers go online and e-mail, instant message, chat, post messages on message boards, enjoy live music, make travel reservations, and read their favorite magazines and newspapers. We provide the framework; beyond that, AOL is shaped by the collective imagination and innovation of our members.

As the Internet evolves, AOL will continue to lead the way, helping consumers make the most of the online medium by connecting, informing, and entertaining them online as never before. From the beginning, AOL has believed the best way to build the online medium has been to give our members what they want, and that will remain our hallmark as we move into this next exciting chapter of the Internet.

Ted Leonsis,
Vice Chairman and President AOL Core Service

America Online, Inc.

Introduction

*W*elcome! You've got mail!

Those four little words changed the face of the Internet. Those four little words echo through houses, dormitories, and apartments millions of times every day. Those four little words live in the world's collective psyche.

And those words communicate the essence of America Online. It's about neighbors and family — about wanting to learn, wanting to share, and wanting to get away for a while. It's about living in a world-sized community, where your newest best friend lives in the next time zone to the west. It's about exploring things you love, and having lots of fun along the way.

Every neighborhood needs a guide to help the residents find their way around, meet the folks, and generally settle themselves in for a fun stay. That's where *AOL For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, fits into your life: Read on . . . and let this book show you around the neighborhood that is AOL.

About This Book

AOL For Dummies, 2nd Edition, acts as your friendly tour guide and road map to an amazing and intriguing digital world. It offers everything you need to get started with (and get the most from) the biggest and friendliest online service in the United States: America Online. Best of all, you don't need to be some normalcy-challenged computer technoid to make sense of the stuff in here. *AOL For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, delivers all of this information in plain language — the way we talked back when *computers* interfaced and *people* had conversations.

Don't just take my word for it — jump on in and discover what's here for you. A world of pleasant surprises awaits!

Conventions Used in This Book

Communication doesn't happen until two people agree on a number of things, such as when to talk, how loud to speak, and who cleans up the broken dishes after the conversation ends. Of course, if they both speak the same language helps (otherwise the broken-dish quotient goes sky-high).

In the name of better communication, a few things in this book look a little odd. (Depending on the day, I might be one of them.) The following items all received special formatting attention to make them stand out from the average, run-of-the-mill information. If you run across something with some strange formatting, look here for the explanation:

- ✓ Web addresses look like this. It's funky and stylish, making a very retro '50s *I live for my typewriter* sort of statement. Examples include

```
www.aol.com  
www.morethangames.com  
www.probabilitytheory.info
```

- ✓ On extremely rare occasions (perhaps once in the whole book), screen names look like this, too. During an intense attempt to make sense of chat-room anarchy, the text refers to screen names shown in a figure. To make the screen names more obvious in the explanation, they all appear in the wacky monofont. Examples include `ImTheFamilyDog` and `JKaufeld`.
- ✓ **Keywords leap from the page in bold.** Why bold, you ask? Because keywords live for boldly sweeping you away to the best of AOL's content — and because bold was pretty much the only formatting option I had left. Examples include keywords **New**, **Games**, **People**, and **Explore**.
- ✓ Instructions that involve clicking Menu Items⇨Look⇨Like⇨This. Every menu requires a few steps of navigation between the beginning and the end. This book leads you through the process with these funky little command arrows (⇨). Underlined letters in a menu show the shortcut keys (for the keyboard addicts out there). Examples include Mail⇨ Saved on My PC, Community⇨Chat, and Keyword⇨AOL 9.0 Optimized Features.

If you find any other really strange or weird-looking text in the book, call the guys with the black suits and the anti-alien guns. It might be serious.

What You're Not to Read

The true beauty of a *For Dummies* book — apart from the friendly yellow cover and the cute little Dummies guy — rests in how it presents information. Unlike many books on the market, you don't have to read *AOL For Dummies*,

2nd Edition, in chapter-by-chapter order. Sure, you can do it that way (after all, it's your book), but the book's information comes out just as easily whether you march sequentially through the chapters or bound and romp from topic to topic. The choice — driven by your quest for knowledge — is yours.



By the same token, the book works hard to make sense of all the weird computer stuff that happens inside AOL. Almost everywhere you turn, technical things appear with simple descriptions. Unfortunately, a few things contained in these pages still came out in their native language: *geek*. To give you fair warning, the book marks those areas with the Technical Stuff icon (displayed for your pleasure next to this paragraph). When you see the Technical Stuff icon, you can decide whether to slog through the material or simply gloss over it.

Because of the strange currents and eddies in software development schedules (and the overwhelming number of Windows-based computers in the world), America Online always releases the Windows version of its newest software long before the Macintosh version. That's why this book views America Online from a distinctly Windows-based perspective. (After all, writing about software that doesn't exist yet is tough.) But don't despair, Macintosh users! You still benefit from all the online content information in Parts III, IV, V, and VI. When the America Online 9.0 software for the Macintosh finally arrives, the instructions in Parts I and II should help, too.

Foolish Assumptions

To know you is to understand you, and goodness knows, if I can't understand you, I can't help you. With that statement in mind (a challenge in itself), here's what I know about you:

- ✔ You're either interested in joining America Online or currently use it (and already feel the effects).
- ✔ You wonder precisely what you can do through the online world — and with America Online in particular.
- ✔ You use a Windows-based or Macintosh computer.
- ✔ You have a modem attached to your computer or connect to the Internet through a cable modem or other high-speed access.
- ✔ You care more about dinner appetizers than about modems and computers combined.
- ✔ Terms like *AIM*, *DSL*, *chat room*, and *Internet* nip at your heels like a pack of disturbed Chihuahuas.

If these statements sound familiar, this book is for you.

How This Book Is Organized

To make finding information a little bit easier, I split the book into six distinct parts. To whet your appetite, here's a peek at each of the upcoming sections.

Part I: Driver's Ed for the Digital Traveler

This section answers stirring questions like “Just what the heck is America Online?”, “Why do I care?”, and “Does Bill Gates really want to send me \$5,000?” (Yes, hard to believe as it seems, it *really* answers that question. Trust me.) Part I gives you a broad overview of what the whole online world is about. It explains what you generally need to know about America Online, explains how to connect your computer to the larger online world, walks you through some cool ways to plug America Online into your day, and walks through the features and highlights of the America Online access software. In short, it's kinda like digital driver's education.

Part II: Settling Into Your Online Home

After moving into a new domicile (whether it's a house, apartment dorm room, or something else), some time passes before the place starts feeling like home. Gradually, you unpack your stuff, hang pictures on the wall, and learn your way around. Slowly and surely, that homey feeling grows on you.

Joining the online world works a lot like moving into a new place — and Part II helps you make that new place into your own unique online home. The chapter starts with a look through the myriad preferences in your AOL software. From there, it addresses the important topic of creating screen names (online personas) for yourself and your kids, and the little tricks to setting the Parental Controls that keep your kiddos on the safe side of the Net. It covers a lot more ground after that, including navigating around AOL and the Internet, working with the Buddy List, and how to use the Companion, AOL's nifty little addition to your regular software.

Part III: Connecting and Communicating

America Online — and really the whole Internet itself — exists for one main reason: to enhance communication between people. Sure, a lot of technical mumbo-jumbo goes on behind the scenes, but at its heart, the big central idea involves connecting you to the other computer-using humanoids on the planet.

Part III drills down a bit further into your AOL software, focusing exclusively on the various communications tools at your disposal. It covers the art of expressing yourself through the basic online tools, such as e-mail, chat rooms, instant messages, message boards, and even Groups@AOL. It even examines the newest communication tool in the system, the fascinating AOL Journals.

Part IV: Diving Into the Fun Stuff

I hear a few fundamental questions over and over from America Online members: Where's the way-cool online information? How do I find the best chats? I'm getting hungry — where's the kitchen?

The chapters in Part IV deliver the goods by focusing on the what's-out-there side of online life. They uncover the lively, topical, and up-to-date America Online content areas, help you take a trip on the Internet, and even find music to enjoy and burn onto CDs (*legally*, of course). As its name promises, this part *definitely* covers the fun stuff on America Online.

Part V: Secret Tricks of the AOL Gurus

Shhh. I don't want *everyone* to hear about this part. Well, at least I don't want *them* to hear about it just yet (you know how spurned techno-weenies behave sometimes). Part V contains the collected wisdom of many America Online experts. It's filled with tips and goodies for making your America Online connection truly come alive. Customize your member profile with new categories, make hotkeys for your favorite online destinations, and add your own buttons to the toolbar with the cool techno-tricks documented in this part. Want to do more? Use the AOL Anywhere tools to keep in touch from wherever you wander — even from your mobile phone or hand-held personal organizer. Enjoy!

Part VI: The Part of Tens

It just wouldn't be a *For Dummies* book without The Part of Tens. In this section, you find places to visit when the urge to explore takes hold of your mind as well as ways to find help when your connection doesn't work. It's a pot-pourri of things to brighten your digital day.

Icons Used in This Book

To make finding the important stuff in the book a little easier (and to help you steer clear of the technical hogwash), this book has a bunch of icons scattered throughout. Each icon marks something in the text that's particularly vital to your online existence. Here's a brief guide to what these little road signs mean:



If you see a Remember icon, get out your mental highlighter because the text is definitely worth bearing in mind, both now and in the future.



You can benefit from my experience (both good and bad) whenever you spy a Tip icon. Whether it marks a trap to avoid or a trick to make your life easier, you can't go wrong heeding a Tip.



Like it or not, I have to include some truly technical twaddle. To shield you from it as much as possible, I mark the techie stuff with this icon. If you see this turkey, flip — don't lazily turn — to the next page. Really, it's better for everyone this way.



If you need to do something that's just the tiniest bit dangerous (such as walk the trail into the Grand Canyon while blindfolded and on laughing gas), this icon tells you to proceed with caution. Pay close attention to these warnings; they mark the most dire of pitfalls. (Don't worry; they aren't too frequent on America Online.)



Those folks lucky enough to enjoy high-speed Internet connections can *also* enjoy a lot of special content inside America Online. This icon points out where I highlight the nifty extras that come along with high-speed connections.

Where to Go from Here

Where should you start this amazing journey into the world of America Online? It depends on your experience level:

- ✓ Brand-new members should start with Chapter 2, and then mess around with the AOL software for a while. Eventually, work your way through all of Part II and Part III as well.
- ✓ Been on America Online a while? In that case, start with the all-new AOL Journal in Chapter 15.

- ✦ Looking to extend your voluminous knowledge of AOL? Part V has your name on it. Build a Web site, create an amazing member profile, and customize your AOL software, all with the info in this part. For bonus points, visit Chapter 24 and start sending instant messages from your mobile phone!

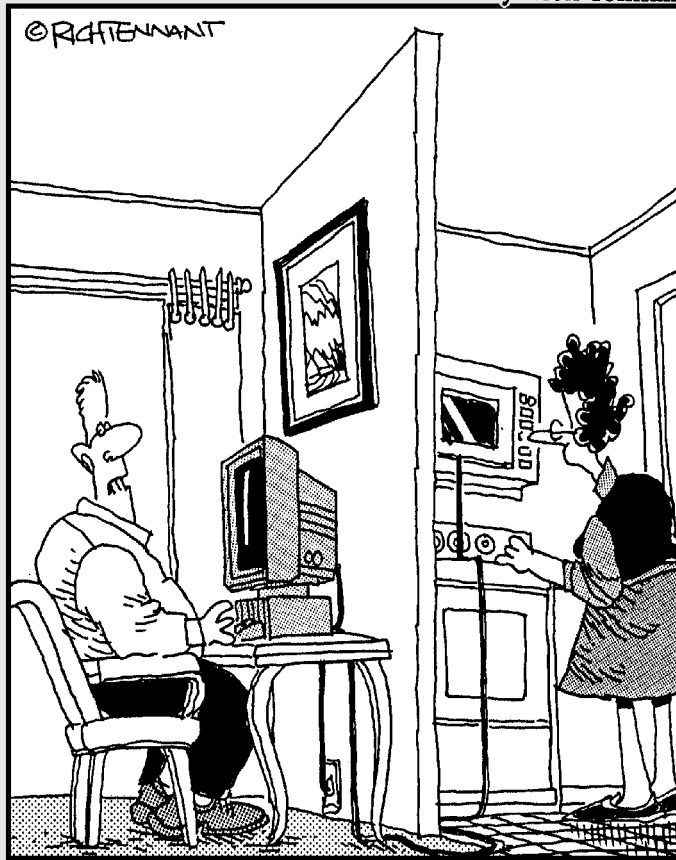
Whichever way you choose, go on out there and have some fun — and keep this book handy just in case you need a little help now and then.

Part I

Driver's Ed for the Digital Traveler

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I know my modem's in the microwave. It seems to increase transmission speed. Can you punch in 'Defrost'? I have a lot of e-mails going out."

In this part . . .

Driver's education class is the only thing holding this country together. It's a massively shared experience. Everyone, at one time or another, learns how to drive. And we all do it with white knuckles the first time, thinking that 20 miles per hour is kinda fast and that maybe we ought to ease it down to a nice, pedestrian 10 miles per hour for a while.

The first time you face the vast plains of the online world, that old memory may rise up. Gripping the disks with white knuckles, you wonder whether 56,000 bps is just a little fast — perhaps you should run the modem at 14,400 bps until you get the hang of it.

Hey — it's going to be okay. The truth is that you can surf the Internet, hold an interactive conversation with people all over the country, and receive files from a computer that's 7,000 miles away without knowing (or caring to know) the details of how it all works.

This part gives you an overview of what this crazy America Online thing is all about and what it can do. It also offers some tips for getting comfortable in your digital habitat and a note or two about working and playing well with others online.

Get ready for the ride of your life. Now, where did I put those car keys?

Chapter 1

What You Got Yourself Into (And What You Need to Enjoy the Trip)

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what this *online* thing is all about
 - ▶ Scoping out the stuff you need to make AOL work
 - ▶ Turning up the speed meter with DSL and cable
-

Perhaps you just bought a new computer and happened across a stray icon labeled America Online. Or maybe your parent, child, grandchild, or significant other decided that you should join the online revolution and endowed you with all the goodies this revolution requires. Or perhaps you don't quite know what to make of all this talk about the information superhighway and worry that you're getting left behind at a rest stop.

For a good understanding of what the term *online* means and where America Online fits into the equation, start here. This chapter explains the introductory stuff and prepares you for that first trip into the online world. It also includes a quick introduction to the realm of high-speed connections, such as DSL and cable. In a lot of areas, getting a high-speed Internet hookup is almost as easy as adding a phone line — and costs about the same, too.

For now, kick back and get ready to understand what your parent, child, or significant other has been talking about all this time. (Feels good to finally know, doesn't it?)

What Online Really Means

What is this “Internet” and “online service” stuff, anyway? Does it have something to do with the information superhighway? Do you even care? Why or why not? Please write a detailed answer on the inside cover of a matchbook and then set the whole thing on fire, watching with pleasure as it burns to a crisp. Don't you feel better now?

If you do, you're not alone. Many people feel apprehensive about this mysterious electronic world you're entering. But take heart — online services and the Internet used to be much more mysterious than they are today. Don't worry if the concept seems more than a little bizarre to you right now. That reaction proves mainly that you're not a nerd. Congratulations on passing the test!

Back to the question at hand: What is an online service? Conceptually, it's much like cable TV. With cable TV, you buy a subscription from your local cable company and hook your television into its network with a funny-looking box that freaks out sometimes. From there, a special wire connects the box to a wall socket.

If the technology does what it should, you turn on the TV and choose from among a wide variety of programming, depending on your interests. When it doesn't work, the problem may be in your TV, in the brain-dead little box, or somewhere between your wall socket and the cable company itself. At the end of the month, you get a bill that you grudgingly pay, all the while wondering whether cable TV is really worth all the time and money you spend on it.

With a few clever substitutions, the cable company example describes America Online (and other Internet Service Providers, or ISPs). You hook up your computer to an odd little device called a modem (which, like its cable-TV counterpart, sometimes freaks out) and plug in a plain phone cord from the modem to the phone jack on the wall. If you use a special high-speed connection (with an appropriately high-tech name such as DSL, satellite, or cable modem), you get an even more esoteric device with its own cool cables. (Flip to the end of this chapter for more about high-speed access.) Somewhere along the line, you purchase an AOL membership and pony up the monthly fee.

The top part of Figure 1-1 shows how the process works with a dialup connection, at least when the technology behaves. Your computer runs the special America Online software, and then either dials a local phone number or zooms out through your high-speed Internet connection. From there, your computer contacts the America Online computers in Virginia. (Incidentally, don't worry about long-distance calls to Virginia — you pay for the local part of the call, and the America Online communications system does the rest.)

After connecting (or, in computer parlance, *going online* — more about that shortly), you choose from among a wide variety of services, depending on your interests. When things don't work, the problem may be with your computer, the America Online software, the modem (stupid modems), your high-speed connection, or something between the wall jack and America Online itself. At the end of the month, you get a bill that you gleefully pay, flush with the happy memory of everything you did online.



By the way, the term *online* means connected. If you're online with America Online, a link is set up through the phone between your computer and the America Online computers. When you get right down to it, the computers are having this swell digital conversation behind the scenes while you're busy reading the news, sending electronic mail, or doing whatever else you do on America Online.



If you use DSL, a cable modem, or some other high-speed connection, connecting to AOL takes even less work, as the lower part of Figure 1-1 shows. Because your computer already has a permanent high-speed Internet connection, the America Online software just hops onto the Net through that connection and rides the communication lines straight to the main computers in Virginia. Quick as a computer price drop, your software connects with America Online and you're ready to go.

Now for the great part: That's *all* you need to know about the technology behind America Online. Really — I wouldn't kid you about something like this. All the cool things you can do, all the fun tricks, and all the stuff that makes America Online a really wild and woolly place require a great deal of technology, but *it doesn't matter to you*. You don't have to know any of this stuff to use America Online!

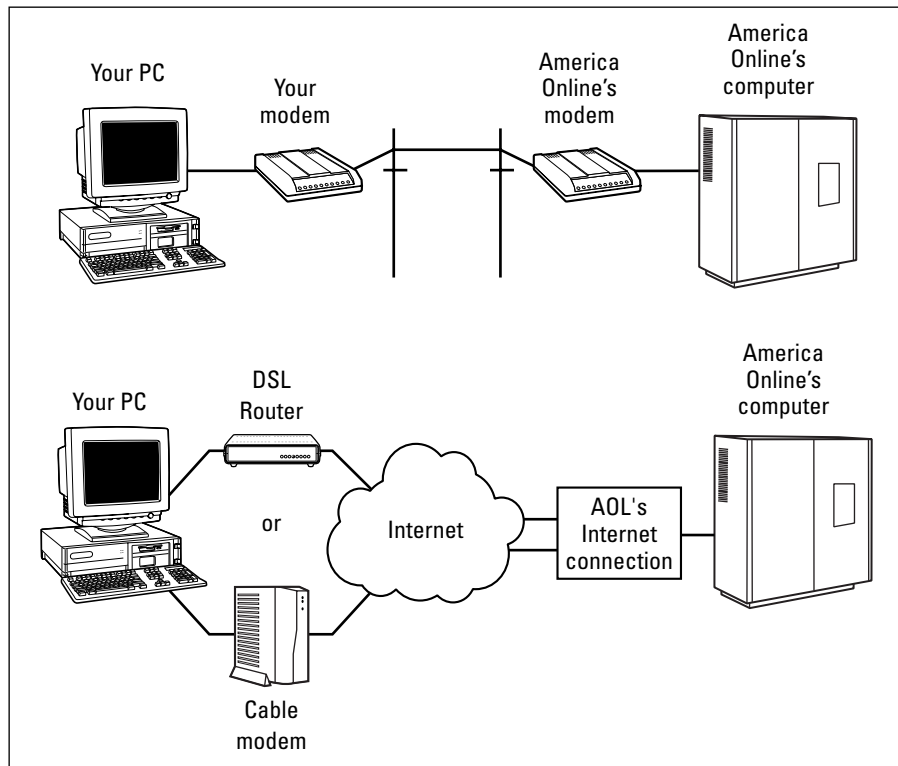


Figure 1-1:
Going online means linking your computer to AOL's computers through a phone line or high-speed connection.

All It Takes Is a Bunch of Stuff

Now that you have a conceptual picture of how all this online business happens, you're ready to dig a little deeper and get into some specifics. You need four parts to make the online thing a reality: the America Online software, a computer, a modem, and a phone line. The following sections explore each element with just enough detail to give you a good understanding of what you need without turning you into a computer nerd (ewww — the very thought gives me the shivers).

For those of you lucky enough to use a high-speed connection to the world of America Online, that connection (whether through the cable TV system, a satellite, or a DSL line) replaces the modem and phone line. Better still, the high-speed connection also replaces the nasty disconnections and painfully slow downloading speed that a modem can inflict on you.



If this high-speed connection piques your interest, flip to the end of this chapter for more details about it.

You need the right software

America Online is a pretty special place, not only because of its content and services but also for the look and feel of its *interface* (the buttons, menus, and windows on-screen). The America Online programmers decided to do things the right way from the start. This decision meant a break with tradition because people would need special software to join America Online. Granted, the software was free (and still is today — but more about that in a moment), but the idea itself was risky for the time. Luckily, the risk paid off handsomely in better features, ease of use, and consistency.

The America Online software probably came preloaded on your computer, but that copy definitely isn't the new America Online version 9.0 program, so use it *only* if your computer doesn't meet the requirements for the newest AOL software.

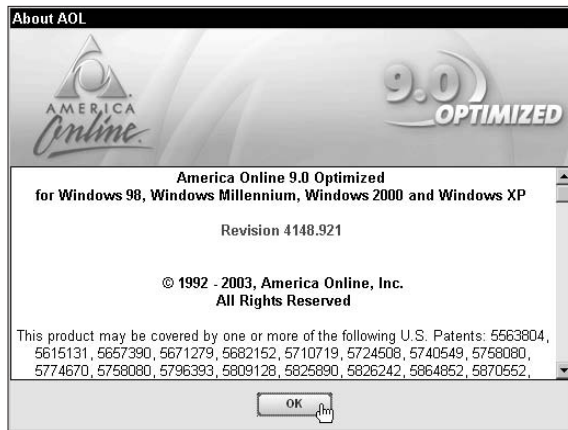


To simplify the programmer's lives and offer you better service, America Online 9.0 doesn't work with Windows 95. Such is life in the high-tech lane. If your computer still loves Windows 95, stick with America Online 7.0. In the meantime, seriously consider picking up a new computer. Computers age like sickly mayflies, so any machine more than five years old really *needs* a break anyway.

If you already use America Online, check which version you have. To do that, start the America Online software, and choose **H**elp⇨**A**bout America Online

from the menu bar. The version number is near the top of the screen, as shown in Figure 1-2. You don't have to (and, in fact, shouldn't) sign on to America Online to find out the software version number.

Figure 1-2:
The latest America Online software for Windows shows off its version number.



Although knowing your program's version number seems like nerd trivia at its best, it actually makes a big difference. This book covers the newest America Online software, version 9.0. If you use an older version of the program, the book's instructions could confuse you quickly (and that's definitely not my goal). Every time new America Online software comes out, the programmers move buttons, shift menu items, and generally remodel the whole thing as they try to make the system easier to use. The programmers tell me that it's the price we pay for progress, but sometimes I think it has more to do with ongoing programmer job security than anything else.

A computer is a must

You can't get around this one: To use America Online, you must have a computer of some kind. Sorry, but that's the way these things go. Having settled that point, the next logical question is, "Okay, smart guy, what *kind* of computer?" "Well," I reply, "that's up to you."

Because the America Online special access software comes in both Macintosh and Windows versions, you get some leeway in choosing your computer. Choose the type of machine that makes you most comfortable. Don't worry if you use Windows at work but prefer a Macintosh for home (or vice versa). You can still share documents, spreadsheets, and many other files between your computers without any (well, without *many*) problems.

If you buy a new computer for your online adventures, make sure that it has

- ✔ **A fast processor:** For Windows, choose an AMD Athlon or Duron series or an Intel Celeron or Pentium 4. For the Macintosh crowd, a G4 processor provides plenty of performance power.
- ✔ **Plenty of random-access memory (RAM):** 256MB is a good minimum for either a Macintosh or Windows machine.
- ✔ **A high-quality color monitor:** A good minimum size is 17 inches, but 19 inches provides a world of difference. For a flat-panel LCD screen, go with either 15 or 17 inches, because a panel bigger than that usually involves mortgaging part of your house.
- ✔ **Plenty of hard drive space:** 30GB or more (why go small?).

If all this computer jargon sounds foreign to you, pick up a copy of *PCs For Dummies*, 9th Edition, by Dan Gookin, or *Macs For Dummies*, 8th Edition, by David Pogue (both published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.).

A modem enters the picture

The next piece of the puzzle is a *modem*, the device that converts your computer's electronic impulses into whistles, beeps, and various digital moose calls. The modem then yells these noises through the phone line to an equally disturbed modem attached to another computer.



The term *modem* is actually an acronym (and you thought you were safe, didn't you?). It stands for *modulator/demodulator*, which is a computer nerd's way of saying that it both talks and listens.

Many computers include a built-in modem as part of the deal these days. If you aren't sure whether your PC includes one, glance at the back of the machine and look for a place to plug in a phone cord. (Check your documentation to make sure that the port *isn't* for a built-in Ethernet network adapter; network jacks and modem jacks look a lot alike!) Congrats — there's your modem!



If your computer didn't come with a modem, or if it's time to replace the poor, old, wheezing thing, take the time to shop around for a good, solid model. You want two things from a new modem: a well-known manufacturer and some blazing speed. Here's what to look for when buying either a new or used modem:

- ✔ **Get a modem made by U.S. Robotics or Creative Labs.** Lots of companies make modems, but these manufacturers stand behind their products better than all the rest. Although the price of a cheap no-name modem may look interesting, resist the temptation. Nothing frustrates your online life more than a cheap modem. The modem connects you to the whole online world. Don't hobble your connection with questionable equipment from a fly-by-night manufacturer.
- ✔ **If you buy a new modem, make sure it's fast.** Modems that run at 56,000 bits per second (bps) are the de facto standard these days. Most manufacturers call them *56K modems* because *K* means roughly 1000 in the computer world. See the "A few words about connections and costs" sidebar in this chapter for a little more information about these extraordinarily fleet animals.
- ✔ **Watch those standards when you pick up a new modem.** If you buy a 56K modem, be sure that it supports the V.92 standard. *V.92* is the newest international screeching and whistling specification for 56K modems. When picking America Online access phone numbers, make sure you look for ones that support V.92. (They're clearly marked on the access phone number lists.)
- ✔ **Watch the standards even *closer* when buying a used modem.** If you shop around for a used 56K modem in the name of saving money, look for units that support the V.90 standard, the predecessor to V.92. Avoid older units using the *K56 Flex* protocol — a failed competitor to the real V.90 standard. Although they work, buying into a failed technology makes no sense.



If you have a high-speed access line, you don't use a traditional phone-line modem at all. Instead, the special connections through a cable-TV system, a satellite dish, or the phone company require some matching special equipment.

What about a phone line?

All this other stuff doesn't do you a whit of good if you don't have a phone line to connect it to. The phone is your link with beautiful, metropolitan Dulles, Virginia, the home of America Online. Luckily, you don't need a special phone line — just about any phone line works.

The key words in that last sentence are *just about* because not all phone lines are created equal. Many phone lines have been endowed by their subscribers with certain very alien services — such as call waiting — that interfere with a computer's basic rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of a connection with America Online.



A few words about connections and costs

If you use a modem for your America Online connection, pay a little extra and get the fastest, highest-quality modem possible. The money you spend now pays you back tomorrow and many days thereafter with a solid, smooth-running Internet connection. On the software side of

things, make sure your America Online connection dials the local access phone number that best matches your modem's capabilities, particularly if you bought a V.92 modem. Check keyword **Access** for the latest phone number list.



As you probably guessed, high-speed connections don't use a phone line like low-speed modems do. If they did, everyone could zip through America Online in a collectively quick blaze of glory.

To successfully use a modem, you need an *analog* phone line. If your home has a single phone line (or two plain, old-fashioned phone lines), you have an analog phone line. Because fax machines need the same kind of phone line, in times of emergency you can unplug the fax and use its phone line to reach America Online.



At work, the story is a little different. Many office telephone systems use *digital* phone lines. You shouldn't plug a normal modem directly into one of these lines. Please, for the sake of your modem, don't try. At best, the modem won't work this time. At worst, the modem won't work ever again because it's fried. If you're planning to use America Online from the office, contact your telephone folks and tell them that you have a modem and need something to connect it to. Remember to ask nicely, or else they may not give you the answer you're looking for.

Enjoying a High-Speed AOL Experience



As you start looking at high-speed connections, the term *bandwidth* pops up over and over. (After the nerds find a word they like, they use it a lot.) Bandwidth describes how much data moves through an online connection over a given period of time.

Modems, for instance, create a *low-bandwidth connection*. That's a very technological way of saying that modems move data slowly. Modems measure their connection speed in bits per second, or *bps*.

DSL and cable connections give you a *high-bandwidth connection* to the Internet. They measure speed in Kbps, or *thousand bits per second*, cleverly recycling the popular nerd convention of substituting *K* for *thousand* whenever possible. As you guessed, the more bits that move through your connection per second, the more information the computer shoves through your wire in a given period of time.



All that techno-speak translates to this: The faster your Internet connection, the more fun you have during those precious moments spent with America Online. Like so many other things in life, faster is better.

Digging into the details

High-bandwidth connections come in several shapes, sizes, costs, and acronyms. The specific connections available where you live depend quite heavily on exactly *where* you live in your city, state, and area of the country. Even though one of the high-speed services may be available in your city, you may discover that it isn't in your neighborhood yet. Cost and ease of installation also vary wildly around the country. (Just because companies sell the technology doesn't mean that they know how to put it in yet.)



Don't automatically assume that no high-bandwidth connections exist in your neck of the woods just because you live far away from a booming metropolitan area. Some of the coolest high-speed projects take place in smaller cities or more rural communities because those areas understand the economic importance of the online world better than their big-city brethren.

DSL and cable represent your two main high-bandwidth options. They cost about the same, but offer differing levels of speed and reliability. To use either one, your computer needs a network card that supports either *10baseT* or *100baseT Ethernet* connections. Lots of new machines include a network card as part of the standard configuration, but if yours doesn't, it's not a big deal. Every computer store (and many home electronics places, such as Best Buy and The Good Guys) carries the cards. For a small fee, they even install the card for you, too.



The whole *baseT* thing just means “twisted-pair network wire that looks like overgrown phone cord.” But could the computer people just say that? Nooooo . . .

Cable: Great when it works, but don't tell your friends

The first time I heard about “Internet access via cable-TV systems” a few years ago, I thought that the person was joking. After thinking about it more (and doing some research on my own), the idea made a lot more sense. Moving television signals around a community is a lot like moving data

around a network — heck, even some of the wire is the same. Today, cable companies all over the country provide high-speed Internet access over the same cable lines that deliver *Brady Bunch* reruns to your living room. (There's some kind of irony there, but I can't quite nail it down.)

When the line works like it should, cable access really screams. It's quite an experience watching a 100MB file pour into your computer in a minute or two instead of an hour or more. The unfortunate downside of cable Internet access (which the cable companies rarely bother mentioning) is its *shared-resource* concept. Due to the cable system's design, the subscribers in a given area share their Internet access (just like you share the neighborhood roads, particularly during rush hour). When everyone uses the system at once (in the evening, after work), response time plummets because each person gets only his or her own increasingly small slice of the total bandwidth. On the other hand, if you work at home, then your access flies all day because you aren't sharing bandwidth with anyone (everybody else is at work, so the roads are clear).

DSL: Not the fastest, but darned consistent

DSL stands for *Digital Subscriber Line*, a cool technology that runs through your existing phone lines. (Considering their huge investment in copper wire, it's no wonder that phone companies looked far and wide for a high-speed solution that turns plain old phone lines into a competitive advantage.)

Your phone company can add a DSL connection to your existing phone line. Even though it goes out over the same wire, DSL uses a different kind of signal that doesn't interfere with the voice part of the phone system. (It works much like those whistles that we can't hear, but that drive dogs absolutely nuts.)

Blazing, consistent speed gives DSL a slight advantage in the market. Cable systems claim to run at 10 to 20 times the speed of a standard 56K modem, but they suffer greatly during high-traffic times (particularly on weekday afternoons and evenings). DSL delivers a slightly slower speed, but without the shared-resource problems that the cable folks calmly describe as a "feature" of their system.

Doesn't this stuff cost a lot of money?

Although high-speed connections cost more than plain modem connections, the difference isn't exorbitant. In fact, it's probably less expensive than you think.



Buying high-speed connection straight from America Online

America Online jumped on the high-speed bandwagon itself with both DSL and cable product offerings. Availability depends on where you live, so for the latest about America Online's homegrown high-speed solutions, go to keyword **DSL** or keyword **Cable** (they both take you to the same place). Type your home phone number and zip code into the dialog box. After just a moment, America Online lists its locally available high-speed plans.

Costwise, America Online's plans usually look about the same as the ones from your local phone and cable companies. You should get similar service and support as well, although I figure that the local phone company has a little more at stake when it comes to keeping me happy.

For instance, if you have an extra phone line for your computer (those computers tie up the phone like a caffeinated teenager), you pay about \$25 per month. A cable modem connection, which runs 10 to 20 times faster than a regular dialup modem, costs around \$30 per month. Add another \$10 to \$15 per month to rent the cable modem, and you get a total monthly cost of about \$40 to \$45 for cable modem service. (DSL lines cost about the same, and they still let you drop the spare phone line.) The *net* cost — because you don't need the extra phone line now — drops to \$15 to \$20.

But the calculation doesn't stop there. Because high-speed connections link you straight to the Internet without going through one of America Online's local access numbers, your monthly AOL service fee is reduced dramatically. Instead of paying \$23.90 per month for America Online, the cost drops to \$14.95 per month using the Bring Your Own Access plan, at keyword **BYOA**. Now the high-bandwidth connection costs only \$6 to \$11 extra. Hmm . . . sounds more enticing, doesn't it?

Chapter 2

I Didn't Know You Could Do That Online!

In This Chapter

- ▶ Starting your online day
 - ▶ Checking your mail
 - ▶ Catching the news
 - ▶ Making sense of your dollars
 - ▶ Surfing the Internet wave
 - ▶ Relaxing with the online games
 - ▶ Getting your sports fix
 - ▶ Researching a topic
 - ▶ Chatting with the neighbors
 - ▶ Finding help
 - ▶ Dealing with difficult people
 - ▶ Saying goodbye
-

Beep Beep Beep Beep BEEP BEEP! [whack] {yawwwwn} <<strreeetch>> Ah, good morning! Nice to see that you're up (and looking as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as ever, I might add). A full chapter lies ahead, so I'm glad that you slept well.

This chapter offers a whirlwind tour through the cool stuff America Online offers. Think of this tour as a visual sampler, a platter of digital appetizers, each one delicious in itself but also tempting in the knowledge that still more awaits discovery. This chapter gives you a broad idea of what you can do with America Online — and what it can do for you.



For now, kick back and read on. If something piques your interest, take a break and try it online. Each section of the chapter includes the keywords and menu instructions you need.

Signing On

Every online experience starts somewhere, and signing on to the service is as good a place as any. Just follow these steps to sign on to America Online:

- 1. Turn on your computer, monitor, modem, stereo, food processor, and that cool cordless toothbrush/answering machine in the bathroom. Marvel at what modern technology accomplished in your life (and how loud it all sounds), and then turn off the unimportant stuff.**

No, you need to leave the computer on for now.

Your computer starts blissfully and leaves you with a ready-to-go desktop screen.

- 2. Find the triangular America Online icon lurking among all your other software icons and double-click it to start the program.**

In Windows, look on the Start button menu or on the Windows desktop. After the program finishes loading, it displays the Sign On dialog box.

- 3. Choose the screen name you want to use by clicking the down arrow next to the Screen Name box and then clicking the name of your choice.**

If this is the first time you chose this particular screen name with the America Online 9.0 software, the program accosts you with another dialog box (called the Password Store Information Box) that demands to know whether you want to store your password. For now, click Cancel and ignore the dialog box. If your curiosity feels piqued by this option, flip to Chapter 5 and un-pique it with the details awaiting you there.

Don't panic if the Password text box disappears after you choose a screen name. It means that the password for that name is already stored in the access software.



- 4. Press Tab to move down to the Password box and then type your password.**

Your password appears as asterisks — not as letters and numbers. That's a protection feature to keep that guy who's looking over your shoulder from breaking into your account. What guy? Why, that one right there. (Yipe!)

- 5. Click Sign On or press Enter to open the connection to America Online.**

The software goes through all kinds of cool visual gymnastics while connecting. Granted, the visuals aren't a Hollywood masterpiece, but at least they're marginally entertaining.



If the connection process doesn't work, make a note of the last step the software accomplished (initialized the modem, dialed, connected, or requested network attention, for example) and then try connecting again. If it still doesn't work, close the America Online software, restart your computer, and give your software one last chance to get things right. (Aren't you glad that your car doesn't work this way?)

If your software still doesn't connect to America Online, breeze through Chapter 25 for a list of the top ten problems and how to solve them.

6. After a moment, the Welcome window appears.

Congratulations — you're online and ready to do some stuff.

Although the Welcome window takes over the screen, both the Quick Start and Buddy List windows nab some real estate, too.



Upgrading to AOL 9.0? Find out what's new here!

Every time the America Online software shifts into a new version, a bunch of new features and options appear, but the programmers *really* outdid themselves this time. Compared to its lower-numbered brethren, America Online 9.0 looks, feels, and acts like a whole different breed of application.

A huge new emphasis on customization leads the feature list. Once upon a time, America Online viewed customization the same way that Henry Ford did with his Model T: Members could customize the software any way they wanted, as long as they didn't change a thing. America Online 9.0 completely turns that around, putting the members in control of everything from the program's visual appeal to the contents of the new QuickView window, which lives behind a new tab right off the Welcome window.

Deeper within the software, you find a new, more powerful e-mailbox, with a message preview pane, spam controls that learn your preferences over time, and new search and save features. Instant messages now offer voice, video, and file transfer options, along with SuperBuddy Icons that animate according to what you type (smiling when you type a :), for instance).

For a great quick-reference guide to America Online 9.0 features, sign on with your new software and then, on the main menu, select **Keyword** → **AOL 9.0 Optimized Features**. The guide window appears in short order. You can even download or print the guide to peruse at your leisure by clicking the appropriate links near the bottom of the window.

Checking the E-Mailbox



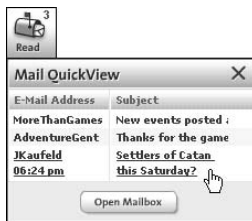
Electronic mail (or e-mail) is one of the most popular America Online services. That's why the e-mail button takes a position of pride and power on the left side of the Welcome window. If the flag is up and a letter sticks out of the mailbox, you have mail waiting (an everyday occurrence in my world and soon to be a regular feature of yours, too). The number next to the mailbox shows the number of messages currently stuffed into your box. If you don't have any mail waiting, the graphic shows a closed mailbox labeled *Mail Center*.



For a quick peek at what's in there, position your mouse pointer over the mailbox icon. When you do that, the mailbox icon runs through a little animation (isn't it cute?), and then the Mail QuickView window appears. This window lists the sender and subject (at least the first 20 characters or so) from the 10 most recent e-mail messages in your box. If you move the pointer over one of the entries (as Figure 2-1 shows), the box shows more of the subject line, plus the time (or day, if it's not from today) that the message arrived. Clicking one of the entries in the QuickView window brings the message up in its own Read Mail window.

Figure 2-1:

The new QuickView window lets you peek at your mailbox without prying it open.



To read your mail, click the You've Got Mail button on the Welcome window or click the mailbox button on the toolbar. After the New Mail window pops up, start looking through your mail. In your copious communication time, give these tips a try as well:

- **Find messages from your friends fast with the new Show Me Mail From tool on your mailbox window.** Click the drop-down menu next to Show Me Mail From, and then choose what kind of mail you want to see: notes from people you know (from addresses in your Address Book), junk from bulk mailers, still more junk from unknown senders, or everything from everybody. This feature makes sifting your mail a breeze.

- ✔ **Train your software to sift away junk e-mail automatically.** When a piece of junk e-mail wanders into your box, click once on the message, and then click the Report Spam button. Your software shifts the message into the Spam Folder and makes a mental note about what to do with future messages that look like this one.
- ✔ **To see the junk e-mail messages that your software filtered away, click the Spam Folder link near the bottom-left side of the mailbox window.** If you find something in there that *isn't* junk e-mail, click the message once, and then click the This Is Not Spam button. Your America Online software promptly remembers to let future messages like that one into your box.

As you probably figured out by now, Chapter 11 covers most everything you need to know about addressing, sending, receiving, and generally dealing with e-mail.

Reading the Latest News

There's nothing like disappearing behind the morning newspaper while waiting for that first cup of coffee to turn you into a human being. But why wait for the paper? With America Online, you have your choice of not one, not two, but — heck — a slew of the best news sources on the planet.

Start with a trip to the main America Online news area, at keyword **News**. Thanks to a sleek new redesign, the news area packs a lot of information into a very small space. Just a few clicks sweep you between the headlines, sports news, and the world of entertainment.



Say the magic keyword and get there fast

Keywords are the America Online answer to the *Star Trek* transporter. A *keyword* is a word or phrase that immediately takes you to a particular forum or service on the system. Chapter 8 explains all the details of keywords, but here's a quick intro to get you started.

To use a keyword, type it in the white box in the middle of the navigation bar across the top of

the screen and then press Enter. Was that fast or what?

For keyboard-centric folks (that's me), press Ctrl+K to open the Keyword dialog box, type your keyword, and press Enter.

Either way, America Online takes you straight to your destination.

If you prefer magazines to newspapers, America Online still keeps you covered. Check out *Better Homes and Gardens* (keyword **BHG**), *Business Week* (keyword **BW**), *Entertainment Weekly* (keyword **EW**), *Sports Illustrated* (keyword **SI**), or *Teen People* (keyword **Teen People**).



For a moving perspective on the news (or at least a moving *picture* of the news), visit the news and sports areas inside keyword **Video**. This high-speed perk provides video feeds from ABC News, CBS Marketwatch, CNN NewsPass, College Sports TV, NASCAR.COM, SI.COM, and the Weather Channel, plus lots of other fascinating options.

Eyeing the Markets

Managing your stock portfolio has never been easier. The Quotes service (keyword **Quotes**, or click the Finance icon on the toolbar) tracks the stocks closest to your heart and pocketbook.

To satisfy a brief curiosity, you can look up a single stock by its symbol. Figure 2-2, for example, uses the AOL symbol to display America Online stock activity. If looking at the big picture is more to your liking, the Portfolio feature (keyword **Portfolio**) follows all the stocks you choose, tracking the current market price and how that translates into a gain or loss for your invested dollars.



Columbus, Eriksson, Magellan, and you

New services appear in America Online faster than facial aberrations on a junk-food-loving teenager. How do you explore them all? Leave it to those clever America Online programmers to think of a way: the Member Welcome Center (keyword **Welcome Center**) and What's New on AOL (keyword **New**).

The Welcome Center includes an overview of what's in the new AOL 9.0 software, an introduction to the myriad features of the system, and the requisite syrupy public-relations stuff reminding you how *much* you *love* the service.

Don't let the fluff put you off, though — the Welcome Center includes some genuinely useful goodies.

Check the What's New on AOL section for the top five new and cool things to do with America Online, plus a fun collection of the latest system additions. New stuff is added all the time, so check this page frequently (every week or two should do it).

Take a few minutes and check out both the Welcome Center and What's New on AOL. They're definitely worth the trip.

Quote & News TWX(USE)

AOL Personal Finance AOL Personal Finance Main Go

Quotes

The Markets: DJIA: 9745.42 +23.63 (+0.24%)

Quote & News Detailed Quote Charts Profile Performance Fundamentals

Enter Symbol (Symbol Lookup) NYSE, Nasdaq, AMEX Go Help

TIME WARNER INC (TWX) My Portfolios
My Alerts

15.73 ↑ 0.15 (+0.96%)
as of 10/20/2003 at 11:46 EDT (NYSE Delay: 20 minutes)

Day High	Day Low	Today's Volume	Open	Previous Close
15.77 11:36 EDT	15.61 9:30 EDT	4,605,800 on NYSE	15.63 9:30 EDT	15.58 on 10/17

quote data by Standard & Poor's Add to Portfolio Add to Alerts

Top Headlines for: TWX

- 10/20: Movielink teams with Lycos for co-branded site
- 10/19: Revenue, content help set magazine prices
- 10/19: Texas Chainsaw tops weekend box office
- 10/19: Murdoch's bets at News Corp should pay off-Barron's
- 10/17: You've Got iTunes
- 10/17: Warner Bros. options film rights to Pearl memoir

Trade For FREE
Trade FREE for a month by opening an account with TD Waterhouse!

Notices & Terms Confirm all data with your broker or financial advisor before trading. AOL Keyword: Quotes

Figure 2-2:
Be a stock
spy with the
Quotes
system.



Like all widely available stock quote systems, the information in Quotes & News gets delayed about 20 minutes. I guess that means you can't call it up-to-the-minute information. Hmm — how about up-until-just-a-little-while-ago information?

America Online charges no extra fee to use the Quotes & News service — it's part of the service. Flip to Chapter 19 to find out more about America Online financial offerings.

Internet On Ramp, Next Right

At this point in your online life, you've probably heard, read, or otherwise discovered *something* about the Internet. If Internet mania somehow passed you by, don't worry; it's about to hit.

The *Internet* is the worldwide network of networks that's all the rage these days. You can't get your hair done, shop for tires, or even play cricket without somehow bumping into the Internet. "Oh, is that a new cricket bat?" you ask. "Aye, a player in the rec.sport.cricket Internet newsgroup recommended it." See what I mean?

The America Online 9.0 software integrates the Web, Internet newsgroups, and everything else the Internet offers into a single simple connection. Go straight to any Web site by typing its address into the big white address box at the top of the main window. For the newsgroups, go to keyword **Newsgroups**. Either way, you find the information you want in no time at all.

There's far too much to say about the Internet to cover it here, so cruise to Chapter 17 and get ready for the ride of your life.

Let the Fun and Games Begin!

Because all work and no play makes me grumpy (and probably does the same thing to you), take a break from the Internet and indulge in some fun. The online world offers games to suit every age, style, and taste.

Whether your idea of action includes Backgammon, Bingo, Cribbage, Spades, or Slots (for points, not money), head for the America Online Games (keyword **Games**). Cosponsored by computer game giant Electronic Arts, the Games area offers everything your heart desires from classic board and card games to high-tech action. For a more sedate and erudite alternative, try your hand at *The New York Times* crossword puzzle (keyword **New York Times**, and then click the [Crosswords/Games](#) link). You can try its free puzzles or pony up \$35 for a one-year subscription to the ultimate *New York Times* crossword and word-game experience.

Multiplayer computer games live all over America Online and the Internet as well. Inside AOL, spin over to keyword **Game Talk** to try the online fantasy and space role-playing games. Venturing out to the Net, visit Yahoo! Games (games.yahoo.com) for card games such as Canasta, Hearts, and Spades; strategy games such as Backgammon and Go; and a cool collection of fantasy sports games. Best of all, the games are free, so play as long as you want (or until your better half casually suggests that you stop).

Following the Ball, Puck, and Sinker

Go ahead. Yell at the top of your voice. Scream at the stats till you're blue — with no one around to cast a sideways glance. Let's face it: You and your computer have been through a lot together. It's about time you let it know how you *really* feel about sports.

Delve into America Online's sports offerings for the current thrills, the off-season victories, and the esoteric agonies of defeat. Whether you thrill to the high-stress challenge of crowd motivation (keyword **Sports Chat**, and then double-click the Cheerleading entry), love the Special Olympics (keyword **Special Olympics**), or keep warm all winter with snow sports (keyword **Snow Sports**), use the Sports Channel to keep current and locate others who share your interests. If you're the only person you know who follows cricket, for example, you can get your fill from the AOL World Sports Cricket area (keyword **World Sports**, and then click the Cricket tab).



Take a stroll through the main AOL Sports window (keyword **Sports**) and click a sport that interests you. The window provides tabs for the season's current events, including auto racing, baseball, and football. Click the [Index](#) link if your favorite doesn't appear in the main window lineup. For folks with high-speed connections, the AOL Sports window also displays current-season video highlights in a handy thumbnail window.

Nailing Down the Details

Oh no! The deadline for your *Chemical Composition of Peeps* report looms in less than two days, and you haven't even started the research. Worse than that, the car's in the shop, a wave of snow blocks the front door, and the library's closed due to blizzard conditions.

Before giving up in despair and heading for consolation from that huge box of hot-chocolate mix in the kitchen, try researching your topic through America Online and the Internet. A Web site or Internet newsgroup exists for almost anything. Heck, even Peeps reside on the Net — try the Peep Research Web site (www.peepresearch.org) or the `alt.food.peeps` newsgroup (keyword **Newsgrps**, and then visit `alt.food.peeps`).

Start your search in the Internet address box, which you find nestled next to the Go button on the browser bar. Type your search term (*algebra*, *Polish history*, *marshmallow peeps*, or whatever) and press Enter, and then browse through the Recommended Sites, Sponsored Links, and Matching Sites lists that appear. Because searches usually return hundreds (or thousands) of matches, remember to click through all the results pages with the links in the lower-right corner of the page. If you don't see anything that looks promising, try one of the links in the Narrow Your Search text box (also at the bottom of each search page).

While you're at it, a News and Photo search (keyword **News Search**) provides all relevant news articles and photographs for your topic within the past 30 days. And keyword **Research** takes you to a trove of sources for more information about your topic, including a dictionary, a thesaurus, an almanac (behind the [More Resources](#) link), the *World Book Encyclopedia*, and map libraries.

Look for more information on newsgroups in Chapter 17. If you need more search and find help, check out Chapter 16.

Enjoying a Little Chat

The People Connection (click the People button on the toolbar or use keyword **Chat**) is the home of the America Online chat areas. Interactively talk (well, *type*) with other America Online subscribers at all hours of the day or night. All this chat happens in what the technology jockeys call *real time*, which is a fancy way of saying that right after you type a message, the other people in that chat area see it on their screens, wherever they are in the world.

The chat areas usually hold a maximum of 36 people.

When Problems Come Up

Compared to other online services, America Online offers an awesome array of support options. You can find online chat areas, interactive tutorials, step-by-step walkthroughs, discussion boards, and even an old-fashioned, pick-up-the-phone-and-call-a-human line. Whew — it really has you covered.

Precisely where you look for answers depends on the problem afflicting you at the moment. Here's a quick guide to help you find assistance fast:



- ✓ If anyone asks for your password or account information through e-mail or an instant message, do *not* give him or her any information — the person lies. Instead, flip to Chapter 4 immediately. It unmask these perilous hoaxes and tells you how to handle them through AOL's built-in security tools, like keyword **Notify**.
- ✓ If you can't sign on, call the America Online Technical Guru Department at 800-827-3338. Wade through the menu prompts, cross your fingers, and get ready to work through your problem with one of the helpful America Online technical-support folks. If you call at one of the system's peak times (such as early in the evening), keep some reading material handy because you may be on hold for a while.
- ✓ If you can sign on but don't know how to do something (for example, send an e-mail or read your Internet newsgroups), look in this book first because the information is probably in here somewhere. If I left it out, you have my apologies (goodness knows, I tried to cover everything). For more help, try the AOL Help center (keyword **Help**) and click the topic that's causing you grief. Want assistance from a real human? Visit the Live Help area (keyword **Live Help**) for an online chat with a helpful AOL staffer. If you prefer an automated tour approach to learning, go over to the Show Me area at keyword **Show Me**. For a more in-depth approach, spend some time in the People Connection's Help Exchange discussion area (keyword **Help Exchange**). Pose your question there so that fellow AOL members can offer their best solutions.



For general assistance with online conduct, viruses, scams, and account security, take a look at AOL Safety, Security, and Privacy (keyword **Safety & Security**). It covers all that and more.

Handling the Rude, the Crude, and the Socially Maladjusted

Few things spoil a perfectly wonderful online evening quite like an annoying oddball in your favorite chat room, a persistently pestering instant message, or an obnoxious e-mail. When problems arise, you need to take action, and this section points you in the right direction.

The following list explains how to handle the various (and unfortunately common) annoyances of online life. If something comes up that's not on the list, check keywords **Help**, **Safety & Security**, **Notify AOL**, or **TOS** (AOL's Terms of Service area) for suggestions.



- ✓ **Disrupting a chat room:** Click the Notify AOL button at the bottom-right side of the chat window to report the problem and summon help. Fill out the brief form and then click the Send button.
- ✓ **Someone just asked for your password in an instant message:** Click the Notify AOL button in the Instant Message window to open the I Need Help dialog box, and then follow the instructions from there. If you're in a chat room, be sure to warn everyone else that someone is fishing for passwords! If you accidentally did give out your password, go immediately (and I mean right-now-don't-wait-to-think) to keyword **Password** and change your account password.
- ✓ **Annoying instant messages:** Don't close the Instant Message window just yet. Instead, click the Notify AOL button in the Instant Message window to open the Notify AOL dialog box, and then follow the on-screen instructions carefully to complete your report.
- ✓ **Questionable e-mail messages:** To report e-mail problems, click the Forward button in the bothersome e-mail message and send it to screen name **TOSReports**. If someone you don't know sends you an e-mail message with an attached file, *do not download the file!* Instead, forward the message directly to the same screen name, **TOSReports**. The odds are *very* good that the file could mess up your computer or set up something to steal your America Online password, both of which fall under the *not a good thing* heading.



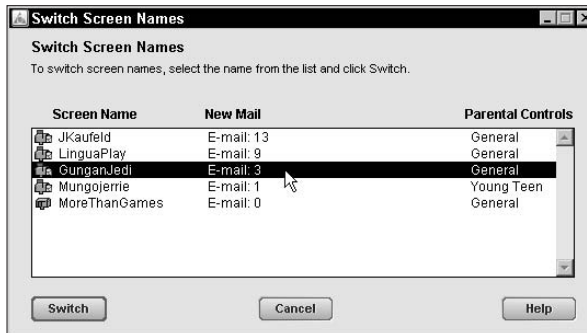
For help reporting other problems, such as raunchy screen names, vulgar member profiles, or tasteless America Online member Web sites, go to keyword **Notify AOL** and click the appropriate button to display the correct reporting window.

When It's Time to Say Goodbye

All good things must come to an end, and so it is with America Online. But signing off from the system is quick and painless. Here's a quick list of goodbye (and goodbye-related) options in the America Online 9.0 software:

- ✓ To sign off from the system, choose **Sign Off**⇨**Sign Off** from the menu bar. This action closes your online connection and leaves you sitting quietly in front of the main America Online window.
- ✓ To switch to another screen name, choose **Sign Off**⇨**Switch Screen Name** from the menu bar. In the Switch Screen Name dialog box (shown in Figure 2-3), double-click the name you want to use, and follow the on-screen instructions for typing your new password. In just a moment, America Online signs your other screen name on to the system — and you don't even have to redial the phone! For more about creating new screen names, see Chapter 6.
- ✓ To shut down the America Online software, choose **File**⇨**Exit**. You're finished!

Figure 2-3:
Moving from one screen name to another is easy with the Switch Screen Names feature.



Finally, save some power by shutting down your computer and monitor. Years ago, the computer tech folks recommended leaving your computer turned on all the time as a way of keeping the machine healthy. While this advice made some small degree of sense back then, it also wasted a lot of electricity in the process. Today's machines don't suffer from regular starting and stopping.

Wait — there's more!

This chapter doesn't even begin to tell you what's available out in the wilds of America Online. Come to think of it, that's what the rest of this book does:

- ✔ To find out more about a specific channel, go exploring! Choose a channel from the list, and then start clicking everything in sight. Okay, it *sounds* a little odd, but you really do uncover the coolest stuff this way. Trust me.
- ✔ To follow the biddings of your own interests, look in the chapters of Part IV.
- ✔ If you feel the need to follow other interests, the kitchen is down the hall on the left.

Chapter 3

Peering through AOL's Windows

In This Chapter

- ▶ Browsing the menus
 - ▶ Camping on the toolbar
 - ▶ Cruising with the navigation bar
 - ▶ Touring the main windows
-

Only one thing stands between you and the online world. It's . . . it's . . . the America Online user interface! (*Insert scary organ music here.*)

No, it's not something else you need to buy. The term *user interface* is just a fancy way of describing the menus, buttons, and goodies you use to interact with a program. It's like an automobile engineer looking at the layout of a dashboard and thinking, "Golly, that's a clever user interface." (Yes, despite the various specialties, most engineers respond to the simplest thing in a predictably unintelligible way — they're just that way.)

This chapter covers the main parts of the America Online 9.0 user interface: the windows, the toolbar, the navigation bar, and the main menu. Whether you use these tools together or separately doesn't matter, because they make your life a little easier either way (and that's more than you can say for most software on the market).

Starting at the Top with the Menu, Toolbar, and Navigation Bar

Sometimes, the best way to get something done involves going straight to the top. In the America Online software, that means raising your eyes upwards to the heavens — or at least to the top of your screen. There, you find the three key pieces of the America Online interface: the main menu, the toolbar, and the navigation bar.

The main menu

Unlike the last few versions of the America Online software, 9.0 *finally* returns the main menu (shown in Figure 3-1) to its rightful position as the focal point of online activity. Better still, the programmers reorganized things so the menu structure follows the generally accepted layout used by pretty much every other Windows application in the world. That means you won't need to guess where the Print command, for instance, might live in the new software. It's exactly where every other Windows program puts it, in the File menu. Thank goodness for small consistencies!

Figure 3-1:
America
Online's
main menu
stands
ready to
assist you.



File	Edit	Mail	Community	Services	Window	Keyword	Sign Off	Help
------	------	------	-----------	----------	--------	---------	----------	------

In addition to helping you with mundane things, such as printing and finding a window that's lost in the visual shuffle, the main menu also gives you quick access to e-mail features, community areas, and all kinds of AOL services. The following list gives a quick description of each menu so you know where to look for what:

- ✔ **File:** The File menu governs everything dealing with text (such as news articles, bulletin-board postings, and forum announcements), files, digital photos, downloads, and other trivialities, such as exiting the America Online access program (but who'd ever want to do that?). The CD/Media Player also lives in here, as does the Filing Cabinet (now known by the Mail Saved on My PC menu item), the Log Manager, and the Print command.
- ✔ **Edit:** Just about every Windows program has an Edit menu, and thankfully the America Online software *isn't* an exception to the rule. The Edit menu contains basic text-editing tools, such as Cut, Copy, and Paste, the built-in spell checker, links to the online dictionary and thesaurus, and the clever little Capture Picture menu item, which lets you make a photograph with your Web camera.
- ✔ **Mail:** The many e-mail functions moved back to the main menu in this edition of the America Online software. Dive into the Mail menu for everything from checking your new mail to reading the mail saved on your computer (to the same Filing Cabinet area you found in the File

menu). This menu also includes the new Set Away Message feature, which tells AOL to send one of those nifty “I’m away from my computer and am actively ignoring you” messages to everybody who drops an e-mail into your box.

- ✔ **Community:** A new addition to the software, the Community window covers the fun things that help you link up with other America Online members. It includes chat rooms, the Match Chat feature, your Buddy List, member profiles, the Member Directory, and the searchable online white pages. To promote communications within the community, it also contains links to Hometown, the AOL Journals, the Groups system, the message boards, and the Internet newsgroups.
- ✔ **Services:** Frankly, I don’t really grasp what the programmers wanted to accomplish with the Services menu. It’s a rather weird mix of unrelated items, much like the junk drawer in my kitchen. Entries for the Calendar and You’ve Got Pictures sit next to Car Buying, Classified Ads, and the Yellow Pages. Sports Scores, TV Listings, Recipe Finder, and Homework Help round out the menu. It’s kinda different.
- ✔ **Window:** This menu is a whoa-I-have-too-many-windows-open navigational lifesaver. If you misplace an Instant Message window or lose track of your Web browser, head to the Window menu and find it right away in the ever-changing open windows list at the bottom of this menu.
- ✔ **Keyword:** Zoom around America Online at lightning speed with the Keyword menu. This tiny little menu helps you prowl through all of the keywords on the system and quickly brings up the Keyword dialog box. Strangely, it also contains a link to the downloadable AOL 9.0 quick reference manual. (I guess they ran out of room on the Services menu.)
- ✔ **Sign Off:** When it’s time to hit the trail and mosey off to other matters, head to the Sign Off menu. As the name implies, this menu signs you off of America Online. It also lets you switch between your screen names *without* signing off, which makes life a whole lot easier for people who use a modem.
- ✔ **Help:** If you have trouble getting on America Online, check the Help menu for assistance. This menu isn’t particularly good at helping you with problems *after* signing on to the system (you can get help faster by just pressing the F1 key), but it does a great job with the *before* sign-on problems, such as when your computer refuses to connect with AOL.



Most of the menu options stay available all of the time, but some (particularly the ones in the Edit menu) appear gray every now and then. When a menu item looks a little sickly and doesn’t work, it means that software thinks the menu item isn’t relevant to whatever you’re doing right then. For instance, you can’t copy something with Edit⇨Copy until you highlight your selection by clicking and dragging the mouse over it. Grayed-out menu items don’t mean that your software is broken, only that it’s bored.

The toolbar

Immediately below the main menu you find the big, friendly, graphical toolbar, displayed in Figure 3-2. This clever piece of navigational assistance provides single-click access to the most-requested online tools and areas. It also offers an easy-to-customize personal button area, with plenty of room for links to all of your favorite areas.

Figure 3-2:
For quick access to the most-used features, turn to the toolbar.



The mixture and position of toolbar buttons change depending on the Parental Controls for the current screen name and the amount of customization you did inside your software. If the left side of your toolbar doesn't look like the one in Figure 3-2, then your screen name probably has a Parental Controls age restriction on it, like Mature Teen or Young Teen. If the right side of the toolbar looks different, that's perfectly normal. That side contains user-created customizable buttons. Although AOL populates the area with a few entries just to get you started, most everybody replaces them with their own choices.

Unlike earlier versions, the AOL 9.0 toolbar contains buttons — pretty, graphical buttons to be sure, but simple buttons nonetheless. In other recent versions of the America Online software, the programmers experimented with a truly groundbreaking and completely misguided interface design where some buttons acted like buttons, while others revealed drop-down menus. After several years of wondering why nobody seemed to understand how the buttons worked, someone thankfully pulled the plug on the experiment and put back the old-fashioned buttons that simply do what they should.

Here's a quick look at what each of the permanent buttons (the ones on the left side of the toolbar) do for you:

- ✓ **Read:** Opens the mailbox window and displays your new mail. This button works just like selecting **M**ail → **R**ead Mail from the main menu. Hover the mouse pointer over this button to display the Mail QuickView window, showing information about your ten most recent e-mail messages.

- ✔ **Write:** Create a new e-mail message from scratch. Either click this button or select **Mail**⇨**Write Mail** on the main menu.
- ✔ **IM:** Send a new instant message to someone. Click this button to get a blank Instant Message window, just waiting for your attention.
- ✔ **People:** Brings up the People Connection window (keyword **People Connection**) for chatting, connecting, and more.
- ✔ **Safety:** This area explains security issues such as virus protection, Parental Controls, and safe communication with others you meet online. You can also get here with keyword **Safety & Security**.
- ✔ **Settings:** Takes you into the rather voluminous AOL Settings window (the same as keyword **Settings**). See Chapter 5 for more about the many options in here.
- ✔ **Music:** Click here to visit AOL's awesome music portal at keyword **Music**. Songs, videos, stories and more — if it's music, it's here.
- ✔ **Finance:** Delivers the AOL Personal Finance window (keyword **Personal Finance**). If you hover the mouse pointer over this button, you get the Finance QuickView window, with a quick snapshot of the markets and links to your online portfolios.

The whole right side of the toolbar (framed with a shaded color) contains the customizable buttons. For the lowdown on turning this part of the toolbar into your personal collection of favorite destinations, turn to Chapter 21.



When you can't remember the details about a particular button, click it and see what happens! You can't hurt your computer or your AOL software by clicking a button. Get adventurous and do some exploring!

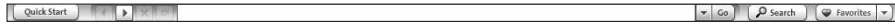
The navigation bar

Just below the toolbar is a thin little group of controls known as the *navigation bar*. Even though the navigation bar is small, it plays a vital role in your time on America Online by acting as both your native guide and skillful scribe.

The navigation bar includes only a few controls, but what these controls lack in number, they make up for in power. Here's a quick breakdown, from left to right, of the cool things awaiting you (for a complete multimedia experience, follow along with Figure 3-3 as you read the following out loud — but don't let anybody see you do it, okay?):

Figure 3-3:

The navigation bar: small, but jam-packed.



- ✓ **Quick Start button:** This little guy makes the floating Quick Start window reappear if you closed it at some point in time. (Really — that's it. The button doesn't do anything else. Kind of a boring existence, isn't it?)
- ✓ **Browser buttons:** The four buttons on the left side of the navigation bar provide the basic features you need to steer through the Web. (The buttons work with America Online–based information areas, too, although it takes some practice before you get the hang of it.) The right- and left-pointing triangle buttons are Back and Forward. The Back button takes you to the Web site or information area you last saw, and the Forward button returns you to the page you were on when you clicked Back. The X button is Stop, which whacks your America Online software over the head, making it lose its concentration for a moment and stop whatever it's doing. The curly arrow is the Reload button, which tells your Web browser to reload the current page. (It doesn't work with America Online areas.)
- ✓ **Address box:** This handy box saves you time and energy by accepting both America Online keywords and Web addresses. This always-present box does *mostly* the same thing as the Keyword dialog box (the one that appears when you click the AOL Keyword button or press Ctrl+K). Just type a keyword or Web address in the box and then press Enter or click Go. If it's a Web address, then America Online immediately whisks you away to the appointed online destination. If it's a keyword, the system takes you to a search page, listing the keyword at the top of the page, along with lots of related Web sites. (It's a strange behavior, but helpful in its own odd way.)
- ✓ **Go button:** Click this button to visit the keyword or Web address in the Address box. (If you prefer a keyboard-oriented approach, just press the Enter key instead of messing with the Go button.)
- ✓ **Search button:** One click opens the Search window, just like keyword **Search**. The Search window offers links to the main AOL Search system, the Image Search system, and the Website Directory.
- ✓ **Favorites button:** Displays the Favorites window, with all of your carefully saved Favorite Places in it. If you click the down-arrow part of the Favorites button, the software displays a drop-down menu with your Favorite Places, plus menu items for your personalized Hotkeys, Toolbar menu additions, and an option that adds the top window to your Favorites.

The navigation bar always appears below the toolbar, no matter how you configure your America Online software. So there.

Meeting Your Windows on the World

Everywhere you go on America Online, you find windows. Welcome windows, information area windows, search windows — sheesh, spring cleaning around here must be a *total* nightmare.

Although a bunch of stacked-up windows seem a little confusing at first, they make America Online the special place that it is. Ever since the early days of the service, the developers built America Online with the Microsoft Windows graphical way of life in mind — and it shows.

This section introduces the windows that appear every time America Online springs into action. Details about the content areas (the stuff you get to by clicking links in these windows) come later in this book. For now, sit back, grab a bottle of spray cleaner, and head for the windows of your digital world.

Getting to know the twins: Welcome and QuickView

Looking for the right place to start your online expedition? Try the Welcome and QuickView windows, shown respectively in Figures 3-4 and 3-5. From here, the news, weather, e-mail, and pretty much everything else inside America Online is only a quick jump away. You can even pick some of what you see and how you see it!

Every time you sign on to America Online, this helpful pair of windows leaps into action. Figure 3-4 shows the dynamic window duo on an average day. The Welcome window offers a great big “Hi there — welcome to the system!” It’s like an electronic version of the Wal-Mart door greeter, only better. This greeter doesn’t just wish you well; it says hi, tells you the top news headlines, keeps tabs on your e-mail box, and never hits you with a shopping cart.

Several key areas make up the Welcome window, although the details of what appears in each section depend greatly on which Welcome window layout you selected at keyword **Change My Welcome Screen**. The options range from a focus on business, news, and sports to details about movies, music, and online fun. Whichever one you select, you always get a big center section that displays the top news stories and your key interest areas, your local weather forecast, and plenty of buttons leading to online tools (e-mail, Radio@AOL, and such) and areas relating to your interests.



Figure 3-4:
How's this
for a warm
welcome?

The fascinating new QuickView window lives behind the Welcome window. To see it, click the QuickView tab in the upper-left corner of the Welcome window. Things immediately shift on-screen, leaving you with a large six-pane window that's yours to customize almost as much as you want, as shown in Figure 3-5.

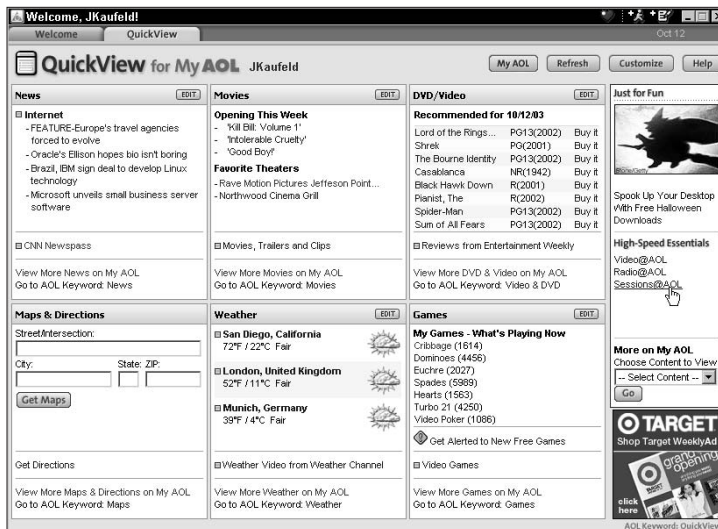


Figure 3-5:
Click the
QuickView
tab to
display the
QuickView
window.



Almost as much as you want!? Yes, *almost*. By clicking the Customize button on the upper-right side of the QuickView window, you get to select which items appear in here. That's the *customizable* part. The *almost as much as you want* part enters the picture because you only get to choose from the options your AOL software offers. So, if you want an area about DVDs and videos, for instance, everything's great — that's one of the options in the list. If you want the top game headlines from the More Than Games Web site (www.morethangames.com), you're sunk. The moral of the story: QuickView works really well, but only with its pre-set selection of choices. Express yourself by customizing your QuickView window, but do it with the same options that everybody else gets. It's individual conformity, raised to a whole new level.

Incidentally, whatever you choose for the QuickView window *also* appears in your Web-based My AOL window (keyword **My AOL**). That's why some of the QuickView options let you select *far* more things than could possibly fit into the little window.



A tale of three icons

Once upon a time, three little icons — a heart, a guy, and a pad of paper — left their homes to seek fame and fortune in the world. At some point in the journey, they wandered into the office of a sad programmer at America Online. The programmer needed three stylish icons to appear atop every window in his software, but he couldn't find any icons that fit the part. When the icons and the programmer saw each other for the first time, brilliant sunlight streamed through the window, an orchestral interlude swelled in the background, and everybody looked around trying to figure out where the light and the music were coming from.

Okay, so it probably didn't happen that way, but that's one explanation for the three buttons that appear in the upper-right title bar of the windows inside America Online. Each button helps you either save or share a link to the current window.

✔ **Heart icon:** Click the Heart icon (the one of the far left) to display a little Favorites dialog box, which lets you add the current window to your Favorite Places, make a toolbar

button for it, or insert a link for the area into an instant message or an e-mail.

✔ **AOL man icon:** When you see the little guy (the middle icon), think *speed!* Think *action!* Think *insert a link for the current window in an instant message!* Granted, it's a long thought, but that's what the little fellow does. And yes, this does exactly the same thing as clicking the Heart icon and then selecting the Insert in Instant Message option — this just works faster.

✔ **Paper icon:** Clicking this button (the one on the far right) creates a new e-mail message that includes a link to the current window. It even inserts a catchy subject line based on the window's title bar.

Older versions of the AOL software show only one button instead of three in the upper-right corner of the window. The solitary button looks like a heart on a piece of paper. It works just like the happy Heart icon does in the new 9.0 software.

Watching your friends with the Buddy List

Ah, the Buddy List. It's America Online's answer to the musical question, "Who can I talk to right now?" By adding all of your friends, acquaintances, business associates, family members, neighbors, and package delivery people to your Buddy List, you get an easy way to say hi, carry on a conversation, and generally see when they're using America Online, CompuServe, Wal-Mart Connect, or AIM (the AOL Instant Messenger).

I can tell you a lot more about the Buddy List — so much that this book contains a whole chapter devoted to the subject. Check out Chapter 9 to uncover the secrets, the value, and the clever options that drive this extremely useful part of your America Online toolkit.

Going anywhere with Quick Start

The third item in this jaunt through the windows also makes its first appearance in the America Online 9.0 software. The Quick Start window replaced the long-lived Channels window (still available at keyword **Channels** if you feel nostalgic) with a more compact, yet more feature-filled navigational experience.

In its top section, the long, tall Quick Start window offers buttons for fun things, such as AOL Search, online shopping, maps, movie times, and the yellow pages. If you click one of the five section headings filling out the rest of the window, a little swing-out menu appears, just like Figure 3-6 shows. These swing-out menus offer lots of links to related information areas all over AOL and the Internet.

Figure 3-6:
Click one of the Quick Start headings for an instant menu of related goodies.



Several specific options appear beneath each section heading. These entries work like simple buttons — click one, and a new window appears. Some of the windows bring up old Channel areas (such as News and Living), while others just lead to popular areas.



Unlike the QuickView window that I discussed previously, everything on the Quick Start window is pre-set. You can't move or change anything. Sorry, but that's just how it goes.

Chapter 4

Dealing with Spams, Scams, Viruses, and Hoaxes

In This Chapter

- ▶ Protecting your mailbox from the junk mail tsunami
 - ▶ Tuning the built-in anti-spam tools
 - ▶ Hiding your address from harvesting programs
 - ▶ Keeping your password a secret
 - ▶ Avoiding password scams
 - ▶ Keeping your computer healthy and virus-free
 - ▶ Recognizing an online hoax when you see one
-

Dear AOL member, you just received an AOL InstaKiss. . . . Due to technical difficulties with our membership system, you must re-verify your account password. . . . Hello! I'm Bill Gates. I need your help to test my new e-mail tracking system. . . . Walt Disney, Jr. wants to send you \$5,000. . . . Don't break the chain! Send this to everyone you know, and the love you want will come to you. . . . Hi! We met in the chat room yesterday. Here are the pix I promised to send you. . . .

Just when you thought visiting your e-mail box was safe, out come the spams, scams, hoaxes, and other annoyances of online life. Like their snail mail counterparts, junk e-mail comes in all shapes and sizes, with varying degrees of apparent officiality and believability. Worse yet, some of the messages mask outright scams designed to steal your account password, cost you money, or generally mess up your tidy online world.

Protect yourself from these mailbox perils with the tips and information in this chapter. The following pages cover the seamy realms of junk e-mail, online hoaxes, common password scams, and virus-infection schemes. Forewarned is forearmed (as opposed to being four-footed or something), so read these pages carefully. Do your part to make the online world safe!

Spam, Spam Everywhere and None of It to Eat

When it comes to bulk e-mail, I feel sorry for the Hormel company. Granted, I feel sorry for everyone who deals with junk e-mail, but Hormel gets particular sympathy. Somewhere in the Internet's past, unsolicited commercial e-mail (or *UCE*, as it's officially known these days) earned the nickname *spam*. Thus, Hormel's unstoppable juggernaut of canned cuisine innocently became the mascot of e-mail frustration.

No matter what you call it — spam, bulk e-mail, UCE, or digital trash — the stuff pops unbidden into your mailbox. The advertisements run the gamut from questionable penny-stock tips to discount long-distance phone cards, plus everything you can imagine in between.

You can't *completely* stop junk e-mail without blocking your mailbox from most of the digital world (although some days, that option certainly sounds tempting), but you *can* slow the deluge down to a mere trickle. By combining the following tips with the powerful spam-fighting tools built into America Online 9.0 (covered later in this chapter), precious few spam messages can evade detection and — best of all — deletion. Here's what to do:



- ✔ If the message includes removal instructions, *ignore them*. Being the ever-idealistic Midwesterner, I originally suggested at least trying the removal instructions. Thousands of junk mails later, I changed my mind. Spammers are notorious for ignoring removal requests or (worse) using your reply as the basis for a new round of spamming.
- ✔ Register your e-mail address with the Direct Marketing Association's E-mail Preference Service. This service represents at least a *step* in the right direction. Sure, it works only for companies that belong to the Direct Marketing Association, but at least it's a beginning. To register, just go to www.dmaconsumers.org/consumerassistance.html, and then click the [How to get your name off e-mail lists](#) link. The system accepts up to three e-mail addresses at a time. When the E-mail Preference Service sends you a follow-up notice through e-mail, use the link in the message to activate your removal listing.
- ✔ Although we can't stop bulk e-mail altogether (the Internet is, after all, an international thing), we *can* outlaw its use by United States–based companies. Contact your representatives in Washington and let them know how you feel. The My Government area (keyword **My Government**) helps you find your congressional representatives, send e-mail to them, and track their voting records.

- ✔ Congress responds best when besieged by large numbers of people, so the folks at the Spam Recycling Center (www.spamrecycle.com) collect unsolicited commercial e-mail and forward it all to your elected officials in Washington. Check the Web site for the Spam Recycling Center's forwarding address and other special instructions. (By the way, its service costs nothing — the people who run it just hate spam.)
- ✔ If you receive junk e-mail that advertises a pyramid scheme, an illegal product, a lottery, or other such things and uses a good, old-fashioned postal address for replies, forward the message to the United States Postal Inspection Service (www.usps.com/postalinspectors), the law enforcement branch of the United States Postal Service.
- ✔ Living in Canada already has its plusses (it's one heckuva beautiful country, eh?), but when dealing with spam, the Canadians are really ahead of the game. Spam is illegal in Canada, so if you live on the northern end of the continent, send your spam complaints to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca).



Despite the fact that spammers want you to *think* that their activities are legal and aboveboard, as I write this book, *no* national laws regulate bulk e-mail. Although Congress took a few tentative steps toward those controls, in the end, members just talked a lot and stopped far short of any real action (a typical Washington maneuver). Numerous individual states already passed anti-spam laws, so check with your State Attorney General's office to find out how things work where you live.

Canning Spam with AOL 9.0

Great news! After our many years of sighing, grumbling, and grouching, the America Online developers finally heard our collective cries. AOL 9.0 gives members their first real weapons to fight junk e-mail. The America Online 9.0 anti-spam arsenal pairs up some old friends (the Address Book, Buddy List, and Mailbox window) with a hefty new recruit — namely the Mail and Spam Controls (keyword **Spam Controls**) that puts *you* in charge of your mailbox.

The Address Book, Buddy List, and Show Me Mail From tool

The junk-mail counterattack begins in your Address Book and Buddy List. If you never used the AOL Address Book before, *start now!* Store e-mail addresses for everybody you know and regularly correspond with in the Address Book. Why? Because the new sorting tools treat the Address Book (and your Buddy List) as a master list of people you *want* to get mail from.

With your Address Book armed and ready, turn your attention to your e-mail inbox. There, AOL 9.0's Show Me Mail From tool organizes your messages based on who sent them, and all with a single click. On the Online Mailbox window, click the Show Me Mail From drop-down list. The software offers five display options, outlined in Table 4-1.

<i>This Setting</i>	<i>Shows These Messages</i>
Everyone	Everybody — every message the mailbox contains
People I know	Messages that match entries in your Address Book
Bulk senders	E-mail that the sender's program marked as bulk mail (a relatively uncommon thing)
Unknown senders	Messages without any sender information — 99.9% spam
All related mail	All e-mails sent on the same date, with the same subject, or from the same person as the message highlighted in the mailbox

Each message also gets marked with a distinct icon, making scanning messages easy. Mail from people you know earns a plain white envelope icon, bulk mail looks like a package wrapped in brown paper, and messages from everybody else show up as a manila-colored envelope.



To make the most of the mail-sorting tools, keep your Address Book entries up to date! Otherwise, you might miss messages that you really want to see when the software accidentally sorts them into the wrong stack. Oops.

The spam controls

Now that the old tools are in place and operating smoothly, turn your attention to the AOL Advanced Spam Filter and the other Mail and Spam Controls behind keyword **Spam Controls**. With this group of goodies, America Online 9.0 definitely kicks the anti-spam battle up a notch. Now, it's all-out *war*.

The biggest anti-spam tool works automatically, behind the scenes. Your personalized Advanced Spam Filter scrutinizes every single message that comes into your mailbox. If something looks like junk e-mail, the Advanced Spam Filter puts the message into the Spam Folder. Best of all, the filter doesn't just rely on other people's judgment — it actually learns what *you* consider junk e-mail. That's where the filter's partner, the Report Spam button (near the bottom of the mailbox window), comes into play.

If some junk e-mail finds its way into your mailbox despite all of your precautions, use the message to train America Online 9.0's custom spam filter. Highlight the message by clicking it once in the mailbox list and then click the happy little Report Spam button. The message immediately disappears from your mailbox, and the Advanced Spam Filter makes some notes about it (including the subject, sender, and other highly technical tidbits). The next time a message like this one arrives, your personalized filter automatically shoves it into the Spam Folder instead of dropping it into your mailbox.



To see the messages that the filter didn't like, click the [Spam Folder](#) link in the lower-left corner of the mailbox window. That shifts the mailbox view around a bit, taking you to the Manage Mail tab and the Spam folder therein. Most of the time, you can use the Delete All button to dump all the dead junk mail out of your world. If the filter accidentally sends a *good* e-mail message here, give the filter another lesson by highlighting the message and clicking the This Is Not Spam button. That moves the message back into your regular mailbox and clears the incorrect filter settings that caused the problem in the first place.

You can tighten up things even more with the settings in the Mail and Spam Controls window, shown in Figure 4-1 (keyword **Spam Controls**). The settings in here include controls on who you accept mail from, what your spam filter does with blocked mail (send it to the Spam folder or just delete it), and whether or not you want to use the Advanced Spam Filter. You also can banish all messages containing clickable hyperlinks and any messages containing certain words that you list.

Figure 4-1:
The Mail
and Spam
Controls
window.





Focus your spam-fighting efforts on teaching the Advanced Spam Filter its job. The more messages that you kill with the Report Spam button (and save with the This Is Not Spam button), the sharper your filters get. Unless you really, really, really hate junk e-mail and don't mind deleting a few valid messages as the cost of your crusade, don't go overboard on the blocking settings in the dialog box. Instead, let the Advanced Spam Filter do its thing.

Fooling the Bulk Mail Behemoth

Unless you move into the online equivalent of a cave in the hills, you can't completely stop bulk e-mail from dumping into your mailbox. But you *can* cut the flow from a torrent to a trickle.



The following sections provide two hands-on ways to protect your mailbox. Because they protect different parts of your online experience, feel free to apply both ideas to your America Online screen names.

Make a screen name especially for chatting

Chatting adds community to the often cold online world. Unfortunately, chatting also leads to a jam-packed e-mail inbox because spammers spend a lot of time gathering screen names from chat-room lists (even though it's against America Online's rules). Protect yourself with a simple technique — make a chat room screen name.

Now that America Online gives you seven screen names per account (and 16 characters in each screen name), you have plenty of space for an extra identity or two. Granted, you need to tell your friends about the *new you*, but it's a small price to pay for less junk mail in your mailbox. Here's what to do:

1. First, choose a new name for your chat identity and create the screen name.

If people already know you in the chat rooms, use a variation of your current name with chat, chats, or something like that attached to the end (such as JKaufeldChats).

For help creating a new screen name, flip ahead to Chapter 6.

2. Set the mail controls for the new screen name to block all e-mail.

This step holds the big key for mailbox protection because it kills the spammer's main tool. Your chat screen name isn't any good to them,

because all the incoming mail bounces off the closed mailbox door. (Don't worry — both your friends and folks you meet in chat rooms can still send you mail. Read on to find the secret!)

To dive straight into the controls, visit keyword **Mail Controls**. For more detail, visit Chapter 7. It offers the lowdown on the mail controls, plus lots more.

3. Build a member profile for the chat screen name. In the profile, tell people to send e-mail to your regular screen name.

Because the spammer's name-gathering software doesn't intelligently read profiles, your other screen name is protected while you chat the night away. For more information on member profiles, check out Chapter 6.

Protect your e-mail address in Internet newsgroup postings

Use the newsgroup preferences to add some extra text to the end of your e-mail address, turning it from an innocent address such as `jkaufeld@aol.com` into `jkaufeld@aol.comkillallspam` (which is both an incorrect e-mail address and a heartfelt personal expression concerning unsolicited commercial e-mail). Putting this protection in place takes only a moment:

1. Open the Newsgroups window with keyword Newsgroups.

If all is well with the online world, the Newsgroups window appears. (If not, America Online's computers don't feel well right now.)

2. Click the Set Preferences button near the bottom of the window.

This displays the Global Newsgroup Preferences, a somewhat imposing window with three tabbed pages.

3. Click the Posting tab.

A new set of preferences hops onto the screen, including the one you want.

4. Click in the text area next to the Junk Block heading, and then type something like `nospam` or `nojunk`. After you finish, click the Save button.

With that setting in place, every time you create an Internet newsgroup message, America Online automatically adds whatever text you typed (the *nospam* or *nojunk* thing) to the end of your e-mail address (because every message includes your address automatically).

What If You Just Gave Your Password to Someone?

If you just gave someone your password, don't panic — these things happen. Go to keyword **Password** and then change your password to something new and different. It takes only a moment.

The best passwords include a combination of letters and numbers, so try things like `blue17hat` or `trainfun47`. Don't make your password obvious (even if it's easy to remember). Never use things such as your name, your phone number, the word `password`, or a simple sequence such as `123456`, `ASDFJKL`, or `000000`.



America Online *never* handles password problems through e-mail or instant messages. The *real* America Online customer service folks don't know your password (it's encrypted and stored in the big computers at AOL-land), they won't ask for your password (especially not for personal identification), and they don't want to know your password if you change it. For that matter, they don't want your credit card number, either (well, they may *want* it, but that's another issue).

If Someone Asks for Your Password, Just Say "No"

Someone asking for your password ranks as one of the oldest scams in the online world, but it catches people every day. The password scam comes in a variety of flavors, but the bottom line remains the same: The scammer wants your account password and will lie, cheat, and use any trick he can to get it.



Regardless of the particular scam's details, some basics always stay the same. For instance, they always ask for your password (granted, some variants ask for your credit card number, but the thought remains the same). Regardless of the approach, your reply never changes! If you get an instant message or e-mail asking for your password, credit card number, or other personal information, do not fall for the trap — *don't give out your information*. The message is a scam.

Defeating instant message scams

Instant message scams are the easiest to recognize and avoid. No company in the world — not America Online, American Express, AT&T, MasterCard, Visa,

or anyone else — will send you an instant message asking for account information, credit card numbers, or passwords. They just don't do business that way. Ever. (That kinda simplifies sorting out the real messages from the scams.)

If you get an instant message that asks for your America Online password, credit card number, or any other personal information, click the Notify AOL button in the message window. When the Notify AOL window pops up, briefly explain that you think the attached message is a scam and click the Send Report button. Congratulations — you just turned in the scammer!

When a scam appears on your screen while you're in a chat room, take a moment to warn the chat room that a scammer is trying to get passwords. After spreading the warning, use the Notify AOL button to ruin the scammer's day.

Unmasking e-mail scams

Although some e-mail scams look pretty authentic, they're still just a variation on the *give me your password* or *I want your credit card number* themes. If you stick with the basic knowledge that no legitimate company in the world asks for personal information unless *you* start the transaction, you're on pretty safe ground.

Some scammers try the high-tech approach to getting your password by building imposter Web sites that borrow America Online's own Web graphics or service names (such as InstaKiss, AOL Mail, or Shop@AOL). Because they still have to trick you into coughing up your screen name and password, the scammers often create fake sites mimicking America Online's actual pages at `americangreetings.com` or `aol.com` (addresses that the scammers *can't* fake). Other scam messages promote fictional contests allegedly sponsored by America Online or another well-known business, which "require" a screen name and password for the contest entry.



A new e-mail scam — arriving just in time for the busy holiday shopping season — involves fake online shopping invoices. Figure 4-2 shows a live sample that recently arrived in my mailbox. Here's the scam: You receive an e-mail message recounting a recent online order that you allegedly placed, usually for something around \$100. In addition to the fake order information, the message also includes a *cancel this order* link. Clicking the cancellation link whisks you away to the scammer's Web site, which (in the name of ending the imaginary order) collects a full set of information about you, including your America Online screen name and password, plus a credit card number and street address. Whoops.

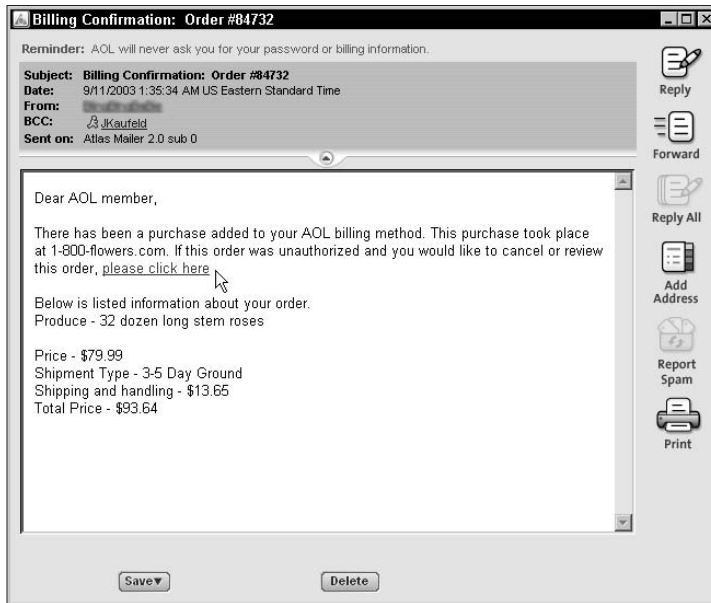


Figure 4-2:
This scam tries to make you think that someone's using your credit card.



No matter how genuine something looks, remember the basics: America Online won't ask for your password, street address, credit card number, or any other information through e-mail or an instant message. And if they do throw a contest, you *never* have to give your account password or credit card number to submit an entry.

How did they find my screen name?

You can run, but you can't hide — no matter how hard you try, they seem to always find your screen name. The next thing you know, the e-mailbox bulges from all the junk. But how did they get your address in the first place?

This happens in two ways. The lazy spammers (which sounds somewhat redundant now that I think about it) just blast out millions of messages. They don't even try to find your address — they simply start with a@aol.com and keep going until they get to zzzzzzzzzzzzz@aol.com.

Other spammers actively harvest addresses from chat rooms, message boards, Internet newsgroups, and even online classified ads! With the names in hand, they start the box-filling flow of messages that you and I struggle with today. For tips about beating these spammers at their own game, flip ahead to the end of the chapter.

Here's how to tell the *real* thing from the *wrong* thing every time:

- ✔ To visit a real America Online–based area, you use a keyword such as **Shop@AOL** or a Web site attached to the `aol.com` domain. You can't accidentally visit a fake online area through an America Online keyword, because scammers can't fake a keyword. They also can't fake the `aol.com` domain because America Online guards it closely. On the other hand, *anyone* can put a fake link in an e-mail message. The moral of the story: If you don't know who sent a message, don't click any links in it.
- ✔ If you visit a suspicious Web site, look carefully at the address displayed in the navigation bar. Genuine America Online services *never* display a computer's numeric address (such as `65.61.162.226`). They also *never* use free Web-hosting services such as **50Mega** (`www.50megs.com`), **Fortune City** (`www.fortunecity.com`), **Freeservers.com** (`www.free.servers.com`), **HyperMart** (`www.hypermart.com`), or **Tripod** (`www.tripod.com`) for its information areas. Instead, it uses the `aol.com` servers, or servers belonging to its partners, such as **CNET** (`www.cnet.com`), **J.C. Penney** (`www.jcpenney.com`), **The New York Times** (`www.nytimes.com`), and the Time Warner companies (`www.pathfinder.com`).



When you receive an e-mail scam, forward the message to screen name `TOSEmail1` (that's TOSEMAIL with the number 1 attached to the end). The friendly folks at America Online's Community Action Team love getting e-mail like that.

Viruses Come in the Darnedest Packages

Despite their best efforts, healthy people sometimes come down with a common cold. They drink the right fluids, eat the best foods, and get plenty of sleep, but the cold still sneaks up and bites them. I guess it's just life's way of saying *it's time to read those new For Dummies books that you bought last month*.

Computer viruses behave the same way, but taking the right precautions dramatically improves the odds of keeping your computer healthy. And what precautions might those be? I'm glad you asked:

- ✔ **Don't download files attached to e-mails from people you don't know.** This is Cardinal Rule #1 of safe computing. Hackers often distribute password-stealing programs in e-mails with a friendly message like Had fun chatting with you in the room last night. Here are the

pictures I promised! This message seems innocent on the surface (except to your significant other), but it hides a nefarious plot. If you don't readily recognize the screen name sending the file to you, don't download the file.

- ✔ **Don't trust filenames.** Anyone can name a destructive file `fungame.exe`, `screensav.exe`, or `coolpic.exe` to camouflage its purpose. (After all, no hacker names something `infectyoursystem.exe`.) If you receive a file like that attached to an e-mail message, refer to the preceding paragraph. Do you know the sender? If not, don't download the file.
- ✔ **Watch out for suspicious file extensions.** The file extension is the last part of a filename (the part after the period). Never, never, never download a file with the `.shs`, `.scr`, or `.pif` extension (especially if the name looks like `kittenpix.jpg.shs`). Ninety-nine times out of fifty, it's a virus. Unless you know what you're doing and why you're doing it, don't download files ending in `.reg`. Those files tweak a very important part of Windows known as the Registry, which you don't adjust too often. Normal files have extensions such as `.exe`, `.com`, `.zip`, `.jpg`, and `.bmp` (although program files — the `.exe` and `.com` files — often harbor viruses, too). If you get a file that you don't recognize, go back to the first item in this section: If you don't know the sender, it's probably a virus or hacker program.

What if you think the computer already caught a virus? In that case, you need some digital medicine. Visit keyword **Virus** for virus-killing steps and antivirus software. If you don't want to tangle with the virus by yourself, coax one of your local computer-savvy friends into helping you (free food makes a great bribe, by the way).

Recognizing Hoaxes: No, Bill Gates Won't Give You \$5,000

The Internet hosts more hoaxes than the *Candid Camera* show crossed with the *National Enquirer*. Free money. Stolen kidneys. Expensive cookie recipes. Modem taxes. Worldwide Internet cleanup day. Free beer. Dying children longing to perch atop mountains of greeting cards. They all sound *sooooo* good, but despite a tiny grounding in reality (or simply a plausible concept), they're all classic Internet hoaxes.

When it comes to hoaxes, P.T. Barnum probably said it best: "Get that mule cart off my foot!" (Oh, drat — wrong quote.) Mr. Barnum's correct quote has to do with the way that a good story encourages people to suspend their disbelief and join in the fun, which is precisely what happens when an Internet hoax wanders into your mailbox. (Ol' P.T. phrased it a bit differently, but the concept remains the same.)



Rather than getting blindly sucked into a hoax, take a moment to mentally challenge the information in the message for yourself. Like the various scams discussed earlier in the chapter, Internet hoaxes follow a distinct pattern. After you know the pattern, picking out the hoaxes is easy. Here goes:

- ✔ **Free money or products thanks to an e-mail tracking system.** This one shows up quite a lot, promising thousands of dollars or free goodies to everyone who forwards the message to their friends. The message guarantees the reward thanks to an e-mail tracking system, which monitors every move the message makes. *Reality check:* There's no such thing as an e-mail tracking system, and if there was one, the privacy advocates would have collective heart failure over it. Besides, neither Bill Gates nor Walt Disney, Jr. really *wants* to give you \$5,000.
- ✔ **Strong statements from vague sources.** Many popular hoaxes rely on official-sounding statements attributed to police ("The Denver police report that . . .") or highly placed government officials. Unfortunately, you can't check on the details of the message because, well, it's not detailed enough. *Reality check:* Look at the Web sites of any groups mentioned in the message. Sometimes, the groups in question offer pages of information debunking various hoaxes.
- ✔ **Send this to all of your friends.** Whether the hoaxes are spooky or sane, timely or timeless, they all request the same Pavlovian behavior: Send the message immediately to everyone you know. The message's accuracy isn't the point — quick movement of this "important information" obviously outweighs little trivialities such as whether the whole thing is correct. *Reality check:* Little if any information really *needs* immediate delivery. Hoaxes count on immediacy because it interferes with research. When hoaxes hit your mailbox, sit on them for a few days before shooting a message back (er, replying to the sender).



For some great hoax-debunking resources, visit the CIAC Hoaxbusters page, at hoaxbusters.ciac.org. This great collection of Internet hoax resources covers just about every e-mail hoax that ever crossed the Net. (In case you wondered, the CIAC is part of the U.S. Department of Energy. The CIAC originally created the Hoaxbusters page for its own, internal use, but over time, people all over the Internet grew to use it.)



When debunking a hoax, be kind. Reply to both the person who sent the message to you and everyone who received it from your friend. Give a quick explanation that the hoax is, in fact, false, and that they shouldn't bother forwarding it to anyone else. Use the Favorite Places tool to put clickable links into your e-mail message so that people can read the truth for themselves. (For more about adding links to e-mail, see Chapter 11.)

Part II

Settling Into Your Online Home

The 5th Wave By Rich Tennant



"The funny thing is he's spent 9 hours
organizing his computer desktop."

In this part . . .

The only thing standing between you and a brain-numbing quantity of mundane details is the America Online access software. You and this program are a team — you'll probably be amazed at what you can accomplish together.

This part shows you how to put the software into action by exploring the fine art of creating screen names, setting Parental Controls, and navigating through America Online. Part II also explores Buddy Lists, America Online's cool tool for organizing your new online friends by screen name, and the new AOL Companion — the power user's answer to ultimate online convenience. In short, this part covers the basic stuff you need to get your citizenship papers in the Great Online World, plus a few advanced thoughts to boost your AOL experience to a new level.

Best of all, I made *sure* that it isn't the least bit boring. Really.

Chapter 5

Making Your Preferences Known

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what the preferences do
 - ▶ Finding the elusive little things
 - ▶ A romp through the essential settings
-

A new America Online account looks like a college dorm room on the first day of school: completely bare — devoid of anything beyond the institutional necessities of lime-green cinder blocks and gray linoleum. As the new residents move in, they put a distinct face on the nondescript space and make it uniquely their own.

Making yourself at home on America Online means setting things up just the way you want them — and that’s what this chapter is all about. It covers the extensive America Online Settings area, exploring useful, helpful, and valuable preference settings, while steering you clear of odd, esoteric, and nerdy ones.



If you’re completely new to America Online, spend some time messing around with the service before digging deeply into this chapter. Several preferences (particularly the ones for mail and Web access) make a lot more sense after using America Online for a while.

This chapter concentrates on the settings that AOL deems *essential* (as evidenced by their presence on the Essentials tab of the Settings window). If you want details about creating screen names and online profiles, see Chapter 6. If you need guidance setting the Parental Controls, flip ahead to Chapter 7.

What Preferences Do, Where They Live, and Why You Care

The preference settings tweak the special America Online software so that it behaves exactly the way you want. (No, you can’t install preference settings in your kids — I tried, but it didn’t work.) The options cover every aspect of

your time with America Online, from sign-on to sign-off, plus a bunch of stuff in between. Best of all, America Online remembers your preference settings from session to session, but you can change them whenever you want.

Bring up the new preferences window with keyword **Settings**. The Settings window (shown in Figure 5-1) immediately hops into action, displaying all of the options inside the window's Essentials tab.



Displaying the *what* tab? The Settings window comes with *tabs*? Yes, you heard it here first. Instead of deluging you with every setting in a single whopping list, the new Settings window splits up things among three tabs: Essentials, By Category, and A-Z. All of the settings appear alphabetically under each tab. Why the change? Frankly, because a lot of customization options were scattered around the system, and they needed a nice, simple, single home.

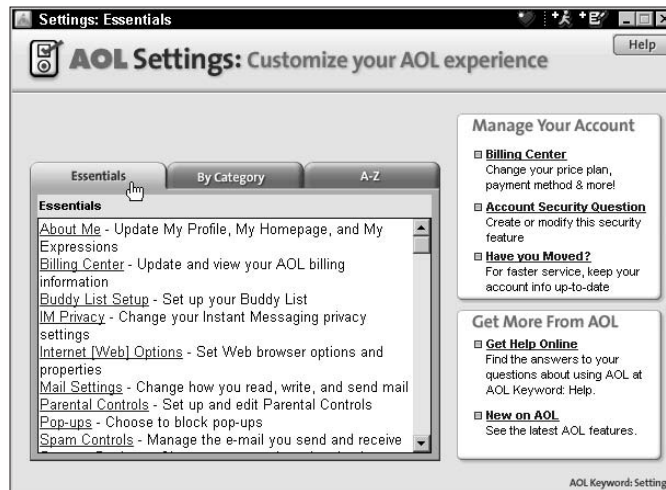


Figure 5-1:
The Settings window, in its option-filled glory.

Managing Your Personal Info and Online Personality

Maintaining your America Online account means more than regularly sweeping around your computer and dusting your modem. Perhaps you need to update your billing information or perhaps add some new information to your online profile. When it comes to your personal AOL settings and billing information, these settings take care of you.

About Me (keyword About Me)

Tired of letting the America Online programmers choose the color scheme of your instant messages and your AOL Desktop? Want to put some visual kick into your member profile? Ever consider starting a Web home page of your own? You can do all of that with a visit to the settings inside About Me, the first item under the Essentials tab. It's like a one-stop shop for online personalization!

The About Me settings window (displayed in Figure 5-2) cover four specific areas: Member Profile, Home Page, Expressions, and the very broad Text and Formatting. The first three lead to specific keyword areas, namely **My Profile**, **Homepage**, and **My Expressions**. These help you customize the information others see about you in both your profile and your Web home page. The Expressions settings adjust the way you interact with your AOL software and the way it interacts with other people through instant messages.

The last option, Text and Formatting, covers a lot more ground than the others. It changes how your screen name appears in other people's Buddy Lists, lets you pick a new font for chatting and instant messages, and points you to the personalization options for signatures on both e-mail and discussion boards.



Figure 5-2: Personalize your AOL experience in the About Me window (keyword About Me).

Billing Center (keyword Billing)

Nobody *really* likes to think about bills (except, of course, the people who sent them to you). Still, keeping abreast of your account settings and payment options makes a lot of sense. That's why America Online created its online Billing Center and added a link for it to the Settings window.

Regardless of what you want to know about the financial side of your America Online account, the Billing Center puts it at your fingertips. Through the options in here, you can change your billing method, pricing plan, contact information, and even your super-secret account security question. The window also includes several buttons dedicated to viewing your current and past bills, and for getting help with any billing questions.



In addition to a searchable help screen packed with lots of ready-to-read help options, the Billing Center window also includes a [Free Live Billing Help](#) link near the bottom. This option works wonderfully for those odd questions or any time you just need a human's opinion about your account. To use the option, just click the link near the bottom of the window. After a moment, the software brings up the Live Billing Support system. From there, follow the on-screen instructions, and you'll have an answer to your question in just a few moments.

Controlling How AOL Looks to You

There's nothing like remodeling (and I *do* mean nothing). A dab of paint here, some wallpaper there, a new deck out back, and pretty soon your house falls down and your marriage hits the rocks. Luckily, doing a little touch-up work on your America Online software won't imperil your home or loved ones.

Start-up Settings (keyword Start-up Settings)

This option joins your software for the first time in America Online 9.0. It's such a simple and powerful window that you may wonder why the programmers didn't think of it earlier. (Goodness knows the thought crossed my mind.)

The little Start-up Settings window doesn't include a lot of options. In fact, it only offers two. The first set of radio buttons asks whether you want to see the Welcome window or the customizable My AOL QuickView window when you sign on to the system.

The second set of buttons offers to open one additional window automatically when you sign on. In a real departure from AOL's traditional benevolent dictator approach to user-customizable options, the Start-up Settings window actually lets you enter any AOL keyword or Internet URL into the Additional Windows setting. Thus, if you always start the day with a rousing game of Cribbage in the AOL Games area (or pretty much anywhere on the Net), you can enter the keyword or URL of your Cribbage game right here. After that, every time you sign on to America Online, your game awaits you automatically. (If this negatively impacts your productivity, don't blame me.)

Toolbar Settings

When it comes to the toolbar across the top of your America Online 9.0 software, there's more there than meets the mouse. Sure, you can drag and drop those little Favorite Place hearts into the highlighted area of the toolbar to create your own buttons, but I'm talking about even *more* than that. There's a whole new level of customization and tweaks that you only discover by going deep into the Toolbar Settings window.

The Toolbar Settings window leads with one of its most useful features — the ability to show only text labels on the toolbar. By getting rid of the pretty little pictures, you recapture quite a swath of on-screen real estate without making the software harder to use at all. If that interests you, click the Text Only radio button in the General Toolbar section.

Those other settings in the General Toolbar section govern how the navigation arrows (the right and left arrows on the navigation bar) work and how your AOL software uses the big History Trail (also in the navigation bar). Most of the time, I leave the other settings off, although sometimes the Auto-Complete AOL Keywords and Web Addresses setting saves me a little typing.



Lots of people want to know about the big Clear History Trail Now button. This useful tool does exactly what it says — it wipes out the entries in the History Trail, that drop-down text box that takes up almost all of the navigation bar. If you ever want to clean up the mess in the History Trail, just come to this window and click that button!

The final options in the window include a pair of links for customizing your toolbar color scheme (which the programmers call the Toolbar Theme) and customizing the Toolbar Menus (which doesn't really mean that at all — it lets you customize areas contained in the main menu, not the toolbar). For information about customizing these menus, turn to Chapter 21. The Toolbar QuickView section allows you to adjust how fast the QuickView pop-ups do their little appearing/disappearing trick. Unless you really, *really* feel the need to change that, just ignore the settings and go on with more fun things.

Welcome Screen Settings (keyword Change My Welcome Screen)

The final option, alphabetically condemned to the dismal lower reaches of the Settings menu, helps you put a new face onto the Welcome window. Because all the faces look basically the same, the exercise feels a little like putting a new face on mime — something changed, but you can't quite tell what, and the subject of the change isn't talking.

Changing your Welcome window only requires a couple of clicks. After going into this window, click the radio button next to one of the eight options. None of these windows cost anything extra, so feel free to switch and swap as you wish. After making your selection, click the big Next Step button.

The next window offers you a selection of stories and features to fill in the main section of your window. All of the options include the top headlines (you just can't escape the news), but they each mix something a little different in as well. Like the options on the first window, just pick something the first time and then go back and change it later. You may as well indulge yourself! When you finish, click the Next Step button one more time.

This final screen recaps your choices, reminds you how to get back here in the future, and (strangely) offers to let you tell the software what to call you. (I'm not sure that I want my software to know me on a first-name basis. After all, we just met.) To lock in your changes, click Finish.

Communicating and Exploring Online

If you use America Online the way I do, then neither of us has a tan — but that's beside the point. You probably spend a lot of time sending and receiving e-mail, cruising the Web, and interacting with your online friends and acquaintances. Behind all of those tools, you find a plethora of settings, and they're all described below for your convenience.

Mail Settings

From a simple *what it does for you* perspective, e-mail rates as one of the most useful features of America Online. After adding a few well-chosen settings in the Mail Preferences window, the useful feature turns into a friendly giant — the high-energy superpower of your online world!

The Mail Settings window includes two tabbed pages: General and Advanced. The General page covers basic settings, including warnings when opening mail with pictures, whether your AOL software automatically stores copies of your incoming and outgoing messages, and the always-annoying Confirm That Mail Has Been Sent option. The newest option, Hide Images and Disable Links in Mail From Unknown Senders, lives at the bottom of the General tab. By default, this setting is on. If this protective behavior drives you nuts, turn it off by clearing the check box.



The other tab, Advanced, really should be called the Settings You Don't Really Care About Changing tab. This page involves stuff like whether your AOL software automatically displays the geeky mail header information when you read messages from the Internet, and if the software offers a bunch of picture quality options when you add an image to an e-mail message. Still, take a spin through the items on this tab to see if any of them catch your fancy. You never know!

Buddy List (keyword Buddy List Setup)

Every day, I find another friend, business associate, or even family member who uses America Online. Thank goodness the programmers developed the Buddy List to help keep track of everybody! Of course, any useful tool requires some kind of set up and control system, and that's where the Buddy List setting enters the fray.

When you click the Buddy List item in the Settings window, America Online serves up the same window that you get from the Setup button at the bottom of the Buddy List itself. The Buddy List Setup window mainly exists to manage your Buddy List groups, as well as the screen name entries in those groups, but it offers a few other amenities, too.

As an extra added service, the window offers one-click links to the Instant Message Expressions area, the Member Directory (in case you can't remember how your friend spells her screen name), the Mobile IM settings that forward instant messages to your SMS-capable mobile phone, and the Instant Message settings tab inside the bigger Buddy List Settings window (at keyword **Buddy List Settings**).

For more about the whole Buddy List thing, flip over to Chapter 9.

Internet (Web) Properties

Although most of the stuff in the Internet Properties area looks like techno-weenie gobbledegook that fits between *advanced carburetor settings* and *amazing tricks you can do at home with expensive lab equipment*, three useful settings stand out from the rest: the Delete Files button on the General Tab, the Web Graphics section on the AOL Browser tab, and the Shopping Assistant tab, in its questionable glory.

Although the Delete Files button isn't really a preference setting, you should click this button every month or so if you enjoy surfing the Web. Every time you view a Web page, the America Online Web browser keeps a local copy of what you see in a *cache* — a temporary storage area used by the program — in a particular folder on your computer.

Storing information in a cache isn't a nefarious plot to use up your hard drive space — all the popular Web browsers do it. On the plus side, the cache makes your Web browser respond faster when you're bouncing back and forth between a few Web pages. The downside, though, is that the cache fills up after a while. Unfortunately, a full *cache* slows down your Web browser a bit (which is precisely the kind of help the World Wide *Wait* doesn't exactly need).



Don't use the Delete Files button unless your schedule calls for nothing more pressing than a bathroom break during the coming few minutes. Depending on when you last cleaned up everything, deleting the temporary files on your computer may take two to ten minutes or even more. During that time, the AOL software goes on a little hiatus and won't respond to you. Just be patient — as long as the hard drive activity light keeps blinking and you hear the drive working away in there, your computer is just fine. When the cleanup is finished, your AOL software pops right into normal (if not *faster*) operation once more.

Graphics make the Web work, but thanks to their size they also slow things down significantly. To make things work as quickly as possible, the America Online software automatically compresses graphics files whenever it can. Unfortunately, compression gives Web graphics a somewhat fuzzy look, as if your monitor needs some serious adjustment or your eyeglasses suddenly went out of whack.

Although members connecting to America Online through low-speed systems (such as a standard phone line) need all the speed help they can get, people using high-speed systems want their graphics looking swell. As a compromise, the in-house software developers included the Web Graphics section of the AOL Browser tab, which lets you tell America Online whether you want it to smooch your Web graphics files.

By default, the software uses the Compress Graphics Only When I Do Not Have a Broadband Connection to AOL setting (which sounds a bit like some geeky country song). Because this option keeps things moving while also watching for those slow-connection moments, I suggest leaving the setting alone.

The last important item in here is the Shopping Assistant tab. Shopping Assistant itself is *not* what's important here (in terms of usefulness, the Shopping Assistant ranks with the *Gosh you've been online a long time, wouldn't you like to leave?* dialog box that plagued America Online users for years). Instead, the important feature is the little check box that turns *off* the Shopping Assistant forever. Just click the Shopping Assistant tab, click the

View the Shopping Assistant check box to remove the check mark, and then smile really big because the nasty Shopping Assistant won't darken your Web browser again. Now there's a reason to sing! (But I'll spare you my rendition of *Born Free*.)

Guarding Your Safety and Privacy

For all of the good it does connecting us to each other, sometimes you feel just a little *too* connected for your own good. Maybe you wonder who your children spend their time chatting with, or why someone with a screen name you never saw before just sent you an instant message suggesting that certain aspects of your life would be better (or at least *bigger*) with the right medication.

Unlike the vanilla Internet Service Providers of the world, America Online puts some serious teeth into its privacy and safety options. The following settings help protect both you and your children from the odd, the strange, and many other online peculiarities.

IM Privacy (keyword Privacy Settings)

Sometimes, you want to talk to the world. Other times, you just want the world to curl up in a little ball and throw itself off a very tall building into a very deep hole. Whatever your current feeling, the IM Privacy settings offer you some very definite ways to either welcome everyone or send them all packing.

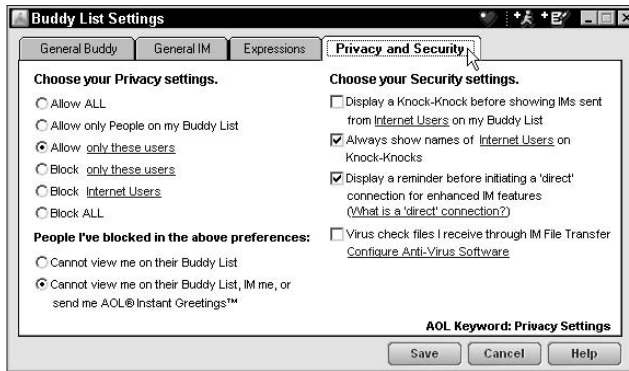


However, there's a disappointing twist to this happy tale. The IM Privacy link actually *doesn't* immediately lead to the IM Privacy settings. Instead, it goes to the General IM tab of the Buddy List Settings window at keyword **IM Settings**. The items on this tab don't help or hinder your privacy at all. Granted, they do all kinds of useful things relating to your instant message experience, but privacy isn't among them. Although I fully expect the AOL programmers to remedy this misdirection at some point, it's worth mentioning in case the repair paperwork gets lost under something on their desks.



In any case, I highly recommend spending some time on the General IM tab anyway, particularly if you spend a lot of time sending and receiving instant messages. Now, going back to the thought that launched this crazy excursion, if you want to get to the IM privacy settings (as the IM Privacy link promised originally), click the Privacy and Security tab, which you find across the top of this same Buddy List Settings window. Figure 5-3 shows off the target. You can also go straight to the right place through keyword **Privacy Settings**.

Figure 5-3:
Click the
Privacy and
Security tab
to recover
from the
IM Privacy
link's
navigational
error.



This rather imposing-looking window of options helps you dictate exactly who can interact with you through both instant messages and the Buddy List system. Your options in here cover both instant message privacy and instant message security.

On the privacy side of the fence, you can tell AOL who you want to interact with online. The default is the Show All setting, which, as you may expect, means everybody who uses AOL, CompuServe, Wal-Mart Connect, or AIM — and that's a lot of people. To trim down the allowable list a bit, choose one of the other privacy options such as the Allow Only People on my Buddy List or Block Only These Users setting. The security options govern what happens when you interact with people using AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) via the Internet and when you create a *direct connection* through the IM system (trading photos and files, talking, or sending video streams).

For the complete story about putting the privacy options to work for you, see the privacy section in Chapter 9.



Hitting the highlights in one easy step

When you're new to America Online, the options get a bit overwhelming. You have so many things to choose from — where should you begin? What should you change first?

In an effort to reduce your stress and make the settling-in process slightly simpler, America Online collected the most-used goodies together in the cool Preferences Help area (keyword **Preferences Help**). With an exhaustive topic list and lots of descriptive instructions, this

window leads you through the most popular account changes. You can adjust all of the important settings, change your screen names, fiddle with your member profile, and assemble the Parental Controls (see Chapter 7 for details about all of those things), as well as mess with Buddy Lists (more about that in Chapter 9), personalize your instant message settings, and much more.

Parental Controls (keyword Parental Controls)

Who needs to join the Navy to find adventure? Just have a couple of kids, and the adventure finds you — in fact, it moves in with you and demands food, entertainment, and shelter on a daily basis! Seriously, the task of protecting your kids online truly takes parenting into a brave new world. The America Online programmers understand the challenge, and they created an amazing basket of tools to help parents build a good defense against the odd, bizarre, and just plain demented junk that lurks in the dim recesses of the online world.

Through the AOL Parental Controls, you can limit the amount of time your child spends online, and set specific access hours when the online world is open to him or her (or, more to the point, closed). The new AOL Guardian takes notes on the Web sites they go to and the people they trade messages with, and then securely reports that information straight back to your AOL screen name. And that's just the beginning! The mail controls, Web controls, newsgroup controls, and many other controls truly let you customize your child's online experience in a way no other service provides.



Because the Parental Controls offer so many options in the new 9.0 software, this book contains a whole chapter devoted to fiddling with them. Head over to Chapter 7 for a complete introduction to launching, guiding, and protecting your kids as they venture into the Great Digital Unknown.

Pop-ups (keyword Pop-up Controls)

Do you hate those annoying pop-up windows as much as I do? First, you have the ones that appear when you sign on to AOL. Those drive me nuts. And then you get the ones that appear like dandelions in the digital yard as you innocently visit some random Web site! You probably just wanted to read the news or something equally simple, but then {pop!} {pop!} {pop!} — your screen fills with stupid banners, silly animations, and far too many if-this-box-flashes-then-you're-a-winner offers. Eeesh.

The AOL Pop-ups control puts a quick and easy stop to all of that pop-up madness. To engage the pop-up shields, click the Pop-ups link in the Settings window, and then click the Suppress Pop-ups from Web Sites I Visit Using AOL Software check box. In one single click, you eliminate the vast majority of the annoying Web pop-ups plaguing the world today.

After doing that, click once more in the *Suppress AOL Member-Only Special Offers* check box near the bottom of the window. Yes, that rids your system of the ads that appear just as you sign onto the system. It's awfully sporting of AOL to offer that option, so make sure you use it on your account.

Spam Controls (keyword Spam Controls)

Welcome. You have tons of junk mail! Aaaaarrgh!! Although AOL's behind-the-scenes controls block (literally) millions of messages each day, millions more slip through the cracks and land in your mailbox. (Or at least it feels that way some days.)

America Online 9.0 introduced the new window full of spam-fighting goodness that appears when you click the Spam Controls link in the Settings list. The options in here let you loosen or tighten the controls on your mailbox as much as you like. Want to grant mailbox admission to only a few select people? Select the Allow Mail Only from People I Know option. Would you rather pick and choose, yet still receive things from the outside world? Apply a Customer Sender List to your mailbox. Whatever level of protection you want, you can probably get it with the Spam Controls.



For a more in-depth explanation of the Spam Controls, visit Chapter 4. That chapter explores how to combine your Address Book with the Spam Controls to put a severe dent into your junk mail influx.

Chapter 6

Doing the Screen Name Tango

In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out the whole screen name thing
 - ▶ Managing screen names
 - ▶ Filling out your profile
-

One of my favorite Internet-related cartoons shows a dog camped happily in front of a computer, talking to another dog that just wandered into the room. (I always thought it would be funnier with ocelots, but it probably loses something in foreign translations.) The cartoon caption plays on the anonymous nature of the online world through its pithy caption, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

The same idea carries directly into America Online. (The anonymity, that is, not the dog/ocelot thing.) Everyone on America Online knows you by the screen name you create and the information you put into your profile. That’s why choosing the right screen name and filling out your online profile are such big parts of your online experience.

But screen names represent more than your online identity. They also play directly into the America Online Parental Controls system (covered in the next chapter), which helps concerned and involved parents take charge of their children’s online activities. Without the right screen-name setup, the Parental Controls don’t do a bit of good.

This chapter guides you through the ins and outs of the whole *who you are and what you can do online* thing. It starts with screen names, and then carries on through the very cool (and newly updated) member profile system. It’s a must-see chapter for your online world. (Heck, tell your friends about it, too!)

What's in a (Screen) Name?

When you joined an online service in the Days of Online Past, you received an account name mechanically generated by a computer. And this computer was quite proud of itself for calling you 71303,3713. After all, the computer had no problem remembering such a splendid name — why should you?

America Online was created by humans and designed *for* humans. As a direct result, *you* (a human) get to choose the name you use on America Online. You can be yourself if you want: Annie, Paul, Svengali. You can also be a little more daring and become Homeschooler, Mungojerrie, or perhaps a strapping Norseman such as Thar Drekskin. Within the bounds of good taste, the choice is up to you (but more about that later).

Each America Online account includes space for seven screen names: one primary name plus six others. The *primary name* is the one you chose when you first joined America Online. This name is special — kind of like your permanent file in school (the mysterious record always spoken of in dark, terrifying phrases such as “You realize, of course, that this incident will go into your *permanent file*.”). Like that legendary file, the primary name is permanent — you can’t change it, no matter how much you want to. The other six names, however, can come and go as you please.

America Online places only a few limits on screen names. Screen names must be between 3 and 16 characters long and must start with a letter. After the required first letter, you can use letters, numbers, and spaces to create your online identity. Also, the assembled numbers and letters can’t cross the line into what Miss Manners might call “poor taste.” (For more about that, see the “Now be nice!” sidebar in this chapter.)

Now be nice!

A creative screen name is your tool for carving out a unique identity in the world of America Online. You’re supposed to be creative — that’s the whole point. However, a subtle line separates *creative* and *obnoxious*.

Here’s a simple guideline for creating a good screen name: Make the name as creative as you want, but if you blush at the idea of explaining it to your children, parents, spouse, or significant other, your screen name is probably beyond the bounds of good taste.

One final thought about choosing a screen name: Make it appropriate. A screen name for official business e-mail looks a lot different than one for a character in the Free Form Role Playing (keyword **RPG**) area. If you want to be BoogerDggr in the chat rooms, that’s your choice, but your new e-mail address (boogerdggr@aol.com) may look a little funny on a business card.

Here's a quick overview of the technical rules governing America Online screen names:

- ✓ You can have seven screen names in your account — one primary screen name and six others.
- ✓ The primary screen name is permanent; you can't ever change it. You can, however, create and delete the other six screen names at your whim.
- ✓ By default, only the primary screen name can make new screen names and adjust Parental Controls. If you want to give that ability to other screen names in your account, you can do so by making the new name a *master screen name*. See the "Creating a screen name" section, later in this chapter, to find out how to create a master screen name.
- ✓ Choose your primary name carefully; it's yours forever. *Really*.
- ✓ Screen names are 3 to 16 characters long, start with a letter, and contain any combination of letters, numbers, and spaces that imagination can dream up (within the bounds of good taste, that is).



Dealing with Screen Names

Managing the screen names in your account isn't just a job — it's a creative adventure. This section goes through everything you need to know to keep your screen names in order.



These instructions *don't* apply to your account's primary name. Short of quitting AOL and signing up again, you can't change that. Never. So there.

Creating a screen name

I think the people who started America Online read too much Shakespeare, because the play *Romeo and Juliet* perfectly outlines the steps for making a screen name. In the play, Romeo can't decide on a screen name. Juliet tries to calm him with the observation, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." His confidence thus buoyed by this botanic observation, he sets off to create a new screen name.



Kids — *don't* try this at home alone. Romeo and Juliet did, and look what happened to them. (If you don't know what happened to Romeo and Juliet, you can find out on the Internet. For a stroll through the classics, visit the Shakespeare area at keyword **Shakespeare**, or the Literature & Literary Figures area inside keyword **Reading**.)

Making a new screen name only takes a few moments. Just follow these steps:

1. Sign on to America Online with your account's primary name or any master screen name.

The primary name can create new screen names, as can any other screen name that has master screen name status (more about that later in this chapter).

2. After safely connecting to the service, go to keyword Screen Names).

The AOL Screen Names dialog box appears. (If you haven't read the screen names sidebar "Now be nice!" earlier in this chapter, now is an excellent time to take a look at it.)

3. Click the Create a Screen Name option.

America Online displays a small dialog box asking whether the new screen name is for a child.

If America Online instead protests that Your account already has the maximum of 7 screen names, kiss one of your current screen names goodbye. For more about that, see the "Deleting an old screen name" section, later in this chapter.

4. If this screen name is for a child and you want some quick tips about online safety, click the Yes button in the little dialog box. Otherwise, click the No button.

If you click Yes, America Online delivers a public-service-announcement-style message about keeping children safe online. If you're new to the online world, *please* read the material. It takes only two or three minutes and is well worth the time. Click Continue when you finish reading.

If you click No in the dialog box (or click Continue after having clicked Yes), America Online continues onward toward making a new screen name. It spits out a nice overview window that reminds you of the steps toward making a screen name.

5. Click the Create Screen Name button to get on with the process.

Finally, when all hope lies exhausted on the floor, you get to make your screen name. To reinforce this point, the Step 1 of 4 window appears.

6. In the text box, type the new screen name, and then click the Continue button.

If the screen name you typed is available, America Online creates it and asks for a password. In that case, skip ahead to Step 8. If someone else thought of the screen name before you, the system suggests that you choose something else, as shown in Figure 6-1.

7. If America Online tells you that the screen name you want is not available, click OK to make the information dialog box leave you alone, and go back to Step 6 and try again.

If your second attempt at picking a screen name doesn't work, then the big computers at America Online leap into the fray and attempt to help you create a valid screen name. The outcome looks much like having your 3-year-old "help" you make a cake from scratch: messy, but with occasionally delightful outcomes. Figure 6-2 shows America Online's the *please lemme help you pick a name* window. You can type three words and let the computer randomly assemble them into a valid name, or you just click the Try Another Screen Name button to do it yourself. If you reach this point, heed Juliet's wise and earnest advice: "O, be some other name!"

If all else fails, add a number like 777, 1234, or 2 to your previously scheduled name choice. That usually works.

After you and America Online agree on a screen name (which may take several tries), the Choose a Password dialog box appears, asking you to set a password for the new screen name.

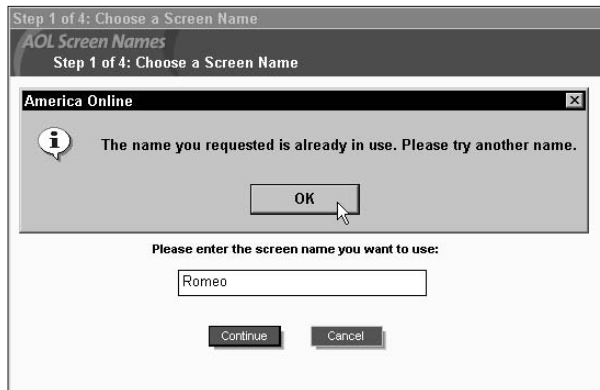


Figure 6-1:
Drat — you have to choose something else.

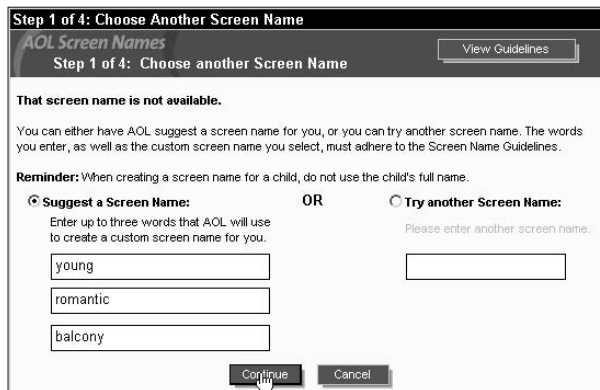


Figure 6-2:
Don't let the computer "help" you make screen names. Baaaad idea.

8. Type the password twice and then click the Continue button.

America Online passwords have to be between six and eight characters long. As you type a password, little stars (asterisks) appear on-screen. Yes, it's *supposed* to happen that way — it's a security thing.

Because you can't see what you're typing, America Online makes you enter the password twice so that you're sure you didn't make a typing mistake. Type the password in the box on the left and again in the box on the right. If the two entries don't agree, the software warns you and makes you try again.

After the password is accepted, the Parental Controls dialog box appears. See the "Psst — what's the password?" sidebar, later in this chapter, for some important thoughts and warnings about passwords.

9. Select an access level for your new screen name by clicking the appropriate option in the Parental Controls dialog box. Click OK to lock in the selection.

If you choose the *General 18+* setting, America Online then asks whether you want this screen name to be a master screen name. (Three of your seven screen names can be master screen names, but no more than that.) For more about that, continue with the next step. For all other types of screen names, skip ahead to Step 12.

Although the Parental Controls dialog box offers some guidelines for choosing the right access level, the decision is up to you as a parent. America Online doesn't require kids to have a particular access level — it's not AOL's job. You, the parent, have the full and final say in the matter.

You can always change the access level for a screen name if you find that it's too restrictive or too loose. For more information about the other Parental Controls, see the next chapter.

10. To designate the new screen name as a master screen name, click the Yes radio button. Otherwise, click No. Click Continue to, well, continue. After America Online reviews everything your screen name can do, click the Accept Settings button to save your work.

Master screen names can create and delete screen names in your account, change Parental Controls, and generally do anything the primary screen name can. You may make your significant other's screen name a master screen name, but don't give that ability to the kids.

Just to belabor the point a bit, *do not* give your child access to a master screen name unless you *want* to give little Timmy or Samantha access to the entire online world, complete with warts, porn, and everything else we know and love.



With everything completed, America Online congratulates you on a screen name well created. It also outlines what the screen name can do with the access you selected back in Step 9 and gives you the opportunity to make some last-moment tweaks to the screen name's Parental Controls settings.

11. **Click Accept Settings if the Parental Controls settings match your wishes, or click Customize Settings to make changes to the Parental Controls.**

(For more about the Parental Controls, flip ahead to Chapter 7.)



12. **To use the new screen name, sign off from America Online by choosing Sign Off → Sign Off from the main menu and clicking Yes in the dialog box that appears.**

The Sign On screen clears, and the Goodbye dialog box bids you a fond farewell.

13. **Click the down arrow next to the Screen Name box and choose your new screen name from the list.**
14. **Press Tab to move to the Password box and type the new password you created.**
15. **Click Sign On.**

Poof — it's the new you!



America Online automatically sends a “welcome aboard” e-mail message to the new screen name, offering some thoughts about good online citizenship, tips for changing your password, and a few other topics as well. The system also sends a reminder e-mail to your primary screen name and all master screen names saying that a new screen name just joined your account. To make sure that the message stands out among the other items in your mailbox, it arrives as Official AOL Mail, complete with a blue icon next to the message subject. Impressive, eh?



If you ever find one of those “Thanks for making a new screen name” messages in your mailbox when you *haven't* made a new screen name, immediately call the America Online Customer Service department, at 800-827-6364. Although it may be nothing more than a computer glitch, it also may mean that someone broke into your account. Either way, calling America Online to find out what's going on makes a lot of sense.

Deleting an old screen name

Even screen names reach the end of their usefulness. When that time comes for the screen names in your account, delete them and go on about your business. Just follow these steps to delete a screen name:

1. Sign on to America Online with your primary screen name or a master screen name.

If you aren't familiar with master screen names, see the brief description in Step 10 of the preceding section. If you don't really care about master screen names, that's fine, too — just barrel ahead with your primary screen name.

2. After connecting, go to keyword Screen Names).

The AOL Screen Names dialog box appears.

3. Click the Delete a Screen Name option in the dialog box.

The aptly named Are You Sure? dialog box pops up.

4. Take a deep breath and click the Continue button.

The Delete a Screen Name dialog box appears, looking just the tiniest bit somber in its fateful duties.

5. Click the screen name you want to delete, and then click Delete.

Be *darn sure* that you want to delete this screen name before clicking the Delete button. Although you can theoretically restore deleted screen names up to six months after you whacked them, it's an inexact science. Translated into English, restoring a deleted screen name is up to the impish whims of the America Online computers. Maybe they'll let you restore the name, and then again, maybe they won't. Who knows how these machines think?

6. After doing the dirty deed, America Online issues the brief, generic obituary, shown in Figure 6-3.

You can't delete the primary screen name. Also, *any* master screen name on your account can delete (and create) other screen names.



Figure 6-3:
He's history
(so to
speak).



Psst — what's the password?

Just like music and cooking, making a good password is an art. Here, in two sentences, is my accumulated knowledge on the subject:

The best passwords string together two common but unrelated words (such as GRAIN-FUN) or add a number to the end of a word (TRAIN577, for example). Your password should not be your name, birth date, spouse's name,

dog's breed, shoe size, or anything else that someone can find out about you.

By the way, if you're setting up a screen name for a child or a password-phobic adult, you can configure the America Online software to automatically enter that screen name's password.

Changing a screen name

What if you have a screen name and decide that you want to change it a little? Well, you're out of luck. To paraphrase the wisdom of Yoda, the Jedi master from *Star Wars*, "There is no *change*, only *delete*. *Delete, then create again*."

Your only option is to delete the existing screen name and then create a new one from scratch. Sorry to break the news to you like this, but that's just life in the online service world.

Restoring a deleted screen name

Having second thoughts about deleting your favorite screen name, eh? Who can blame you? (After all, that really *was* a great screen name!) Thank goodness America Online offers the Restore a Screen Name option. If all goes well, after a couple of quick clicks, your old screen name (complete with its online profile) is back, as good as new.



Notice that I said, "If all goes well." As you may suspect, things *can* go wrong with the restoration process — like the simple problem of the America Online computers saying "No, you can't have that name back." Precisely why they do this, I don't understand. It probably has something to do with zebra migrations, cat hairballs, and the number of lawyers worldwide telling the truth at any given moment (not like that's ever a *big* number).

Now that you suffered through fair warning that the process may not work, follow these steps to restore a deleted screen name:

1. Sign on to America Online with your primary screen name.

2. After you connect, go to keyword Screen Names).

The AOL Screen Names dialog box appears.

3. Click the Restore a Screen Name option in the dialog box.

The Restore a Screen Name dialog box pops up.

4. Look through the listed screen names, click the one you want to restore, and then click the Recover button.

Assuming that the America Online computers feel cooperative, the system restores your screen name and gleefully pats you on the back to celebrate.

If the name you want isn't on the list or if the America Online computers decide that you can't recover it, you have my condolences. (I lost a few screen names this way myself.) See the "Creating a screen name" section, earlier in this chapter, because that's your next stop.

Turn a Bit and Let Me See Your Profile

When you see people on the street or in the office, the first thing you notice about them is how they look. Beyond that, they're mysteries until you meet them, talk with them, and invest some time getting to know them.

In the world of America Online, your screen name determines how you "look" to the outside world. But America Online has something else, too — something really neat that I personally wish existed in real life: the member profile.

A *member profile* is a collection of tidbits and trivia about the owner of a particular screen name. For example, my member profile appears in Figure 6-4. Despite what you may think, I'm an average, all-American game player, computer jockey, musician, husband, and father of two. (I also write books, but you already know that.) If I'm chatting with someone online and the other person wants to know a little more about me, all he or she has to do is choose **C**ommunity → **G**et Member Profile from the toolbar (or press Ctrl+G), type my screen name in the Get a Member's Profile dialog box, and click OK. Presto! My member profile appears on-screen.

So where does all this profile information come from? From you (mine came from Cleveland, but that's another story). It's up to *you* to create a member profile for your screen name. If you don't create a profile, other members can't find out about your likes, interests, and hobbies. In short, you barely exist on Planet AOL.

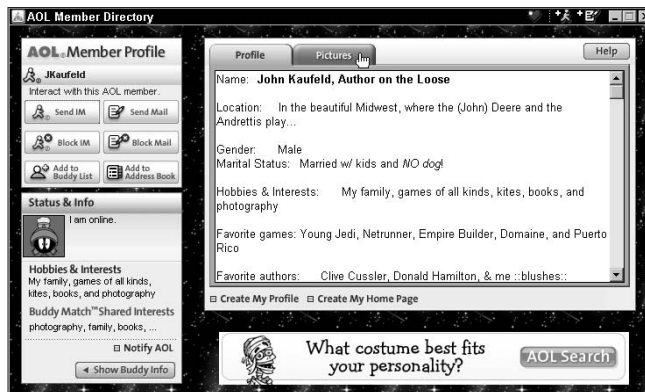


Figure 6-4:
Now you
know all
about me.

Here are a few additional thoughts about member profiles:



- ✓ Please, oh please, fill out your member profile. Leaving it blank is like moving into a new neighborhood because you heard that it had lots of fun people and then acting like a hermit.
- ✓ There's another reason to fill out your member profile: People who share your hobbies and interests can find you by searching the People Directory. Chapter 16 explains the details.
- ✓ Although this falls under the heading of *plain old common sense*, I want to drive home a point. *Do not* put your phone number, address, or other truly personal information in your profile. On a scale of good to bad, this is reeeeeeaaally bad. Parents, check your kids' profiles every now and then just to make sure that they didn't put anything too personal or too weird in there.
- ✓ If you use more than one screen name, you need to fill out a member profile for each one. Every screen name has its own member profile.
- ✓ Some parts of the service (such as the member-created game clubs at keyword **Game Clubs**) rely on information in your member profile as part of the game.

To create (or update) your member profile, follow these steps:

1. Make sure that you're signed on to America Online with the correct screen name.

Because every screen name has its own member profile, pairing the right name and profile is important. (Imagine the fascinating possibilities of confusing the profiles of Howard the Bank President and his role-playing alter ego, Thar Drekskin, barbarian hunter and drinker of fine ale.)

2. Choose **C**ommunity → Member **D**irectory from the main menu. When the Member Directory window appears, click the **My Profile** link.

At long last, the Edit Your Online Profile dialog box appears, along with a brief reminder about *not* sharing your personal information. If you're *creating* a member profile, the dialog box is blank. If you're *changing* the member profile, your current information appears in the spaces.

3. **Fill out the member profile form.**

The Member Profile window includes a bunch of tabs stacked along the left side of the window, next to the typing area. To fill out your profile, click a tab (such as *Name*, *Location*, or *Favorite Gadgets*), and then type in some text. Some of the tabs (notably the Gender and Marital Status lines) let you enter only a few characters or words, but most of them give you plenty of space to write. Use the formatting buttons along the top of the text area to add some spice and color to your entries.



To see how the profile looks as you work on it, click the Preview button at the bottom of the window. You can always change your profile any time you want, so experiment a bit and see what you come up with.

4. **Click the Save button to save your work.**

After clicking the Save button, America Online replies with a little dialog box telling you that your profile is being updated. Although the update process usually happens immediately, it occasionally takes a little while (about ten minutes or *much* longer if the system is busy).



The new member profile system gives you a lot of cool tools for customizing and visually tweaking your profile page with color, fonts, Web page links, and even pictures. Chapter 20 goes into all of the details.

Chapter 7

Taking Away the Online Car Keys with Parental Controls

In This Chapter

- ▶ Keeping your kids safe online — it's your job
 - ▶ Using the basic Parental Controls
 - ▶ Putting boundaries exactly where you want them
-

Like any major city or tourist destination, America Online offers much for you to see and do. Unfortunately, the similarities don't end there. Every big city also has a section that the tourist guide suggests avoiding, as well as a small, eerie population of less-than-moral people. If I said that America Online was immune to this concept, I'd be a fool (no editorial comments from readers who know me personally, please).

Whether you like the thought or not, the online world contains some places (and some people) that your kids really don't need to visit. That's what the Parental Controls are all about. They offer you, the parents, control over what your kids can and can't do with America Online.

This chapter gives you the tools you need to monitor and restrict your child's online activity. Best of all, America Online's Parental Controls are divided by age group, so as long as your children have individual America Online screen names (a highly suggested option), you can set individual controls for each child based on age and maturity level. While America Online gives you blanket Parental Controls for various age groups, you don't have to stop there. You can customize each child's screen name with the individual controls — for e-mail, newsgroups, downloads, Web access, and time online — that offer the best fit. Then, as your child changes and matures, you can adjust the controls accordingly.

Just as your child is one-of-a-kind, with America Online's Parental Controls settings, you don't have to settle for cookie-cutter controls. You can make them as individual as your young explorer.

Reviewing the Basics of Online Safety

Online safety floats into many a conversation these days like an amorphous cloud hanging over the atmosphere. Even the government got into the child protection biz not too long ago with COPPA (the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act). With all the buzz about online safety, what's really important? And why do you, as a parent, care?

Most people you know probably agree that luring children qualifies as unsafe for the children. Aside from that point, however, a lot of leeway exists along the continuum between *safe* and *unsafe*. The goal of America Online's Parental Controls is to match your idea of safe with your child's America Online screen name. Before going into the details, here are a few thoughts to set the stage:

- ✔ Different people have different views about what kids should and shouldn't do (just look around your neighborhood for proof). Please understand that I'm not hopping onto a moral high horse and proclaiming what's right and wrong for your kids, and that I'm not passing judgment about what's available out there (although the thought *is* tempting sometimes). I'm just explaining the tools available and giving some very general advice for parents whose kids know the Internet better than they do.
- ✔ To make the Parental Controls really work, only you, the parent, should know the password to the *primary screen name* (the screen name you created when you first signed up for America Online) and any *master screen names* (new screen names that you gave master screen name privileges).
- ✔ Create a screen name specifically for your child to use. Remember that each America Online account can have up to seven screen names at no extra charge — one primary name plus six others. To give each child in the family a different level of access to America Online and the Internet, create separate screen names for everyone.
- ✔ If you're curious why I'm making such a big cloak-and-dagger deal out of who's using which screen name, here's the reason: Master screen names are special. *Only* a master screen name can set Parental Controls and create screen names for your account. If your child uses a master screen name for online access, he or she can simply turn off whatever Parental Controls you turn on. (Whoops!) Instead, create a screen name especially for your child, place the controls on it, and keep the master screen name for yourself.

Starting the Controls — and Backing Safely Down Your Digital Driveway

Display the Parental Controls window by clicking the Settings button on the toolbar and then choosing Parental Controls from the Essentials list that appears or by using keyword **Parental Controls**. Either way, the Parental Controls information window appears. It offers general thoughts about the Parental Controls thing, plus tosses out some cool tips and suggestions concerning online safety and the America Online premium services (the ones that cost extra to use). When you're ready to do the Parental Controls thing, click the Set Parental Controls Now button at the bottom of the screen.

America Online provides two levels of parental control, depending on how much you want to tweak the digital knobs and levers. The basic level offers four general options (Kids Only, Young Teen, Mature Teen, and General). When you choose one of these options, America Online sets a bunch of default restrictions governing what that screen name can access both within America Online and outside on the Internet (when accessing the Internet with the America Online built-in Web browser and other Internet tools).

The more advanced level is Custom Controls. This à la carte approach to the Parental Controls helps you choose specific limitations for chatting, instant messages, downloading, Web use, e-mail, and Internet newsgroups. Although these settings take a bit more knowledge of America Online and the Net, you end up with an online experience tuned exactly to your wishes and your child's needs.

How do you choose the right controls for your kid? It depends. Consider the age and maturity of your child. Granted, *our* kids are all above average, but for this one moment, try to be especially objective. How responsible is your child? How naive? How trustworthy? Yes, these are tough questions, but this decision is very important. Here are a few general guidelines to help you along the way:

- ✓ For children ages 10 or younger, I recommend using the Kids Only default option. This option lets them get into Kids Only, the area within America Online that's designed for that age group, plus kid-friendly Web and Internet sites. You can feel comfortable that your little one won't run across anything incredibly weird (except, of course, other kids).
- ✓ The preteen and teen years are more challenging. (Stating the obvious is one of my strengths.) If you use any controls at all, start with the appropriate teen-access setting. If your online child finds that setting too restrictive, try relaxing things by using some specific Custom Controls

options discussed in the following section. If you use the Custom Controls feature, I recommend blocking member rooms in the Chat control, FTP in the Download control, and any Internet newsgroup containing the magic word *sex* or *erotic* in the Newsgroup control. That combination maximizes the widely acceptable stuff while blocking off the Internet's most (ahem) colorful content.

- ✔ If you feel comfortable giving your kids free run of the world, that's cool. In that case, use the General option, which gives them full access to both America Online and the Internet. Nothing says that you must use the controls — they're just available tools.



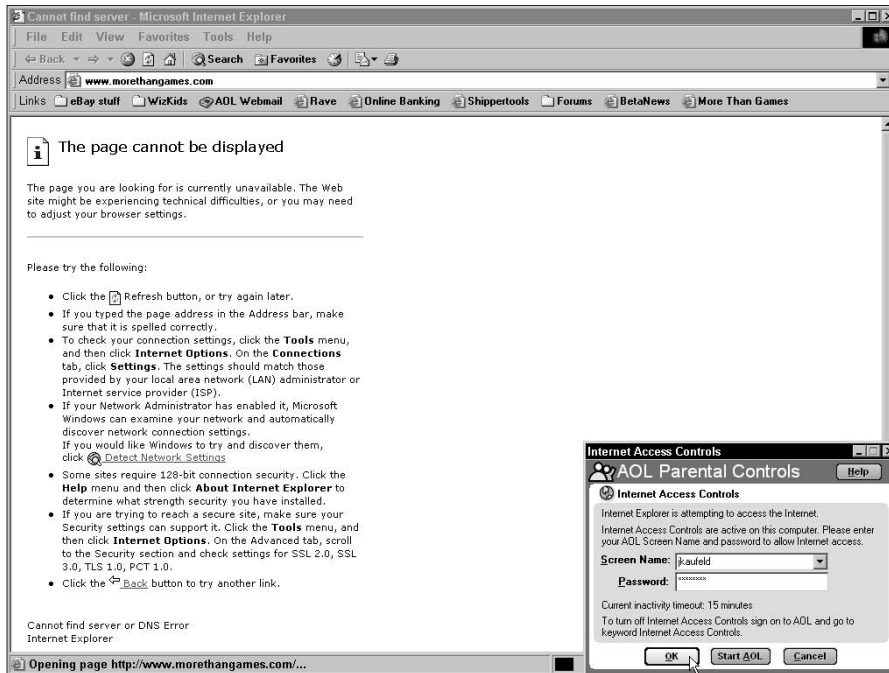
As you poke around Parental Controls, look for the Internet Access Controls button in the main window. Possibly one of the neatest things to come out of the America Online development burrows in a long time (at least, from a parent's perspective), Internet Access Controls allow you to limit your child's access to any additional Internet browser that may be loaded onto your computer outside of America Online.

If you connect to America Online with a DSL line or through your cable provider, installing Internet Access Controls on your computer means that your child can no longer bypass the parentally controlled America Online screen name you carefully set up. With Internet Access Controls installed, everyone needs to enter his or her America Online screen name and password before they can use any Web browser on your computer, as Figure 7-1 demonstrates. The computer then screens that name and password for parental controls. If it matches your child's screen name and password with any of the Parental Controls settings outside of General (and it does, if you set the controls), a window appears telling your child that she can access the Internet only through America Online. Then the America Online software helpfully appears, ready for sign on.

If you worry about unrestricted preteen Internet access as much as I do (because I now have two preteens at my house), setting one or more of these controls might just replace the hair you lost through concern for your little loved ones. And if you decide to install Parental Controls on your child's screen name and you find that America Online automatically blocks one or more of your personally parentally approved favorite sites, you can unlock specific sites so your child can visit them without restriction. The Web Controls portion of the next section explains how to unlock Web sites.

You can change all of the Parental Control settings at any time, so don't worry about ruining your children forever by making the wrong choice. Choose the settings, talk to your children, and see how everything works. If you need to make adjustments, do so. Most of all, work with your children and let them know that you're interested in their online world. That makes a bigger impact than any control ever can.

Figure 7-1:
With the Internet Access Controls in place, your kids go only where the Parental Controls let them, even if they use a browser outside the AOL software.



Tracking their time online

What do these kids do while sitting in front of the AOL software for hours at a time? If you ask, you'll likely hear the common teen or preteen responses: "What? Oh. Chattin'." "Playin'."

Chatting with whom? Who in the world has hours to talk online? Playing what? What game could possibly interest them that long? (Not to be nosy here, but sooner or later the children's rapt attention arouses the parental curiosity in most of us.)

America Online designed a tracker just for us parents who want to ensure that their children don't spend their time in unsavory online places, or with possible unsavory online residents. Known as the AOL Guardian (keyword **AOL Guardian**), this Parental Control tracks where your darling wanders during Internet time. It tracks Web sites your child visits (or attempts to visit), number of instant messages sent, and

number of e-mail messages sent while online. It also keeps track of any activity in your child's Buddy List or online Address Book.

You can set up AOL Guardian on any screen name that carries Kid's Only, Young Teen, or Mature Teen Parental Controls. Once you set it up, AOL Guardian sends you an e-mail each time your child signs on with his screen name. The e-mail tells you when the child was on as well as a summary of your child's online activity — which can be really helpful. A little forewarned, you're ready for "Daaaaad, I tried to get on this specific site and AOL wouldn't let me. Will you mark it as an okay site, please?" With the AOL Guardian e-mail, you already know which sites the child attempted to visit, and you can check them out to approve (or disapprove) before the request even comes your way.

Tailoring Online Life with Custom Controls

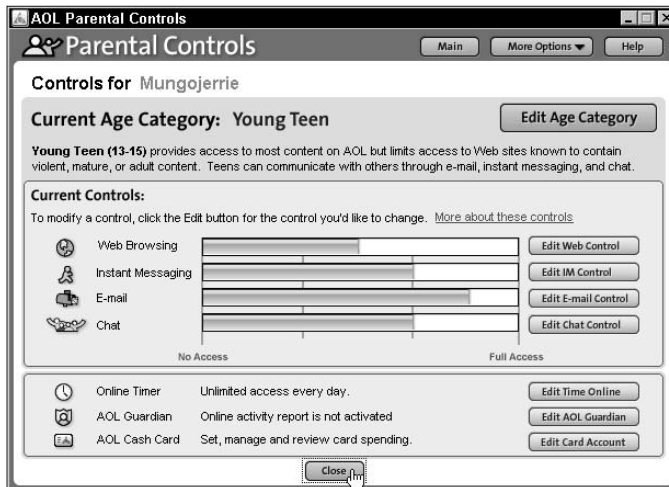
Sometimes (well, *frequently*, in my case) the one-size-fits-all solutions just don't fit. If your child needs more access here and less access there than the Kids Only or teen access controls allow, try customizing the Parental Controls. In the main Parental Controls window (keyword **Parental Controls**), click the child's screen name in the Edit Parental Controls section of the window. This leads you to the do-it-yourself side of the Parental Controls (shown in Figure 7-2), where you, the parent, take complete control over what your kids can and can't do online.

The options in this window govern the most important interactive parts of America Online. Each option is described in this section.



None of these controls protect a child who has access to a master screen name on your America Online account. (Master screen names *always* have permission to change the Parental Controls for any screen name in your account.) To take advantage of the Parental Controls, you *must* create a separate, nonmaster screen name for your child.

Figure 7-2:
The Custom Controls give you incredible flexibility to tailor your child's online access.



AOL Guardian control

When they play outside for hours at a time, you find yourself peeking out the door every now and then. If they're at a friend's house, you often give them a specific time to be home and then check the clock to ensure that they're home when they said they'd be home. While you don't want to peek into

every aspect of your child's life, some times you feel better if you know what they're up to. If you need a little reassurance now and then when it comes to your child's online life, AOL Guardian may provide it for you.

AOL Guardian helpfully sends an e-mail to the master screen name detailing your child's online activity. E-mails and instant messages sent, time online, Web sites visited, and Web sites your child attempted to visit all appear in the AOL Guardian e-mail you receive after each time your child signs on to the service.

To set up the AOL Guardian control:

- 1. Sign on to America Online with a master screen name and then go to keyword Parental Controls.**

The Parental Controls window appears, ready for your tweaking.

- 2. In the Edit Parental Controls box, click your child's screen name in the list.**

The Parental Controls window changes to show the controls set for that specific screen name.

- 3. Click the Edit AOL Guardian button near the bottom of the Parental Controls window.**

The AOL Guardian Controls window appears, awaiting your instructions. It sports one lonely option, but it's a good one.

- 4. Check the Send Me AOL Guardian Reports option.**

Checking the option activates the system that tracks your child's online activity and sends you an e-mail report. AOL Guardian also helpfully throws a dialog box to the screen when your child signs on to remind him that his activity is logged through AOL Guardian.

- 5. When you're satisfied with the change, click Save.**

A dialog box appears telling you that your AOL Guardian changes are saved.

- 6. Click OK to make the dialog box go away, and then close any open Parental Controls windows.**

There. You're done. To cancel AOL Guardian, simply repeat the steps and uncheck the Send Me AOL Guardian Reports option.

Online Timer control

First it was baseball cards. Then video games took over. Now your children spend every free moment of their day glued to the home computer, wandering the world of America Online. You *hoped* they'd enjoy the online world, but

spending all evening *every* evening online (plus many hours on the week-ends) is a little more enjoyment than you had in mind. Luckily, the America Online Parental Controls include precisely the option you need: an online timer.

The Online Timer control helps you build digital fences in your child's online schedule. You can control both the *amount* of time your child spends online and *when* the time is available. These settings work no matter how your child signs on to America Online. Whether sitting at your home machine or over at a friend's house using the Guest option, the Online Timer control keeps your child within your limits every time.

To set the Online Timer control, follow these steps:

- 1. Sign on to America Online with a master screen name. After you're online, click the Settings icon from the toolbar and then click the Parental Controls link (or use keyword Parental Controls).**

The detailed Parental Controls window soundlessly enters the room.

- 2. In the Edit Parental Controls box, select the child's screen name.**

The window shifts and shimmies a bit, and then displays the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you chose.

- 3. In the Current Controls area at the bottom of the dialog box, click the Edit Time Online button.**

The Online Timer window pops onto the screen.

Change your mind? Don't feel like building a timer after all? Not to worry, because the America Online programmers offer a quick way out. Just click Cancel at this point to keep things just the way they are right now.

- 4. Select the type of time limit you want, and then click Next.**

For most kids, either the Allow Access for x Hours Per Day or the Allow Online Access on Saturday and Sunday Limits settings work the best. After you make your choice, America Online displays the duration and timeframe settings that match your time limit choice. To customize your child's online limits day by day throughout the week, use the Custom Daily Access option. The Change These Settings link allows you to set specific time limits within any time range you choose for each and every day of the week.

- 5. If you opt for Custom Daily Access, click the Change These Settings link.**

A window appears with each time limit and timeframe option equipped with a down arrow.

- 6. For Custom Daily Access, set your child's number of online hours and available time frame by clicking the down arrows next to each entry and then clicking your choice. (If you opted for one of the quicker options, simply skip this step and move on.)**

While individually selecting 21 time options may look daunting, it goes quite quickly once you start. After all, you already have in mind when you want your child online. Remember that you're choosing how many hours per day your child can use America Online, as well as the time frame when those hours are available. Click Save when you finish, and the now-set dialog box whisks away.

7. Choose your time zone from the pull-down list.

If you live in one of those esoteric parts of the country that doesn't use daylight saving time (like I do), then you probably need to reset your time zone every six months when you spring forward and fall back — or whatever you do in your part of the country.

8. Double-check your work. If everything looks fine, click Save. To adjust something, make your changes, and click Save.

And with that, your work is finished. The Online Timer settings are in place, ready to corral your wandering child.

Web controls

Few things in the world change faster than the Web (although the flux-filled policy statements of many career politicians do come close). The Web is filled with thousands of clever and informative sites, but it's also the home of many pages best left unseen by little eyes. To keep curious youngsters pointed toward the truly educational things rather than the woo-hoo-hubba-hubba educational ones, try applying some Web controls.

These controls limit the sites that the America Online built-in Web browser can connect to. Sites get rated by the Powers That Be (whoever they are) according to the type of content they contain. The Web controls include Kids Only (a limited list of sites for ages 6 to 12), Young Teen (another limited list for ages 13 to 15), and the Mature Teen block list (which allows full Web access but blocks specific inappropriate sites). The system's other option grants full access to the Web.



For younger kids, stick with the Kids Only–approved site listing. After your children blossom into the terrible teens, give them the appropriate teen setting or full access (as long as they can handle the responsibility). Because so much of the America Online content is Web-based, I can't recommend completely shutting down Web access for any account.

To apply the Web controls, follow these steps:

- 1. Sign on to America Online with a master screen name, and then click the Settings icon on the toolbar and click the Parental Controls link from the list that appears.**

The detailed Parental Controls window soundlessly enters the room.

- 2. In the Edit Parental Controls box that fills the window, click the child's screen name.**

The window updates itself and displays the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you chose.

- 3. In the Current Controls area in the middle of the dialog box, click the Edit Web Control button.**

The Web Controls window pops onto the screen.

- 4. Select the level of Web control you want.**

You can choose only one setting per screen name.

- 5. Click Save to store the settings; then close the Parental Controls window.**

The Web controls are ready to serve and protect.



If you find that your child cannot access a site that you deem suitable for him, or if you think that the preset America Online controls allow too much freedom for the range you chose, use the Web Unlock feature to block or allow specific Web sites for your child.

Here's how to use the Web Unlock feature:

- 1. Go to the Parental Controls window by using keyword Parental Controls (or click the Settings icon in the toolbar and then click the Parental Controls link from the list).**

The detailed Parental Controls window soundlessly enters the room. If your child attempts to visit a Web site and is denied, she can request that the master screen name approve the site. In that case, you see a Web link next to your child's screen name in the Parental Controls window.

Clicking the Web link takes you directly to the Web Unlock List window. In that case, proceed directly to Step 4. Otherwise, continue with Step 2.

- 2. In the Edit Parental Controls box that fills the window, click the child's screen name.**

The window displays the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you chose.

- 3. In the Current Controls area in the middle of the dialog box, click the Edit Web Control button.**

The Web Controls window pops onto the screen.

- 4. Click the Web Unlock button in the box at the bottom of the Web Browsing Controls window.**

The Web Unlock List window opens, showing you three options:

- The Pending Request tab shows a list of sites your child wants to view but is blocked by the software. Check the box next to the site, and click either the Approve Request button to allow your child access to that site, or the Deny Request button to say no.
- The Allowed Sites tab lets you type in any Web address that you want your child to see. It also shows the list of sites you allowed in the past through this window, and gives you the option to remove any of them. If you have several children set up under several screen names, you need to go through this process for each screen name if you want all of them to view the site. Use the Show Lists drop-down menu to switch between screen names that carry Parental Controls.
- The Blocked Sites tab blocks any specific Web site that you want to be sure America Online catches. Or block a Web site that you find inappropriate that America Online may allow. For example, if you have a personal or family aversion to cartoons, you may want to block www.cartoonnetwork.com.

5. When all looks as you want it to, click the window's Close button to send it back to Parental Controls haven.

The window disappears with all your instructions intact.

Instant message controls

Instant messages are the immediate communication windows that appear out of nowhere (sometimes scaring the living daylights out of you, depending on the hour of the day and how hard you are concentrating at that moment). Instant messages let you carry on a private, one-on-one chat with someone else on America Online or on the Internet (through the America Online Instant Messenger software — see keyword **Instant Messenger** for the scoop about that).

Depending on the age and maturity of your children, you may or may not want them using instant messages. (I turned the whole instant-message thing *off* on my kids' accounts, but my kids are also in the under-13 age bracket.) To limit your child's access to the instant message system, follow these steps:

- 1. Sign on to America Online with your master screen name, click the Settings icon on the toolbar, and then click the Parental Controls link that appears in the Setting window.**

The Parental Controls settings window appears, eager to help.

2. In the Edit Parental Controls box near the top of the window, click the child's screen name.

The window displays the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you selected.

3. In the Current Controls area in the middle of the dialog box, click the Edit IM Control button.

The Instant Messaging Control window hops to the screen, just like the one shown in Figure 7-3.

Figure 7-3: Keep instant messages off your child's screen with the Block Instant Messaging option.



4. If you want to keep instant messages from your youngster, select the Block Instant Messaging option for this screen name.

The choice is clear: Let your child use instant messages or not. This isn't a shades-of-gray kind of decision.

5. After you're satisfied with the control settings, click Save to save them. Close the Custom Controls window (click the X button in the upper-right corner of the window or click the Close button at the bottom of the window) when you're finished.

The instant message controls are in place (and you can breathe a little easier).

E-mail control

E-mail is a powerful communications tool, although it can also be powerfully annoying. With the new America Online Mail controls, however, you can take command of your e-mail box and, more importantly, protect your kids from mail they shouldn't get.

The Mail controls fall into three distinct groups: general limitations on all mail, specific restrictions based on a set of e-mail addresses, and whether a screen name can receive messages with pictures and files. Here's a look at your options by group:

- ✔ **Control Who I Get Mail From:** These options establish simple, wide-ranging limits on all mail sent to a particular screen name. The options are
 - **Allow Mail from All Senders:** Anyone on AOL or the Internet can send e-mail to this screen name.
 - **Allow Mail Only from AOL Members:** If your friend isn't on AOL, you won't be getting any e-mail from her.
 - **Allow Mail Only from People I Know:** Anyone lucky enough to make this person's Buddy List or Address Book can send e-mail to the screen name.
 - **Block Mail from All Senders:** So much for the e-mail thing — it was nice while it lasted.
 - **Use a Custom Sender List:** Define special instructions about how this screen name receives mail. Click the Custom Sender List link to open the Custom Sender List box. This allows you to either block specific e-mail addresses or allow specific e-mail addresses.
 - **Block Mail Containing Pictures or Files:** If you check this box, all messages containing either images (pictures inserted directly into an e-mail message) or attached files are blocked, no matter who it's from.
 - **Blocked Mail Should Be:** This final selection lets you determine what America Online does with all blocked mail. Either permanently delete it so the offending e-mail is gone without a trace, or deliver it to the Spam Folder and let America Online take it from there.
- ✔ **Control What Is in the Mail I Get:** These controls deal with spam, which is the e-mail you don't want your kids to get anyway. Who wants to sort through junk mail before they get their first apartment address?
 - **Mail Filtered by AOL's Advanced Spam Filter:** Automatically places junk e-mail into the Spam Folder as the America Online Spam Filter detects it. Check this option to turn it on.
 - **Mail with Clickable Hyperlinks (URLs):** Checking this box sends e-mail that contains underlined links directly to the Spam Folder, no questions asked.
 - **Mail Containing Words on my Custom Word List:** Create a Custom Word List of terms that you don't want to see in your e-mailbox, and then check this box. Those messages are history.

- **Allow This Screen Name to View Contents of Spam Folder:** This check box, near the top of the window, allows your child to see what was blocked from her e-mail account and tossed into the Spam Folder if you check it. If you go to all the trouble to select the Spam Filter on a child's account, you probably don't want them digging around in the folder that contains the junk mail. But maybe that's just me.

These controls offer a great deal of flexibility — enough for everyone I hope. My favorites on the list are the Allow Mail Only from AOL Members (great for easily blocking Internet junk mail) and Use a Custom Sender List (because it's a slightly looser version of the preceding option) options. Although at certain moments the hermitlike Block All Mail option is interesting, I think defining who *is* acceptable is more powerful than blocking those who aren't.

To put up some e-mail controls, follow these steps:

- 1. Sign on with your master screen name, click the Settings icon on the toolbar, and then click the Parental Controls link in the window that appears.**

The Parental Controls window opens.

- 2. In the Edit Controls box at the top of the screen, choose your child's screen name from the list.**

The window resets itself to display the current Parental Controls settings for the selected screen name.

- 3. In the Current Controls area at the bottom of the dialog box, click the Edit E-Mail Control check box.**

The Mail and Spam Controls window appears, ready to help protect your kids, as shown in Figure 7-4.

- 4. In the Mail and Spam Controls window, click the option for the proper level of basic mail control.**

If you choose the Use a Custom Sender List option, be sure to click the Custom Sender link so you can include those e-mail addresses to include (or block).

- 5. Decide whether the screen name can receive messages containing pictures or attached files. Check or uncheck the box to match your choice.**

If you check the box, all messages with pictures or files attached are blocked.

- 6. Determine the fate of all blocked mail, and click the button next to your choice.**

Either file it away in the Spam Folder or destroy it. The choice is yours.

Figure 7-4:
The Mail and Spam Controls window helps you shield your kids' mailboxes from unwanted messages.



7. Check what mail (if any) you want delivered to the Spam Folder. Your choices are:

- Mail filtered by AOL's Spam Filter
- Mail with clickable hyperlinks (URLs)
- Mail containing words on my Custom Word List.

8. Check the box next to the screen name in the drop-down menu if you want to allow this screen name to view contents of Spam Folder.

Decide whether to allow perusal or not.

9. Click Save, and the Mail and Spam Controls window closes on its own. Close the Parental Controls window as well if that ends your work here.

Your mail controls are now in place and running. If you like these e-mail controls, and want to apply them to another screen name as well, click Save & Copy instead of Save, and America Online lists your screen names so that you can choose the next E-mail Control recipient.

Chat controls

The People Connection chat rooms are a popular attraction on America Online. Unfortunately, the word *popular* often translates into *time-consuming*, because you can easily lose track of time while chatting the night away.

To keep your kids (or even yourself) out of the chat rooms, follow these instructions:

1. **Sign on with a master screen name and click the Settings icon on the toolbar, and then click the Parental Controls link in the Settings window.**

The general Parental Controls information window appears.

2. **In the Edit Parental Controls box at the top of the screen, click the child's screen name in the list.**

The window resets itself, displaying the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you chose.

3. **In the Current Controls area in the middle of the dialog box, click the Edit Chat Control button.**

The Chat Controls window appears, filled to the brim with detailed information about the chat controls (as shown in Figure 7-5).

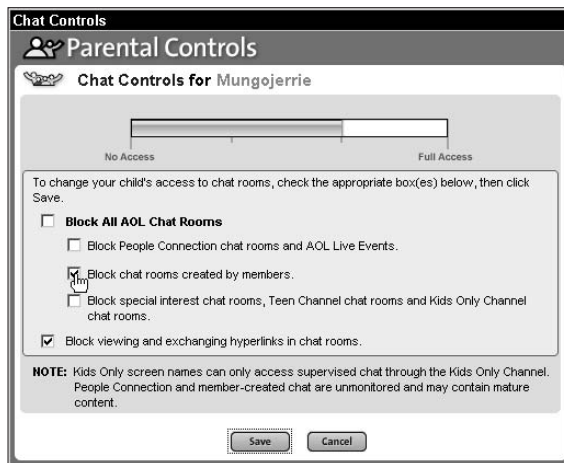


Figure 7-5:
Keep younger kids out of chat rooms with a couple of well-chosen controls.

4. **Select the chat controls that you want to turn on.**

Table 7-1 explains each of the four options, including a Severity option that offers an opinion of how draconian that particular setting is.

5. **Click Save.**

America Online responds with a brief note that your changes are saved.

6. **Click OK, and then close all the Parental Controls windows.**

Another one's done!

Turning off the chat options is as easy as turning them on. Just repeat the preceding steps and deselect each check box, removing the check mark for it.

Table 7-1 Parental Controls Options		
Control	Severity	Description
Block all AOL chat rooms	High	Woof! This one really drops the bomb. Use it only as a last resort.
Block People Connection chat rooms and AOL Live Events	Medium	Blocks all general AOL chat areas, including AOL Live and the People Connection, but still gives access to conference rooms.
Block chat rooms created by members	Low	Recommended! Prevents access to member-created and private chat areas but allows the use of the regular People Connection areas.
Block special interest chat rooms, Teen Channel chat rooms and Kids Only Channel chat rooms	Medium	Blocks conference rooms throughout America Online, including the discussion rooms in Research & Learn and the Kids Only chat areas.
Block viewing and exchanging hyperlinks in chat rooms	Low	Prevents the screen name user from clicking a hyperlink that someone types in a chat room.

Additional master screen names

In the world of screen names, only a few are masters — the rest, simply subordinates. That's a good way to keep things if you're a parent with online kids. By default, only your primary screen name (the one you created when you first signed on to America Online) is a master screen name. If adding another master screen name would simplify your life, open the Additional Master Parental Controls and get to work.

The Additional Master window accomplishes only one thing: It turns normal screen names into master screen names. It doesn't *create* screen names (for that, use keyword **Screen Names**), change screen names, or even smirk at screen names. This is one seriously focused window.



Do *not* give your child a master screen name! That's the digital equivalent of loaning your beloved teenager the keys to your 1966 Corvette, signing over the vehicle's title, handing him or her your gold credit card, and casually mentioning that you're on the way out the door for a two-year-long world

cruise. In short, having a master screen is free rein for the child to do whatever he or she wants in the online world. Because master screen names can set Parental Controls and create screen names, *only* parents should use the master screen names.

With that warning ringing in your ears, here's a run-through of the process of changing the master screen name settings:

1. **Sign on with the master screen name and then click the Settings icon on the toolbar and click the Parental Controls link in the AOL Settings window.**

The Parental Controls settings window finally appears, ready to work.

2. **In the Edit Parental Controls box at the top of the window, select the child's screen name.**

The window updates itself and displays the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you chose.

3. **Click the More Options button at the top of the Parental Controls window, scroll down to the Additional Master setting and click the entry.**

After that little romp, you land in the Additional Master Screen Names Controls window.

4. **Select the option at the bottom of the window that bestows master-screen-name status on this lowly screen name.**

Only three of your seven screen names can be master screen names. Your primary screen name automatically has master status, so you can assign as many as two more masters on your account.

5. **After you finish setting the Master option, click Save.**

America Online stores your preferences and updates the online records for your screen names. As a security precaution, America Online automatically sends to the primary screen name a notification e-mail that gives the time and date each screen name received master status.



If you open your e-mail box one day and find a letter saying that one of your screen names recently received master status but *you* didn't do it, immediately call the America Online Customer Service department at 800-827-6364 and enlist its help to find out what's happening with your account.

Download controls

Of all the Parental Controls, the Download controls are probably the least important. Granted, some things in the world I don't want my kids downloading from America Online or the Internet, but that's hardly my biggest concern about online life.

If it's a bigger worry in your life than in mine, follow these steps to limit your child's access to downloadable files:

- 1. Sign on to America Online with your master screen name and then click the Settings icon on the toolbar. After the window appears, click the Parental Controls option.**

If everything works just right, the Parental Controls settings window appears.

- 2. In the Edit Parental Controls box at the top of the window, select the screen name for your child.**

The window updates itself and displays the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you chose.

- 3. Click the More Options button at the top of the Parental Controls window, and scroll until the Download control item appears, and then click its entry.**

The vaguely impressive Downloading Control dialog box leaps into view.

- 4. To turn on the Download controls, select one or both options in the dialog box.**

I wouldn't bother with the Block AOL Software Library Downloads option, but turning on the Block FTP Software Downloads option makes a lot of sense. FTP (File Transfer Protocol) copies files through the Internet, and there's no telling what your inquisitive kiddo may find out there.

- 5. Click Save.**

An energetic dialog box pops up, letting you know that your changes are saved.

- 6. Click OK, and then close the Parental Controls windows.**

Download controls are now in place!

As you may have guessed by now, to undo the Download controls, you simply repeat the steps to create them. The big difference is that this time you click the option *off* rather than turn it on.

Newsgroup controls

Of all the custom Parental Controls, the Newsgroup control is the most valuable. Internet newsgroups are an incredible resource, filled with discussions about almost every topic imaginable. However, not all the conversations out there are designed for eyes under age 18.

To block out the most *exotic* (I'm being kind here) material that newsgroups offer, follow these steps:

1. Sign on with the master screen name and then click the Settings icon on the toolbar. Finish your trip by clicking the **Parental Controls** link in the AOL Settings window.

The Parental Controls settings window appears.

2. In the Edit Parental Controls box in the middle of the screen, click the child's screen name in the list.

The window resets itself so you can see the current Parental Controls settings for the selected screen name.

3. Click the More Options button at the top of the window, find the Newsgroup controls entry, and click it.

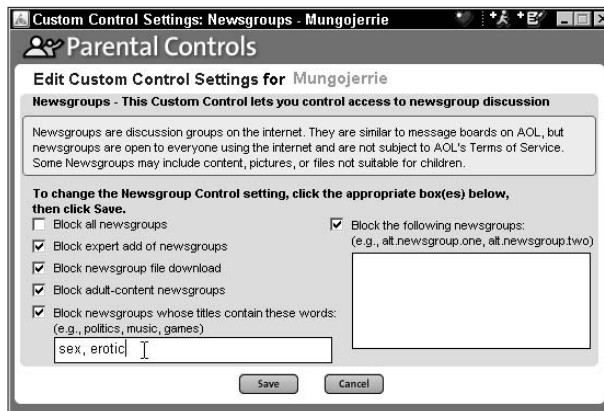
The Newsgroup control window pops into view.

4. For most kids, I recommend setting the controls as shown in Figure 7-6.

The example setting blocks your child from any Internet newsgroup with, shall we say, stimulating words in its name. This one setting quickly blocks off most of the content that many parents are concerned about.

This setting just takes care of the newsgroups (which *really* need taken care of, by the way); it does *nothing* to keep your kids out of the more explicit areas of the Web. For that, see the “Web controls” section, earlier in this chapter.

Figure 7-6: These two little words keep your kids out of so much trouble that it's amazing.



5. When you finish the settings, click Save.
6. Close all the various open windows and continue with your regularly scheduled day.

Your child is now mostly safe from the Internet newsgroups.

To undo these restrictions, work back through the preceding steps. In Step 4, delete the entries in the Block Newsgroups text area. Remember to click Save when you're finished!

Premium services

Your monthly America Online fee covers a lot of ground. It provides e-mail access, Internet access, chat rooms, message boards, and lots of other goodies. Even so, some areas of the service (notably, some of the cool multiplayer games) bring an extra hourly fee. If your kids enjoy computer games as much as my kids do, keeping junior (or juniorette) out of the for-pay games could spell the difference between fiscal responsibility and financial disaster.



Some parents must be at America Online, because all the generic age restriction settings (Kids Only, Young Teen, and Mature Teen) automatically block access to premium service areas.

If you want to *give* your children access to the pay-by-the-hour games and other premium fee areas, follow these steps:

- 1. Sign on with the master screen name and then click the Settings icon on the toolbar. Complete the journey by clicking the Parental Controls link in the Settings window.**

The Parental Controls settings window appears.

- 2. In the Edit Parental Controls box at the top of the screen, click your child's screen name in the list.**

The window resets itself so you can see the current Parental Controls settings for the screen name you clicked.

- 3. Click the More Options button at the top of the window and click the Premium Services option.**

The Premium Services window hops into view.

- 4. Select the Block Premium Services option to choose your premium services settings.**

To block your child's access to premium service areas, select the option. To allow your child into the pay-by-the-hour areas, deselect the option (click in the box until the check mark disappears).

- 5. With your setting in place, click Save to . . . well . . . save your settings. Close the various Parental Controls windows and then carry on with your regularly scheduled online time.**

That's it — the settings are good to go!

Chapter 8

Navigating the System and Marking Your Favorite Destinations

In This Chapter

- ▶ Cruising with keywords
 - ▶ Seeing things swiftly with QuickView
 - ▶ Staying organized with Favorite Places
-

It doesn't take much traveling before you start compiling a mental list of roads you enjoy driving, locales that don't match your temperament, and restaurants that you never found despite splendid directions from the hotel concierge. It's human nature — we know what we like, and when in doubt, we usually choose the known rather than the unknown (particularly because we go there without getting lost).

During your first forays around the online world, you probably discovered several (and perhaps many) likable haunts across both America Online and the Internet — and you probably got lost once or twice along the way, too. To help remember the interesting places, you likely turned to that tried-and-true friend of office workers everywhere, the sticky note. Unfortunately, after a few weeks of online exploring, your monitor (and possibly the wall space around it) looks like the ancient burial ground where sticky notes go to die.

With so many places to visit out there, the sticky note solution to remembering your favorite spots usually causes mild memory trauma and frequent office-supply raids, neither of which make life very fun. That's where this chapter fits into your world.

The following pages explore the gentle art of navigating America Online through its keyword system, which moves you instantly from here to there and everywhere. It also explains how to rid your monitor of those *remember this area's keyword* sticky notes with the built-in Favorite Places and QuickView features.

If you're tired of stumbling across something cool and then losing the note that can get you back there, kick back, put your feet up, and flip through this chapter. It's here to help.

Unlocking the Keys to Keywords

Almost every information area, window, and fascinating destination in America Online has a special word or phrase that identifies it. The America Online software refers to those words and phrases as *keywords*. Keywords work like little magic carpets that whisk you wherever you want to go around the system. Using keywords saves you lots of time, and makes the service all the easier to navigate, too.

Most America Online areas display their keyword along the bottom-right side of their window, just like the Homework Help window in Figure 8-1. Some windows use a single word, such as the AOL Sports area at keyword **Sports**. Others use a simple phrase such as **Job Hunting 101**, an area devoted to helping you land a new gig. Capitalization *never* counts with keywords, so don't worry about that at all.

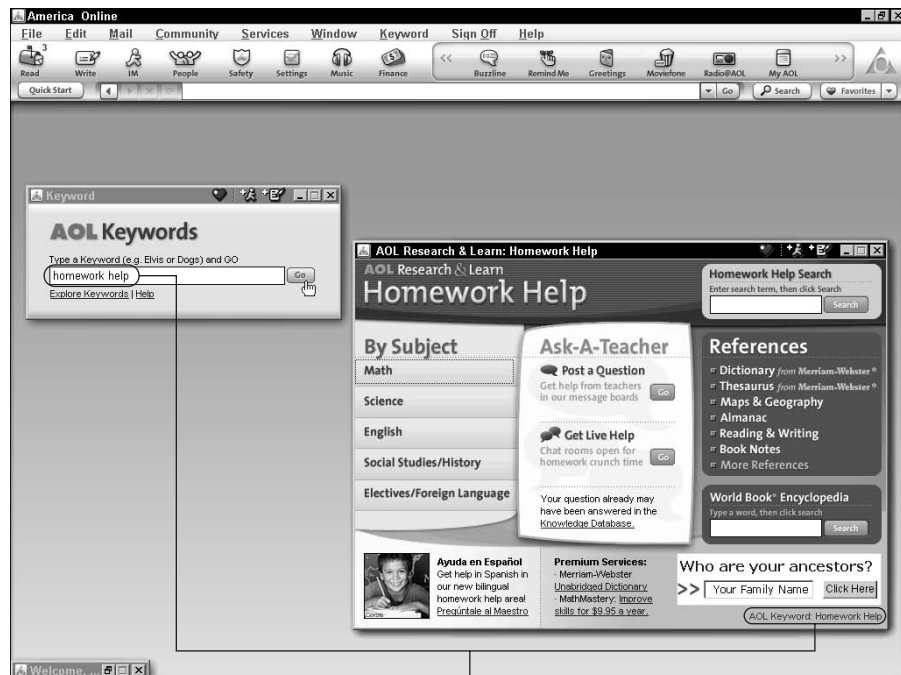


Figure 8-1: Almost every area inside AOL has a keyword for easy navigation.

Type a keyword and go to the corresponding AOL area.

To make keywords easier to use and generally more intuitive, the vast majority of online areas respond to several alternate keywords, both with and without punctuation. For instance, you can get to the popular Fatherhood area with keywords **Dad**, **Dads**, **Father**, and **Fatherhood**. Likewise, the Parent-To-Parent area pops into view by typing either **Parent-to-Parent** or **Parent to Parent** (without the dashes).

To use a keyword, press Ctrl+K. The Keyword dialog box comes up, as shown on the left in Figure 8-2. Type the keyword and click the Go button (or just press Enter). If everything works as it should, America Online immediately displays that keyword's window. If the keyword system doesn't recognize what you typed, you get an Internet Search window instead, filled with results that match (or at least *sort of* match) the word or phrase you put into the keyword dialog box.



You can also type keywords into the big white text box on the navigation bar, but you may end up somewhere you don't expect. Unlike the Keyword dialog box, the programming for the navigation bar assumes that you want to *search* for information rather than go to a keyword. As Figure 8-2 shows, the first choice offered by the navigation bar involved searching the Internet for items matching *homework help*. As an afterthought, it also suggested going to the Homework Help keyword, but only if you click on the Go To AOL Keyword option.

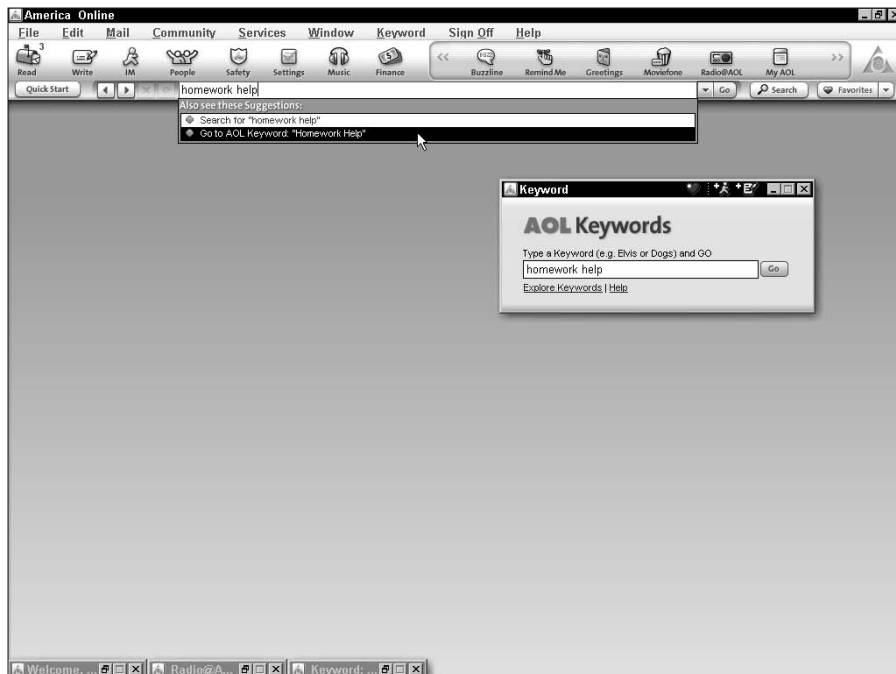


Figure 8-2:
You can enter keywords either place, but they work better in the Keyword dialog box.



Where do you find keywords? At keyword Keyword!

Granted, the name sounds kinda silly, but the ultimate keyword lists found at keyword **Keyword** make the redundancy worthwhile. This window serves up every single keyword available on America Online (plus, unfortunately, a few that aren't found on the system anymore — apparently the janitorial staff doesn't scrub the list too often).

This handy window displays three tabs across the middle, each one leading to a different organization of the keyword list. The first tab, A-Z, gives you a nice, simple alphabetical listing of keywords. Given the number of keywords on America Online (well over 13,000 the last time I checked), wading through the straight alphabetical list takes a while.

The second tab, By Subject, corresponds to the old Channels listing from AOL 8.0. Search this list when you want to dive into the keywords relating to a particular category. When you click an entry in this list, the window refreshes itself and presents you with a detailed list of keywords related to the topic.

The By AOL Feature tab rounds out the window's options. All of the keywords in here relate to America Online itself, not the service's content areas (such as sports, news, and quilting). Look in here when you seek keywords for areas like Billing, Buddy Icons, Marketing Preferences, Themes, and so on.

Remember your favorite keywords by noting them on the Cheat Sheet in the front of this book. Use that list as a memory jogger or to plan your online sessions. As your list of beloved keywords grows (and it will, don't worry), store and organize them in your Favorite Places list, described in the section "Organizing the Places of Your Heart," later in this chapter.

Getting There Fast with QuickView

As part of their ongoing effort to help you find the coolest online places (and to herd everyone in roughly the same direction — toward the ads), the America Online folks added a new tool to your navigational arsenal: the quasi-customizable QuickView window (shown in Figure 8-3). The QuickView tab lives at the top of the Welcome window, next to the Welcome tab. When you click the QuickView tab, the Welcome window steps off-stage, and the rather massive QuickView window replaces it, filled with whatever — well, mostly whatever — you want to see.

"Wait a minute," I hear you cry in navigational confusion. "What do you mean *quasi-customizable*? And what's with the *mostly whatever* crack?"

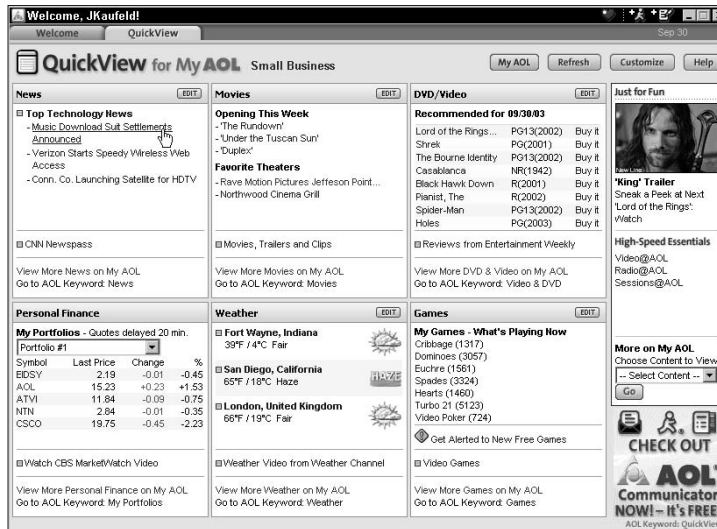


Figure 8-3:
Customize
the *other*
half of your
Welcome
window
with
QuickView.

Unfortunately, I meant just what I said. The QuickView window, unlike the whatever-you-want-to-put-there Favorite Places system and the My Shortcuts do-it-yourself menu, is *quasi-customizable*. Yes, you select what kind of information appears in there, but you only get to choose from a preset list of options that America Online (in its infinite wisdom) provides. If you love the online game shows, the AOL.COM customizable news page, or the online Yellow Pages, then QuickView completes your life. If your tastes run toward more unique things (like the Web-graphics or home-schooling forums), you're out of luck with QuickView. Instead, use either Favorite Places or My Shortcuts for quick access to those areas.



The America Online programmers (secreted away in those massive Dulles, Virginia, offices) assure me that they included the “most popular” online areas in the QuickView options. Still, I wish they included an “other” entry to add your favorite keyword or Web site. But alas, it doesn't (at least not yet).

The first time you sign on with new America Online 9.0 software and click the QuickView tab, you see the default QuickView area, filled with destinations probably known and loved by America Online's Marketing department. Replacing those with destinations that *you* know and love takes only a moment:

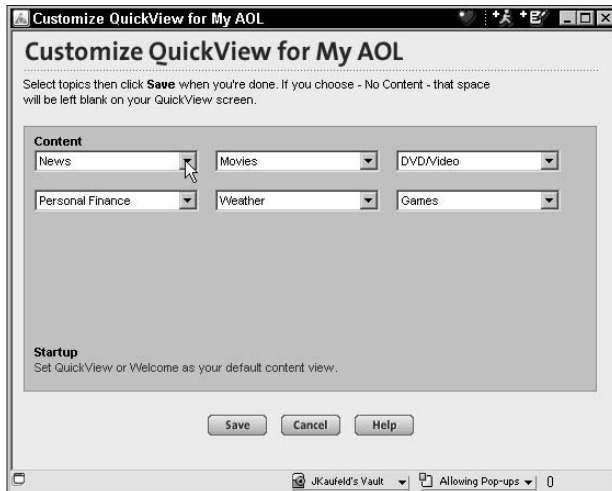
1. **With your computer signed on to America Online, click the Customize button along the top right side of the QuickView window.**

The aptly named Customize QuickView for My AOL window appears, looking similar to Figure 8-4.

The settings for QuickView are unique to each screen name, so you need to repeat the setup process for each screen name in your stable.



Figure 8-4:
Fill the QuickView window with the content you want by customizing these settings.



2. Click the down-arrow next to any of the six content areas.

A drop-down menu slides into view.

3. Run your mouse through the drop-down menu until you find an area that interests you. When you find the right topic area, click it once.

The topic takes its position in the chosen slot.

4. Repeat Steps 3 and 4 until you fill the six QuickView slots.

When each slot shows an online area that you love, it's time to save your work.

If you *really* like the QuickView window, you can tell your America Online software to display it instead of the Welcome window when you sign on to the service. To do that, click the link down by Startup, in the lower-left side of the dialog box.

5. Click the Save button at the bottom of the window.

America Online saves the QuickView for this screen name (not for all screen names in your account).

After the customizing dialog box disappears, QuickView displays all the content areas you selected. Depending on what you chose, you may need to click the Refresh button (near the top of the QuickView window) before all of the information shows correctly.



In addition to the master customization button at the top of the QuickView window, every individual content area has its own Edit button. Those little buttons let you add yet *another* level of customization to your window by either selecting specific stuff you like (such as types of news or specific games) or by filling in some demographic information so the system can make educated recommendations (in the DVD/Video and Music areas, for instance). Spend some time playing with the options in each section to get the most from your QuickView experience.

Organizing the Places of Your Heart

A new button is in town — and it's appearing on a toolbar near you. Say hello to Favorites and its sidekick, the Favorite Places window — both ride hard to organize the online areas you know and love.

The Favorite Places system doesn't bring any law into your digital life (and I hope Congress won't either), but it promises a *lot* of order. Rather than limit yourself to just 10 destinations socked away on the My Shortcuts menu (see Chapter 21 for the details about that) or six QuickView areas selected from whatever America Online feels like offering, Favorite Places stores as many locales as you want. And you get to choose them all! Is that just too cool or what? (I know, I know — no one should get this excited about software.)

Figure 8-5 shows a hard-working Favorite Places window in action. The heart entries link to areas inside America Online or to Web pages on the Internet. For example, the item highlighted in Figure 8-5 is the Senate Simulation forum on America Online. Folders (such as Help & Safety or Gaming and Fun) apply some order to the impending chaos.



Figure 8-5 also shows another cool feature of the America Online software: The Favorites menu, beneath the Favorites tab. When you add an online area to your Favorite Places, the area automatically appears in both the Favorite Places window and the Favorites menu under the Favorites button. Because items in both places work the same way, you end up in the same place whether you double-click its heart entry in the Favorite Places window or just choose the same item from the Favorites menu.

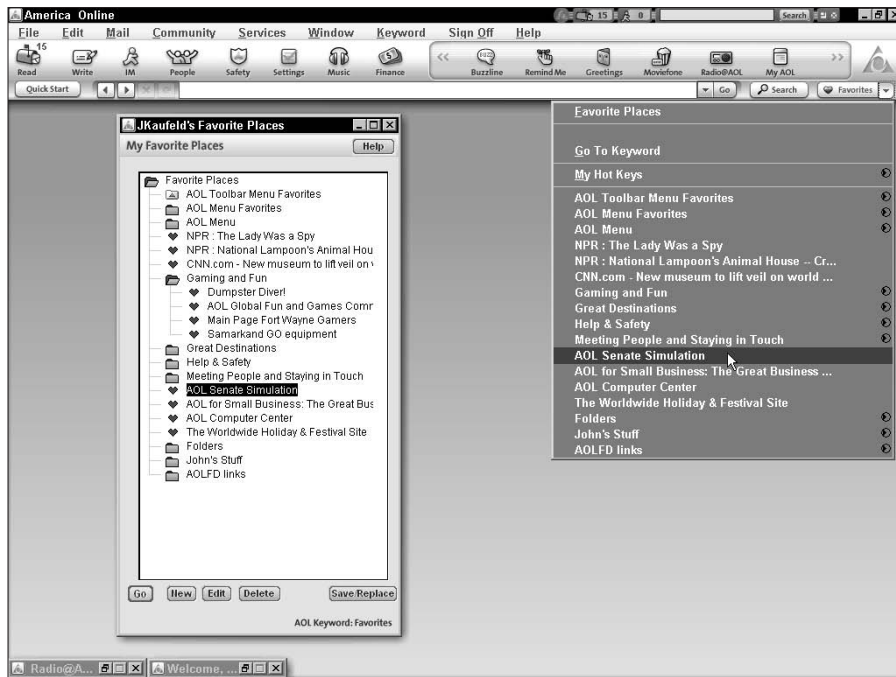


Figure 8-5:
The famous
Favorites
Places
dialog box
and its
twin, the
Favorites
menu on
the toolbar.

A few other random musings about the Favorite Places system wandered out of my brain at the last moment:

- ✔ To use the Favorite Places system, you must have version 4.0 or later of the America Online access software for Windows. Any older America Online software just isn't this cool.
- ✔ Even though all the items in your Favorite Places window also appear on the Favorites menu, you can changes entries only in the Favorite Places window. The Favorites menu notices the changes on its own, so don't worry about that.
- ✔ You're not limited to the folders shown in Figure 8-5. I created those to meet my exceedingly peculiar needs. You have the freedom — yes, even the right and responsibility — to create equally peculiar folders for yourself. Flip ahead to the “Adding a folder” section for more about making your own folders.

Using folders in the Favorite Places window

I almost forgot to mention this, but two of my brain cells, spurred into action by the caloric heat of a half-digested Oreo, reminded me that double-clicking is the key to using the Favorite Places window:

- ✓ To open a folder, double-click it.
- ✓ To close the folder after you're finished with it, double-click the folder again.
- ✓ To visit a favorite place, double-click it.

Flip back into single-clicking mode when you're using the Favorites menu on the toolbar. Because it's a menu and not a list of items in a window, you click once to choose destinations there.

Adding a favorite place

Including a new favorite place is a cinch. You can do so in two ways: the Easy Way and the Other Way. This section tells you how to handle them both.

The Easy Way is for areas inside America Online or Internet-based Web pages and gophers you browsed your way into:

- 1. Display an area you're fond of, either inside America Online or on the Internet.**
- 2. Click the big heart icon in the window's upper-right corner.**

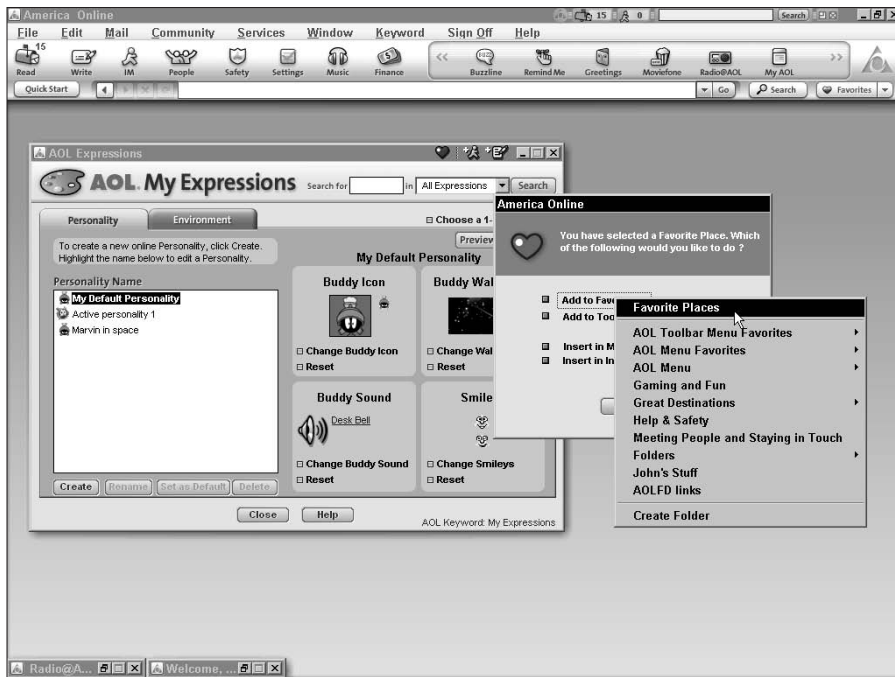
A little dialog box appears, demanding to know what you intend to do with the link to this online area.

Not every window in America Online has one of those cute little heart icons. It's unfortunate but true. If the window you're looking at doesn't have one, you can't add it to the Favorite Places list.

- 3. Click the Add to Favorites button to include an entry for this online area on your Favorite Places list.**

A list of folders in your Favorite Places list appears next to the dialog box, as shown in Figure 8-6.

Figure 8-6: America Online helps you collect favorite locations and share them in e-mail and instant messages.



4. To store this item in a certain folder, click the folder name in the pop-up list. To simply throw the item into the Favorite Places list, click the Favorite Places entry (the first one on the list).

Wherever you choose to store the item, your new entry takes up residence in both the Favorite Places window and the Favorites menu.



If you click the Insert in Instant Message button, a new Instant Message window appears, complete with a ready-to-use link to this favorite place. Clicking Insert in Mail does much the same thing, except that a blank e-mail message pops up, with the link in the body and a friendly Check This Out notice on the Subject line.

Use the Other Way when someone dashes up and says, “I just found the neatest Web page — you gotta check it out!” The Other Way assumes that you have the address of a Web page and want to include it manually in your list of favorite places:

1. Click the My Favorites button on the toolbar.

The Favorite Places window appears.

2. Click the folder in which you want to store the new item.

If you don’t know where to put the item, click the Favorite Places folder at the top of the window. That’s as good a place as any — and you can always move the entry somewhere else later.

3. At the bottom of the Favorite Places window, click New.

The Add New Folder/Favorite Place dialog box appears, with the New Favorite Place option already selected. (Isn't it nice when the software does something *useful* for you?)

4. In the Enter the Place's Description box, type a name for this entry and press Tab.

5. In the Enter the Internet Address box, type the entry's address.

Figure 8-7 displays a finished entry, ready to be saved for posterity.

6. Click OK to add the entry to your Favorite Places window.

Figure 8-7:
The
Dumpster
Diver digital
gift page is
ready to join
my favorite
places.

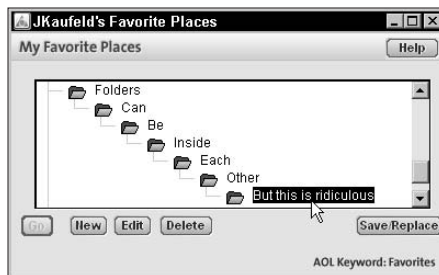


Adding a folder

Adding all kinds of favorite places to your system is great, but you need some organization to keep everything in order. That's why those clever America Online programmers included folders.

Folders can live in the Favorite Places area or inside other folders (see Figure 8-8). Either way, creating a folder is easy.

Figure 8-8:
An example
of folder
creation
run amok.



Here's how:

1. Click the My Favorites button on the toolbar.

The Favorite Places window pops to attention.

2. At the top of the window, click the Favorite Places folder.

The Favorite Places folder is highlighted (this is a good sign).

3. Click New.

The Add New Folder/Favorite Place dialog box appears on your screen (another good sign).

4. Click the New Folder option.

The dialog box suddenly shrinks to half its previous size, shedding those unwanted pounds and inches in no time at all.

5. Click in the Enter the New Folder's Name text box, and then type the name of your new folder. Click OK when you're finished.

Your new folder appears at the bottom of the Favorite Places list.

6. Move the folder to wherever you want it in the list.

If you're not sure how to move the folder, look in the next section.

Moving folders and favorite places

Creating folders and favorite places is one thing, but organizing them is another. The little buggers tend to land wherever the America Online software feels like putting them. However, moving them around is easy after you get the hang of it.

The technique is the same for both folders and favorite places. After you open the Favorite Places window, follow these steps:

1. Decide which item you want to move and where it's headed.

2. Put the mouse pointer on the chosen item and press and hold the mouse button.

3. While holding down the mouse button, move the item to its destination and then release the mouse button.

The item settles down, safe and sound in its new home.

Modifying folders and favorite places

In every life, there comes a point when it's time to make some changes. When that time in the life of your Favorite Places window arrives, have no fear. Although change is never fun, at least it's easy in the Favorite Places window.

Open the Favorite Places window and then follow these steps:

- 1. Click the folder or favorite place and then click the Edit button.**

For a folder, the Rename dialog box appears. For a favorite place, the description and Internet address dialog box appear.



- 2. Make your changes (usually to the name of the item).**

If you change your mind and don't want to make any changes, double-click the upper-left corner of the box.

- 3. Click OK.**

Deleting folders and favorite places

Favorite Places entries, like other impetuous flashes in the dark sky of fading youth, have a limited life span. When the time to delete an entry comes, just do the deed and go on as best as you can. Solemnly open the Favorite Places window, and then morosely proceed through the following steps:

- 1. Click the item you want to delete.**

- 2. Click the Delete button.**

- 3. In the pop-up dialog box, click OK.**

The entry is no more. Remember, ask not for whom the Delete button clicks — it clicks for thy once-favorite place.

Chapter 9

Where's Your Buddy? Where's Your Pal?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Creating, deleting, and changing Buddy Lists
 - ▶ Maintaining your privacy
 - ▶ Making your preferences clear
-

Gathering your buddies for a quick chat always adds fun to the day. After all, what would your life have been like these past few years without your best friends? When you meet new friends on America Online, you can keep track of their screen names with the AOL Buddy List feature and avoid the frustrating experience of meeting a new best friend one day and losing him or her the next — all because you forgot your friend's name!

This chapter explores the world of digital friend tracking, including creating, adding to, and deleting from your America Online Buddy List. In case you find yourself in a talkative mood, you also find out how to send instant messages to your buddies and gather them for a cozy private chat.

Who's Your Buddy?

At a glance, the Buddy List tells you which of your friends are online. It even organizes your buddies into groups, making the task of discerning the office crowd from the gang at last week's online Jell-O diving competition an easy one. (After all, the difference may be important, even if a few names overlap.)

By default, every time you sign on to America Online, your Buddy List jumps into action, hanging out in the upper-right corner of the screen. (If you don't want the list to always come up, you can adjust the Buddy List's behavior with the Buddy List preferences, covered later in this chapter.) As your buddies sign on and off the system, the list updates automatically. Table 9-1 shows how the Buddy List marks screen names as they arrive, depart, and generally hang around America Online.

Table 9-1 How the Buddy List Tracks Your Friends		
<i>When Your Friend Does This . . .</i>	<i>The Buddy List Does This . . .</i>	<i>So It Looks Like This . . .</i>
Signs on	Displays an asterisk (*) behind the name	JKaufeld*
Stays online for a while	Displays just the name	JKaufeld
Signs off	Puts the name in parentheses	(JKaufeld)



If the Buddy List shows a tiny picture next to your friend's screen name, shows the screen name in a strange font, or fancies up the letters in delightful color, that means your friend personalized his or her instant messages with a Buddy icon. You can snazz up your name the same way in a couple of easy steps. Start at keyword **My Expressions**, to customize your Buddy icon, buddy wallpaper, buddy sound, and smiley set. To change how your screen name appears in the Buddy List, try keyword **Format Screen Name**. This window offers several fonts, plus a wild variety of color combinations (including my favorites, Ocean Waves and Rainbow).

Because of all the new instant message features added in the 9.0 software (such as talk, file transfer, instant images, and video), the programmers also bestowed a new trick to the Buddy List. By moving your mouse pointer over any name on your Buddy List, the 9.0 software displays a little dialog box about that person. The box shows the buddy's icon, offers single-click e-mail writing, e-mail searching, and instant messaging. Better still, the bottom of the little dialog box shows your buddy's software capabilities — what your friend's copy of America Online (or AIM, for the non-AOL members out there) lets them do. This feature simply and easily resolves the whole problem of your trying to do something cool — like a Video Messenger session — with a friend, but everybody getting frustrated because the friend's software couldn't make the cool thing happen. Now you *know* exactly what your friend can do right from the start. What a deal!

The following sections cover all the important stuff you need to know about building, using, and changing Buddy Lists on America Online. For information about privacy preferences and Buddy List preferences, see the "Privacy Preferences: Please, I Vahnt to Be Alone" and "Tweaking Your Buddy List Preferences" sections, later in this chapter.



What if some of your friends don't use America Online? Are they lost forever? Goodness no! Tell your Internet-based friends about the cool AOL Instant Messenger program (better known as *AIM*), which lets them send and receive instant messages, create a Buddy List, and do many other nifty tricks. Find out all the details at keyword **AIM** (or www.aim.com for your *Net-dot-friends*).

Adding someone to a Buddy List

Including people on the Buddy List is a snap. Here's how to do it:

1. In the Buddy List window, click the Setup button.

The Buddy List Setup window appears, just like the one shown in Figure 9-1.

If your Buddy List window isn't already on-screen, choose Community → Buddy List from the menu or use keyword **Buddy** to summon it. From there, click the Setup button and keep going through the steps.



Figure 9-1:
Tweak your
Buddy List
groups from
this window.

2. Scroll through the list of names, click once on the name of the Buddy List group you want to bulk up with a new member, and then click the Add Buddy button.

The Add New Buddy window hops on the screen, looking as bright and chipper as ever. If you accidentally click twice on a Buddy List group, don't worry. That just tells America Online to temporarily hide the screen names in that group. Double-click the group name again, and — poof! — the screen names appear once more.

To create a new section in your Buddy List, see the “Creating a Buddy List group” section later in this chapter.

3. In the Enter New Buddy's Screen Name box, type the screen name of your buddy and then press Enter.



The little dialog box disappears as your buddy's screen name takes its place in the Buddies in Group area.

If your buddy's mobile phone uses the Short Message Service (or SMS) feature, you can also send an instant message straight to the phone. To do that, choose the Cell Phone Number option in this box and then type the phone number (with area code — just like you normally enter phone numbers) into the dialog box. After pressing Enter, a second dialog box appears, asking you to enter a name (or some other identifying text) to use for this item's entry in your Buddy List. Type something clever like **Hanks mobile**, and then click the OK button. Once in your Buddy List, this item appears with quotation marks around the name and a little cell phone icon to the side. (How cute!)

- 4. Repeat Step 3 until all your buddies land in there.**
- 5. After finishing the list, close the Buddy List Setup window.**

The Buddy List Setup dialog box poofs away, leaving you ready to wander America Online as you want.

Adding a buddy from an instant message

The easiest way to add buddies to your list is to include them while you chat using IM. This is so simple to do that it's almost worth sending instant messages to your friends just so you can add them to your Buddy List. Here's the lowdown:

- 1. Connect with your buddy through the instant message system.**

It's not important who sends the first message. You simply need an Instant Message window with IM To: (*your friend's screen name*) open and active.

- 2. Click the Buddy Info button at the bottom of the Instant Message window.**

The Buddy Info window appears, displaying a bunch of available options.

- 3. Click the Add to My Buddy List button.**

The Add to Buddy List window appears, showing you the Buddy List groups you already created. At this point, you can drop your buddy into an existing group, or select the Create a New Buddy List Group option and fill in the new group name into the accompanying box.

- 4. Select an existing Buddy List group, or click the Create a New Buddy List Group button and name the group. Then click Save.**

Whichever option you choose, AOL drops your buddy into that list and presents a helpful dialog box informing you that your buddy is now part of your Buddy List.

5. Click OK to make the dialog box go away.

That's it! Trust me — this takes a whole lot longer to explain than it does to do. After you work through the steps once or twice, adding a friend to your Buddy List through the IM window becomes almost second nature.

Creating a Buddy List group

What if you recently met a whole slew of new people in a particular chat room, on a message board, or through an e-mail mailing list? You can keep track of your entourage the easy way by creating a unique Buddy List just for them:

1. In the Buddy List window, click the Setup button.

The Buddy List Setup window appears, eagerly awaiting your new creation.

2. Click the Add Group button to make a new Buddy List and add people to it.

The Add New Group dialog box hops onto the screen, ready to accept your creative effort.

3. In the Add New Group box, type a name (16 letters or fewer works great, but you can go up to 48 letters) for the new list and then press Enter.

Your new Buddy List group appears in the Buddy List Setup window (and in your Buddy List window as well). Because the group is new, it contains no buddies. This kind of thing depresses the Buddy List software, so take a moment and add your friends' screen names to the list. (When in doubt, *never* upset your software. Be kind and gentle with it, and it may consider doing the same for you.)

4. Click the Add Buddy button, type your friend's screen name in the dialog box, and then press Enter.

Your buddy's screen name takes its place in the Buddies in Group area.

5. Repeat Step 4 until all your buddies are in there.

6. When you finish, close the Buddy List Setup window.

The Buddy List dialog box proudly displays an entry for your new list (see Figure 9-2).



Make sure you spell your friends' screen names correctly when you drop them in your Buddy List. The software doesn't check to ensure that the screen names are correctly spelled and active. So, if you create a list with a bunch of buddies who never seem to show up online, you may want to double-check the spellings.



Figure 9-2:
The Quilters
proudly join
my list of
friends.

Deleting someone from a Buddy List group

Sad to say, but sometimes buddies become ex-buddies. Your interests change, their interests change, and suddenly you no longer correspond. Or maybe a friend simply changed screen names, which means that you need to add his or her new screen name and delete the old one. Whether deleting a buddy from a Buddy List group is traumatic or transitional, AOL provides you with a way to do the job:

1. In the Buddy List window, click the Setup button.

The Buddy List Setup window appears.

If your Buddy List window doesn't appear, keyword **Buddy** brings the Buddy List window to attention.

2. Scroll through the list of Buddy groups and screen names to find the passé or absent friend, and click once on the friend's screen name.



The screen name is highlighted, as if it knows something bad may happen to it soon.

3. **Delete your buddy's screen name from the list by clicking the Delete button. Reassure the software that you know what you're doing by clicking Yes when the Are You Really Sure About This dialog box pops into view.**

The buddy's screen name disappears from sight and from the Buddy group, as well. If for some reason you decide that deleting this buddy was all a hasty mistake, click No to keep your friend in the Buddy group.

4. **Click the X button in the upper-right corner of the window to make the dialog box go away.**

The Buddy List Setup window departs the scene. You're now ready to continue life with America Online.

Deleting an entire Buddy List group

Once a year or so, you probably get the urge to clean house (at least that's the way it works here). When the cleaning bug hits, take a look at your Buddy List groups and see whether the window needs a bit of tidying. If you're hanging on to Buddy List groups that contain no members, groups that track outdated interests, or lists of e-mail business addresses for the job you left 18 months ago, a little window cleaning may be in order. Here's what to do:

1. **In your Buddy List window, click the Setup button to display the Buddy List Setup window.**

If your Buddy List window isn't handily on-screen, use keyword **Buddy** to bring the Buddy List Setup window to life.

2. **To highlight the Buddy List group that you want to discard forever, click its entry in the list. Then seal the list's fate by clicking the Delete button.**

A small dialog box worriedly rushes to your screen, asking whether you truly want to delete the Buddy List group.

To set Buddy List groups apart from screen names, the groups appear in the list in a **bold** font with a tiny plus sign next to them.

3. **Click Yes in the Are You Sure dialog box, and then close the Buddy List Setup window to finish the process.**

The Buddy List control window adjusts to the change, displaying one less Buddy List group in its collection.





Watch carefully — it even does tricks!

Now that you have these cool, new Buddy List groups, what do you do with them? Well, plenty!

Want to know where your friend is hanging out online? Find your buddy fast by right-clicking his or her screen name, and then picking Locate Buddy from the menu that appears. This option works just like the regular Locate Member Online option (the same one you get with the Ctrl+L key combination). Locate Buddy tells you whether your buddy is signed on to America Online and whether he or she is in a chat room. If your buddy is in a publicly available chat room, the Locate dialog box also offers a handy

Go button that whisks you away to join your buddy's chat.

Quickly send your friend an instant message by double-clicking his or her screen name. An Instant Message window opens on-screen with your friend's screen name already filled in.

If you had a more face-to-face discussion in mind, use the Buddy Chat feature to invite your buddy to a private chat room with the two of you (and whomever else you want to invite). See the "Building an Online Treehouse with Buddy Chat" section, later in this chapter, for all the details.



Be *very* sure that you want to delete a Buddy List group before you click Yes to delete the list. If you mistakenly delete the wrong list, you have to re-create that Buddy List group from scratch. Did this already happen to you? (If so, I'm very sorry.) See the "Creating a Buddy List group" section, earlier in this chapter.

Renaming a Buddy List group

Suppose that you woke up this morning and realized that last night's dream gave you the perfect name for one of your existing Buddy List groups. Never fear — changing that Buddy List name is a snap:

1. **In the Buddy List window, click the Setup button to display the Buddy List Setup window.**

If your Buddy List window is hiding from you, keyword **Buddy** calls the Buddy List Setup window to your screen.

2. **Right-click the Buddy List group that you want to rename, and then pick Rename from the pop-up menu.**

A Rename box jumps to attention, looking like it does everywhere else inside Windows. (These programs lack even the most *basic* creativity sometimes!)

3. Type the new name for your Buddy List group.

Choose a name that's representative of the entire group or one that helps you remember why you placed these screen names together, such as the license number of your first car (after all, it's *your* list).

4. Press Enter to make your changes a reality. Finish the process by closing the Buddy List Setup window.

If you glance at your Buddy List window, you see an updated window that proudly displays your new Buddy List group name.

Privacy Preferences: Please, I Vahnt to Be Alone

You don't have to be a movie star to want privacy every now and then. Sometimes, you just want to get away from it all and enjoy a little peace and quiet. That's why the Buddy List system includes a collection of privacy preferences.

If you don't want people to track your screen name with a Buddy List, that's easy to set up. Here's what to do:

1. In the Buddy List window, click Setup.

The Buddy List Setup window appears on-screen. If your Buddy List window isn't visible, use keyword **Buddy** to bring it on the screen.

2. Click the IM Settings check box.

The Buddy List Settings window ambles onto the scene, ready to assist.

3. Click the Privacy and Security tab.

The Privacy and Security portion of the window jumps to the screen, looking very similar to the one shown in Figure 9-3.

Although it looks rather daunting, this window makes a lot more sense when you break it into parts. The left side of the window shows two long-winded section names: Choose the Your Privacy Settings options and the People I've Blocked in the Above Preferences options. Each section contains several options, which let you choose a feature from a list of possibilities; clicking one option turns off the others. On the right side, you find the instant message security settings, a new feature in the 9.0 software.

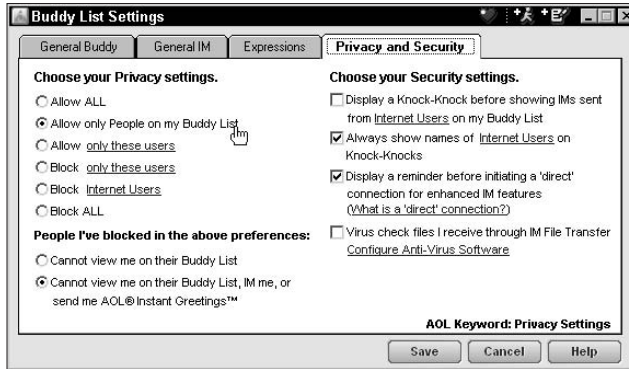


Figure 9-3:
Regain your
Buddy List
privacy.

4. Select the privacy level you prefer:

- **To completely block yourself from Buddy Lists all over America Online (including AOL Instant Messenger users on the Internet),** select the Block All option.
- **To either allow or prevent a few members from tracking you on their Buddy Lists,** first select one these options: Allow Only People on My Buddy List, Allow Only These Users, or Block Only These Users. To type the acceptable (or unacceptable, depending on your setting) screen name list, click the link next to the appropriate option. A Create a Custom list dialog box appears. At this point, enter either the Enter Screen Name or IM Address box, and type the specific screen names you want to block or allow. Finally, click Add. Add as many screen names as you want to block (or allow). Click Save when you finish the project.
- **To block only AOL Instant Messenger users from communicating with you from the Internet,** select the Block Internet Users option.

5. Decide whether to apply these preferences for Buddy Lists only or for Buddy Lists, instant messages, and AOL Instant Greetings.



I recommend using the Buddy List setting rather than the bigger Buddy Lists, AOL Greeting Instant Messages option. The latter option is best if you want to strictly limit who can see you with a Buddy List or send you instant messages.

6. Turn your attention to the right side of the window, and pick your Security Settings.



The two settings in the middle of the list (displaying the names of people sending Internet IMs and automatic reminders about direct connection IM features like file transfer and talk) both enhance your online security, so I recommend leaving them turned on. If you share a lot of files with people via IM, make sure you turn on the virus scanning software option at the bottom of the list.

7. After finishing the various settings, click Save.

The Buddy List Preferences dialog box silently departs the scene, without so much as a whimper about saving your work. Don't worry — if you clicked Save, America Online really *did* catch your settings.

8. Click the X button in the upper-right corner of the Buddy List Preferences window to close it.

Continue with your regularly scheduled online experience, free from unwanted interruptions.

Tweaking Your Buddy List Settings

Some days, you want sound in your world; other days, the mere thought of extra noise makes your head pound. Alter your general Buddy List Settings to match your mood. Opt for or against sounds when your buddies come and go, and tell the system whether you want to see your Buddy List every time you sign on.

To fiddle with your Buddy List settings, follow these steps:

1. Go to keyword Buddy List Settings.

The Buddy List Settings window appears, with the General Buddy tab already selected. Isn't software helpful when it wants to be?

2. Look through the settings in the window and make changes according to your mood.

Each of the settings pretty much explains itself. In a flush of helpfulness, the America Online developers added explanatory links next to most of the items, so if something doesn't make sense, click the What Is link next to it for a decent description.



Most of the time, you want to leave all the options in here turned on (with check marks in the boxes). The second one in the list, Add People I Send IMs To, gets a little annoying after a while, because it just keeps packing more and more screen names onto your Buddy List. Of all the options in here, I suggest turning that one off.

3. After making all the changes to your Buddy List settings, click Save.

America Online returns you to wherever you were.



To add a buddy icon and custom buddy sound to your own instant messages, go into the My Expressions area at keyword **My Expressions**. The four options in that window cover your buddy icon, IM Wallpaper, Smiley theme, and IM sounds.

Building an Online Treehouse with Buddy Chat

Instant message conversations have their place, but for extended chatter, using the AOL chat rooms is better. Chat rooms offer a larger text area for scrolling messages and the ability to talk to more than one person at a time. With the America Online Buddy Chat feature, the system quickly creates a private chat room and invites the members you choose as well as any other friends you decide to include manually at the last moment. This feature works only when your friends are signed on, so don't try chatting with people who aren't there. If you do, someone may offer you a nice, padded computer, complete with a very special room of your own!



Extra! Extra! This news just in!! Buddy Chats now work with both America Online members *and* AIM users! Yep, that's right — draw your friends from all over the online world into a Buddy Chat room near you. (In case you wondered, AIM users still can't do regular America Online People Connection rooms. Such is life.)

Here's how you create a Buddy Chat of your own:

- 1. In your Buddy List, select the name of a buddy you want to chat with. Then in the Buddy List window, click the Buddy Chat button. (To invite more than one person, click the next name and then click the Buddy Chat button. Continue until you feel tired or overwhelmed by the number of people you know.)**

The Buddy Chat window appears. AOL fills in the screen name of your selected buddy, and the name appears in the Screen Names to Invite box.



To invite a whole group full of buddies, click a Buddy Group entry (such as Family or Friends) instead of clicking a single buddy's screen name. Everybody in the group automatically gets an invitation.

- 2. Alter the listed screen names as much as you like by erasing names and filling in others.**

Invite as few as one person or as many as you can reasonably fit into a chat room and still have a good time. (Remember, only 23 people, including you, fit into a chat room.) You're free to add any America Online or AIM screen name to your Buddy Chat List, even if that name isn't in your Buddy List.

3. In the Message to Send box, type a reason for getting together.

AOL helpfully starts your message with *You are invited to:* — either complete it or replace it with a phrase of your own.

Some invitations, such as *You are invited to clean the pool,* tend to turn people off. Spend a few seconds on your invitation to make it sound appealing if you want your friends to attend your chat.

4. Change any (or all) of the chat room names to make them friendlier.

The Location text box suggests rather arcane chat room names; usually *Chat* with about 20 numbers tacked on the end. For a good start to your chatting experience, change the name to something a little more noteworthy and interesting.

AOL chooses these chat room names to minimize the chance of having someone you don't know drop in to your private chat room. If you change the chat room name to something more generic, such as *I love dogs* or *Jane*, you may receive a surprise visitor every now and then as someone else thinks up your chat room name. If this happens, simply tell the person that you're sorry, but that chat room name is already taken. Most of the time, the person leaves as quickly as he or she came. If the person doesn't leave, click his or her screen name in the People Here list and then click the Eject Member button. That solves the problem rather elegantly.

5. After adding, altering, and amending your invitation to your heart's content, click Send.

Your Buddy Chat invitation wings its way to your friends.

To ensure that you're not forgotten, AOL drops you right into your new chat room. After hopping into the room, you find that it works much like a normal private chat — mostly because it *is* a type of private chat room. (For a quick refresher on private chat rooms, flip to Chapter 12.) The invitation also features an IM button for sending a quick instant message back to the person who sent the Buddy Chat (namely you, in this case). You may receive an instant message from a buddy in a teasing mood or from someone who had a momentary brain lapse on your screen name's identity.

6. Greet your buddies as they drop in to the room and have a great conversation!

If any friends use an AIM-based messaging system, you can Buddy Chat with them as well. Treat their screen names just like regular AOL names, and everything works just the way it should. Ain't technology grand?

Chapter 10

AOL Companion: Look — on the Desktop! Something Small, Blue, and Useful

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting to know AOL's newest desktop tool
 - ▶ Taking the Companion for a spin
 - ▶ Choosing the parts that you like best
-

Everybody wants somebody, some time — or at least that's how the old crooner tune goes. The sentiment particularly holds true in today's online world. Despite the many places to go, things to do, and ways to utterly lose an afternoon on the trip, wandering the Net remains a lonely business. If only you had a traveling partner to share the ride. Nothing fancy, mind you — just a friendly piece of software that helps you find neat stuff, keeps tabs on the latest news, checks your e-mail box, and even watches for incoming instant messages.

As if delivered to your desktop by the fated winds of chance — or, more to the point, by the technical prowess of a few folks on the AOL development team — America Online's new 9.0 software includes just such a cohort for your journey. Ladies and gentlemen, meet your new counterpart: the AOL Companion.

Covering everything from e-mail to the local weather forecast, the AOL Companion supplies tools galore for simplifying your online excursions. (And it's blue, too — blue looks cool.) This chapter digs through the Companion's many features and services, ensuring that you get the most from this incredible little tool. Starting with the Companion's three size settings and working onward through its content and customization choices, the chapter covers your new software accessory from top to bottom.



Although everybody gets a copy of the AOL Companion automatically with the America Online 9.0 software, the folks who use a high-speed, always-on Internet connection *really* get the most from Companion's features. If you access AOL through a modem, don't despair — take a look at this chapter's sidebar for some ideas about putting the Companion to work in your world.

Meeting the Companion

There it sits on the desktop, looking small, cute, and blue. The first time you saw it, you probably wondered if some part of the America Online software simply escaped and set up shop at the edge of your screen. But it's not an escapee — the folks at AOL actually *put* the little fellow there. That's the AOL Companion, the newest tool in America Online's continuing quest to sit at the center of your online world.

For the ultimate in flexibility (and possibly as a programmer's silent nod to his love of superhero comics), the Companion appears in three different forms, each with its own superb powers. Figure 10-1 shows the little fellow in his three poses:

- ✔ **Small layout:** Think of the Small layout as the minimized Companion. The Companion displays only basic information — namely, the number of e-mail inbox messages awaiting your attention, the number of instant message sessions currently happening in your software — and a search box to find stuff on the Web. You can make the layout even smaller by right-clicking anywhere on the Companion, selecting Minimized Options from the pop-up menu, and turning off your choice of Mail Count, Instant Message Count, and Search Field. (If you shut them all down, the Companion gets *really* small.) Windows 2000 and Windows XP get an extra treat from the Companion's programmers: When minimized, the companion turns translucent so you can park it on top of a program and *still* see both the Companion and your application. How's *that* for a cool feature?
- ✔ **Large layout:** In this form, the Companion displays your current (or most recent) screen name signed on to AOL. Along the top, it tells you the date (a handy detail under many circumstances), and at the bottom, it offers Settings and Help options. In addition to these options, the Companion shows off its scrolling bar of handy-dandy information tools. For all of the details about each tool, see the next section. Switch between the Large and Small layouts by clicking in the little Maximize button at the top of the Companion window.
- ✔ **Expanded layout:** After clicking one of the Companion tools, the software flips into its expanded form, complete with a little *whssipp* sound to celebrate the change. Companion uses the extra space for displaying whatever information you selected — the weather, your Buddy List, the

top headlines, and such. To manually expand the Companion, click the tiny triangle button on the left side of the tool area. Click the same button (now a tiny triangle pointing in the opposite direction) to collapse the Companion back to its large layout form.

The Companion performs its other big trick when an instant message hits your AOL software. The moment the message arrives, the Companion pops a small dialog box into the lower corner of your screen (as shown in Figure 10-2) telling you who sent the message and previewing the first part of its text.

Figure 10-1:
The AOL Companion struts its stuff in small, medium, and large sizes.

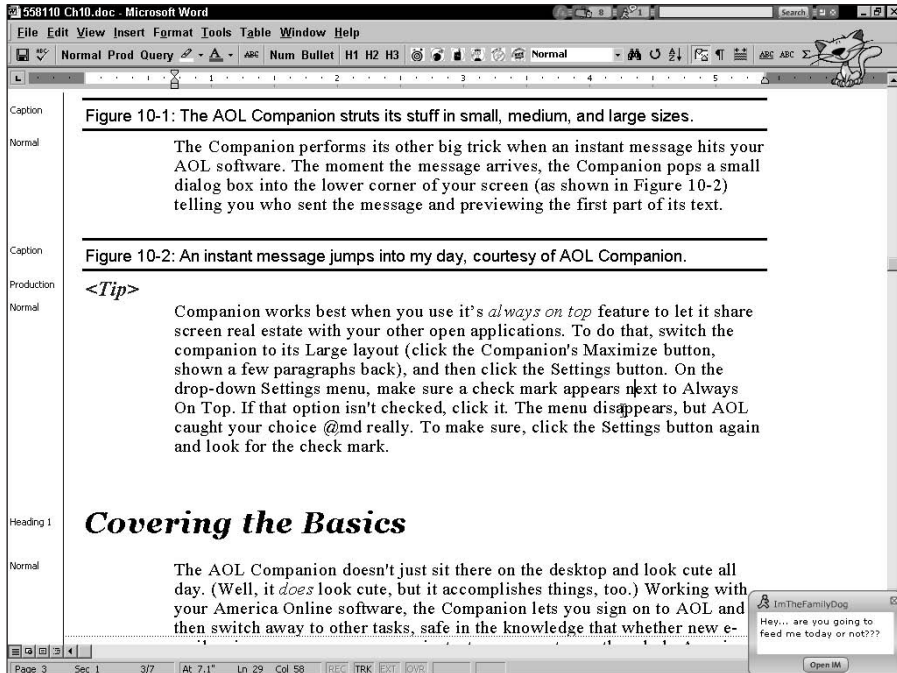


Figure 10-2:
An instant message jumps into my day, courtesy of AOL Companion.





Companion works best when you use its Always on Top feature to let it share screen real estate with your other open applications. To do that, switch the companion to its large layout (click the Companion's Maximize button), and then click the Settings button. On the drop-down Settings menu, make sure a check mark appears next to Always On Top. If that option isn't checked, click it. The menu disappears, but AOL caught your choice — really. To make sure, click the Settings button again and look for the check mark.

Covering the Basics

The AOL Companion doesn't just sit there on the desktop and look cute all day. (Well, it *does* look cute, but it accomplishes things, too.) Working with your America Online software, the Companion lets you sign on to AOL and then switch away to other tasks, safe in the knowledge that whether new e-mail arrives or someone pops an instant message at you, the whole America Online world rests only a click away — regardless of what other program you're using.

Here's how the Companion puts your favorite AOL features at your fingertips while you're signed on to AOL:

- ✓ **Check your mail (small or large layout):** Click the mailbox icon in the companion, and the America Online software automatically appears. A moment after that, your mailbox magically opens, displaying your current incoming e-mail.
- ✓ **Converse through instant messages (small or large layout):** When someone sends you an instant message, the Companion does several things at the same time. First, it displays the message in a little pop-up window (the window shown in Figure 10-2). After that, it increments the IM counter and adds a talk bubble next to the Instant Message button on the Companion (see Figure 10-3). If you hover the mouse over the bubble, the Companion tells you who sent your most recent IM and repeats the first few words of the message. Click the bubble to list everybody you're currently chatting with through instant messages.
- ✓ **Switch screen names with a quick click (large layout only):** Click the down-arrow next to your screen name, select Switch SN from the drop-down menu, and then click the Go button. The AOL software hops to the screen, offering the Switch Screen Names window — just as if you chose Sign Off→Switch Screen Name from the AOL main menu.
- ✓ **Configure the Companion:** For such a small thing, the Companion includes a lot of settings. Right-click anywhere on the Companion to pop up its settings menu. From there, you can add or remove content, turn its sound on or off, and adjust whether or not it sits atop everything else on your screen. Clicking the Settings button with the Companion in its large layout leads to the same menu.



Do dialup members really care about the Companion?

Like an emotionally scarred mouse lovingly dropped at your feet as a love gift from the family cat, AOL 9.0 plopped the Companion onto the desktop of your modem-bound computer. You cast a wary eye toward the bequest, trying hard to say something nice, but all the while wondering what on earth drove your software (or your cat) to do this.

Although the Companion works just fine through a dialup account, do you care? After all, you probably don't leave your America Online account signed on for hours at a time, tying up your phone line as you plow through all kinds of non-Internet computer tasks.

Like so many things in life, the answer to this burning question is *it depends*. Maybe you *do* stay on the system for hours upon hours, listening to AOL Radio as you whack away at the Great American Novel. If that's you, then yes, the Companion might just change your life. If you rarely venture outside the AOL software from the moment you sign on until you sign back off, the Companion probably won't affect your world one bit.

But look on the bright side — the Companion doesn't hurt, either.



The Companion counts your e-mail and accesses your instant messages only when you're currently signed onto AOL. When you sign off the system, you sign off the system, just like you always did — Companion doesn't change that behavior. At that point, the Companion stops counting your e-mail, neglects your instant messages, and forgets your Favorite Places. But the moment you sign back on, the Companion immediately leaps into action.

If the Companion shows zeros for both e-mail and instant message counters, either you didn't sign on to your AOL software yet or you joined the Witness Relocation Program and nobody knows how to find you. After signing onto AOL, the Companion updates the counters automatically as new messages arrive.

Figure 10-3:
The talk bubble speaks!















Flipping Through the Tools

Whether or not you fell in love with the Companion's e-mail and IM tricks, there's plenty to like among its 11 tools. By delivering quick information fixes with a single click, the Companion starts shoehorning its way into your online life from the first time you use it.

Following is a list of the Companion's current tools. My contacts in America Online's development team say that they plan plenty of additions to Companion's paraphernalia, so don't be surprised if your tool strip shows a few more icons. In that case, just move the mouse pointer over the unknown icon and let the Companion pop up a tiny window telling what that item does. If a particular tool works only when you're signed on with AOL, I noted that in the description. All other tools work both inside and outside the America Online software.

Without further ado, here's your tool rundown, in the order they appear inside the Companion:

	Also on AOL	Must sign on. I think the marketing department added this one at the last moment. It randomly advertises various AOL features. Unfortunately, only the marketing folks care.
	Address Book	Must sign on. Peruse your AOL Address Book, look up anything and everything you stored in there, and then compose an e-mail message with a single click.
	Dictionary	Look up unknown words and phrases, check the thesaurus, or see the word of the day.
	Favorite Places	Must sign on. See your Favorite Places without opening the Favorite Places menu in your America Online software. Visit any site on the list by double-clicking it.
	Movie Listings	See when and where your favorite movie currently appears in your hometown (or any hometown for that matter).
	Top News	Pick up the hottest headlines, straight from the wires. The Companion lists the headlines whether or not you're currently signed onto America Online, but you can read the stories only while signed on.

	Weather	View the five-day extended forecast for your neighborhood.
	Yellow Pages	Need to find a plumber or veterinarian fast? (Hmm . . . sounds like the cat flushed itself down the loo again.) Click the Yellow Pages tool, type the business you want, and let the AOL Companion do the rest.
	Search	Scour the Net for stuff that amuses, amazes, and augments your existence.
	Map	Looking for directions? Type the address in here and — poof! — a perfect map appears. And you don't even need to fold it when you're finished.
	Horoscopes	Peer toward the stars and see airplanes pass overhead — er, get silly observations from a person who obviously had someone else in mind.
	Buddy List	Must sign on. See who's online right now. Double-click a name to switch back to the AOL software and send the person an instant message.



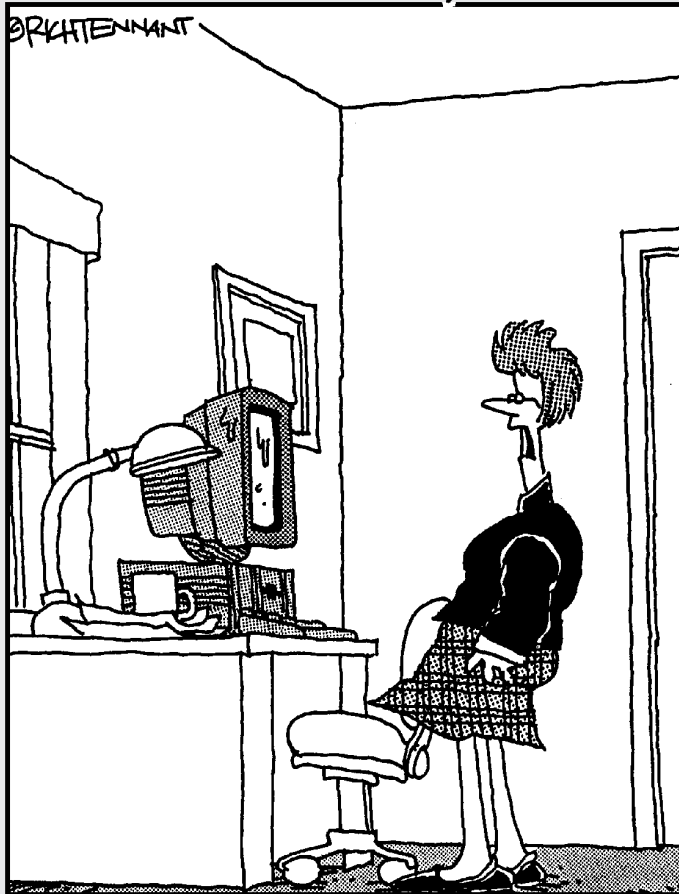
As long as you stay signed on to AOL, the Companion flips you back to the America Online software every time you click one of the tools. After signing off AOL, the AOL-specific tools go away (either disappearing entirely or turning gray). Clicking the remaining tools opens your default Web browser, probably Microsoft Internet Explorer or AOL's Netscape.

Part III

Connecting and Communicating

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"After you've had one of your online sports 'chats', I wish you'd remember to wipe the screen off!"

In this part . . .

I hear you repeat the question, “So what can you really *do* with AOL?” You know that the online world truly is the Next Big Thing, and you want to join in the fun. But what can you *do* with it?

Welcome to Part III — your field book for the Digital Age, offering tips for finding the who, what, and where of digital life: the ins and outs of sending e-mail to the world at large, diving into the world of online chats, exchanging quick quips with instant messages, and investigating online discussion boards. To make this part complete, I also include chapters on Groups@AOL and AOL Journal. Groups@AOL gives you tools to organize your social life, extended family life, or favorite collection of hobbyists. (Great Aunt Zoe complains because she doesn’t know what you’re up to these days? Start a family Group and let her know!) AOL Journal, on the other hand, gives you the tools you need to air your convictions, your compassions, or today’s erudite comments to the world.

Chapter 11

E-Mailing the World, One Mailbox at a Time

In This Chapter

- ▶ E-mailing other America Online members
 - ▶ Slinging your e-mail through the Internet
 - ▶ Giving your messages some oomph
 - ▶ Sharing links with your friends
 - ▶ Reading your incoming mail
 - ▶ Organizing the mailbox
 - ▶ Tracking everyone with the online Address Book
-

In my humble opinion, e-mail is *the* communications medium of the millennium. It seems as if everybody has an e-mail account at the office, at home, or both. Messages travel quickly, arrive safely, and rarely get delayed by any of the obscure national holidays that shut down the post office so frequently.

Through America Online, you can send e-mail to virtually anyone on the planet. (No, I'm not kidding — I'm not even exaggerating.) One way or another, your e-mail message flies on the wings of technology from your online mailbox to its destination, whether the message is headed to another America Online e-mail box or to an Internet e-mail address.

This chapter tells you how to join in the fun, from sending Internet mail to organizing your incoming messages. No matter what you want to know about e-mail and America Online, this chapter is the place to look.

Sending E-Mail to an America Online Subscriber

You're surrounded by other America Online subscribers every time you sign on. So, the odds are good that you'll send at least a few messages to some of these people. That's what the e-mail system was designed for in the first place, so trading messages with other members is pretty easy. The mail system also has some special features, such as *unsend*, that work only when you're writing to another America Online person. (If unsending a message sounds interesting, check out the "Stupid mail tricks" sidebar, later in this chapter.)

Before sending e-mail to someone, you must know the person's screen name. Upper- and lowercase don't matter, but spelling *does*. For example, you could enter my screen name as **JKaufeld** or **jkaufeld**, and the mail still goes through. But if you try **JKaufield**, don't expect a reply — at least not from me — because the name is misspelled.

Stupid mail tricks

As though allowing you to send e-mail to anyone on America Online wasn't enough, those zany programmers threw in some extra features designed to make your mind do loops. Look for these options along the bottom of the Mailbox window or in the pop-up menu. (Right-click a mail message's entry in the online mailbox to see the menu.)

✔ **Status (button):** Want to see whether your buddies have read their mail lately or are just ignoring you? Click the Sent Mail tab. Then click the mail message you sent and click the Status button. America Online returns a dialog box with the screen name of the person who read the letter and the time and date it was read. If the message is still in unread limbo, the time and date are replaced with (not yet read). Status

works for messages sent only to America Online members.

✔ **Unsend (button):** If you send a message that you quickly regret, America Online lets you reach through the system and pretend that the message never happened — as long as the other person hasn't read it yet. To unsend a message, open your mailbox and click the Sent Mail tab. Find the message you're embarrassed about, click it, and then click the Unsend button. A dialog box appears, asking if you really want to unsend the message. Click Yes. If the message hasn't been read yet, America Online yanks it from the other person's e-mail basket and throws the message away. If the person has read the message, it's truly too late — Unsend won't work now. Unsend also doesn't work for mail sent to Internet addresses.

- ✔ **Save (button):** When a message is too important to risk losing, store a copy away in one of the America Online software's two mail storage areas: on your PC or on AOL itself. Saved messages effectively live forever in there (at least until the drive fails or AOL's main computers die, neither of which should be any time soon). This trick works for New Mail, Old Mail, Sent Mail, and Mail You Wish You Had Read Before Sending. (Sorry about that — I got carried away.) To save a message on your computer, click the message's entry in your mailbox, click the Save button, and then click the On My PC option. A menu pops up, listing all the folders in your Filing Cabinet. Finish the job by clicking the folder where you want to store this message, or click the Create Folder option to tuck the message away into its own special place. America Online responds with a notice that it squirreled the message away as requested. To save a message on AOL, click the message's entry in your mailbox, click the Save button, and then click the On AOL option. You don't get any folder options when saving things to AOL, so the software simply replies that the message was successfully saved. To find your saved mail, open your mailbox and click the Manage Mail tab; then look in the Saved on AOL folder or the Saved on My PC folder, depending on where you tucked away the messages.
- ✔ **Ignore (pop-up menu):** When junk mail (or any other mail you don't want to see) fills your box, this option makes a great antidote. As its name implies, the Ignore option disregards the current message, automatically consigning it to the Old Mail page of the online mailbox without actually opening it. If you get a great deal of junk e-mail, the Ignore option promises to warm your heart. To ignore a message, right-click the message's entry in the online mailbox and choose Ignore from the pop-up menu.
- ✔ **Delete (button):** Then again, why simply ignore an annoying message when you can delete it from your world completely? Trash those trying messages by clicking once on the message title (to highlight the message) and then click Delete. Good-bye message, hello online trashcan!

Before sending your first few messages, take a second to look through these tips and suggestions for making your e-mail stand head and shoulders above the crowd:



- ✔ Crafting good e-mail messages takes a little different writing style than other kinds of communication. Awesome e-mail requires a bit of care, the right words, and a willingness to type until the message is clear. If you're new to e-mail, don't panic — I was new once, too (and look what happened to me!).
- ✔ Make your message easier on the eyes by splitting it into paragraphs of two or three sentences each. For the sake of your poor recipient, don't compress an entire message into a single huge paragraph. (That makes the message *really* hard to read.) Press Enter (or Return) a couple of times every now and then to break the behemoth into smaller, more digestible chunks.



- ✓ According to the America Online official *Terms of Service* agreement (so-called by lawyers and other people who create official-sounding language because they enjoy it; keyword **TOS**), you can't send unsolicited advertisements through the e-mail system. If someone specifically asks to receive information from you, that's perfectly okay, but blanketing everyone in a chat room with e-mail about your company's new Web site falls on the Not Okay side of the chart.

Enough of this talk — time to hit the keyboard and start e-mailing! To send an e-mail message, follow these steps:

- 1. If you use either the Light Usage or Limited pricing plans and you signed on to America Online to compose an e-mail message, sign off now.**

Unless you're an excellent typist, need to send a very short message, or just don't care how high your America Online bill goes this month, don't compose messages online if you pay for access by the minute. Instead, write your message offline (without connecting to America Online) by continuing with Step 2. (Your credit card bill will thank me next month.)

- 2. Create a new mail message by clicking the Write button on the toolbar or by pressing Ctrl+M.**

A blank e-mail window mystically appears.

- 3. In the Send To box, type the recipient's America Online screen name.**

To send the same message to more than one screen name, keep typing screen names in the To box, separating each name with a comma.

If the screen name is in your Address Book, click the Address Book button and then double-click the entry for that person or group. After choosing all your addresses, click OK to make the Address Book go away. (Flip farther into this chapter for more about the Address Book.)



As you begin typing your friend's screen name in the Send To box, the America Online software might helpfully finish filling in the name. Don't worry — it can't read your mind. To do its auto-complete trick, the AOL software just thumbs through your Address Book as you type, looking for possible matches. When it finds one (or more), it pops up the little Suggestions box, listing the addresses it found. To change this behavior (and set many other fascinating things in your e-mail), go through the E-mail Preferences section in Chapter 5.

You can freely mix America Online screen names and Internet e-mail addresses when sending a message. Just separate each entry with a comma, and the America Online e-mail system makes sure that the message goes to the right place. When you include a group of recipients from the Address Book window, the America Online software automatically adds commas for you. Isn't that helpful?

4. Press the Tab key to move the blinking cursor into the Copy To box. Enter the screen names of people who should get a copy of the message but should not be listed as main recipients.

Odds are, you won't ever use the Copy To feature, but I had to mention it anyway. It's just the kind of guy I am.

Don't bother putting your own screen name in the Copy To area. You automatically get a copy of every message you send behind the Sent Mail tab of your online mailbox.

5. Press Tab again to put the cursor in the Subject box. Type a brief (50 letters or fewer) description of the message.

Write your message subject so that the other person can tell right away what it's about. If the message is *really* important, write something like **URGENT** at the beginning of the subject and be sure to include some details after that. Because your readers may have 35 other messages to look at, making the subject descriptive helps them figure out which message to check first.

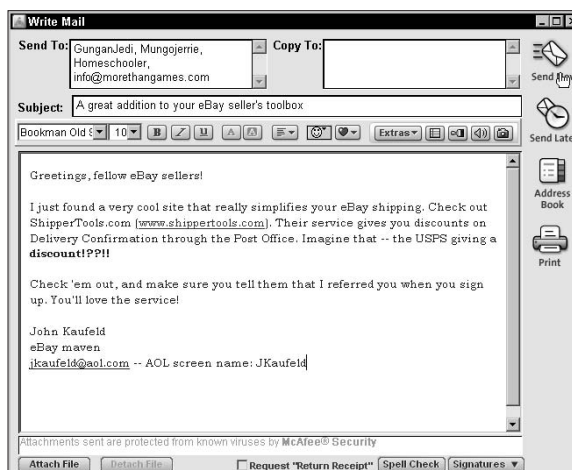


The preceding "50 letters or fewer" note isn't a limitation of America Online's software — it's just a suggestion for making your subjects more informative. The America Online software lets you enter up to 80 letters in an e-mail subject, which makes a pretty sizeable subject.

6. Press Tab once more to get to the message area at the bottom of the screen. Type your message text there.

Enter the text as though you're using a word processor; for example, don't press the Enter (or Return) key at the end of every line. But do press Enter (or Return) a couple times every now and then to break the message into easy-to-read paragraphs, as shown in Figure 11-1.

Figure 11-1:
Leave some white space in messages to make them easy to read.



Want to spice up your messages a bit? Try some cool formatting, add some gorgeous graphics, or include live links to your favorite Web sites. For all the jazzy details, flip ahead to the “E-Mailing with Panache” section, later in this chapter.

7. To send a file with the message, do the following:

- a. **Click the Attach File button.**
- b. **In the Attach File dialog box, find the file you want to send and double-click it (or highlight it and click the oddly named Open button).**

After selecting the file (whichever way you do it), the Attach File dialog box vanishes. The name of the attached file appears in the bottom of the Write Mail window.



To attach another file to the same message, click the Attach File button again. In fact, you can attach just about as many files as you want, and the America Online software automatically compresses them into a Zip file for you. Isn't technology wonderful (at least when it works)?

If you change your mind about attaching the file, click the Detach File button (it's right next to Attach File in the Write Mail window — what a strange coincidence).

8. To mail the message:

- a. **If you already signed on to America Online, click Send.**
- b. **If you aren't signed on right now (an important difference if you pay by the hour!), minimize the mail window and then sign on. After you're on, double-click the mail message window's title bar (look for it in the lower-left corner of the screen) and then click Send.**



America Online automatically reassures you with a little message, Your mail has been sent, but that reassurance gets old if you send a great deal of mail. To stop the annoying little dialog box from popping up, turn off the Confirm That Mail Has Been Sent option in the Mail Preferences window. (See Chapter 5 for everything you never — er, ever — wanted to know about preference settings.)



America Online automatically keeps copies of all your outgoing mail for about 25 to 30 days. To review these old messages, choose **Mail** ⇨ **Sent Mail** from the main menu. If you're truly attached to your correspondence, tell your America Online software to squirrel away copies of all outbound messages in your Saved On My PC area (which we previously called the Filing Cabinet — isn't progress wonderful?). To find out more about this setting, along with the many other fascinating and tweakable items that control your America Online experience, flip back to Chapter 5.

Writing to the @'s: Sending Internet E-Mail

Using America Online as your e-mail link to the Internet is easy. In fact, you can pretend that you're just sending mail to another America Online user, except that the person has a very weird screen name.

To send mail from your America Online account out through the Internet, you go through exactly the same steps as you do to send e-mail to another America Online user. The only difference with Internet e-mail is how you address the message.

The key to sending Internet e-mail is getting the address right. Most Internet mail addresses look a little bizarre to uninitiated eyes, but that's no problem — read on and enjoy your initiation.

Rather than simple, straightforward things like JKaufeld, Internet mail addresses look like this: `chiefelf@morethangames.com`. The part to the left of the @ is the person's ID (the general Internet term for screen name). The other half is the name of the computer that the person uses for e-mail. When you put the whole thing together, you get an Internet e-mail address.



These addresses get complicated sometimes (the one for a friend of mine in France contains about 50 letters, numbers, and various punctuation symbols). An easy way to get the address exactly right is to ask your friend to send you a message first. When the message arrives, carefully copy the address into your America Online Address Book with the Add Address button (on the right side of the mail window, as you read the friend's message). Now you don't have to worry about the gory, technical address stuff anymore — just select the entry from your Address Book, and you're finished. (Address Book, paging the Address Book — look just a few pages ahead for more about this useful online tool.)

Because you use America Online, you have an Internet e-mail address, too; it's your screen name with `@aol.com` glued to the end. If your screen name is Mungojerrie, your Internet e-mail address is `mungojerrie@aol.com` (and you probably like the musical *Cats*, too). The Internet address ignores any spaces or capital letters in the screen name, so don't worry about them when giving your e-mail address to a friend.

By the way, remember to use the person's *screen name* or *Internet address* rather than the person's *real name* when you're sending an e-mail message. Although both America Online and the Internet use advanced technology, computers still don't know people by their given names (and I, for one, hope that they never get to that point!).

E-Mailing with Panache

In these image-conscious times, looking good is almost as important as sounding good. Thanks to advances in the America Online software, e-mail messages are more powerful and flexible than ever. The formatting buttons put you in charge of your e-mail's text size, style, alignment, and even color.



Most of these formatting tips work with instant messages, too. Don't let your e-mail have *all* the fun. See Chapter 13 for the lowdown on instant messages.

The buttons just above the message area control the formatting magic. They're grouped into sets by what they do. Here's a quick rundown of the sets, from left to right:

- ✓ **Font and text size:** Choose one of the installed TrueType fonts and the size that meets your purpose. If the people receiving the message have that same font installed and use the America Online 4.0 software or a newer version, they see your message in the font you chose. If a recipient doesn't have the exact font you used, his or her computer valiantly looks for a similar font and goes with the best thing it finds (which sometimes looks mighty heinous).
- ✓ **Text formatting:** These are the bold, italic, and underline buttons, as their labels demonstrate.
- ✓ **Text color:** Change the color of the text with the first button. Use the second button to change the background color of the entire message (not just a small portion of it). Remember that blue text on a blue background doesn't show up very well!
- ✓ **Text alignment:** Like any good word processor, the America Online e-mail system understands left, center, and right justification. The drop-down menu also includes options for numbering, bullets, and increasing or decreasing indents.
- ✓ **Insert Smiley:** Sometimes only a smiley face will do. Or perhaps you're looking for a frown. This button gives you a wide range of emotions in graphic form. Smiles, frowns, kisses — they're here for the using.
- ✓ **Favorite Places:** You loved them as a toolbar button, and now they're back in the e-mail window. The heart button lists your Favorite Places, which makes clicking Favorite Places links so that they drop into your e-mail messages easy (see the next section for more about that).
- ✓ **Extras:** This drop-down menu lists all your favorite mail goodies: stationery styles, mail art, and sounds. When you locate one of these e-mail decorations that you really like, add it to your list, and it appears under your Extras button. Slick, eh?



- ✓ **Stationery:** The lined-paper button lets you select from a group of pre-determined stationery styles, such as clouds, notebook lines, and rainbow. Better yet, you can add stationery styles to your Extras list by clicking a selection and then clicking the Add to List option at the bottom of the pop-up menu. Add some pizzazz to your next e-mail by using a sport or floral background, or select one of the standard plain background colors such as blue or yellow.
- ✓ **Art:** Mail art dresses up a message with icons of just about anything you might want. Watch a butterfly flutter, send congratulations, or commemorate a favorite holiday in your e-mail messages. Use the Art button to scroll through the options, and then click the Add to List button at the bottom of the Art Mail pop-up menu to add a piece of art to the Extras menu for later. If you find a piece of art too wonderful to leave for later, the Insert button places the selected graphic into the current Write Mail message.
- ✓ **Sounds:** As if graphics and backgrounds were not enough, now you can even enhance your e-mail messages with sound. Click the Add to List button to add that irreplaceable sound to your Extras list so it's always available when you need it. Now your messages can beep, buzz, and chirp.
- ✓ **Insert a picture:** The camera button inserts a graphic image into your e-mail, so you can tell Aunt Sarah about the holiday party and show off the digital pictures. You can even use the image as the background to your message if you like. To insert a graphic, click the camera button and then, select either the Insert a Picture or Insert Background option. Then select an image file. Poof! The graphic appears in your message.
- ✓ **Spell check:** Clicking the Spell Check button at the bottom of the Write Mail window checks your spelling (yes!) to prevent embarrassing spelling mistakes.



- ✓ **Signatures:** Look for this button along the bottom of the Write Mail window as well. In e-mail terms, a *signature* is a little bit of text, usually no more than four lines, that your e-mail software adds to the end of all your e-mail messages. It usually includes your name, e-mail address, and some pithy quote or brief advertising message. Click the Signatures button to build a new signature, set your default signature, or use an existing signature in your current message.

The new 9.0 software lets you include a graphic or a Favorite Place in your signature file along with the formatted text you already know and love. In the Create Signature window, use the camera button to drop your favorite photo or graphic into your signature file. Use the heart button to insert a Favorite Place. The America Online software scales it down so that it fits under your name (or whatever you use as a signature in e-mail messages). Very cool.

The font, formatting, color, and alignment buttons all work the same way. To use them with new text, click the buttons for your choices and start typing. The software applies the fonts, formatting, and whatever else you choose to the text as you type. To format text that's already in the message, click and drag across the text you want to change and then click the various formatting buttons. Presto — the old text looks new! To remove some formatting, highlight the text in question and click *off* the format options you don't want.

Linking with Ease

Almost every time I wander America Online or surf the Web for a while, I run across something that's really neat and worth sharing with my friends. In the past, I laboriously copied the Internet address or America Online keyword into a mail message — and sometimes messed it up in the process. Today, though, I never miss an address because I let the America Online software insert the link for me.



Before trying this trick, you need to understand how the Favorite Places area works and what it does for you. If you're not familiar with Favorite Places, flip back to Chapter 8 and find out more about them before attempting this link thing.

When you want to include a link to an America Online keyword or an Internet site in an e-mail message, follow these steps:

- 1. Go to the keyword area or Internet site so that it's in a window on your screen.**

If the keyword area doesn't have a Favorite Places icon in its window, you can't send a link to it. Sorry — it's just how life goes sometimes.

- 2. Click the Favorite Places paper-and-pen button in the upper-right corner of the window.**

A fresh e-mail window appears with your link ready and waiting in the message body.

- 3. Address the message, type a subject and body, and then send the message just as you normally would.**

The America Online software makes this mail-the-link thing easy, doesn't it?



Flash! America Online 9.0 now *recognizes* Web site addresses when you type them in an e-mail message! It's true — and you heard it here first. Forget the painful click-drag-drop routine of days gone by; the 9.0 software handles everything for you. Just type the Web address into your mail message like normal text. America Online notices the address (provided it starts with the standard `www`) and converts it to a clickable link automatically. If the address looks a little different (such as `games.yahoo.com`), type `http://` in front of the address so that the software can recognize it.

Incoming Missive, Sir!

Sending mail is only half the fun. After you send something, you get a reply (at least sometimes)! If you think that a mailbox full of junk mail is a lift, just wait until you sign on to America Online and find a message or two in your e-mail box. Someone out there cares!

To check your online mailbox, click the mailbox button on the toolbar or the You've Got Mail button on the Welcome Screen. Either way, America Online whisks you away to the Online Mailbox window's New Mail area.



America Online 9.0 adds a fast and clever way to see what's in your mailbox: the Mail QuickView window. To bring up the Mail QuickView window, move your mouse pointer over the Read button on the toolbar. After just a moment, the Mail QuickView window unrolls, giving you a brief introduction to the first ten messages in your e-mail box. The window shows the sender's e-mail address and the first 15 or so letters in the message's subject. When you move the mouse across a message's entry in the list, the entry expands a bit, adding the date you received the message and the next few words in the subject. To read any of the messages, just click on its entry in the list. The window also offers an Open Mailbox button at the bottom that works just like the Read button on the toolbar.

The first few times you look at the new Online Mailbox window, you might feel slightly off balance (goodness knows *I* did). The listing shows some messages in bold print, others in regular type, a few with an envelope and a magnifying glass, and still others with a spiffy blue envelope icon. Although it may not look this way right now, the America Online programmers created this scheme to

help you — really. Here's a brief explanation of all the strange colors and text, as well as a tip or two for managing the chaos . . . er, comprehending the new organization system:

- ✔ Messages with a vanilla-colored envelope come from *known senders*. If the sender's screen name or e-mail address appears in your Address Book or Buddy List, America Online assumes that you know the person well enough to want mail from him or her. The software also sorts these messages to the top of the mailbox, leaving a slushy pile of orange envelopes at the bottom. (More about those next.)
- ✔ Orange envelopes with a magnifying glass over them represent mail from *unknown senders*. They might be bulk e-mailers who helpfully sent you a mailbox full of spam today, messages from new business associates who haven't found their way into your Address Book entries yet, or friendly notes from other America Online members wanting to establish a pen-palship. Whatever the source, America Online determines that you don't know these people and cautions you to be careful with the magnifying glass and brightly colored envelope.
- ✔ Orange tied packages with stamps indicate that this message comes from a Bulk Sender, someone who sends bulk e-mail to many different addresses. The package icon doesn't necessarily mean that the message is junk mail to you; if you receive e-mail newsletters or press releases, those messages may very well carry the bulk e-mail icon.
- ✔ Blue envelopes with the AOL icon designate an *Official AOL* e-mail message. These messages come to you from America Online's Official Office of Corporate Messages and Stuff. They announce new screen names in your account, tell you of interesting new services, or provide some other vital — and official — communication from AOL.
- ✔ When the message sender and subject appear in **bold** type, you haven't read that message yet.
- ✔ If you read a message and then click the Keep As New button, the message stays in the New Mail window, but the sender and subject appear in normal type. The message automatically keeps its icon (a vanilla envelope for a known sender or an orange envelope for an unknown sender) for sorting.

Now that you have the lowdown on why everything looks the way it does, what can you do about it? Well, several things, actually. If the varying colored envelopes annoy you, click the Type button to group the envelopes by color so that your buddies who send you cream-colored envelopes appear at either the top or bottom of the list. (Your choice; click the button a few times until you like the look.)

If you prefer to see all e-mail messages by date or by sender, no matter when they arrived, use the Date button. In much the same way, E-Mail Address sorts by sender above all other criteria, and Subject sorts by the message's subject line — a handy little feature if you follow a group of messages about one particular topic or you attempt to keep your business correspondence sorted by subject.

For more drastic sorting solutions, take a look at the Show Me Mail From drop-down menu. By default, the window is set to Everyone. If you're feeling less than social today, a click of the drop-down list changes the option to People I Know, Unknown Senders, or even Bulk Senders — those people who send the junk mail that fills up your mailbox. (Setting the option to Bulk Senders makes deleting all those unwanted e-mail messages easier.)

Delving Into Your Mailbox

After you get beyond the haphazard look of the New Mail window and finish organizing it to look more like home, it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty, who-sent-me-what-today stuff. To read a message, double-click the message in the New Mail window or click it once and then click the Read button. Your message hops up into its own window. After reading the message, America Online gives you a lot of options for what to do next:



- ✔ If the sender uses America Online, the software gives you a host of cool options for working with the sender's e-mail address. Click the sender's e-mail address in the message (the America Online software treats the address as a clickable link). An Info dialog box appears, offering to send this person a mail message or an instant message or to add the person to your Address Book or Buddy List. You can also block all mail from this person.
- ✔ To reply only to the person who sent the message, click the Reply button. Clicking this button displays a new message window, already addressed and ready to go. If you highlight some of the sender's message *before* clicking the Reply button, the America Online software automatically copies whatever you selected into the new message.
- ✔ To share your comments with the sender *and* everyone else who received the message, click the Reply All button. A freshly addressed message window hops onto the screen. To automatically include some of the original message in your reply, highlight the text before clicking the Reply All button.
- ✔ To send a copy of the message to someone else, click the Forward button.

After finishing your enjoyable time with the message, close the message window by clicking the X button in the upper-left corner of the window.



As part of the never-ending fight against people who send junk e-mail, America Online added a feature to its e-mail system software that identifies e-mail coming from outside the service. When you open a message sent from someone outside America Online, the line right above the message body contains a clickable [Sent from the Internet](#) link that says (Details). If you see that link on the message, the message *didn't* come from an America Online member or from America Online itself. No matter what the sender address says (especially if it's something like the one in Figure 11-2), the message came from someone out on the Internet.

Figure 11-2:
Despite its
@aol.com
e-mail
address, the
[Sent from
the Internet](#)
link tells you
that this
message
came from
some jerk on
the Internet.
It's a scam!



So what does the link do? If you click the Details link, a little dialog box hops onto the screen, displaying the *e-mail header* information. This technical stuff describes where the message went on its way to your mailbox. Most of the time, you don't care about this stuff, but at certain moments (when troubleshooting e-mail problems with the Technical Support folks, for instance) you need to dig through the headers.

Here are few more tips for handling your online mailbox:

- ✔ **To keep a message in your inbox after you read it:** Click the message once in the New Mail window and then click the Keep As New button.

Unread messages live in your America Online inbox for about 30 days after arriving. After that, they turn into very small pumpkins and are shipped to your local grocery store, never to be seen or heard from again.

- ✔ **To save an important message:** Either print it or save it in the America Online software's built-in storage spot.

To print a message, press Ctrl+P or select File⇒Print. To store the message, open the e-mail message (as if you're reading it) and then click the Save button. In the pop-up menu, decide whether you want to save the message to AOL or to your local PC. If you save it to AOL, then you're done — end of process. If you save it to the local PC, a new menu pops up, listing your storage folders. Select the folder where you want the message stored. The America Online software copies the message without delay. For more about saving your messages, see the "Organizing Your E-Mail Mess(ages)" section in this chapter.

- ✔ **To read a message in the Old Mail folder:** After reading a message, it hangs out in the Old Mail area for anywhere from a few days to a couple of weeks after you first look at it. (In the Mail Preferences setting, you can tell the America Online computers to store incoming e-mail for at least seven days — see Chapter 5 for more about that.) To reread an old message, choose Mail⇒Old Mail from the menu. Doing so displays the Old Mail window. Double-click the message you want to read.



- ✔ **To read a deleted message:** In these days of rampant unsolicited e-mail (commonly known by its greasy nickname *spam*), the Delete key often gets quite a workout as you browse through your incoming mail. Sometimes the key gets a little carried away, and you accidentally delete an e-mail that you actually wanted to read. America Online, hearing the plaintive howls of its membership, finally developed a solution: the Recently Deleted Mail area.

To read (and even retrieve) a message you accidentally deleted, choose Mail⇒Recently Deleted Mail from the menu. This action displays a dialog box containing mail that you deleted within the last 24 hours. Double-click a message to read it, click the Keep As New button to put the message back into your mailbox, or click the Permanently Delete button to *truly* consign the little sucker to oblivion.

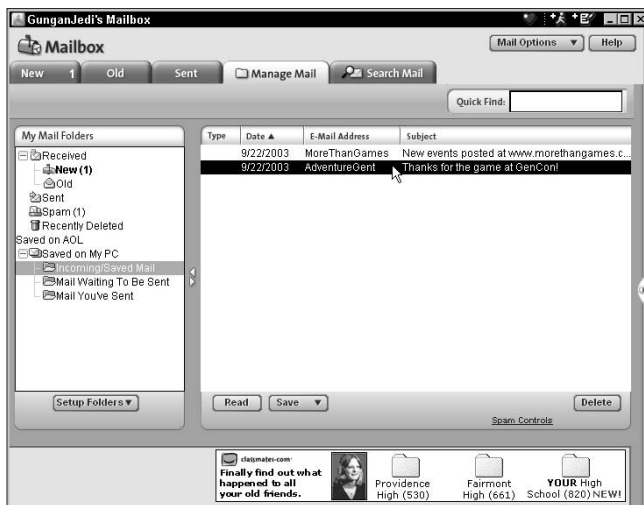
Organizing Your E-Mail Mess (ages)

I absolutely *live* on e-mail. Maybe it's my job or the peculiar people I work with (or perhaps it's my nerdy side showing again — I hate it when that happens), but I spend a great deal of time each day fielding incoming messages and unleashing my own outbound correspondence flood. Thankfully, my faithful digital assistant, the Manage Mail window, keeps all my e-stuff organized.

The Manage Mail window tracks incoming and outgoing e-mail, spam messages that were automatically distilled from your account, and e-mail messages you recently deleted. You can even save e-mail messages on the America Online servers so that you can access them from anywhere. Best of all, it's built right into the America Online software, so you have nothing to download and nothing to buy.

To open the Manage Mail window, choose **File**→**Mail Saved on My PC** (Filing Cabinet) from the menu bar. The window hops on the screen, looking much like Figure 11-3. The file folders along the left side of the window represent different storage areas. The buttons along the bottom help you organize the stuff in your Manage Mail folders.

Figure 11-3: The Manage Mail window stores your digital information in electronic manila folders.



Doing the basic mail-management tasks

You have much to work with here, and this area is easiest to understand when you play with it. Before turning you loose, here are some basic ideas about how the Manage Mail window works:

- ✔ **To view a folder's contents**, double-click it. The messages inside appear in the large window to the right. When you open a folder, the software displays all the items the folder contains (which can be a lengthy list). Don't be surprised if you have to scroll up and down to see everything in a folder.
- ✔ **To view an e-mail inside a folder**, double-click the item in the large list window. The list window also offers the same organizational buttons as the Read and Sent Mail windows, so you can organize any folder's messages by type, date, e-mail address, or subject.
- ✔ **To create a new folder**, click the Setup Folders drop-down menu at the bottom of the My Mail Folders window and then select Create Folder. Type a name for the new folder and then click OK. The new folder appears at the bottom of the Saved on My PC folders. Isn't automated organization amazing?

Note: Folders can be inside other folders, just like in the real world. For example, you can create additional folders to nest inside the Mail You've Sent folder to further organize your mail stack.
- ✔ **To move items from one folder to another (which is easy)**, move your cursor over the item you want to move, click and hold down the mouse button, and drag the item to its new home. When the mouse highlights the destination folder, release the mouse button. Manage Mail gently puts the item in place and then notifies you that it moved the message.
- ✔ **To find a misplaced e-mail message**, type words from the subject or sender's e-mail address into the Quick Find text box to have the Manage Mail search engine ferret it out. To search the full text of messages, click the Search Mail tab and do your search there. Make sure that the *Search Content* setting behind the [Search Options](#) link is turned on; otherwise, this tool searches only the e-mail address and subject, too.

Backing up and cleaning out

Few things hurt more than losing all your important files and such when your hard drive crashes. Protect the things you love by occasionally copying your Manage Mail items to a floppy disk, Zip disk, or whatever other kind of removable computer disk is lying around nearby. America Online automatically backs up your now-organized Manage Mail contents once every four weeks or so, if you tell it to as follows:

1. **Click the Settings icon on the toolbar.**

The AOL Settings window appears, with the Essentials tab showing.

2. **Click the By Category tab and scroll through the list until you see the [Organization](#) link. Click it.**

A new set of links appear, ready for your attention.

3. Click the **Personal Storage Settings** link.
4. **Make sure a check mark appears in the Automatically Backup My Personal Storage Every X Weeks check box. (If it doesn't, click in the check box.)**

Your choices range from once a week to once a month.

Now you can copy them to a floppy disk to keep them safer than a hard drive backup (you find the backup in the Backup folder of the America Online software on your hard drive).

5. **Click the Save button to make your changes permanent, and then close the Settings window.**



If you store business e-mail or other important messages in your Manage Mail folders, change the Personal Storage preference from 4 weeks to 1 week, and make backup copies of the Manage Mail information at least once per week. (Yes, it's really that important.)

America Online automatically stores copies of all your mail (both sent and received) in the Saved on My PC folder of the Manage Mail window. The idea is cool, but it eats up disk space pretty quickly. Leave this feature on to see whether you like it (but regularly delete the old messages that you really don't need to keep).

If you decide that you don't want America Online saving all your e-mail for you, click the Settings icon on the toolbar and then click the Mail Settings link in the Settings window that appears. The Mail Settings dialog box jumps to the screen, listing all sorts of useful and arcane mail settings. To turn off America Online's automatic organizational help, uncheck the Retain All Mail I Read in My Saved Mail Folder and Retain All Mail I Send in My Mail I've Sent Folder options.

Catching People with Your Address Book

You start meeting people right away in America Online. Join a discussion, drop in for a chat, or attend a live presentation, and suddenly you have online friends. You also have a problem: How do you keep track of the members of your newfound social club?

It's time to invoke the familiar refrain, "Luckily, the America Online programmers thought of that." Yup, those clever folks from Virginia did it again. Step right this way, and meet the America Online Address Book.

As address books go, this one's simple. It handles entries for single screen names or big, honking mailing lists (assuming that you're into large, noisy name collections).

- ✓ **For an individual**, the Address Book holds the person's real name, screen name, or Internet e-mail address, Web site address, phone numbers, postal mailing address, and various notes describing the entry.
- ✓ **For a mailing group**, the entry consists of a descriptive title and a list of the assembled crowd's e-mail addresses.

The Address Book lists both individual entries and groups in one master alphabetized list. Better still, America Online now stores a copy of your Address Book in a safe, secure corner of its big computers out in Virginia. Now your Address Book is available *every* time you sign on to America Online — even when you use someone else's computer to sign on with the Guest option! (I probably shouldn't be this excited about the Address Book, but it's the nerdy side of me showing through — down, nerd, down!)

Adding Address Book entries

Before you can use the Address Book to send messages, you have to put some addresses in it. With that marginally deep thought in mind, here's how to add new items to your Address Book:

- 1. Open the Address Book by choosing Mail ⇨ Address Book on the main menu or by clicking the Address Book button in a New Mail message window.**

The Address Book window pops up, all bright and cheery.

- 2. To add an entry for a person, click the Add button. To build a group entry, click the Add Group button.**

A blank Contact Details or Manage Group dialog box appears.

- 3. Fill in the appropriate spaces in the dialog box and then check your work carefully, especially the e-mail address entry (or entries, as the case may be).**

When making a Group entry, choose e-mail addresses that you have already included in your Address Book or carefully type any other America Online screen names and Internet e-mail addresses that you want. Type the new addresses one after another, with commas separating them, as shown in Figure 11-4.

Figure 11-4:
Mix and
match
America
Online
screen
names and
Internet
e-mail
addresses in the same
group.



Although capitalization doesn't count here, spelling definitely does! For example, you can enter my screen name any way you want (JKaufeld, Jkaufeld, jkaufeld, or jKaUfEID all count), and America Online figures out that you mean me. If you put in jkaufield (with an *i*), however, the system gets all confused and doesn't send the mail to me.



To turn your about-to-be-created Address Book group into a full-blown online clubhouse through America Online's new Groups@AOL system, click the Yes option next to the fateful question "Do you want to share this group" and then follow the other instructions that appear. For more about Groups@AOL, flip ahead to Chapter 14.

4. After you finish, click OK.

The new entry pops into the Address Book window, in alphabetical order. If you made a new shared group item, America Online automatically whisks you away to the Make a Group window inside Groups@AOL. Just follow the instructions, make no sudden moves, and hope that no telemarketers call right then.

Repeat the process until your Address Book overflows with friends, acquaintances, business associates, and other online contacts.



If you want to make an Address Book entry for someone who just sent you an e-mail message, just click his or her e-mail address in the message the person sent. That displays a special Info dialog box with a simple button for adding the person to your Address Book. If the person uses AOL, you also get buttons to put him or her on your Buddy List and to see the person's online profile.

Deleting Address Book entries

So now you may have an Address Book full of stuff, and it's getting unwieldy — plus you can't remember who half these people are. No problem — that's what the Delete button is for. Deleting is a quick and painless process. Here's how to do it:

1. **Open the Address Book (if you haven't already) by choosing Mail⇨Address Book on the main menu.**

Of course, you can also click the Address Book button in the e-mail message window if that's where you happen to be when the inspiration hits.

2. **Scroll through the Address Book list until you find the entry you want to dispose of.**
3. **Click the description once to highlight it, and then click the Delete button.**
4. **When the software wrings its little hands and asks whether you're *serious* about this deletion business, click Yes.**

If you just want to see what the Delete button does and how the program reacts when you use it, click No. Apologize to your software for even *thinking* of tricking it like that. Shame on you.

Changing Address Book entries

Because things change at a ridiculous pace, particularly in the online world, keeping your Address Book up-to-date is a never-ending task. That's why your Address Book has an Edit button.

Here's the scoop on changing an existing Address Book entry:

1. **Open the Address Book (if it's closed) by choosing Mail⇨Address Book on the main menu or by clicking the Address Book button in a brand-new mail message.**

2. **Click once on the entry you need to change.**

This step highlights the entry.

3. **Click the Edit button.**

The Contact Details or Manage Group window comes back. It's the same window you used to create the entry.

4. Make your changes as necessary.

Everything is open for change, so make whatever modifications you must. If you're working with a list, you can freely add and delete screen names.

All standard Windows text-editing tricks work here: highlight, delete, insert, and the rest. Edit (and play) as much as you want.

5. After you finish with the changes and are pleased as punch with them, click Save to save your work.

Click Cancel if you want to abandon your carefully wrought editing and keep the record the way it was. Whichever button you click, the Address Details or Manage Group dialog box vanishes, and you're back to the Address Book window.

Emergency! Saving and replacing your Address Book

The Address Book makes your e-mail life so much easier that many people rely heavily on it as part of their everyday online existence. After using computers for a while, though, you quickly find out that even the best technology (yes, even the America Online software) occasionally fails. With the Address Book, the little word *fails* translates to *toasts your painstakingly assembled and utterly irreplaceable list of e-mail addresses*. In other words, in case of failure, kiss the Address Book goodbye.



America Online 6.0 through 9.0 take Address Book protection to a new level by storing your Address Book *online*, in the vast digital vaults of America Online's main computers. Every time you sign on, America Online automatically checks the Address Book stored on your computer. If the system detects an empty Address Book (which is what your Address Book looks like after a computer crash), America Online automatically copies its saved version down to your computer. Voila — your Address Book is safe and sound again!

If you feel safer with paper copies in your home filing cabinet, you can always print your Address Book contents. Although it might generate a lot of printed paper, you'll rest at night knowing that your Address Book entries sit securely in your safe deposit box at the bank (okay, that might be going a *little* far). To print your Address Book entries:

1. Choose Mail⇨Address Book on the main menu or click the Address Book button in a New Mail message window.

The Address Book window quickly responds to your summons.

2. In the Address Book window, click the Print button.

A helpful Print dialog box appears, asking whether you want to print one of the following:

- **All the contacts in your Address Book.** To narrow or define the contacts so you don't print 235 people each time you need the information for 15, assign each entry to a category. Look on the Category tab in the Contact Details window.
- **Selected contacts** (this prints any entry you clicked to bring its contents into view in the lower text box).
- **Complete contents**, including the dog's birth date if you remembered to put it in someone's Address Book entry.
- **Summary contents**, which includes only key information, such as name and Internet address or screen name.
- **Mailing labels.**

3. Make your selections and click the OK button to start the parade . . . er, output.

Your printer begins churning out Address Book information.

Chapter 12

Chatting the Day (And Night) Away

In This Chapter

- ▶ Connecting with the online community
 - ▶ Entering a chat
 - ▶ Chatting the night away
 - ▶ Finding a chat to call home
 - ▶ Keeping your password private
 - ▶ Making a private room
 - ▶ Attending the theater
 - ▶ Logging your chats
-

Interacting with your fellow members sits at the very heart of America Online. I never saw an online service that's *into* the idea of community as America Online — and darn it, people in a community should talk to each other. The People Connection exists so that you can chat informally with others, make friends from all over the world, connect with people who share your interests, and generally redeem yourself in the eyes of your mother, who still thinks that you shouldn't spend so much time alone with your computer.

This chapter introduces the People Connection communities and chat rooms and goes into detail about how the whole place works. It also explores the AOL Live theaters and the Computing Center's Online Classrooms, home to some of the finest online presentations ever shown, um, online. Turn off the TV, let the newspapers stack up by the door, and get ready to boldly go where a whole lot of people eagerly await your arrival.

They Don't Call It Community for Nothing

After looking far and wide for the perfect metaphor to describe the social wonders of the People Connection, the answer hit me the other night at a party. Duh — it's a big, fun, wild online *party!* Like all good parties, the People Connection (keyword **People Connection**) gives you several different ways to socially link with people in the online world.

At most every party, some people come to just hang out, flit from group to group, and talk until they're out of words. For that group, there's the realm of online chatting that made the People Connection famous. With hundreds (and usually thousands) of live chat rooms running 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, the People Connection certainly earned its legendary reputation as the premier home of social exchange, general conversation, and the occasional pointless argument.



Ready to take a dip into the warm chat-room waters? Flip ahead a few pages for most everything you ever want or need to know about chatting.

A good party also gives folks with similar interests some space to *really* connect for in-depth discussions. (Parties held in most homes call this space the “kitchen.”) When you want to join a discussion on a particular interest that you hold dear, use the America Online Match Chat feature (keyword **Match Chat**.) Match Chat takes the interests from your profile — or enter some new ones into the search field if you like — and it ferrets out a whole list of active chat rooms that match your stated interest. Take a peek at the selection that Match Chat offers you and then pop into a chat room or two to see how they fit.

Ambling into a Chat Room

Getting into a People Connection chat room is easy. In fact, you probably fell into one more than once by just wandering around the system and clicking a few random links.

To formally set sail for the Wonderful World of Chatting, use keyword **People Connection** or click the People button on the toolbar. Either method drops you into the People Connection main window. To find a particular chat room of interest, click the Chat Room Listings button in the upper-left side of the window, and then click your way through the chat category and room listings. When you find an interesting room, click its name and click the Go Chat button!



Why you simply must fill out your profile

Before getting too far into the fun and frolic of the People Connection, you need to know about member profiles. Your member profile is a little online dossier you write. It contains whatever you want other America Online subscribers to know about you, such as your real name, your birthday, and the computer you use. You don't have to fill out every line — leaving some parts blank is perfectly okay.

Why fill out your profile? Well, if someone meets you in a chat room or reads a message you

posted and wants to find out more about you, he or she checks your member profile. People often search the member profiles looking for other America Online members with the same interests. My wife scored an interview in a national magazine because the writer read her profile and liked what she found there.

Making a profile isn't hard. Flip to Chapter 6 for all the details. To make a truly amazing profile, check out Chapter 20 for tricks of the profile masters.



Feel like trying your luck a bit? Let your America Online software throw you into a random chat room. You never know who (and sometimes *what*) awaits! For a taste of on-the-edge living, select **C**ommunity↔**C**hat **N**ow on the main menu. After a moment of intense thought, the America Online software spins some big digital wheel, chooses a room name, and sends you there. It's truly an online *wheweee* experience if ever there is one.

Regardless of how you arrived in the chat room, your screen resembles Figure 12-1. Because the People Connection rooms are, after all, for chatting, the *chat text area* fills most of the window. Opposite the chat text is the *people list*, a roster of the members sharing the chat room with you. Along the bottom of the window is the *message box*, where you compose your witty comments before pressing Enter (Return) or clicking Send to share them with the room.

At the top of the window sits an innocuous-looking Chat Options button. Its drop-down list works like a transporter beam to various chats:

- ✓ **People Connection Main:** Sends you back to the main People Connection window.
- ✓ **Chat Room Listings:** Takes you to the window that lists most of the available chat rooms online.
- ✓ **Private Chat:** Leads you to the quiet world of invitation-only chat rooms.
- ✓ **Match Chat:** Opens the Match Chat window so that you can request chat rooms that equate to your own interests.

- ✓ **Chat Search:** Opens a nifty little search window that lets you search for a specific chat room.
- ✓ **Member Directory:** Sends you straight to the Member Directory window, just like choosing Community → Member Directory from the main menu.
- ✓ **Chat Preferences:** Displays a dialog box containing the various chat settings (just like clicking the Settings icon on the toolbar, selecting the A-Z tab, and then clicking the Chat Preferences link from the list).

A standard chat room holds 23 people at a time. If you try to get into a chat room that's full, America Online either sends you to another chat room with the same name plus a number (such as Lobby 34, New Member Lounge 15, or Beach Party 63) or digitally shrugs you off, saying that the room is full (which usually happens if you try to enter an overflowing member-created chat room). If America Online shrugs, all you can do is wait a few moments and try again.

If your kids use America Online, you definitely need to know about the Parental Controls for chat rooms. Check out Chapter 7 for the details.

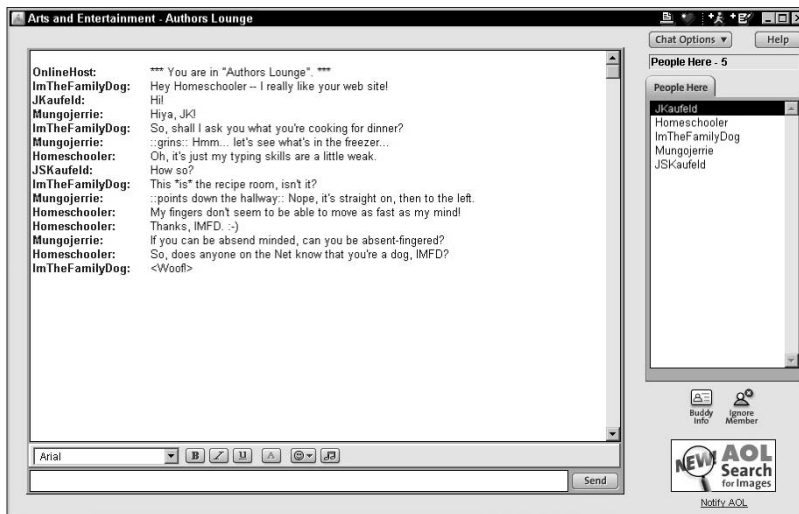


Figure 12-1:
Welcome
to the chat
room —
dive in and
enjoy!

Finding Conversations among the Keystrokes

It's only fair, both to you and to noncomputer portions of your life, to say this right up front: Chatting in the People Connection is almost too much fun for words. If you like people, thrive on conversation, and enjoy typing, you may as well put a pillow and blanket next to the computer because you found a new home.



Stop chat room junk mail in its tracks

Although chatting makes the online world come alive with friends (both old and new), it also makes your mailbox strain at the sides with junk mail. Unfortunately, junk e-mailers scan the screen name lists in chat rooms and send out hundreds, if not thousands, of useless, and often downright lurid advertising messages. Left undefended, your mailbox may get 30 to 100 junk e-mails or more during a single chatting session!

So what can a dedicated chatter do to stem the tide? Create a dedicated chatting screen name, that's what! It's your simplest, yet most powerful, weapon against junk e-mail.

The idea is straightforward and — thanks to the fact that all America Online accounts get up to

seven screen names — easy to use. Create a new screen name for your chatting experience and then use the Mail Controls (keyword **Mail Controls**) to block all e-mail to the account. In the member profile for your chatting name, include a note directing people to your e-mailable screen name. That way, the chat room bulk e-mailers won't bother you, but your friends can still drop you a line.

For more about screen names and member profiles, see Chapter 6. To find out more about junk e-mail (and how to fight it), flip back to Chapter 4.

The People Connection chat rooms are America Online's answer to clubhouses, meeting halls, corner pubs, and your living room (except that chat rooms are a little tidier). Put simply, chat rooms are digital gathering spots where you and up to 22 other folks type about life, the universe, and what's for dinner.

When you first arrive in a room, the chat text area is blank except for a brief note from a computer named OnlineHost announcing which room you're in. After a few moments, the chat text area comes alive with messages. (Don't try to talk with the OnlineHost — it never listens.)



What's the key to a successful chat room conversation? Knowing how to read your screen. Flip back to Figure 12-1. The chat text area is a mess, isn't it? That's because whenever anyone types a message in a chat room, everyone can read it. It's like a conference call where everyone talks at the same time *all* the time.

To follow the flow of a chat room, you have to skip around. The chat text in Figure 12-1 shows at least three different conversations. Here's a breakdown of the action.

At the top of the window, Im The Family Dog compliments another room member, Homeschooler, on his Web site. Homeschooler is deep in conversation with someone else at the moment, but he replies to Im The Family Dog

near the bottom of the window. Meanwhile, I wandered into the room, and Mungojerrie welcomed me. Near the middle of the window, Im The Family Dog and Mungojerrie carry on a little conversation about food. Around the same spot, Homeschooler and JSKaufeld chat about typing. At the bottom of the window, Mungojerrie tosses out a half-hearted joke (at least it came out that way) based on Homeschooler's last comment.

Tossing your own thoughts into the chat room maelstrom is easy. Basically, start typing. Whatever you type appears in that long, thin box along the bottom of the chat room window. When you finish typing, press Enter (or Return) or click Send. In a moment or two, your words of wisdom appear in the chat text area for all to see. A single chat room comment holds only so much text, so choose your letters, numbers, and punctuation marks carefully (or split your thought into two lines).

If you type a comment but your text *doesn't* appear in the box at the bottom of the chat room window, click the mouse anywhere in the text box along the bottom of the chat room window. When you see the blinking toothpick cursor way over on the left side of the box, go ahead and start typing again.

There's much to tell about chat rooms, but little of it follows any kind of organization. With that bit of rationalizing out of the way, here are some randomly assembled thoughts and tips about the wild world of chatting:



- ✔ To get someone's attention in a chat room, start your comment with the person's screen name. If the person doesn't respond in a minute or two, try it again. If all else fails, send the person an instant message asking whether he or she saw what you typed. Check out Chapter 13 for the details about instant messages.
- ✔ To quickly read a fellow chatter's member profile or send the person an instant message, scroll through the People Here list until you find the person's screen name and double-click it. A dialog box fills the left-hand side of your screen. At the top of the box are several buttons destined to make your life easier:
 - The **Send IM button** sends an instant message to the selected person.
 - The **Send Mail button** opens the Write Mail window with the name filled in, ready to go.
 - If you find the person's overtures annoying, the **Block IM** and **Block E-mail buttons** await your attention.

On the other hand, when you meet a new friend you can use the **Add to Buddy List** or **Add to Address Book buttons** so you don't lose track of your new buddy once the chat room window closes.

The dialog box automatically displays the person's member profile if one exists. To get back to the chat room after playing in the window, close the little dialog box. Before making another comment in the chat room, click the mouse anywhere in the long box at the bottom of the window and then start typing. (Otherwise, what you type doesn't appear on the screen.)

- ✔ If a person is getting out of hand or you just don't like listening to him or her, find the person's screen name in the People Here list, click it, and click the Ignore button. Look for it directly under the People Here list. From then on, nothing the person types appears on your screen. (Isn't technology wonderful?)
- ✔ If you wander into a game chat, someone may ask you to "roll dice" in the room. For wonderful yet mysterious reasons, all America Online chat rooms understand the special command `//roll`. This command tells the America Online computer to pretend to roll some dice and print the results in the chat room. By default, it "rolls" two six-sided dice (just like you do in Monopoly and other board games). You can also specify the number of sides and number of rolls by typing `//roll-dice xx-sides yy` (replace `xx` with the number of dice and `yy` with the number of sides on each die). So, to roll four eight-sided dice, type `//roll-dice 4-sides 8`.
- ✔ If you see people writing comments like `afk`, `bak`, `LOL`, and `ROFL!`, don't worry — they're not making fun of you. That's standard chat room shorthand for things like "away from the keyboard," "laughing out loud," and other ever-necessary observations. For more about these, use keyword **LOL Online**. The LOL Online window offers definitions, online shorthand notation, and lots of useful tips for communicating with shorter "words."



Chat rooms get noisier than usual in the AOL 9.0 software, thanks to the addition of the Buddy Sounds (keyword **Expressions**, and then click Buddy Sound). If you set a Buddy Sound, then everybody in the chat room hears that sound when you enter the room *and* when they double-click your screen name in the chat room member list to see your profile. For more about all of the expressions available in the 9.0 software, check out Chapter 20.

Seeking Out a Chat Room

The People Connection ranks as one of the top America Online destinations. Finding the room that's right for you may take some time, particularly because the area contains hundreds, if not thousands, of active chats all the time.

To simplify your chatting life (and find interesting chats quickly), use Search All AOL Chats, the People Connection search feature:

1. Use keyword Chat Search to display the Search All AOL Chats window.

(If that doesn't work, click the People toolbar button and then use the Search By Topic text window at the top of the People Connection window.)

2. Type a few words to describe the room you're looking for and then click Search.

America Online lists both People Connection–sponsored rooms and member-created chats matching your description. If a member created the chat, the system lets you know and warns you that the chat room might contain conversation not meant for young ears — er, eyes.

3. Scroll through the list until you find a likely candidate, and then click the chat room's name.

America Online displays a brief description of the chat.

4. To hop into the chat room, click the big Go Chat button in the description window (or save a step and use the Go Chat button next to each individual entry).

If a chat room has space for you (remember that each chat room holds 23 people), you immediately pop into the room. If the room is full, the software lets you know.

This set of steps searches all of America Online, looking for interesting chats sponsored by various online areas. It *doesn't* search the general People Connection chats, though. The only way to find a chat in the People Connection is by old-fashioned browsing in the Find a Chat window (click the People toolbar button and then choose Find a Chat from the drop-down menu).



After getting into the room, add it to your Favorite Places list by clicking the little heart icon in the chat room's upper-right corner. For more about Favorite Places, see Chapter 8.

Beware the Password Scammers

I wish that I didn't have to include this section, but I must. Password scamming is alive and well on America Online. The good news is that America Online actively fights the jerks who do it; the bad news is that more jerks are *always* available to replace the ones who get caught.



Don't *ever* give your password or credit card information to anyone — *anyone* — who asks for it, whether it happens online or some other way.

Nobody from America Online will ever ask for your password. Period. Never. It won't happen. No matter what the person says, who the person claims to be, or what the person threatens to do, ignore and report anyone who asks for your password.

Figure 12-2 shows actual samples of password scammers I bumped into on America Online. I want to emphasize that: *I did not make these figures up — they are real.*

If you get an instant message that looks like the ones in Figure 12-2, don't bother to reply or say anything catty (leave that to people like me); just get ready to ruin the scammer's day. Here's how to report a password scammer to America Online:

1. **If you're in a chat room when a password-scamming message appears, type a note in the room that says someone is fishing for passwords.**



Be sure to give the screen name of the person who sent you the instant message. It never hurts to remind everyone to *never* give out their passwords — think of it as your good deed for the day.

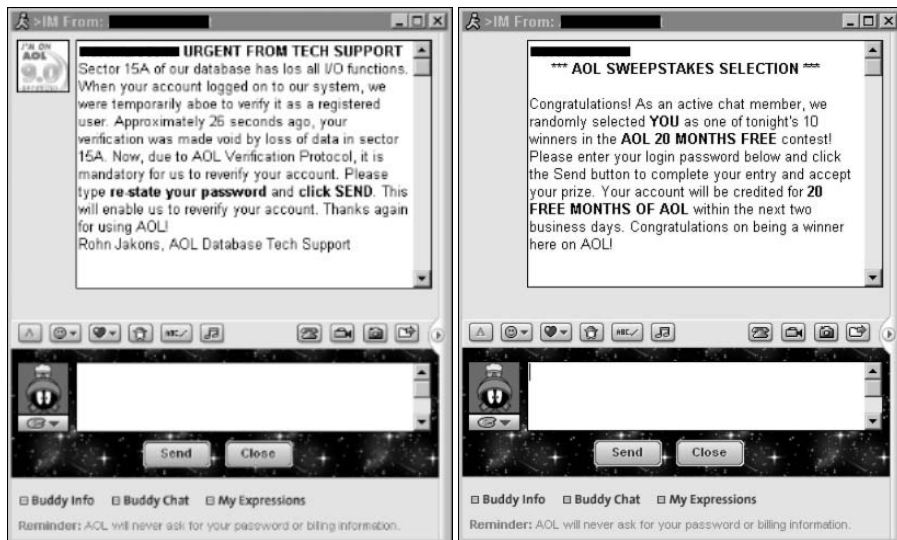


Figure 12-2:
They
promise
anything to
get your
password!

2. **Click the Notify AOL button in the Instant Message window.**

The Notify AOL window appears. Thanks to the wonders of modern software, the system automatically prepares a report for the Community Action Team (the America Online version of community police), including the screen name of the person who sent you the message, the message text, and several other items.

3. **If you want to add any comments with your report, type them in the text area at the bottom of the Notify AOL dialog box.**



You don't need to include any extra comments, but this dialog box offers the opportunity anyway. If you do type some notes, they're automatically appended to the report.

4. **After filling out the report to your satisfaction, click Send Report.**

The window closes automatically. Bye-bye, scammer!



If you gave out your password before realizing that the person requesting it was a scammer, all is not lost. *Immediately* (and I mean *right now*) go to keyword **Password** and change your account password. After that, go through the preceding steps and report the scammer.

Enjoying a Little Private (Room) Time

Whether you're talking business or catching up with a friend, the People Connection's private room feature gives you all the benefits of a chat room without the inconvenience of filling it with strange people. Private rooms are great for reunions, parties, brainstorming sessions, and regional meetings.

Private rooms are just that — private. No one can get in without knowing the name of the room (a name *you* make up, by the way). America Online doesn't keep a master list of active private rooms. People outside the room can't monitor the discussion in a private room.

Private chat rooms still have *some* limitations, though. For example, a private room holds only 23 people (so you can't have a really *whopping* party). And you get unexpected guests every now and then. Someone thinks up the same name *you* used and — poof! — that person appears in your private room. Don't worry, though — that doesn't happen very often. Also, private chat rooms, unlike their public counterparts, don't include a Notify AOL button in the chat window. To report a problem, use keyword **Notify AOL**.

To create or join the discussion in a private chat room, follow these steps:

1. **Click the People icon on the toolbar and then click the Create a Chat button on the People Connection window that appears.**

The Start Your Own Chat dialog box appears.

2. **Click the Private Chat button.**

The Enter or Start a Private Chat dialog box hops nimbly to the screen.

3. **Carefully type the name of the private room you want to either join or create, and then click the Go Chat button.**

The chat room window appears, with the name of the private room emblazoned across the top.



If you're creating a new private chat room, make up any name for it you want. If you're joining someone else's room, type the name exactly as the person gave it to you (assuming that the person sent you the room name when he or she invited you in).

If you are heading into a private chat with some friends but find yourself alone in an empty private room instead, make sure that you typed the name right (capitalization doesn't count, but spelling does). If you unexpectedly waltz into someone else's private room, blush profusely, type a brief apology, close the window, and start over at Step 1.



If you spend a great deal of time chatting with folks on your Buddy List, the new Buddy Chat feature promises to make your life a little easier. Flip to Chapter 13 for the details.

Attending Classes — and Enjoying Them

Remember when we attended classes because we wanted to? No? Oh . . . er, that must have been someone else. If you never experienced the thrill of learning for fun, now you can with America Online's free online classes. Every now and then knowing the ins and outs of a specific topic is nice, especially if that topic happens to concern your computer. Spending an hour or so in an online class that covers your chosen subject might not only answer the current question at hand, but it may also arm you with a few cool tricks along the way.

Drop into a class on online safety. Or perhaps brush up on a specific application, such as Microsoft Word or Paint Shop Pro. If e-mail or the ins and outs of Favorite Places stump you, check out one of the scheduled online classes. These classes, brought to you by the America Online Community Education Center, feature real live instructors who teach short courses on everything from keyboarding basics to Macromedia Flash. Each individual class takes place in an Online Classroom.

The Online Classrooms live at keyword **Classes**. These rooms look and act differently than the ones you find elsewhere on America Online, although they behave fundamentally like chat rooms. These classrooms contain two large windows, a normal thin chat window along the bottom where you type your comments, and a People Here list. Everything typed by the course presenter appears in the text window at the top of the screen. The bottom of the screen resembles the standard free-for-all environment of a classic chat window. Everybody attending the class sits in the same group, and all their comments appear in the window's large text area. Usually, classes include a few moderators (one on "stage" with the presenter and the other in the audience) who track audience questions and generally keep the peace.



In case someone asks (I can't imagine why anyone would, but it's a strange world), the developers inside America Online call the rooms in the Online Classroom area *enhanced conference rooms* (or *ECRs*). Some other areas of the service use ECRs for small meetings and courses.

As with chat rooms, you need to know many other things about classrooms to make your enjoyment complete:



- ✓ Did you miss a presentation you wanted to attend? No problem — just look for a transcript. Use keyword **Classes**, and then look for the transcript link in the window that describes each individual class. First click the Daily Class Schedule link in the New Member and AOL Classes window, and then click any specific class title in the schedule. Because all transcripts are plain-text files, you can read them with any word processor.
- ✓ Online Classroom events put everyone in a single window, so you can't actually change seating rows as you can in a large theater if you find that you're allergic to the person next to you. That's not a big problem, though, because a staffer always watches over the room and keeps everyone in line.
- ✓ For a list of approaching Online Classroom events, use keyword **Classes**. The [Daily Class Schedule](#) link lists all current classes for the week. Events are organized by date. Scroll through the list and double-click whatever event looks interesting to get the details.

Recording Your Conversations

For whatever reason (whether it's simple paranoia or something more complex), you may want a record of what went on during a chat. Perhaps you're attending a forum conference center presentation and need to review the chat for ideas. Or maybe you're just feeling a little cloak-and-dagger today and want to spy on your chat room friends. Whatever the reason, keeping a copy of your chats is easy.

To record the chat room you're in, follow these steps:

1. Choose File→Log Manager from the main menu.

This selection displays the Logging dialog box with the name of your chat room in the Room box.

2. In the Chat Log area of the Logging dialog box (near the top of the screen), click the Open button.

In the Open Log dialog box, the chat room name automatically appears as your log name. (You can change it, if you want, by typing a new name for the file.)

3. Click Save or press Enter to open the log file.

From that point on, any new chat text appears on-screen *and* gets saved on your hard drive. Text already on-screen before you started the log isn't in the file.

4. Close the chat window to save the log file.

When you close the chat window, the log file automatically closes and saves with the chat room name that you gave it to begin with.

Chapter 13

Dropping a Quick “Hello” with Instant Messages

In This Chapter

- ▶ Sending instant messages
 - ▶ Playing the IM Catcher
 - ▶ Temporarily turning the darn things off
 - ▶ Protecting your precious password
 - ▶ Messaging from a Web browser with AIM Express
-

Years ago, when the world was young and we called brick-size desktop calculators and LED watches high *tech*, saying “Hi” to your friends meant calling them on the phone, yelling to them over the backyard fence, or sending them a quick note through the (gasp!) postal mail. As time went by, immediate gratification won over genteel manners; thus phone calls became the norm.

The online world took immediate gratification to a whole new level by delivering messages anywhere in the world within moments. It also introduced new problems because the friends who used to live next door now live in the next time zone (or, worse, the second continent on the left just past that ocean over there). E-mail still flies through the wires with the greatest of speed, but it’s not interactive — you can’t enjoy the back-and-forth exchange of ideas that a good, old-fashioned phone call provided.

Because programmers abhor missing features, the clever developers at America Online came up with the Instant Message system. *Instant messages* blend the immediacy of e-mail with the interactivity of a phone call by letting you type back and forth with someone else on the system. It all happens right now — or, as the computer people say, in *real time* (as opposed to fake time, I suppose) — like a private, one-on-one chat room.

This chapter explores the Instant Message system and details how to send and receive instant messages (or IMs, for short), plus how to shut the little buggers off when you want to concentrate for a while.

Online Telepathy with Instant Messages

Sometimes, you just want to drop a quick “Hi!” to someone you happen to bump into online. That’s what the America Online instant message feature is for. It’s an easy way to have a quick conversation with someone regardless of whatever else either of you is doing at the time (see Figure 13-1). Instant messages are private, too — only you and your correspondent see what passes between you. Because instant messages happen, well, *instantly*, both you and your intended recipient need to be signed on to America Online; otherwise, the whole thing fails miserably.

Messages from an Internet user — the mystery of AIM

Once upon a time, only America Online members enjoyed the wonder and merriment of instant messages. Everyone else — specifically all those non-AOL users wandering forlornly through the Internet — pined away, hoping that one day they too might send instant messages to their friends on America Online.

Several instant-message-like programs sprouted on the Internet, but then America Online delivered its own solution: AOL Instant Messenger (fondly known as *AIM* to most of the world). Thanks to the wonders of modern technology, AIM lets non-AOL members send and receive instant messages, chatting away with both the America Online member population and everyone else who signs up for the AIM service.

When you (an America Online subscriber) receive an instant message from someone using AIM (but with a screen name not on your Buddy List), the message doesn’t simply pop up. Instead, the new IM Catcher dialog box (keyword **IM Catcher**) appears, saying that an Internet user sent you a message. For more about the IM Catcher, see the section “Intercepting Messages with the IM Catcher” also in this chapter.

In general, if you don’t recognize the screen name sending the message, click either the Block or Ignore button on the IM Catcher window. (That’s a good, general online safety rule.) America Online’s Terms of Service don’t apply to AIM members, so nothing stops them from sending whatever they want. (Drat the luck!)



Figure 13-1:
An instant message appears.

The top of the Instant Message window tells you the screen name of the person who just “dinged” you. Just below that is the incoming message area, where your friend’s half of the online conversation takes place. The bottom half of the window forms your writing desk, where you compose witty thoughts and decorate them with the formatting buttons. Although it’s small, the IM window packs in everything from formatting to file sharing, with voice and video, too. That’s a lot of zing for such a limited space. Here’s a closer look at the IM window’s array of communication tools:



✓ **Adjust Font:** Nothing spices up a mundane IM conversation like wild formatting, so the programmers put the various text formatting options within easy reach. Click the first button in the IM window for everything text related, including font, point size, **bold**, *italic*, and underline, plus a rainbow of foreground and background colors.



✓ **Insert Smiley:** A happy face adorns the Insert Smiley button. Click it to reveal a drop-down list with 16 faces. Whether you feel angelic, blue, or beyond cool, you find a smiley to add pizzazz to your text. The Change Smileys button at the bottom of the Insert Smiley list takes you to the My Expressions window, where you can pick your ultimate smiley collection from a bewildering array of options.



✓ **Insert Favorite Place:** When the conversation turns to your favorite America Online areas and Web sites, click the Insert Favorite Place button to throw a link straight from your Favorites Places list into the instant message. Just find the link in the window that appears, and then click it. The AOL software automatically copies the link into your half of the IM window, ready for sending.



✔ **Send Instant Greeting:** It's a penguin — well, actually it's a penguin button. (Real penguins need more than mere software to survive.) This dapper little guy marks the IM window's new Send Instant Greeting button. Click this button to deliver a fun multimedia wish to your IM partner. Unlike the cards in the American Greetings area (keyword **American Greetings**), Instant Greetings cost nothing except the time to make, send, and receive them.



✔ **Spell Check:** This tool catches those miz-spelt words that creep into everyone's writing. When you finish writing an IM, click the Spell Check button and then follow along carefully as the America Online software puts your spelling to the test.



✔ **Share Music:** Click the musical notes button to turn up the music in your Instant Message window. This button brings up the Music Share dialog box, offering several musical selections that you can listen to and share with a friend through IM. (Of course, you can always share them without listening first, but you both might be in for a surprise.) The Music Share dialog box usually includes a mixture of audio and video, along with an AOL Radio channel. To share music, just click the Share button in the Music Share dialog box.

✔ **Start AOL Talk Session and Start AOL Video Messenger Session:** No matter how hard it tries, sometimes plain text (and even formatted text) just doesn't convey the shades of emotion contained in IM notes like "Oh crud-on-a-stick! I just got punted again." Moments like this don't fully communicate the raw emotion without the agitated sound of a live voice or the image of the perturbed human on the other end of the line. Thanks to some dandy AOL 9.0 innovations, the Instant Message system now includes two multimedia communication tools that solve that exact problem.



- The AOL Talk tool (the phone button) lets you speak directly to the other member, provided both your computer and your friend's include a microphone and speakers.



- The AOL Video Messenger service (behind the video camera button) sends your friend either a video from your handy Web camera or a funny clip provided by either AOL or yourself.

Even with the hassle and expense (minimal on both counts) of the extra techno-gear to make these things work, both AOL Talk and AOL Video Messenger are very fun and cool features. Try these with a friend sometime!



- ✔ **Send Picture** and **Send File**: With all of this advanced communication going on in your IM windows, words barely take up enough space. To make the most of these tools, try sharing pictures or trading files back and forth between your computer and your friend’s machine with the Send Picture and Send File options. The Send Picture button builds a mini-photo collection right there in the IM window for you and your friend to flip through. The Send File button handles a quick transfer of data files between the two machines.

Along the bottom of the Instant Message window sits a bunch of action buttons:

- ✔ **Send** ships your message away to the recipient.
- ✔ **Close** makes the message go away, never to be seen or heard from again.
- ✔ **Add Buddy** does just what it says — it puts the sender’s screen name from the instant message into your Buddy List. After clicking the Add Buddy button, the AOL software asks which group you want to put the person into. It also helps you create a new group for this buddy if you prefer that option.
- ✔ **Buddy Info** opens the sender’s whopping Member Directory dialog box. You can send the person an e-mail, add your friend to your Address Book or Buddy List, block e-mail or instant messages from this person (this would be for ex-pals, I suppose), view the person’s Member Profile, and see if he or she is in a public chat room — all from this one place.
- ✔ **Buddy Chat** works just like the Buddy Chat button on your Buddy List — it creates a special chat room for you and your online friends. Both America Online members *and* AOL Instant Messenger users can join your Buddy Chats.
- ✔ **My Expressions** opens the My Expressions window, where you can customize practically everything worth customizing in your IMs. Chapter 21 gives you the lowdown on the Expressions window and all its neat gadgetry.
- ✔ If a fellow America Online member sent you an instant message, the last button on the window says **Notify AOL**. This button reports password scammers (more about that later in the chapter), abusive messages, or anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.
- ✔ If the instant message came from an AOL Instant Messenger user, nothing appears in the final button slot — it’s empty.

Using these little instant message text bombs is easy — here's how they work:

1. To see whether someone is online, check your Buddy List or use the Locate command (Ctrl+L).

The Buddy List system is a great tool for tracking your friends online. To find out more about it, see Chapter 9.

You can only send instant messages to someone who's signed on and has the Instant Messaging option turned on in the America Online Parental Controls area (keyword **Parental Controls**), or who is using AOL Instant Messenger (AIM).

2. If you found your target with the Locate command, click the Send IM button in the Locate dialog box. If you used the Buddy List, click the person's name and then click the Send IM button.

Either way, the Send Instant Message dialog box pops up.

3. If the person's screen name is not in the To box already, type it there. Then press Tab to move the blinking cursor to the text area and type your message.

Keep instant messages short — 10 to 12 words. If you have something long to say, use e-mail.

For some extra fun, click the Smiley button and include a cute little face with your words. (After all, if you can't have fun with instant messages, what's the point?)

4. After you finish typing the message, click Send.

If the message's recipient is signed on and accepting instant messages, the Instant Message window briefly disappears from your screen and then reappears in the upper-left corner.

If something goes wrong along the way (perhaps the person isn't online right now, or you misspelled the person's screen name), the America Online software displays an error message to keep you informed.



When your friend gets the message, he or she can reply by clicking the Respond button. Your friend's message then appears on your screen, and you can start a running dialogue. (That's assuming, of course, that your buddy feels like talking today.)

Intercepting Messages with the IM Catcher

Over the last few years, AOL members discovered a deep love for instant messages. Unfortunately, the spammers did, too. Today, so many fake IMs appear on the average member’s screen that the industry even coined a new term for them — *Spim*, short for *IM spam*. To turn this tide back, the AOL programmers added the new IM Catcher feature (keyword **IM Catcher**) to the 9.0 software.

The IM Catcher automatically sits behind the scenes, watching for instant messages coming from people who aren’t on your Buddy List, because that means the messages probably fall into the spim category. (That’s one more reason why you should populate your Buddy List with entries for everybody you know.) When a suspect message arrives, the IM Catcher window appears, listing the message sender’s screen name, number of IMs the sender fired at you, and the time of the person’s last message.

From there, you can open the IM, get the Buddy Info about this member, permanently block the member from sending IMs to you, or simply ignore the current message. If a bunch of messages from different AIM members appear, you can ignore all of them in a single step with the Ignore All button.



If you see the old-fashioned “knock-knock” message window when an unknown IM arrives instead of the IM Catcher window, you might need to jumpstart your IM Catcher. For step-by-step instructions on doing that, see Chapter 25.

Turning Off Instant Messages Because Sometimes You Just Want to Be Alone

Life on America Online sometimes resembles a huge commune. The moment you sign on, one (or sometimes several) of your friends immediately sends you an instant message and wants to chat. For hours. Or days.

To check your e-mail in peace and quiet or perhaps do a little online research, hang America Online’s cool Do Not Disturb sign by turning on the Away Message. The setting is temporary, so the next time you sign on to the system, instant messages are automatically turned *on* again.

To temporarily hang your little *I'm somewhere else* sign, follow these steps:

1. **After signing on to America Online, click the Away Message button at the bottom of the Buddy List window.**

A swing-out menu appears. (Don't ask why the Instant Message Away Notice button lives at the bottom of the Buddy List window. I don't know, either.)

2. **Click the Away Message that you want to use.**

This selects the Away Message of your choice and turns it on immediately. A little line of text also appears at the top of the Buddy List, reminding you that an Away Message is on.



The America Online software comes configured with four standard I'm Away messages. You can add your own by clicking the Setup Away Message option in the swing-out menu, and then clicking the New button in the Away Message dialog box. Follow the on-screen instructions from there.



Your Away Message stays on until you turn it off by clicking the Away Message button again or by sending an instant message. Either way, when you turn off the Away Message, America Online immediately displays a little dialog box that tells how long your Away Message was on, how many messages it intercepted, the screen name of the last person to send you a message, and the time that the person sent it. As an extra benefit, all the instant messages you ignored immediately appear on your screen. (What a deal!)

To set up an Away Message, just click the Away Message button and then choose the Set Up Away Messages option. A little dialog box appears for making new away messages with the New button, changing your current messages with the Edit button, or killing a current message with the Delete button. Let your creativity run amok here and see what sort of fun messages you can write!

Catching Password Scammers

Whenever you collect millions of people in one place (even if it's a virtual place), somewhere in the mix you're bound to find a few undesirable characters. At home, it's the telemarketers. At work, it's the slightly unhinged coworker who lines his cubicle with aluminum foil to block CIA thought-control transmissions. In the online world, it's the password scammers.

These bottom-feeders want only one thing: your account password. Nobody — and I mean *nobody* — from America Online or any other company will ever ask for your password. It won't happen! No matter what they say in their message, no matter who they claim to be, they are lying. Pay no attention to their drivel. Instead, get ready to report them to America Online.

If someone sends you an instant message asking for your password, credit card number, or anything else like that, report the person immediately with the Notify AOL button at the bottom of the Instant Message window. Whether the person claims to be from the America Online Billing department, a credit card company, or Mars (which is where he or she should be), it's all a lie. In Chapter 4, you can find out more about this subject, including a few sample scams and detailed instructions for nailing — er, reporting — these lowlifes.

Taking Instant Messaging Anywhere with AIM Express

Try as it might, your computer simply can't follow you everywhere. (After all, even the most technologically affluent folks out there need some quiet time away from their digital *consigliere*.) But the need to send instant messages knows no such limitations — it strikes regardless of where you are or how much technology sits next to you at the moment.

When the instant message bug bites during one of those computer-less moments, don't despair! If you can find anything (computer, online kiosk, or whatever) with a Java-enabled Web browser and an Internet connection, America Online's new AIM Express system puts you back into the messaging action.

AIM Express combines the power of instant messaging with the go-anywhere flexibility of the Net to ensure that the capability to carry on a text-based conversation follows you everywhere, just like one of those creepy black-suited guys from your father's favorite conspiracy theory. The system works with any America Online screen name, as well as any AIM screen name. It doesn't take any special software or setup, either. Just register your America Online screen name for use with AIM (that takes only a moment, and you can do it from AIM Express with the big Register button), type your screen name and password, and you're ready to communicate.

The AIM Express system displays your screen name's Buddy List, supports Buddy Chats, and covers most of AIM's other basic features. Not bad for something that pops up wherever you need it!

Fire up AIM Express by pointing your browser to the rather ugly URL www.aim.com/get_aim/express/aim_expr.adp. From there, click the little Start button on the screen. Depending on the speed of your connection, it takes a few moments to a few minutes before AIM Express revs into gear. After it appears, just type in your screen name and password. When the system recognizes you, your Buddy List appears, and you're ready to start sending IMs!

Chapter 14

Posting On the Message Boards and Joining the Groups

In This Chapter

- ▶ Frolicking in the message board folders
 - ▶ Peeking at the subjects and messages (and adding some of both)
 - ▶ Exploring your free group communications toolkit
 - ▶ Setting up a group of your own
-

You can't turn around on America Online without running into a discussion. Whether you want to talk about music, mayhem, or something in between (such as Branson, Missouri), America Online has a place for you somewhere.

After finding your online home, it's time to join the fray by diving into an online discussion. Of course, you need to know a few tricks to make sense of the whole discussion thing. This chapter guides you through the some times obscure path toward joining a discussion group and posting your opinions in the message boards for all to see.

Winding Your Way through the Message Folders

Before joining a discussion, you have to find one. To do that, cruise around in your favorite online areas and look for an item labeled something like *Chat and Messages*, *Message Boards*, *Discussion Boards*, *Rant and Rave*, or perhaps just *Boards*. Any of these labels is a strong clue that you found a discussion area with message boards awaiting your thoughts.



Organize your favorite message boards

Like interactive chat rooms, lots of people find message boards very engaging (which is a nice way of saying *woefully addictive*). You get hooked in the discussions on one message board, and then find references to another, and pretty soon postings, replies, and message threads fill your entire online world.

Flipping from message board to message board takes time, energy, and effort, even for the most ardent fan. To simplify your whole message board existence, America Online created the My Boards window, which sits behind keyword **My Boards**.

This window works like a customized Favorite Places area devoted to various message boards. It lists all your favorite boards in one

place, gives you search and message listing tools like the regular message board areas do. For hard-core message board fans and folks, the system also helps you read the messages *offline*, saving you online time (and freeing up your phone for the teens in your life).

To add boards to your My Boards area, click the Add to My Boards button on the right side of any message board window. America Online automatically adds that board to your personalized message board list. When you want to check the board's messages, just go to keyword **My Boards** instead of wandering through the message board area, eventually digging down to it. Using My Boards seriously saves your valuable time!



For the motherload of message boards, go to Message Board Central at keyword **Message Boards**. This area contains links to just about every message board across the whole of America Online. Start with the broad topics listed in the first window, and then drill your way down to specific boards that cover the topic you seek.

Because details always make more sense if you know the terminology involved, here's a quick romp through the top message-board terms. Ready? Here goes:

- ✔ Message boards usually contain a bunch of individual topics, each of which works like a miniature bulletin board. Some boards — particularly the movie and TV discussions in the Entertainment Community (keyword **Entertainment Community**) — focus on a single theme, so they contain only subjects, not multiple topics.
- ✔ Topics, in turn, list the member-created discussion subjects.
- ✔ Subjects contain one or more member-written messages.
- ✔ Messages hold your thoughts, carefully arranged and presented for maximum effect among your fellow discussees.

With all that firmly in mind, press onward for a more detailed explanation of the whole menagerie.

After finding a likely looking message board, you encounter a window like the one shown in Figure 14-1. This window gives you an overview of every topic and folder in a particular discussion area. The board shown in Figure 14-1 lists a mixture of topics (marked by the little card with a pushpin in the top) and folders (with virtual manila folders, to show that each one holds a number of topics or maybe even other folders). Because the online staffers in charge of each discussion area organize the boards however they see fit, the organizational details of each area vary widely (or wildly) among online forums.

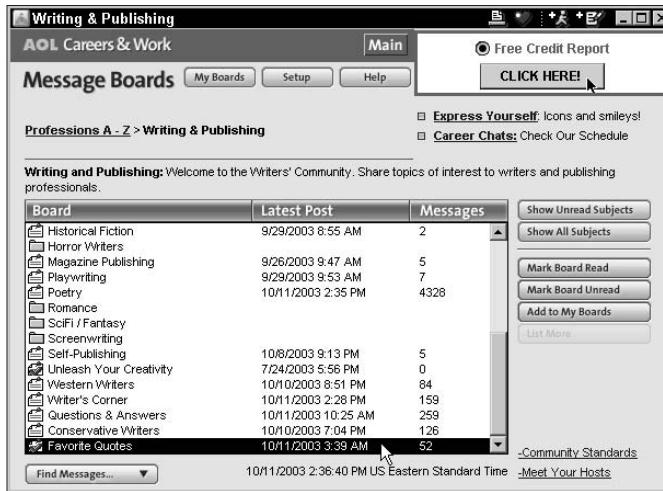
Beside the topic descriptions sit the message board feature buttons. You usually see six buttons there, although the last one (List More) appears only if the need arises. Table 14-1 lists the buttons, along with brief descriptions of what each one does. These buttons filter the postings on a particular message board, helping you see only the messages you want to see. Use them well to make short work of keeping up with your favorite boards.

Table 14-1	Pressing the Message Board Buttons
<i>Button Title</i>	<i>Action</i>
Show Unread Subjects	Opens the current topic and displays only the subjects you haven't read.
Show All Subjects	Opens the highlighted bulletin board topic and lists all the subjects in it, whether you previously read them or not.
Mark Board Read	Marks all the subjects in the current topic as though you had read them.
Mark Board Unread	Clears all the "you read this subject" markers for items in the highlighted board so that all subjects appear when you list this board.
Add to My Boards	Adds the selected board to the list of message boards you can read offline through Automatic AOL sessions. The list lives at keyword My Boards .
List More	Lists the rest of the topics in the window (available only if a particular message board has numerous topics).

The Find Messages button near the bottom of the screen helps you find specific subjects in a board by performing a quick search. It knows how to search for a single word, for a phrase, or for subjects that appeared during a particular time frame. The search system looks at only the currently highlighted message board, so make sure that you click a message board name before starting your search.

Figure 14-1:

This message board contains a slew of folders (which lead to more topics and folders).



Keep these tips and tricks in mind when wrestling with friends and fascinating fellow posters on the message boards:



- Don't fret if you double-click a message item and America Online replies with a terse message saying `This message is no longer available`. It just means that the message was posted so long ago that it was erased to make room for new ones.
- Use the Signature option in the Message Board Setup window to automatically add a few words about yourself to the bottom of each posting. Remember that it's automatic — don't accidentally embarrass yourself. Display the Message Board Setup window by clicking the small, but useful, Setup button lurking along the top of any message board window; then click the Signature tab to make your mark.
- Whenever you post a message, America Online automatically inserts your Buddy Icon next to your name in the top of the message. To change the picture used as your Buddy Icon, visit the My Expressions area at keyword **My Expressions**.
- If you actively participate in a message board, save yourself a lot of time by adding that board to your My Boards area. See the sidebar, "Organize your favorite message boards," in this chapter for more about that.

Reading, Replying to, and Generally Browsing the Messages

When you find an interesting topic, double-click its entry to display a window like the one shown in Figure 14-2. These topics are discussion subjects themselves — the real meat of a message board.

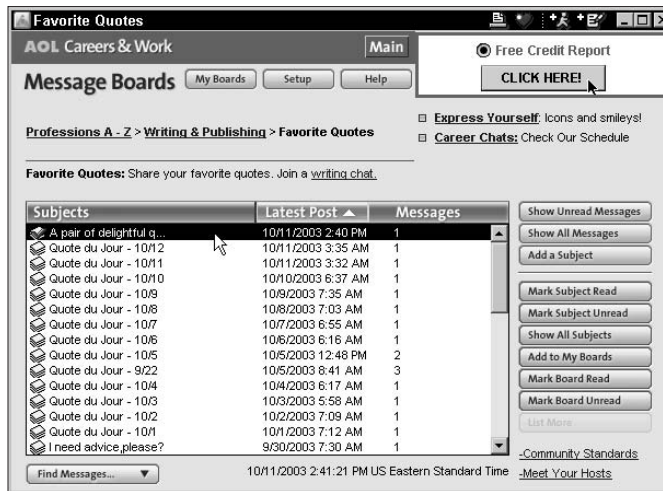


Figure 14-2:
The discussion is off and running in the Subjects list.

In the middle of the screen is the Subjects list, displaying the first 15 or so subjects open for debate. The Subjects list shows the title of the subjects, the date and time of the latest posting, and the current number of responses.

The Subjects list and individual Message windows use the same basic set of feature buttons along the side of the window. Although each window adds one or two unique buttons to the list, the majority of them appear in both places. Table 14-2 lists the buttons on both windows in alphabetical order, and offers brief descriptions of what they do. If a button lives in only the Subjects list or the Message window, the explanation notes that, too. Some of these buttons may look familiar because they also appear (or work very similarly to) buttons you can find on the message folders window.

<i>Button Title</i>	<i>Action</i>
Add a Reply	Add your own thoughts to the current subject. (Message window only.)
Add a Subject	Add a new subject to the current message board.
Add to My Boards	Adds the selected board to the list of message boards you can read offline through Automatic AOL sessions. The list lives at keyword My Boards .
Ignore Author	Don't like what someone says? Click this button to ignore the person. (Message window only.)
List More	Lists the rest of the topics in the window (available only if a particular message board has numerous topics).
Mark Board Read	Marks all the subjects in the current topic as though you read them. (Subjects List window only.)
Mark Board Unread	Clears all of the "you read this subject" markers for items in the highlighted board, so all subjects appear when you list this board. (Subjects List window only.)
Mark Message Unread	Clears the "you read this message" marker for the current message. (Message window only.)
Mark Subject Read	Marks all the messages in the current subject as though you already read them.
Mark Subject Unread	Clears all of the "you read this message" markers for items in the highlighted subject, so all messages appear when you read this subject.
Show All Messages	Opens the highlighted subject and lists all the messages in it, whether you previously read them or not. (Subjects List window only.)
Show All Subjects	Opens the highlighted bulletin board topic and lists all the subjects in it, whether you previously read them or not. (Subjects List window only.)
Show Unread Messages	Opens the current subject and displays only the messages you haven't read. (Subjects List window only.)

To see a message within the subject, double-click the subject entry in this list or click it once and then click the Read Post button. The message appears in a window like the one shown in Figure 14-3.

After all the effort it takes to get here, the window works with surprising ease. The message text dominates the windows (as it should — after all, that's why you came). Every America Online message begins with a brief header giving the message's vital statistics: subject, posting date, author, and a grim-looking message ID that makes you wonder whether it's harboring some secret code. The message follows.

Along the side of the window sits a whole raft of feature buttons described earlier in Table 14-2. Pay close attention to the difference between buttons that talk about subjects versus the ones that speak of messages. Subject buttons affect a whole subject area, while message buttons only do things with the messages within a particular subject.

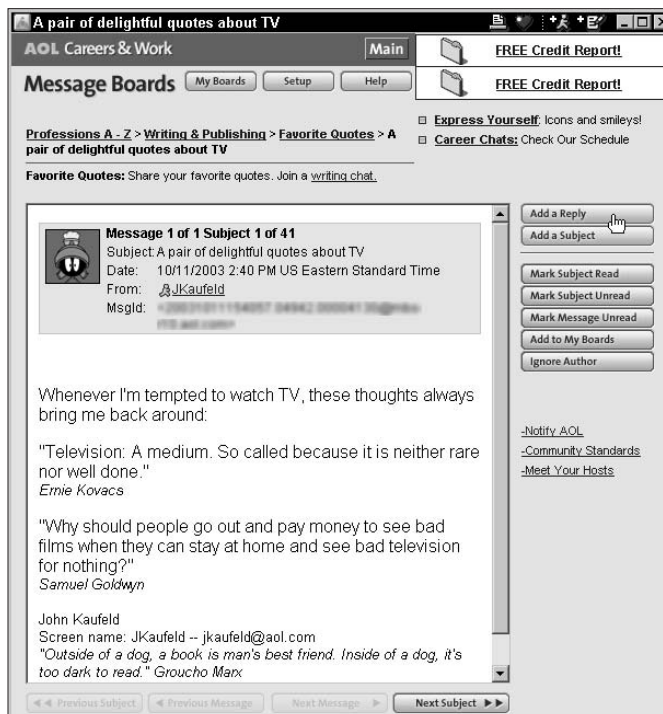


Figure 14-3:
Finally, a
message
appears.



Time for a party? Send AOL invitations!

Planning a company party, a family event, or even a casual gathering of friends takes a lot of effort. Make things a little easier with America Online's new AOL Invitations service, at keyword **Invitations**. Choose an appropriate invitation from the system's hundreds of options, fill in the important details such as time and date, and then list the e-mail addresses of everyone who should get an invitation. The AOL Invitations window creates a Web-based invitation page, complete with a running tally of who received

invitations, who replied, and what they said in their replies.

Because AOL Invitations lives on the Web, the invitations work for both America Online members and general Internet users. You incur no cost to send them, receive them, or reply to them. After your guests reply, they can swap messages with attendees, get maps to the event, and generally work themselves into a preattendance frenzy.

Free Online Toolkit with Every Groups@AOL! Act Now!

Friends. Family. Golfing buddies. The PTA. The Indian Hills Water Polo League and Equine Snorkeling Association. No matter the topic, people naturally form groups. Whether they share a hobby, an interest, their lineage, or their faith, some common bond pulls them together. It's the way of things.

After its formation, of course, every group figures out who missed this month's meeting and promptly nominates that poor soul as the Official Keeper of Membership Lists and Facilitator of Intra-Group Communication, a job that condemns its holder to a future filled with scrawled index cards and overgrown phone trees — or at least that's how things worked before Groups@AOL.

With a few clicks and absolutely no cost or obligation whatsoever, Groups@AOL creates a fully functional Web site geared toward group sharing and communication. Here's a look at what you get:

- ✓ **Membership Tools:** Invite new members into the group, quickly see who already belongs, send e-mail to the entire group in one easy step, and delegate authority for managing the group — it's all part and parcel of the Groups@AOL experience.

- ✔ **Favorites List (Private groups only):** Group members share their favorite online sites, movies, music, books, restaurants, deals, and more. Anyone in the group can post new items, so everyone gets involved.
- ✔ **Photo Library:** Share pictures of special group moments with the online photo library. Upload your own digital images or pull them directly from You've Got Pictures (keyword **YGP**). Every group gets plenty of storage space for several photo albums.
- ✔ **Events Directory:** Keep your group informed of special dates with the shared events directory. Everyone in the group can add new items to the list and look at what's there. Members who also use America Online's My Calendar feature can copy group events to their online calendars with the click of a button. (Isn't it nice when software works *together* for a change?)
- ✔ **Message Board:** Debate and discuss the topics of the day in your group's private message board. Read and reply to posts from other members, or send your thoughts out to all members by using the group's master e-mail address. Public and Private groups handle message board postings and e-mail messages differently.
- ✔ **Chat Room:** If your group loves to talk, Groups@AOL offers exactly the feature you need: a private chat room, available only to group members.
- ✔ **Automatic Buddy List and Address Book entries (Private groups only):** The Groups@AOL system automatically creates a Buddy List group with entries for each member of your Groups@AOL team. In addition, Groups@AOL also adds the group members to your online Address Book. (It's that "working together" thing again — I'm starting to like this program more and more.)

So who can create and use these cool groups? Anyone. Yep, anyone at all on the whole Internet can join or create a group hosted through Groups@AOL. All they need to do is sign up for an AOL Instant Messenger name, which registers them in America Online's Official Database of Known People.



If you delete a screen name that you used to make a group or if you cancel your America Online account, any and all groups you created suddenly implode. Poof! No more group. To keep that from happening, create groups with your master screen name and then invite your other screen names to "join" the group. After these other screen names become official members, go back into the group's Manage Members controls with your master screen name and designate the other screen names as owners. That way, if you delete one of the other screen names, your group feels no pain. (If you completely kill your America Online account by deleting your master screen name, your group gets toasted anyway.)

Picking the right kind of group

To meet the broadest range of needs, Groups@AOL knows about two very different kinds of groups: Public groups and Private groups. The type of setup you choose depends greatly on your goals for the online communication system. The type of group also dictates how the group works — whether people can join at will or if someone needs to hold the door and admit them.

Public groups look much like the community areas in the People Connection, but they behave more like a glorified mailing list. Public groups get listed in a searchable Groups directory, and anyone can join by asking or by just diving in, depending on how you set up group membership. Because you created the group, you maintain a lot of control over how things work. Every message posted in the group's bulletin board automatically gets copied to all members by e-mail. Likewise, the system archives all messages sent to the group's e-mail address into the discussion board.

Private groups, on the other hand, are completely private — people can't just wander into your group accidentally. To join your group, the group owner must invite that person to join, and the person must accept the invitation. Unlike private chat rooms, where people can still barge in if they happen to guess the room name, Groups@AOL keeps your group stuff safely away from nonmembers. To get the most out of a Private group, members must visit the group page regularly. Although a Private group gets a master e-mail address just like a Public group, the e-mail features ignore the group's discussion board — they have nothing to do with each other. Private groups also get some customizing features that let you spice up the group's online look. (Don't get too excited, though — you can't customize things too awfully much.)

Making a group for you and yours

Creating your group's new online home takes only a few minutes. Before starting, you need to make a few decisions about your soon-to-be-group. Get out a piece of paper and your choice of writing utensil, and then jot down ideas that answer the following bullets:

- ✔ **Decide whether this is a Public group or a Private group.** Public groups get listed in the searchable Groups directory, but Private groups stay hidden behind the digital veil, through which only invited members may pass.

- ✔ **Pick a name for your group.** Come up with a few acceptable alternate names in case someone else snagged the name you want. Public group names can contain between 4 and 32 letters or numbers, including spaces. Private groups name, for no apparent reason, can only contain between 4 and 16 letters or numbers but *nothing* else — just letters or numbers.
- ✔ **For a public group, choose a short, spaceless version of the name, too.** This name becomes the group's e-mail address. Keep it short, in the 4- to 16-character range. Private groups automatically use their name as their e-mail address.
- ✔ **Along with the name and address, come up with a brief (two-line) description of your group.** After all, the potential members need to know something about your new group!
- ✔ **Finally, develop a list of America Online screen names or e-mail addresses for the initial members you want to invite to join the group, if you feel like inviting anyone at all.**



You can change the group description anytime you want, so don't worry if you get writer's block on the first try. It happens to the best of writers (and occasionally to me, too). Likewise, adding new members whenever you want is easy, so feel free to start with a short list of new members and pick up the rest later.

With all of your notes handy, go over to keyword **Groups**. The Groups@AOL main window opens. Click the Make Groups button on the left side of the window to begin the group-making process. From there, AOL steps you through everything, from picking between a Public and Private group, to figuring out where your group fits in the all-encompassing Groups@AOL directory. It's a well-developed, step-by-step process that looks absolutely exhausting if I try to explain it here. That's why I'm letting you do this one on your own. (Well, that and the fact that the Groups@AOL system is just so darned helpful.)



If you really, *really* want some exhaustive help about making a group, go to keyword **Help**, and then type `groups@aol help` into the Help search box. When the search results window appears, click the [Groups@AOL Help](#) link. A window appears that tells you infinitely more than anyone really wants to know about building AOL groups.

Chapter 15

Reading, Keeping, and Sharing Thoughts with an AOL Journal

In This Chapter

- ▶ Flipping through other people's journals
 - ▶ Commenting on what you read
 - ▶ Making your own journal
 - ▶ Writing new entries
 - ▶ Adding entries through instant messages
 - ▶ Putting photos into your journal
 - ▶ Making your journal talk
-

A few years ago, a rash of online journals broke out all over the Net. People started pouring their thoughts and observations onto simple Web pages. (Granted, those first folks came from the geekier side of life, but just ignore that for now and work with me on this.) Every day, and sometimes several times each day, these folks added something new to their online journals. They e-mailed links to their friends, who read the pages and then passed along the links to others. Then the process repeated itself.

Over a short period of time, these *Web logs* mushroomed in popularity. More and more people joined the trend, which soon exploded into a full-bore Internet event, complete with its own term: *blogging*, a shortened version of *Web log*. Special blogging software even showed up on the market, along with special sites dedicated to the *blogsphere*, the interlinked world of blogs. (Personally, I think they need a new term for that one. Something about *blogsphere* gives me weird mental images.)

The new AOL Journals area brings blogging straight to your AOL account. It offers a fun and easy way to share your words with the world, without becoming a techno-geek in the process. The Journals system takes care of the technical stuff (like fitting your words into a column on a Web page) behind the scenes, leaving you free to focus on what you want to say to the world. Your journal entries can hold photographs, too, letting you show and tell your tale. And it's free — just another cool bonus as an America Online member.

This chapter introduces you to the Journals system, helps you find your way around, and walks you through the steps to making a journal of your very own. It also explores adding pictures to your journal entries, and gives you tips for adding entries on the go through instant messages and the popular AOLbyPhone service. A world of communication awaits you — and it's all at keyword **Journals!**



The Journals system lives inside AOL's popular Hometown area (keyword **Hometown**). That's the same place AOL keeps all of the Web pages you create with 1-2-3 Publish or Easy Designer. As you get into the whole journal thing, don't be surprised if AOL keeps mentioning member Web pages as well. Because it thinks of both your journal and your Web pages as communications tools, it constantly talks about them both in the Hometown and Journals areas.

Browsing the Virtual Journal Shelves

I'm a sucker for wandering the aisles at the library or my favorite bookstore. The habit started accidentally when I was a kid. I couldn't read the signs on the library shelves (they were too high for me to see), so I just went up and down the aisles looking for titles that caught my attention. I do the same thing today, except now that I can read the signs, I *start* in an interesting section and explore from there — plus I don't get lost in the store as often.

Like the bookstore, the AOL Journals system organizes all journals in the Hometown Community under headings, such as Careers & Money, Entertainment & Games, Personal Interests, and Business Park. To find interesting journals (or homepages), just browse through the headings. Here's how you do it:

1. Select **Community**→**Hometown** from the main menu, or go to keyword **Hometown**.
 - **If you already made an AOL Journal or Hometown Web page**, then your personal AOL Hometown page appears. It's a rather strange collection of information and links. At the top of the page, it lists all the Web pages and AOL Journals in your personal storage area (keyword **My FTP Place**). In the middle, the AOL Hometown page highlights the world of AOL Journals, with links to tips and journal-enhancing techniques. Way down at the bottom of the page, you get a search link for AOL Journals and Homepages.
 - **If your screen name doesn't have an AOL Journal or Hometown Web page**, then you see some encouraging text suggesting that your life might be more complete if you made either a journal or a Web page. (Don't believe it — making them both is kinda fun, but neither one qualifies as a life-changing experience.)

2. Scroll to the bottom of the AOL Hometown page. In the Search & Explore AOL Journals and Homepages area, click the [All Communities](#) link.

The window rebuilds itself and now displays a master list of the Hometown areas under the clever View All Communities heading.



If you feel like searching for a particular topic (games, photography, or jazz, for instance) instead of digging through headings, type your term into the search box and click the Search button. When the search results window appears, scroll through it and click anything that looks interesting.

3. Find a heading that looks interesting and then click it.

If the heading contains some subheadings, then you get a list of those (shown in Figure 15-1). If you drilled down far enough to hit some journals and Web pages, then the system lists those.

The system mixes journals and Web pages in the listings, but at least it marks them with icons so you can tell the little fellows apart. Journals get a little book image next to them, while home pages earn a tiny house. It's awfully cute.



To see only journals or Web pages, click the [Journals Only](#) or [Home Pages Only](#) link on the results page, in a section marked *Explore*. That simplifies your searching a bit.

Figure 15-1: After clicking one of the top-level headings, Hometown offers a bunch of subheadings for your perusal.

AOL Hometown - Business Park

Main: >> Business Park

AOL Hometown

As Easy as 1-2-3
 Don't fret, you can still build a home page with our easy publishing tools or by uploading your own HTML via FTP. Put your business on the Web or share a view of your city. If you build it, they will come.

Business Park

Search by keyword or members' screen names

Find homepages in Business Park only.

Explore Business Park

- AOL Journals: Business**
[Business Journals](#)
- Building & Construction**
 Architecture, Contractors, Electrical Work, Landscaping, Other Building & Construction, Plumbing, Realtors & Brokers
- Computers & Technology**
 Other Computers & Technology, PC Repair & Services, Personal Computers, Software, Telecommunications, Web Design / Consulting
- Creative Arts**
 Advertising, Graphic Design, Media & Journalism, Other Creative Arts, Photography
- Entertainment & Recreation**
 Artists & Galleries, Movies, Theaters & Actors, Music & Musicians, Other Entertainment & Recreation, Sports & Recreation

United Mileage Plus, Visa® Card
 5,000 Bonus Miles **FREE*** Companion Ticket (additional terms apply)

Get Started Today

Create a Journal
 Build your own blog with our cool tools.

1-2-3 Publish
 Create a home page in less than 3 minutes.

Easy Designer
 Upgrade your pages to add photos, more.

AOL Journals
 Find everything you need to know to get started right here.

Build Your Business fast

Inside AOL

- People Connection
- Download Center
- Beta-a-Buddy

4. Repeat Step 3 until you find an interesting journal or Web page.

You can always hit the Back button on the navigation bar a few times to work your way back to the mast headings list.

For a quicker journey through just the Journals area, go to keyword **Journals**, and then use the Search AOL Journals box on that window. Going this route automatically limits your results to journals, saving you a bit of time, energy, and clicking.

Sharing Comments with Others

Nothing brings out your own opinions quite like reading someone else's opinions. Because the whole journaling thing centers around communication, the AOL Journals system includes an option that lets you post comments on the journal writer's entries.

Although the Journals system turns the commenting setting on by default, some folks turn it off for their journals. Maybe they just want a safe place to vent, or perhaps they simply don't care for any feedback. Whatever the reason, their journals don't include any Comments links — and that's just the way it goes.

If you feel like adding a comment to an entry in someone's journal, look for a This entry has X comments link, at the bottom of each journal entry (the X is a number, usually zero, showing the current number of comments for each entry). Sitting next to the total, click the Add Your Own link to add your comment. The AOL Journals system responds by sending you to a comment page similar to Figure 15-2. Type your comment into the window, check your work, and then click Save.



You can't edit or delete a comment you leave in someone else's journal, so check your work *very* carefully. Make darned sure you really want to say whatever you typed, and remember that the Journals system automatically tags the entry with your screen name. Whenever anyone (including the journal owner) reads your comment, he or she knows immediately who said it.



As a journal owner, you always have control over other people's comments on your work. View the comments by clicking the Show Recent link (right next to the Add Your Own link). If you don't like a particular comment, delete it by clicking the Delete Comment button. To prevent someone from adding comments to your journal, click the Block This User button.

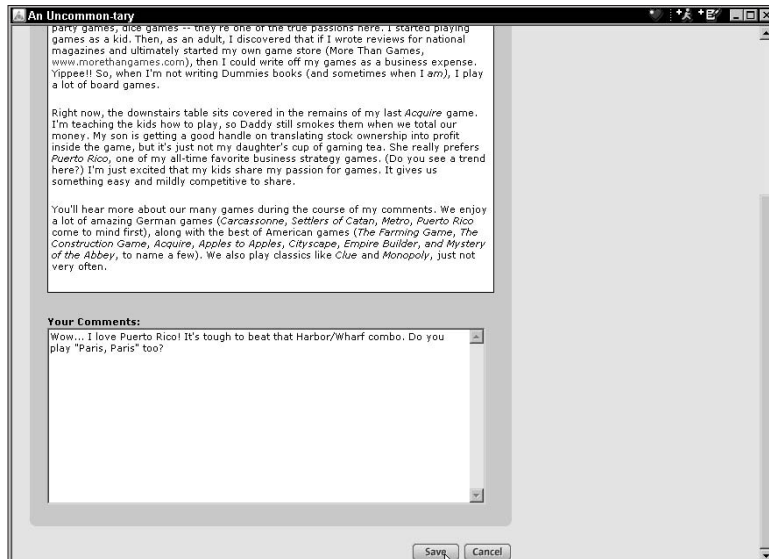


Figure 15-2:
Share your
thoughts
about *their*
thoughts
with a
comment.

Creating a Journal of Your Own

You — yes, you — have a story to tell. It might paint a picture of sunny days and laundry flapping in the breeze, or twilight hours haunted with shadows, uncertainties, and peril. It could define your daily life, or life as you wish it were. Whatever direction your story takes, it's still your story, it's still worth telling, and it really wants to get out (even though it went into hiding every time you had to do a writing assignment in your high school English class), so make a home for your story inside an AOL Journal.

Before starting your journal, do a bit of planning. Your journal needs a few things to get off the ground:

- ✓ **Title:** Keep this short, simple, descriptive, and creative. Your journal's title appears atop every page of your work, so both you and your visitors see a lot of it. The AOL Journals system also uses your journal's title as part of its Web address, so shorter works better than longer. You might want a journal called *My Thoughts About Life, the Universe, and Peanut Butter*, but when the software turns that into an address, do you really think people will type `mythoughtsaboutlifetheuniverseandpeanutbutter`? If you rename your journal later, it still keeps its original Web address. (Sorry, that's just part of life, the universe, and peanut butter.)

- ✓ **Brief description:** The AOL Journals software puts the description right under your journal's title when displaying your work. Because it also feeds the description to the AOL Journals search system, make sure your description includes terms that help people find your work. If your journal covers a hobby, name the hobby. If you're famous and it's about you, put your name in there. (Heck, if you're famous, call me — I'll help you write your entries!)
- ✓ **Community:** Think about which Hometown community best fits your journal's topic. Is it business-oriented or for fun? When creating your journal, the system makes you pick one of several journal-specific community areas, but later you can list it in as many other categories as you want. (You add it to other community categories in keyword **Hometown**, with the Select Community button.)
- ✓ **E-mail addresses for your friends:** When you finish making the journal, the AOL Journals system gives you a chance to e-mail an announcement message to your friends, family, and anybody else you think would care. Having a list of your friends' e-mail addresses and screen names makes this step easy. (You can send more announcements in the future, so don't fret if you overlook someone. Just remember them the next time around!)

You can make as many journals as you want for each screen name in your account — there's no maximum limit. Many people keep a business journal and a personal journal, plus another one for a hobby. (I don't know how they possibly make time to keep all of those journals updated and still do anything in their lives, but I digress.)



Check your work carefully as you create the journal — particularly the journal title. Although you can change anything you want after making your journal, you can't ever change your journal's Web address. It's permanent.

With the planning out of the way, it's time to make your journal. The whole process only takes a few minutes. Here's what to do:

1. **Open the AOL Journals window by selecting Community → Journals from the main menu or with keyword Journals.**

On cue, the AOL Journals window appears.

2. **Click the Create A Journal Now link.**

The much larger Create a Journal window hops into action. Grab the notes you made about your journal title, description, and such, because that's next.

3. **Carefully type the name of your journal.**

Whatever you type becomes the permanent name of your journal, so make double sure that you spell everything right. You get one chance to change the journal's address later in Step 8, but after that, it's a done deal.



4. Press Tab to move the cursor to the Description field, and then type the description of your journal.

Keep it brief — just a sentence or a few words works fine.

5. Press Tab to move the cursor down to the Community area, and then select your journal's organizational home.

You can change this later in the Hometown window (keyword **Hometown**) if you decide that you don't like it or if you want to include your journal in more communities.

6. Leave the Simple Journal radio button selected. Click Next to continue.

As with the other items, you can customize your journal to the extreme after you finish creating it. For now, just go with the basics.

7. If you want to announce your new journal's creation to a bunch of friends right now, click the radio button for that.

I suggest leaving this set to "No". As you probably guessed, you can always send out the invitations later, directly from the journal itself.

8. The window displays the Web address (known as the URL) for your journal. To change the address, click the Change Address button and follow the instructions.

If you change the journal's address, only put letters, numbers, or dashes into the name. Sorry, but that's one of the Internet rules.

9. Write down the address for your journal, and then click Finish to complete the process.

After a few moments, your new journal appears on-screen, stunning in its blankness.

If you forget to write down your journal's Web address, go to keyword **Hometown** and double-click on your journal's entry in the Sites list at the top of the window. Your journal opens in a new window.



Keep a link to your journal handy by adding it as an icon on your toolbar. Just open your journal like normal, and then drag the little heart icon from the top of the journal window into the customizable section (the right side) of the toolbar. Pick an icon to use (I like the little red book — it seems appropriate), and then type a brief label, such as `Journal`, for your entry. Click Save to finish the process. After that, just click your new button to nip straight into your journal. For several other shortcut-making options (including how to add custom items to some of the menus), skip ahead to Chapter 21.



Adding Entries to Your Journal

New entries form the lifeblood of your journal. Journals get more interesting as you add more entries. A constant stream of new items draws people back to your journal regularly to find out what's new. Whether you drop a few lines about a random thought or carefully compose a full-blown treatise about your deepest philosophy, consistently adding new stuff keeps your journal alive.



Please update your journal regularly. *Pretty please, with sugar* (or sugar substitute, if you prefer) on top.

To add a new entry to your journal, fire up your America Online software and then go through these steps:

1. Open your journal.

Your journal appears in a window. (If you don't know the address for your journal, go to keyword **Hometown** and double-click your journal in the list of your sites at the top of the page.)

2. Click the Add Entry button.

A new screen appears, with spaces for the parts of your journal entry.

3. Fill out whichever sections of the Add an Entry page that you want to include in your item (as shown in Figure 15-3).

The AOL Journals system lets you include as much or as little stuff in each entry as your heart wishes. If you only want to express your mood, select a mood — or tell the world what you're listening to right now, but leave them guessing about everything else.



Generally speaking, you want to fill in everything on the form. It makes your journal look complete, consistent, and cool (and that is, of course, the ultimate goal).

4. When you finish the entry, click Save.

The system inserts your new entry at the beginning of your journal.



Each entry tops out at 2,200 characters, which seems like a lot of space until you get rolling about your favorite topic. If you run out of space in an entry, use the Copy and Paste commands to split the text into two entries.

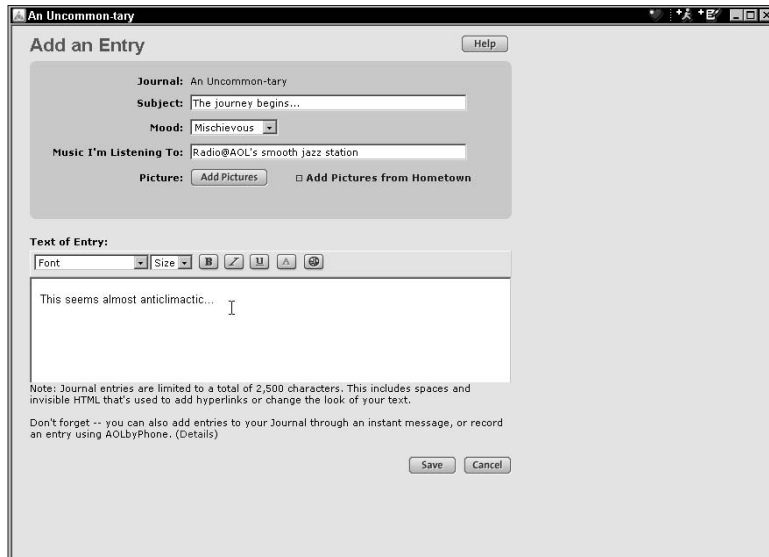


Figure 15-3:
My journal
begins
with its
first simple
entry.

Tossing In a Quick Entry with IMs

The programmers at AOL must know how busy we all are, because they created a very fast and clever way to pop a few lines of text into your journal with an instant message. This trick works great for those moments you feel like sharing a quick rant or perhaps a brief celebration.

To add an entry via an instant message, send a message to screen name AOLJournals with at least four words in the message body. Whatever you type goes straight into your journal as a new entry. You can send the instant message from the full America Online software, AOL Instant Messenger, or even AIM Express (www.aim.com, then click the [AIM Express](#) link), but you have to sign on with the screen name that owns the journal. If you started more than one journal with that screen name, the AOL Journals system instant messages you back, asking which journal gets the new item.

Because the instant message only delivers text for the body of the entry, the new entry contains no subject, mood, or music information. Although you can add that stuff through instant messages, I suggest putting it in later by opening your journal, finding the entry, and clicking the Edit Entry button.



If the thought of nerdily crafting a journal entry through multiple IMs sets some technological corner of your heart to fluttering, send the message HELP to screen name AOLJournals. The AOL Journals system replies with a list of commands you can send via IM to fill out the other parts (Subject, Mood, and even Music) of the journal entry.

Adding a Picture (Instead of 1,000 Words)

Thanks to America Online's amazing You've Got Pictures system (keyword YGP), including a picture in your journal entry only takes a couple of clicks. In fact, the AOL programmers automated just about everything in the process.

You can include any digital picture stored on your computer (even on a CD) or images that you already uploaded to You've Got Pictures. If the picture currently lives on your computer, then the You've Got Pictures system automatically uploads and stores it online for you.

Personalizing things to match your tastes

After making a few entries and generally getting comfy with everything, invest some time with the visual look of your journal. Play around a bit with the journal settings and text formatting options to make your journal truly as unique as the story it tells.

Within each journal entry, you get all the classic formatting tools you know and love. The buttons above the text area handle font choice, font size, bold, italic, underline, and text color (but don't mess with the colors unless you know your way around a color wheel, because "ugly" appears in many simple color combinations). You can also add links to your favorite sites by clicking the little world button and typing a site address.

Try mixing and matching the text effects to create something that's uniquely yours. In my journal,

for instance, I start most of the entries with a big capital letter (what the production folks call a *drop cap*). To do that, I highlight the first letter of the first word in my entry, and then make it Arial Black, size 24. Poof — instant drop cap!

The master settings for your journal live behind the Edit Journal button at the top of your main journal page. Click that button for instant access to the settings for your journal's on-screen layout (number of columns and position of the feature boxes), entry layout, color scheme, comments (accepting or ignoring comments), name, and description. This area also includes links for telling other people about your journal and banning certain screen names from reading what you write.

To add a picture to one of your journal entries, follow these steps:

1. **Open the entry by clicking the Edit Entry button (or simply add a new entry), and then click the Add Pictures button.**

The You've Got Pictures window launches. The tabs across the top of the window let you switch between pictures on your computer, images you already sent to You've Got Pictures, and items sent to you by other people.

2. **Click the check box next to the photo you want to include.**

You can include up to eight photos.

3. **Click the Add Pictures button.**

You've Got Pictures takes care of the rest automatically, by uploading, copying, and generally reorganizing things until your journal entry photo gallery is done.



You can add up to eight photos to a single journal entry, so don't go hog wild with the photos. Adding pictures also slows down the journal loading time for people using a dialup connection, so take that into consideration before stuffing tons of full-color images into your journal.



In case you wondered, there is another way to add photos to your entries. Next to the Add Pictures button sits an unassuming [Add Pictures from Hometown](#) link. To use this option, you need to manually transfer your photos from the computer to your file storage area on AOL. To do that, you use the strange and ornery FTP system at keyword **My FTP Space**. I mention this option in passing because, frankly, it's nerd territory. America Online's FTP windows look like relics from the mid 1990s because that's what they are. To make FTP work, you really need more information than I can give you here. I recommend heading to the FTP area in the Message Boards. To get there, start at keyword **Message Boards**, and then click Computer Center Boards⇨Building Web Pages⇨FTP Issues. (On a side note, if you think *that* was hard, just wait until you tangle with FTP.)

Speaking Your Thoughts So Others Can Hear

At one time or another, you probably misread the tone of something in an e-mail or instant message. C'mon — fess up. It happens to all of us. When you talk to someone on the phone, you hear his or her voice speaking words, but you also hear the tiny inflections, hearty laughs, and all the other inflections people use to shade meaning into what they say.

If you subscribe to AOLbyPhone, you can capture all those vocal inflections in your journal by literally calling in your new entries. Just dial the AOLbyPhone number, sign into your account, and choose the Journal Entry option. The system instructs you to start speaking at the tone and to press the # sign when finished. (Don't you just love the computer voice? She's so forceful . . .) Follow the instructions and, in just a few moments, the system adds the new voice item straight into your journal.

The next time you check your journal through the AOL software, the audio entry sits at the top (unless you added another entry later). The system displays a little speaker button and a link to play the audio entry. It also shows exactly how long the audio item is, so that people know what they're getting into. Anyone clicking the link hears your dulcet tones delivering your words exactly the way you wanted to.



Of course, you can manually edit the audio journal entry later to add a title, mood, music, and even written words (in case the voice thing was just a little too unambiguous for your message).

Part IV

Diving Into the Fun Stuff

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"This is amazing. You can stop looking for Derek. According to an AOL search I did, he's hiding behind the dryer in the basement."

In this part . . .

What do you do after you send every e-mail message you can think of, you're up-to-date on your favorite message boards, and no one's up for chatting at 3 a.m.? That's when you take a few moments to dive into the *other* stuff America Online offers — those sections of the service that enhance your online life by filling your hard drive with cool files and floating cool jazz through the room (or cool country, if you prefer).

The chapters in this part introduce you to the ins and outs of wandering through the Internet, sending and archiving favorite pictures, following weather patterns, current news, and financial markets, and tuning into your favorite Radio@AOL station. With over 75 stations to choose from, you're sure to find one that meets your current mood! As an added bonus, I also included a chapter on finding ultimately cool stuff online — information, files, people, and more. So grab your favorite soda . . . or um . . . other drink, and relax to your favorite tunes while you surf the Web and generally satiate your need to know.

Chapter 16

Finding People, Places, Things, and Information

In This Chapter

- ▶ Searching for people
 - ▶ Discovering great online places and resources
 - ▶ Finding disk-filling files and programs
-

If I could have a nickel for every time that someone asks me how to find things in the online world, I'd ask for a dollar instead. (A nickel doesn't buy *anything* these days.) Whatever the payment, I'd be up to my eyeballs in money. That's because tracking stuff down on America Online and the Internet is (ahem) challenging — or at least it *was* challenging before those clever programmer types invented the supercool *search systems*.

Whether you want something specific or feel like browsing aimlessly for a while, start your hunt here, with the various search systems available through America Online. This chapter reveals the search oracle's mystic secrets, starting with the Search button and continuing with a romp through all your search-related tools. Whether you seek an online area, Web page, favorite quotation, obscure fact, e-mail address, or business phone number, the America Online search tools make quick work of the job.

Finding People: Sniffing Out Friends, Acquaintances, and Other Novel Folks

Although the world of America Online is full of information covering every topic under the sun, its people are what make life fun — people who populate the chat rooms, fill the message boards, and pack the audiences at online events. No matter what brings you to America Online, the community is what keeps you there.

The tools in this section help you find people, wherever they may reside. Each tool takes a slightly different spin on the problem, from locating friends signed on to the system to discovering friends-to-be among the millions of other America Online members.

Locating folks

The America Online Locate command gives you a quick way of finding your friends. If you know your pal's screen name, the Locate command tells you whether your compatriot's signed on at the moment and also reports whether he or she is in a chat room. If your friend's chatting the light fantastic in a public chat room, auditorium, or conference room, the Locate system automatically offers to take you right to that chat. (Ahh . . . definitely one of those "Isn't technology wonderful?" moments.)



Speaking of technology, America Online also includes a way for you to prevent people from finding you with the Locate command (and through Buddy Lists). To find out more about the built-in privacy options, see Chapter 9.

To quickly find someone online with Locate, follow these steps:

- 1. Choose Community↔Locate Member Online or press **Ctrl+L**.**

The Locate Member Online dialog box appears on the screen, ready and willing to do its thing.

- 2. Type the screen name in the dialog box, and then press **Enter** or click **OK**.**

The system searches hither, thither, and even Yonkers to see whether the person you seek is signed on to America Online, the European AOL services, or the AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) system.

If the person is signed on right now (and didn't block you through the Buddy List system's privacy preferences), America Online displays the AOL Buddy Info dialog box, as shown in Figure 16-1. The system giddily announces that it found the person and tells you whether he or she is in a public chat room or private chat room or just skulking around the system waiting for you. If your pal is in a public chat room, the dialog box also gives you the linked room name. Click the link to join your friend there. The dialog box also offers buttons to send the person an instant message or an e-mail message.

If the person you seek isn't online at the moment, the same AOL Buddy Info dialog box appears, but this time it says that your friend is offline. In that case, make sure that you check your spelling, because America Online doesn't say, "Whoops, you misspelled the screen name" — instead, it looks for a person with the screen name you type, whether or not it's a valid America Online screen name.



Figure 16-1:
Hey — I'm
signed on!

Searching the Member Directory

Whether you like to fly kites during rainstorms while dressed as Ben Franklin or meditate in front of the TV considering Zen and its effects on game show hosts doesn't matter. With a veritable world of America Online members at hand, you're very likely to come across people just like (or significantly similar to) you somewhere on the system. The trick is finding them — and being found yourself.

To make yourself as findable as possible, fill out your online profile. Sign on to America Online, choose **C**ommunity **M**ember **D**irectory from the main menu, click the My Profile button in the dialog box that appears, mark your place in this book, and fill out the profile dialog box. After you finish, click Save to save your profile information and then come back to the book. (Yes, I'll wait for you.) Now that you completed your profile, you're part of the Member Directory. Congratulations.



If you want an incredibly fancy profile that's sure to make people stop and say, "Hey, that's an incredibly fancy profile," flip to Chapter 20.

Now that your information is in the system, try searching the Member Directory for friends-to-be. To do so, follow these steps:

1. Choose **C**ommunity **M**ember **D**irectory or use keyword Members.
The Member Directory Search dialog box appears.
2. In the big box, type something that describes the people you want to find: a hobby that you enjoy, the city you're from, your occupation, or whatever else you can think of.

Short descriptions work best. Check your spelling — you don't want a typo standing between you and your friends-to-be! In addition, the more specific you make your descriptive terms, the more useful your results are.

3. Click Search to see whom you can see.

If America Online reports that it can't find anyone, check your spelling again (never hurts) or search for some other unique characteristic. If everything works, the dialog box overflows with possible new friends. (Okay — it doesn't really overflow, but that's poetic license for "you get so many entries that a scroll bar appears next to the list.")

No matter how many entries the search system finds, it shows you only the first hundred, which is another reason to make your terms as descriptive as possible. Searching under *cars*, for instance, could return thousands of entries — so many, in fact, that AOL doesn't even bother to give you the results. (In this case, you see a dialog box telling you that your search was too broad and that the software refuses to complete it. But you knew that.) Using a more specific term, such as *Chevy Cavalier* or *Mercury Comet*, gives you a list you can work with.

4. Double-click the screen name of anyone who looks interesting, click the Send Mail button in the Member Profile window, and write a "Hi, how ya doing?" e-mail message.

You made contact — or at least started. Now sit back and see where things go from here.



As you reach this last step, remember that you get only one chance to make a good first impression. Make your introductory e-mail message witty, genteel, interesting, and most of all, polite. If the person in question never writes back to you, don't take it personally — just search the Member Directory again and look for someone else to correspond with instead. Likewise, if some people reply that they're not accepting new friendship applications right now, respect their request for peace and quiet.

Finding friends with the Match Chat

Once in a while you'd like to have someone to talk with about your growing tatting shuttle collection. Or perhaps you read sixteenth century French poetry for fun, and you can't seem to find anyone who shares your passion. (After all, most of the sixteenth century French aren't around anymore.) Thanks to a new feature called Match Chat (keyword **Match Chat**), America Online searches for chat rooms that line up with your interests. When you fill out a member profile (keyword **Profile**) for your screen name and list your hobbies and interests, Match Chat automatically searches for those terms when you first open the Match Chat window.



Getting there on the first try with online maps

Traveling the online world makes for some interesting trips, particularly when you get sidetracked along the way. You never know what you'll find on your way to some far-flung digital destination. On the Internet, getting lost is half the fun!

Although I love adventure as much as the next geek, getting lost in the real world (you know — the one with sunshine, construction crews, and

bird droppings) isn't a particularly fun thing. That's why I always hit America Online's home for driving directions and maps, the popular MapQuest site (keyword **Maps**).

This area includes browsable, printable maps of the known universe (well, at least the terrestrial parts), plus step-by-step driving directions and a complete trip planner. And it's free — did I mention that?

If you don't have a member profile, or you want to search with another interest, the Match Chat window supplies a text box for that very purpose. (These programmers think of everything!) After Match Chat finishes grinding through chat room names and descriptions, looking for a set of chat rooms that match your query, it displays a list of what it thinks are promising-looking chat rooms.



If you know you're going to be online at a particular time, schedule a Match Chat for that time frame in advance. Keyword **Schedule Match Chat** takes you to the Match Chat dialog box you need. You can schedule a chat for your particular hobby or interest, or select from the AOL Top Ten list. Fill in the date and time of the chat you want, tell the system when you want it to remind you of an upcoming chat, and click Save. If you find you really like this scheduled Match Chat thing, you can even set the system to repeat the Match Chat at particular intervals.

Searching the Match Chat system takes only a few steps. Here's what to do:

1. **Choose Community ↔ Match Chat from the menu or use keyword Match Chat to open the Match Chat system.**

The Match Chat dialog box opens. If you have interests and hobbies listed in your member profile, it begins to search on the first word it finds in that section of your profile. Otherwise, the dialog box sits and awaits your instructions.

2. **Fill in the topic of your current interest, and then click Search.**

The Match Chat system chews on your information for a while and then displays its search results (this may take a while). After the system finds a plausible set of chat room titles, it lists them in a new, expanded Match Chat window. If you see more than one screen of chat options, scroll through the list using the Next link until you find the specific chat that you want.



If you have a profile entry already keeping Match Chat busy, a dialog box appears stating that you have a search in progress, thank you, but if you want to end the current search and start your own, click Yes. Go ahead and click the Yes button, and when the dialog box disappears you find Match Chat already busily searching out your new term.

Finding Places: Tracking Interests and Meeting Informational Needs

Do you ever sit in front of your computer, staring at the America Online screen, knowing that what you want to know *must* be in there somewhere? If only you knew where to look . . . (insert wistful sigh here).

The next time that feeling strikes, fire up one of the America Online topical search systems. These routines search not only the content areas in America Online but also the wealth of stuff on the Web to match you with precisely the place you want.



If you're looking for a particular topic, start with the People Connection Search feature (keyword **People Connection**, and then use the Search box), which covers America Online's world of discussion boards, online chats, and even member home pages and relevant Groups@AOL. For more Web-based information, try AOL Search (keyword **Search**) or one of the other Web search engines discussed in the "Searching the Web" section, later in this chapter.

Find it on AOL

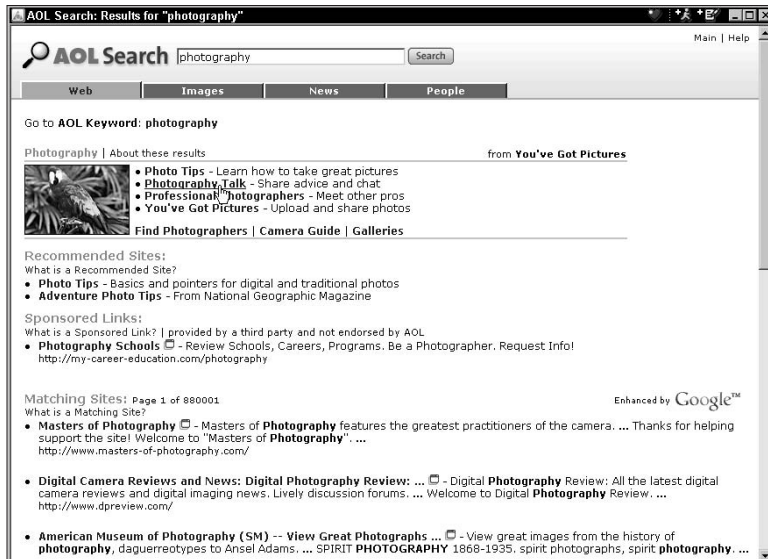
To track down an online community for your favorite topic, try the handy AOL Search system. AOL Search takes any word you type (such as *homework*, *finances*, or *photography*) and looks for that subject among the America Online forums and services as well as a voluminous database of interesting Internet sites. The system lists everything it finds relating to your subject.

To start searching, sign on to America Online and follow these steps:

- 1. In the white box on the navigation bar, type the word you're looking for, and then press Enter.**

After a moment, the Web browser pops up, displaying the results of your search, as shown in Figure 16-2. The system splits your results into sections: AOL Keywords (areas within America Online), Recommended Sites (featuring Web sites and America Online areas), Sponsored Links (folks who paid to put their site links in front of you), and Matching Sites (other individual Web sites and America Online areas that match your search term).

Figure 16-2:
Whether your topic is generally general or a little esoteric, the odds are good that it's somewhere on AOL or the Internet.



You can tell the America Online–based links from the Web links because areas on America Online include the area's keyword in the listing.

If the system displays a window apologizing that it couldn't find any matches for the topic you entered, don't worry — you didn't do anything wrong. Instead, close the gee-I'm-sorry-I-failed-you window and search with a different word. If you run out of terms, take your search out to the Web through one of the other Web-based search systems, covered in the aptly named "Searching the Web" section, later in this chapter.

2. Browse through the search results to see what America Online found for you. To view something on the list, click its entry. To see more matching sites, click one of the Next links.

After you click an item in the results list, the information pops into view, either in the Web browser window (where the search information was just a moment ago) or in an entirely new window (if the area lives inside America Online itself). Pretty cool, eh?

3. If you find a site that you really like, click the heart icon along the window's top bar and then click Add to Favorites in the dialog box that appears.

The site's address nestles itself among your other Favorite Places so that you can find the site again. (For the ins and outs of Favorite Place navigation, turn to Chapter 8.)

4. After finishing with that particular area, go back to the Search Results window to look for other items of interest.

If the stuff you looked at replaced the Search Results window, use the Back button on the navigation bar to flip back to the search information. (Or, if all else fails, just start your search over again.)

5. To start another search, close the various windows and start over at Step 1.

If you don't feel like looking for anything else right now, feel free to close all the search-related windows. (No penalty for tidiness.)

Digging a little deeper

The Search system has more than one button and a cool window. In fact, lots of searching resources are all over America Online. The trick, as usual, is knowing where to look.

The following list points out the other search-thingsies lurking on the America Online toolbar menus and skulking around the system:

- ✓ **Search All AOL Chats (keyword Chat Search):** Scour the service's content areas for interesting scheduled chats. Just type your topic of interest and click the Search button to find a chat covering your Subject of the Day!
- ✓ **General America Online Help (keyword Help):** Cruise through the Member Services area for tips and information about life in the online world.

Searching the Web

Seemingly, almost everybody (including the local plumber) offers information through the Web these days. That diversity makes the Web an incredible repository of information — like a library filled with the collected knowledge, opinions, and ramblings of a measurable percentage of the world's populace. Sounds almost too good to be true, doesn't it?

Well, you're right — there is a catch. Although the Web world is filled to the brim with cool stuff, organizationally speaking it's a mess. Imagine a library organized by a tornado, with assistance provided by every kindergartner in your hometown. Not a pretty picture, is it?

Shortly after the Web came to be, many clever people built indexes and search systems to tame this wild digital frontier. Some of these systems exhaustively scour Web sites, cataloging everything there so that you can find information through keyword searches. Others take a slightly different approach by building a topic index that you browse by clicking menus. Both systems have their advantages, depending on what you want to find and how you want to look for it.

The America Online foray into the world of Web searching is AOL Search (keyword **Search**). AOL Search gives you the best of both worlds by offering both a searchable database and a browsable Website Directory — although the list of subjects is somewhat limited right now — as the following list describes:

- ✓ **Go topic hopping through AOL Search:** Just click one of the links in the category list that appears in the Website Directory window — you get there by clicking the [Website Directory](#) link in the main AOL Search browser window. Each of these links leads to more-detailed lists. Just keep clicking until you dig your way down to a particular site that meets your needs. If you click your way to the bottom of the barrel without finding a good match, try a keyword search instead.
- ✓ **Use the AOL Search fill-in-the-blank search option:** Type a word or two describing your topic in the box at the top of the AOL Search window and then click the ever-exuberant Search button. After chewing on your request for a few moments, AOL Search returns with a list of matching sites. To view any of the matches, just click the site's entry. Sometimes, AOL Search uncovers so many possible matches that they don't fit on one screen. In that case, AOL Search presents a Next button at the bottom of the window. Click that button to view the next page of matching entries.



If AOL Search can't come up with anything that matches your topic, it quietly tells you of its failure and often implies that the problem is somehow your fault. Don't believe it — it lies. If this problem crops up during your search, take your topic to another of the Web's search engines, which I list in Table 16-1. Some engines, notably Yahoo!, provide automatic links to other popular search systems when they display your search results (just in case you want to try your luck elsewhere). To use one of the other search systems, type the address from Table 16-1 into the big box on the navigation bar.

<i>Search Engine</i>	<i>Web Address</i>
AltaVista	www.altavista.com
DogPile	www.dogpile.com
Excite	www.excite.com
Google	www.google.com
Lycos	www.lycos.com
Yahoo!	www.yahoo.com

Browsing through some great resources

Sometimes nailing down precisely what you want to find isn't easy. Instead of being a simple, cut-and-dried topic, your goal is more vague — sort of an I'll-know-it-when-I-see-it feeling. Even so, you still need some places to start looking. The general areas listed in the preceding section may meet your needs, but sometimes a more narrowly focused source sparks your imagination in a way that a more general one can't.

The following list identifies a selection of searchable resources from all corners of America Online. Some areas offer news, and others come bearing general introductory notes. All these resources are free, which make them my friends by default:

- ✔ The king of general references has to be the Research & Learn Channel's More References window (keyword **More References**). Just look at the list in that window — topics ranging from etiquette to personal finance, plus even more that scroll off-screen! No matter what kind of information you seek, the More References list makes a great starting point.
- ✔ Every schoolchild in the United States knows that stumping the encyclopedias is hard (keyword **Encyclopedias**). Putting these general reference guides online makes browsing and searching their content even easier.
- ✔ In addition to the encyclopedias, America Online offers many other classic references, such as a dictionary (keyword **Dictionary**) and a thesaurus (keyword **Thesaurus**). AOL goes a step further by offering specialized word references, too, such as word histories (keyword **Word Histories**), other dictionaries (keyword **Dictionaries**), and the beginning connoisseur's friend, the Wine Dictionary (keyword **Dictionaries** and then double-click Wine Dictionary in the list).
- ✔ Writers need accurate and extensive sources to find facts for their stories, but sometimes they also need information that's a little off the beaten path. For days when you want a good laugh or feel like adding to your storehouse of the odd and mystifying, check out Straight Dope (one of my favorite Web sites, at www.straightdope.com), Strange But True (keyword **Strange but True**), and the ever popular Fun Facts forum (keyword **Fun Facts**).
- ✔ What report, theme, or presentation can't use a good quote to spice it up? Choose the best sound bites from several volumes of quotations behind the Research & Learn Channel's Poetry and Quotations folder (keyword **Quotations**).
- ✔ If your research sends you looking for ethnic information, try areas such as the AOL International (keyword **International**), Africana.com (keyword **Africana**), or the Latino community (keyword **Tu Gente**). Each one includes resources, discussions, and chats that may lead you to still other resources in the Great Out There.

- ✔ Digging into the world of business? Check out Research a Company (keyword **Research a Company**) for general corporate information, employee thoughts, and a searchable library of press releases; Investment Research (keyword **Company Research**) for financial reports; and the news by company ticker system (keyword **Quotes**) for the latest news-wire tidbits about your favorite firms.
- ✔ The thought's frightening, but the federal government is the single largest publisher in the United States. It also generates more statistics than the law should allow. To dip into the wellspring of numbers that your tax dollars bought, check out the Federal Statistics Web site, at www.fedstats.gov. If you're looking for general information on any of a great number of government agencies, see the Government Guide (keyword **Government Guide**).



If you need to collect information about a topic on an ongoing basis, check out the News Profiles system, at keyword **My News**. You define what kind of stories you want to see, and the News Profiles system scours the news wires, automatically forwarding any matching stories directly to your mailbox. Setting up a profile takes only a moment, but it keeps going and going, just like an electronic news version of that annoying pink bunny. For more about News Profiles, turn to Chapter 19.

Finding Cool Programs and Nifty Files

After working through the initial euphoria (and the first credit-card bill) of owning your computer, the next thought that usually goes through your mind is something such as “I wish that the computer could do X,” where X is some incredibly important task that none of your current software and hardware setup comes even *close* to performing. Worse, if you're like most people (myself included), X is quickly followed by Y, Z, and a whole horde of functions starting with peculiar math symbols that you barely remember from school.

Sounds as though you need software — and lots of it at that! Purchasing commercial programs to accomplish everything is a great idea, but your credit card is still on life support from your computer purchase. Copying your buddy's program is out of the question (the software makers frown on that in a big, ugly, nasty way). What's a computer owner to do? Search the file libraries of America Online, that's what!

The thousands of file libraries on America Online contain programs that process words, mangle (sorry, *manage*) data, implode unfriendly aliens — the list goes on. And these programs keep your budget happy because they're either freeware (free programs donated to the world by proud developers) or shareware (try-before-you-buy programs that require only a small payment to the author). You may even find demonstration versions of commercial applications.

To help you find the software needle in the online haystack, America Online created the Software Search system. This system quickly puts the software you need right into your hands — or, more precisely, right on your hard drive, which is an infinitely better place for a program (software stains wickedly if you get it on your clothes).

Get into the File Search system by using keyword **Download Center**. The AOL Download Center window appears, with a lonely-looking search box near the top. Fill in your search term to give the box something to do, and click Go.

Here are the details on how to use the software search system:

1. Open the AOL Download Center window with keyword Download Center.

The Download Center window opens, ready for your instructions.

2. Decide what you're looking for, and type it into the Search box at the top of the Download Center window (shown in Figure 16-3).

Next to the Search box you see a text box containing the kind of computer AOL thinks you have. If you want to download something for a different system, use the arrow to select from the drop-down list that appears.

Figure 16-3:
Tell AOL what you want to download in the Download Center.



3. When you're ready, click Go.

The AOL software search system does its thing, and it presents you with a list of possible options that match your search criteria.

4. Browse through the list for something that looks promising.

The list could contain electronic text (when's the last time you lounged at your computer reading a copy of *The Odyssey*?), photos, graphics, screen savers, chat logs, software demos, freeware, or shareware.

5. When you find something that looks interesting, click the Download Now button.

A warning dialog box appears, asking if you really want to download this file. Depending on your version of Windows, click *Yes* or *Save* to assure your computer that you think this is perfectly safe. To change your mind about the whole thing, click *No* at the dialog box.

The Save As dialog box then appears, with the name of your new file already filled in. Determine where you want the new file to land, and then click *Save*.

6. America Online downloads the file and then asks if you want to open it. Click Open to see your new jewel immediately, Open Folder to see where the file landed, or Close to continue with your AOL session.

If you downloaded a ZIP file (a set of files compressed together using a zipping program), America Online automatically unzips the files and places them together in a folder.

7. The file is now yours. To grab another file in the same list, repeat Steps 5 and 6. To start the whole process over and search for another topic, jump back to Step 2.

Before you know it, your hard drive overflows with new files.



In the unlikely event that you can't find what you want in the voluminous America Online digital catacombs, point your Web browser to either [Download.com](http://www.download.com) (at www.download.com) or [Shareware.com](http://www.shareware.com) (at www.shareware.com). These two sites (both part of the huge CNET Web presence) carry software for almost any use and occasion, including business applications, utilities, and games. You incur no cost to use these areas (and no salesman calls).

Chapter 17

Cruising the Internet

In This Chapter

- ▶ Checking out the Internet connection
 - ▶ Getting started: a brief Internet primer
 - ▶ Using Internet e-mail
 - ▶ Leaping through the Web
 - ▶ Newsgroups: the Internet's answer to discussion boards
 - ▶ Downloading the world with FTP
-

Turn on the TV news and what do you hear being discussed? The Internet. Go to lunch with some friends and what's bound to either come up at your table or is loudly debated at the one next to you? The Internet. Attend a cocktail party and what's on everyone's mind? Well, if the party is boring, they may be thinking about how much better the *last* party was; but to pass the time until they can make a polite departure, they're talking about the Internet. (What's wrong with these people? Don't they have real lives?)

Rising from technoid obscurity to media-star status in just a few short years, the Internet is still a mystery to most people. (Heck, it's *still* a mystery to me sometimes, and I'm paid to understand it!) In the hope of sparing you additional moments of fear and anxiety, this chapter explains a little about the Internet (just enough to get you going) and a lot about America Online's powerful Internet connections. It also unmaskes the odd language of the Internet, introducing and explaining terms such as *World Wide Web*, *FTP*, and *newsgroup*.

A big electronic world is out there, just waiting for you to visit. Grab your modem and get ready to go Internet surfing!

AOL.com Basics

The AOL.com Web page (keyword **Internet** — go figure about that one) offers a little bit of everything for the Web adventurer. The window sports a place to enter the address of a Web site you want to visit as well as a fill-in-the-blank link to America Online's massive search system (also available at keyword

Search). The rest of the window offers information links covering everything from basic Web-page building to online shopping, plus quite a few stops in between.



Because it's such a popular destination, the America Online software includes a built-in hot key for the AOL.com window in the My Hot Keys area (click the Favorites button, then select My Hot Keys from the pop-up menu). Press Ctrl+5 to head out to AOL.com anytime you want!

So Just What Is This Internet Thing?



Hang on to your seat — I'm about to explain the Internet in four (yes, just *four*) paragraphs. This may get a little hairy at times, but you have nothing to worry about because I'm a trained professional. Kids, don't let your parents try this stuff at home.

The Internet started as a big Department of Defense project somewhere back in the 1960s, slowly expanding through the '70s and '80s and coming into its own in the '90s. It was originally supposed to help university researchers exchange information about super-secret defense projects, thus decreasing the amount of time necessary to find new and ever more fascinating ways to end life on the planet. The government linked computers at colleges, universities, research labs, and large defense contractors. The Internet was born.

At the same time, the seeds of today's organized disorder were sown. This research network connected lots of bright, intelligent people, and those people started coming up with bright, intelligent ideas about fun, new things to do on the research network. "I wish we could send messages to each other." Poof! The Internet's e-mail system began. "How about a discussion system where we can swap notes — kinda like an electronic bulletin board?" Poof! The network newsgroups were born.

Then anarchy took over. Discussion areas originally intended for deep conversations about megaton yields and armor deflection/implosion ratios carried witty repartee about Buddha, the Rolling Stones, and kite flying. Everyone with an opinion to share was welcome, as long as they could get there in the first place.

Although the Internet slowly bubbled and fermented throughout the 1980s, things suddenly changed when the mid-1990s arrived. In the span of a few years, the Internet simply exploded in size and activity. Thousands of computers and networks around the world joined the fun. Newspaper articles and TV news stories appeared, introducing this electronic colossus to the

normal world. Non-computer companies linked up to the network as business e-mail use blossomed. Millions of average people began poking around on the Internet through online services such as America Online.



With that brief bit of background under your belt, ponder these important tidbits before venturing into the online world:

- ✓ No single computer or place is called *the Internet*. The Internet is a collection of millions of computers all over the world.
- ✓ No one is really in charge of it all. No one. Some committees and groups keep everything headed in the same general direction, but no one actually leads the parade.
- ✓ No one knows how big the Internet is. Suffice it to say that it's really, *really* big — and still growing.
- ✓ The Internet is not free (even though you and I don't pay extra for it through America Online). It kinda looks like it's free because you just pay for your America Online account — you're not charged for the telecommunications time between the America Online computers in Dulles, Virginia, and the rest of the Internet world. I bring this up only so that you remember that *someone* out there is paying the bill; it's good netiquette to use Internet resources wisely, particularly FTP (covered later in this chapter).
- ✓ Believe it or not, all this anarchy works if everyone's nice about it.



Free speech is the *rule* on the Internet, not the exception. If you see a Web page or read a newsgroup posting that's offensive to you, you have my personal apology. But that's all the sympathy anyone's going to give you. The communications code of the Internet is simple: If something offends you, either ignore it or disagree with it, but *don't* post a message suggesting that "somebody ought to shut those people up." An action such as that is sure to fill your mailbox with angry e-mail questioning your parentage and suggesting that you do some biologically impossible things in the corner.

E-Mail the Internet Way

Perhaps you joined America Online solely to use Internet e-mail. (It wouldn't surprise me at all.) An Internet e-mail account is an absolute must these days, particularly in the business world.

The America Online e-mail system makes Internet e-mail a snap. You don't have to remember any special commands or visit any obscure corner of the service to send an e-mail message through the Internet. Just create the

message as you normally do, type the person's Internet mail address, and click Send. If you need a quick review of the how-tos of America Online e-mail, flip to Chapter 11 or choose **Mail** → **Mail Center** from the menu and poke through the information there.

Here are a few notes about Internet e-mail that just didn't fit anywhere else:



- ✔ An e-mail message takes anywhere from a few seconds to a few hours to make its way through the Internet and find its destination. If you send a message and it doesn't arrive by the next business day or two, consider the message lost.
- ✔ Yes, Internet mail messages sometimes get lost. No, it's not the Postal Service's fault.
- ✔ Your Internet e-mail address is your screen name — minus any spaces in it — with @aol.com appended to the end. For example, my Internet mail address on America Online is jkaufeld@aol.com (my screen name first, and then the extra Internet stuff tacked on to the end). If my screen name included a space (making it *J Kaufeld*), the Internet e-mail version would still be jkaufeld@aol.com, because the Internet doesn't like spaces in e-mail addresses.
- ✔ America Online's very cool *unsend e-mail* feature works only on mail sent *from* an America Online subscriber *to* either an America Online member, a CompuServe subscriber (addresses ending in @cs.com), or someone with a Wal-Mart Connect account (addresses ending in @wmconnect.com). Unsend doesn't work on any mail sent through the Internet (so think twice before clicking Send). Why can you unsend mail to CompuServe and Wal-Mart Connect, but not to the rest of the Internet? Because America Online owns CompuServe, and CompuServe provides the software and behind-the-scenes connections for Wal-Mart Connect. And there you have it.



Look through Chapter 11 for all the particulars about using e-mail both through the Internet and within America Online.

Consider getting an Internet book

If one of the main reasons you joined America Online was for its Internet services, I highly recommend getting a good book about the Internet. I personally suggest *The Internet For Dummies*,

9th Edition, by John R. Levine, Carol Baroudi, and Margaret Levine Young (published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.). No, it's not because I have to suggest it — I really have the book myself.

Topic Hopping on the Web

It's huge. It's interconnected. It has a funny name. It's the most exciting, promising part of the Internet. It's also a very cool part of the America Online suite of Internet services. It's (electronic drum roll, please!) the World Wide Web.

The Web is a most amazing place. Where else can you find newspapers, technical information, company product catalogs, a library of folk song lyrics, far too many personal biographies, and a clock that displays the current time with fish sponges? (Not at the local mall, that's for sure.)

So just what *is* the Web? Like the Internet, it's not a single, unique place out there somewhere. Instead, the *Web* is a collection of interlinked *sites* containing millions of interlinked *pages*. The links between the various sites and pages are what make the Web a truly cool place. Because anybody can add pages and link to pretty much any other page, the Web keeps growing, changing, shifting, and generally getting better every day. It's an information browser's dream come true!

A quick stop at the terminology shop

The Web just wouldn't be a computer thing if it didn't have a whole slew of new terms and acronyms to baffle and amaze you. Here are the terms you need to make sense of the Web:

- ✔ **You use a Web browser to travel hither and thither through the Web.** The America Online software includes a built-in Web browser for your convenience.
- ✔ **A Web page is the smallest building block of the Web.** It's an electronic page with information and links to other places on the Web.
- ✔ **A Web site is a collection of Web pages.** A site may have just a few pages or more than a hundred. It depends on the site's purpose and how much time, energy, and effort the site's builder puts into it.
- ✔ **Every Web site has a home page.** It's usually the first page you see when you visit that site. The term also refers to your own personal Web page (if you created one) or the page that appears when you start your *Web browser* (the software you use to browse the Web — see the next section for more info about the America Online browser).
- ✔ **To find something on the Web, you need to know its *URL* (short for *Uniform Resource Locator*).** This special code tells the browser software what kind of site you're visiting. World Wide Web URLs start with `http://` (or `https://` for high-security sites such as online banks). Instead of

`http://`, file download sites (known as *File Transfer Protocol* servers to the geeks in the audience) use `ftp://` in front of their addresses. Thanks to advances in Web software, you normally don't need to start Web addresses with the weird looking `http://` thing anymore. Instead, just jump straight in with the `www` part (for example, `www.aol.com`).

- ✓ **HTTP is half the magic that makes the Web work.** The abbreviation stands for *HyperText Transfer Protocol*. All you need to know about it is that Web site addresses start with `http://`.
- ✓ **The other half of the Web's magical underpinnings is HTML, the HyperText Markup Language.** HTML is the fundamental programming language of the Web. If something has `.html` (or sometimes `.htm`) appended to its name, the odds are that it's a Web page. In everyday conversation, HTML is a spelled abbreviation (such as "I'm working with H-T-M-L").
- ✓ **Don't worry if you notice page names ending in weird things like `.php`, `.asp`, or `.shtml`.** Those pages work just like regular `.html` Web pages for you, but they use different software behind the scenes to simplify their developers' lives.
- ✓ **Links connect Web pages.** When you follow a link, you click a button or a highlighted word and go careering off to another destination in the online world.
- ✓ **Because having only one term for things often fosters understanding and comprehension, the World Wide Web goes by several monikers.** It's also referred to as the *Web*, *WWW*, or *W3* (but only by the true geeks).

For more information about how the Web works, see *The Internet For Dummies*, 9th Edition, by John R. Levine, Carol Baroudi, and Margaret Levine Young (published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.).

A few thoughts about Microsoft Internet Explorer versus Netscape Navigator

The software industry rarely sees a war like the ongoing Explorer versus Navigator Conflict. Microsoft, the reigning titan of software, stands toe-to-toe with Netscape, rogue challenger and Internet upstart, while their respective Web browsers duke it out in head-to-head battle, feature by bloody feature. Suddenly, a new face appears outside the ring — egad, it's America Online!

Yes, in a surprise move, America Online leapt into the Microsoft/Netscape fray by purchasing Netscape lock, stock, and browser code. The pundits fretted, the stock market roared, and the crowd collectively said "Hmmm." It was a glorious day.

What does all this corporate activity mean to you? That's an excellent question. I wish that I had an excellent answer. Here's my insight, for what it's worth:

- ✓ The America Online 9.0 software relies on Internet Explorer, the Microsoft product, for all your Web-browsing needs. The America Online software and Internet Explorer are so tightly integrated, in fact, that nothing short of high explosives (or a 12-year-old hacker with a free afternoon) could pull them apart.

The odds are good that, even though it owns the competition, America Online will keep Internet Explorer as its primary Web browser. (It's part of the deal to keep America Online prominently displayed in every copy of Windows that Microsoft sells — arguably an important benefit to the America Online folks.)

- ✓ Expect America Online to announce sometime in 2004 that you, the member, can replace Internet Explorer with Netscape Navigator if you so desire. Even though the default (Internet Explorer) remains the same, the challenger (Netscape Navigator) can sneak in through the back door.

As with any look into the future, these predictions represent only one nerd's opinion. Other computer people probably harbor different anticipations, but the odds are just as high that they're wrong, too.

Taking the Web browser for a spin

America Online did a great deal of work to integrate the Web as seamlessly as possible. It was quite a trick, too, because you need special software (called a *browser*) to look at Web pages.

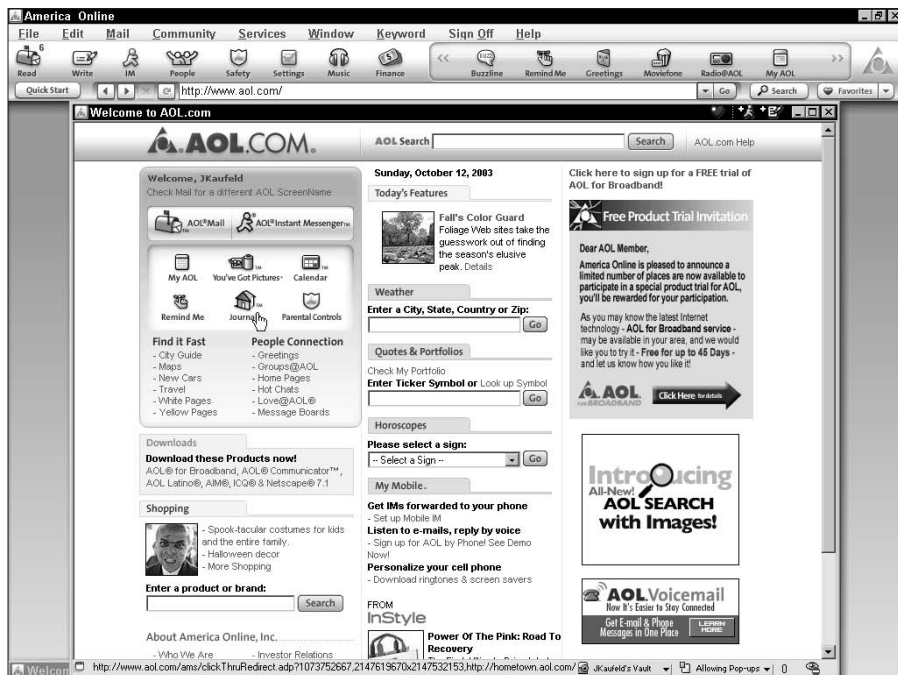
The Web browser, shown in Figure 17-1, is built right into the America Online access software. The navigation bar, just underneath the toolbar at the top of the screen, contains all the buttons and controls you need to traverse the Web. Flip to Chapter 3 for all the details about the navigation bar.

To go directly to a particular page, press Ctrl+W or click in the address area (the big, white box) of the navigation bar, and then type the address of the page you want to see. You don't need to include the `http://` part in front of the address, but it doesn't hurt if you feel like doing it anyway. When the address is in there, press Enter or click Go. Shortly, the built-in Web browser comes to life, displaying your page in glorious color.

A few more details about the Web are worth mentioning here:

- In addition to Web sites, your Web browser understands FTP sites, too. However, some pages have links to Internet newsgroups (more about those later in this chapter), which, unfortunately, your browser *can't* understand. If you click a link and the browser displays a window that says something like `Cannot interpret link`, it's a clue that you just clicked something beyond the browser's comprehension. I hope this difficulty gets fixed, but as long as I'm wishing, I'd like a pony and a milkshake, too.
- The most common Web-oriented error you see is something to the effect of `Sorry, I can't contact that site` (although the computers don't say it that nicely — they intone more ominous things, such as `Error 404 Requested URL not found`). Double-check the address and try it again. If it *still* doesn't work, either America Online is too busy to be bothered with the Web right now or the Web page you're looking for isn't available at the moment. Either way, try again later.
- Want to take your Web browser for a quick test-drive? Try visiting the foam-bath-fish clock at `www.savetz.com/fishtime/fishtime.cgi`. Just type its address into the big, white box in the middle of the navigation bar; then hit Enter. The *clock o' fishies* should pop up right away!

Figure 17-1:
The
America
Online Web
browser,
doing
its Web
browsing
thing.



Newsgroups Talk about the Craziest Things

The Internet newsgroups are a collection of, oh, about 90,000 discussion topics, from artificial intelligence applications (the `comp.ai` newsgroup) to the latest Kennedy assassination theories (try `alt.conspiracy.jfk` or `alt.assassination.jfk`). Newsgroup discussions get pretty wild sometimes, with ideas flying through the network. The language is often fairly (ahem) to the point, so if you're easily offended, you may not want to venture too far into the newsgroups.



I want to be *very* clear on this point. When you venture into the Internet newsgroups, you leave the friendly, trusting, carefully manicured community of America Online and venture into the wild, uncontrolled reality of the Internet. It's the difference between the lawns of suburban Tulsa and the potholed pavement of lower Manhattan. The Internet has no Terms of Service agreement — anything goes (and usually does). That's not to say that the Internet has *no* rules, because there definitely are some. They're simple and unwritten, and they apply to almost every newsgroup:

- ✔ You're welcome to join the discussion, as long as you take the time to understand the newsgroup before contributing anything. Read a newsgroup for *at least* a week or two before posting something of your own. Also, read the newsgroup's Frequently Asked Questions document (known as the *FAQ*). If you can't find the FAQ anywhere in the current newsgroup postings, post a message asking someone to point you toward it.
- ✔ Stick to the topic of the newsgroup. Posting get-rich-quick schemes and business advertisements to the newsgroups is in very poor taste. People do it, but everybody just ignores the messages.
- ✔ You may agree or disagree with anything that's said. You may agree or disagree as loudly as you want. If you disagree, focus on the point — don't degenerate into personal attacks. "I find your choice of facts biased" makes a good reply to someone. Asking someone "Does your mother *always* dress you funny" might spark a conflagration.
- ✔ You may *not* question a person's right to say whatever comes to mind. Yes, some points of view are, shall we say, distasteful, but some people feel that way about what you and I think, too.
- ✔ If someone disagrees with you rather abusively (known on the Internet as *flaming*), the best thing you can do is ignore the message. If you can reply in a levelheaded tone, that's fine, but it probably won't change what the other person thinks. It's best to let the flames die down and just go on with other conversations.

By now, I hope that I scared you a little about the Internet newsgroups. Well, *scared* really isn't the right term. How about *educated* instead? The newsgroups really aren't as wild and vicious a place as I'm making them out to be, but you need to understand that they also aren't part of America Online — they're completely outside the mores of the America Online world. If you visualize yourself stepping from your neighborhood into a completely foreign environment every time you use the newsgroups, you start with the right frame of mind.

Functionally, the newsgroups work much like the America Online message boards. Like the message boards, you go to the newsgroups — the newsgroups don't *come* to you.

Finding and subscribing to a newsgroup

As I said, literally thousands of newsgroups await you — and America Online carries them all. To keep things from getting too out of hand, the newsgroups are organized into categories by topic. Table 17-1 briefly explains the main categories. Other categories (*lots* of other categories, in fact) exist out there, but you can explore those on your own. Each category contains a bunch of related newsgroups (or, in the case of the `alt` and `misc` categories, a bunch of newsgroups related only because someone said so).

Table 17-1	
Newsgroup Category Names	
<i>Name</i>	<i>Description</i>
<code>alt</code>	Alternative — home of freewheeling discussions on just about any topic
<code>aol</code>	America Online — articles of interest to America Online members
<code>biz</code>	Business — topics generally relating to business on the Internet
<code>comp</code>	Computers and computer science — where the nerds hang out
<code>misc</code>	Miscellaneous — all the stuff that doesn't fit under one of the other hierarchies
<code>news</code>	Network news and information — discussion and information-only groups about the Internet itself
<code>rec</code>	Hobbies and recreation — think sports and hobbies, and you have this one figured out

<i>Name</i>	<i>Description</i>
sci	Science and research — if you thought that nerds were in the comp group, just wait until you look in here
soc	Society and social commentary — focused mainly toward both of the sociologists in the audience
talk	Talk — talk, talk, talk, talk (get the idea?)

Your search for an interesting newsgroup starts by guessing which hierarchy the topic belongs in and then browsing through that hierarchy's available newsgroups. Simple enough, right? Here's how to do it step by step:

1. Start your trip by choosing Community → Newsgroups from the main menu, or by using keyword Newsgroups.

The Newsgroups window pops up.

2. Click the Add Newsgroups icon.

The Add Newsgroups Categories window appears.

3. Choose a category.

Scroll through the list of available categories until you find one that looks interesting. Double-click a category to see which newsgroups it contains. A window listing all the category's newsgroups elbows its way to the screen.

4. Scroll through all the listed newsgroups, find one that looks interesting, and double-click its entry in the list.

Yet another window, which may or may not tell you anything helpful about the newsgroup, appears.

Often, this step leads you to another window containing a browsable list of newsgroups. In that case, keep browsing — the madness ends soon, trust me.

5. Sample some messages and subscribe to the group if you like what you see.

For a look at the messages in this newsgroup, click Read Messages.

6. If you're sold, close the sample messages window and click the Subscribe button to include the newsgroup on your subscription list.

To pretend that you never saw the newsgroup in the first place, just close the windows and go about your business.

Subscribing to a newsgroup may take a minute or two to allow the America Online computer to think, ponder, and snicker at its capability to make a human wait for something.



For more about reading messages in a newsgroup, see the next section.

- 7. When the Group Preferences dialog box appears, click Save to make it go away, too.**

After a great deal of digital consternation, America Online displays a brief dialog box saying that the newsgroup is now on your list.

- 8. Click OK to make the confirmation dialog box go away and leave you alone.**

Likewise, the Group Preferences dialog offers some advanced tools for simplifying your newsgroup experience. (In one of those odd paradoxes of technology, the tool for making newsgroups easier is itself almost too complex to use.)

For now, don't worry about the Group Preferences settings. You can always get back to the window by clicking the newsgroup name in the Read My Newsgroups window and then clicking the Preferences button.

- 9. Subscribe to more newsgroups if you want.**

To subscribe to more newsgroups, just close the last few windows (click the upper-right corner of the window) until you work your way back to the Add Newsgroups window.

Congratulations — you did it!



If someone describes a marvelous newsgroup and gives you the Internet name of it (which looks like `alt.folklore.urban`), you can use the Expert Add button in the Add Newsgroups window and skip this whole menu-driven process. However, you must know the exact name, complete with all the required (and occasionally odd) punctuation marks.

Reading messages

Subscribing is, of course, only the first step. Your next task is finding time to read all the stuff you subscribe to. Unlike mailing lists, newsgroup messages don't stack up in your e-mail box — they collect in some mysterious place deep within America Online. To read what's new, you have to pay another visit to the Newsgroups window. Here's what to do:

- 1. Choose Community->Newsgroups from the main menu or use keyword Newsgroups.**

The Newsgroups window pops up.

- 2. Click Read My Newsgroups.**

After a few pensive moments of waiting, the Read My Newsgroups window pops into view. It shows the name of the newsgroup, the number of messages you haven't read, and the total number of messages in that newsgroup.

Even if you subscribe to only one or two newsgroups, your newsgroups list comes preset with some suggested reading, courtesy of America Online.

3. Double-click a newsgroup to see what's new.

A window that's more a scrolling list than anything else (see Figure 17-2) appears. The window shows the article title and the number of responses in the *thread* (that's the newsgroup term for *discussion*).

To see all the articles in the newsgroup (whether you read them or not), click the newsgroup name and then click List All Subjects.

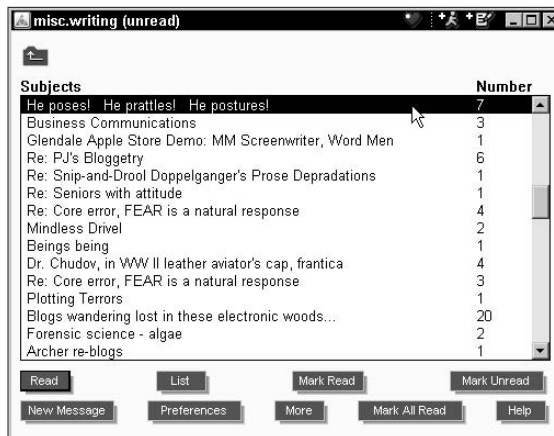


Figure 17-2:
So many
articles, so
little time.

4. To read a message, double-click its title.

A window containing the message text opens. Read to your heart's content and then close the window after you're finished.

5. Read messages or reply to them.

To reply to a message, click Reply to Group. If you have a specific question for the person who wrote the article, click E-Mail to Author rather than post a reply to the newsgroup. To see the next message in the thread, click the Message -> button. For the preceding message, click the <- Message button. If you're thirsty, get something to drink.

6. When nothing else looks interesting enough to read, click Mark All Read.

7. Click OK in the dialog box that wonders whether you really want to do that.

This last step tells America Online to pretend that you read all the messages in the newsgroup. That way, you can quickly tell which messages are new the next time you wander through.

Contributing something

Reading a newsgroup is fun, but soon enough, you decide that it's time to post a few messages of your own. Adding a message to a newsgroup isn't hard, but it does take a few more steps than your average e-mail message. Here's what to do:

- 1. Pretend that you plan to read the messages in a newsgroup, and follow Steps 1 through 3 in the preceding section.**

At this point, the window for whatever newsgroup you want to post an article to appears on the screen.

- 2. Click the New Message button.**

A Post New Message dialog box appears.

- 3. Type a descriptive subject in the Subject area, press Tab to move down to the Message block, and type your message.**

A Use Signature check box sits below the Message block. If you want to sign all your newsgroups postings in a standard way, such as *John Doe — Ace Contractor, Incorporated, or Sven, Lover of Adventure!*, you can write your signature once and then check the box to sign your name the same way with each posting you send.

Oh — by the way — although the window says that the signature is set in “Preferences,” it doesn't mean the master Settings dialog box at keyword Settings. Instead, you find it behind the Set Preferences button in the main Newsgroups window.

- 4. When the message looks groovy, click Send.**

When writing for a newsgroup, be brief and to the point. Say what you want to say and then stop. Don't go on and on and on. Whatever you do, don't ramble. I used to ramble, but I don't anymore. And it's a good thing, too, what with all the newsgroup postings I write these days. Really.

- 5. Click OK when the system asks whether you're serious about posting the article. Click Cancel if you suddenly decide that the world is a better place without your message in the newsgroup.**



Unsubscribing from a newsgroup

Getting out of a newsgroup takes a whole lot less time and effort than getting into one. In fact, it's so quick that you'll hardly believe it:

- 1. Open the Newsgroups window with keyword Newsgroups or by choosing Community ⇨ Newsgroups from the menu.**

The Newsgroups window reports for duty.

2. Click the Read My Newsgroups button.

The now familiar Read My Newsgroups window appears, which you shouldn't confuse with the George Bush "Read My Lips" window or the William Shatner "Read My Books" window.

3. Click the name of the newsgroup that you want to kick off your subscription list and then click Remove.

With only a moment of digital concentration, America Online unsubscribes you from the selected newsgroup and announces the fact in a little dialog box.

4. Click OK to make the box go away.

Although the group still appears in your newsgroup list temporarily, it won't show its face the next time you open the window.

A brief word about Parental Controls

The newsgroups offer a wild array of useful and interesting information, but some of the stuff could send a shipload of sailors into a collective blush. Thanks to the Parental Controls section, you can prevent such a thing from happening at your house (assuming you have a shipload of sailors huddled around your America Online account).

The Parental Controls for newsgroups are available under the cleverly labeled Parental Controls button in the Newsgroups window. These controls let you do the following:

- ✓ Block the Expert Add feature, which limits a screen name to only the newsgroups that America Online chooses to list under the Add Newsgroups button
- ✓ Block access to the newsgroups entirely
- ✓ Prevent program and file downloads from the newsgroups
- ✓ Block specific newsgroups you choose
- ✓ Block newsgroups with "adult" content
- ✓ Block any newsgroup that contains certain words in its name
- ✓ Grant a screen name access to the complete list of available newsgroups

If you have a child using America Online, I *highly* recommend blocking the Expert Add feature for that child's screen name. You may want to go further, but you can worry about that later.



Because little eyes and fingers often get into the darnedest places, America Online offers a strong, flexible group of Parental Controls. For all the details about your online child-management options, flip to Chapter 7.

FTP Downloading for the Nerd at Heart

If you think that the file libraries in America Online are a hoot, you haven't seen anything yet. Welcome to File Transfer Protocol, more commonly known as FTP. FTP is the Internet's answer to the Copy command. And let me tell you, it's certainly one answer.



You're about to enter (bring up geeky music in the background) the Technoid Zone, so keep a pocket protector handy. With FTP, you're interacting directly with computers all over the world without the benefit of software to protect you. It's you against the computer. If using Macintosh Finder or Windows File Manager to track down an errant file on your hard drive makes you queasy, you don't want to try FTP.

You can use the America Online FTP service in two ways: by going to the built-in FTP sites or by typing an address on your own. I suggest using the built-in options at first because you can be relatively sure that they work.

- ✔ If you're absolutely *dying* to discover FTP, check out the Using FTP option in the main FTP window (keyword **FTP**) or the FTP help section of Member Services (keyword **Help**).
- ✔ Trust *nothing* you download from the Internet through FTP. Assume from the start that it's completely virus-infested, like a little digital epidemic just waiting to break loose on your computer. Virus-check absolutely *everything* that comes to roost in your computer from the Internet.
- ✔ Yes, I'm serious about the virus checks. I do them myself.

All it takes to use FTP is a strong stomach for the technical side of life and these instructions:

- 1. Dive into the FTP system with keyword My FTP.**

The big, friendly, and nontechnical My FTP Place window opens.

- 2. Click the Anonymous FTP button.**

The Anonymous FTP window opens. Unlike the first FTP window (the one from the previous step), this window actually *accomplishes* things.

3. **Scroll through the Favorite Sites list and double-click one that sounds interesting. When the detailed site window appears, click OK to make it leave you alone.**

After a moment or two (or perhaps three, if the Internet is having a busy night), the FTP site's directory listing fills the screen.



To visit an FTP site that doesn't appear on the list, click the Other Site button at the bottom of the window. When the Other Site window appears, type the site address in the box, and then click the Connect button.

4. **If a file or directory on the system looks interesting, double-click it.**

Different things happen depending on the icon that's next to the item. If the icon is a file folder icon, that entry is a directory; double-clicking it displays a new window showing you what's in there. If the icon is a document, a dialog box pops up and offers you a View File Now button. To view the document without downloading it, click the button. If the icon is a bunch of disks, you're looking at a program or a compressed file that's available for downloading. Sometimes you see the funny-looking handshake icon; it stands for a pointer to a particular subdirectory.

5. **Keep poking around and have a good time.**



If you found the preceding steps a little vague, there's a reason: I deliberately made them that way. FTP really *is* more advanced than the Web or the news-groups. You need to understand a lot of nerdy stuff, such as subdirectories and types of file compression (including ZIP, TAR, and many, many other kinds), before FTP makes much sense, and even *more* to get useful things from FTP sites. Still, it's worth learning about, particularly if you *want* to learn the more in-depth techo-stuff. Good luck, brave technological explorer, and remember to virus-check your files!

Chapter 18

There's Music in the Wires

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding how online music works
 - ▶ Listening to Radio@AOL
 - ▶ Bringing music videos to your PC screen
 - ▶ Enjoying the crazy world of MP3 files
-

Video in the virtual network. Melodies among the protocols. Ditties on DSL. With their growing popularity and broad selection, online media channels need *some* kind of catchphrase, but at this rate, it probably won't come from me. Even though I can't name it, I can still feed my growing addiction to online music and video through Radio@AOL and the Internet's many other cool online music and video tools.

Audio and video quality jumped significantly from when they first arrived on the scene. In the late 1990s, online music sounded like a rasping cat in a drainpipe, while postage-stamp-sized video presentations appeared so jerky that they made walking pigeons look positively graceful.

Online broadcasting really took off in the last few years. Thanks to the newest software and faster connections, those issues largely faded into the past. Now, silky stereo and smooth-as-movies images rule the day. As quality increased, content options grew and multiplied as well. Even commercial radio and TV stations joined the online world with streaming broadcasts of their original programming.

If you never sampled online music and video before (or if, like me, you became disillusioned during the early days when it just wasn't worth the trouble), give it a try today. This chapter forms your guide to the online media experience. Starting with some quick background to frame the online music world, the chapter covers Radio@AOL (America Online's in-house music offering), plus a whole Net's worth of online music video channels. It also dabbles in the world of MP3, explores putting *you* on the air as the keeper of your own online radio station, and introduces AOL's new online music system, MusicNet. Crank up the volume and spin to some tunes!

Pushing Guitars Through the Internet Takes More Than Strong Biceps

Moving music over the Internet requires a lot more technical prowess than mortal humans realize — or at least that's what the computer people told us as they thrilled to the first hissing, half-broken notes that emerged from their computer speakers through the Internet. It was an *imagine the possibilities but don't look too hard at what we have now* moment. In the end, the technologists delivered on their promise. Today's Internet music sounds a whole lot closer to radio or CDs than it did even two or three years ago.

Bringing the musical magic home to your machine requires a *media player* program of some kind. Because lots of companies *want* you listening to their music, the basic players cost nothing more than the time it takes to download them from the Net. Of course, the expanded, extended, gold-plated versions of the players cost some bucks (either all at once or through a subscription), but you needn't upgrade to that level unless you *really* want to do it. It depends on what you want to see or hear, and how attached you feel to the whole online media experience.

Above the cloud of music and video start-ups, two companies vie for the love and affection of the online media community: RealNetworks (www.realnetworks.com) and Microsoft (www.microsoft.com).

RealNetworks created the granddaddy of online music software, RealPlayer. RealPlayer (www.real.com) handles both music and video programming and includes links and preset buttons leading to a rather surprising selection of content. Its free Basic player provides all the functions and content that most people need. If you truly love online media or want to enjoy better video reproduction (larger images and higher quality), purchase its upgraded player with the monthly SuperPass subscription. This gives you both the cool player plus a ton of stuff from SuperPass, including sports programming, music from the Smithsonian archives, NASA TV, movie previews, and more. Real also offers its own subscription music service, Rhapsody. For more about that, flip ahead to the end of this chapter.



Thanks to a deep, abiding love (and a far-reaching marketing agreement), America Online named RealPlayer as its music software of choice. When you install the America Online 9.0 software, you automatically get RealPlayer in the process. Everything happens on its own — you just sit back and watch. Both Radio@AOL (America Online's new music service) and Spinner (an AOL-owned company) use RealPlayer for delivering their tunes.

After observing (and enduring) the growing popularity of RealPlayer, Microsoft tossed its own ball into the media game with the release of Windows Media

Player (www.microsoft.com/windows/windowsmedia). Building on its multimedia experience (and the fact that it *is* Microsoft), Media Player promptly grew to a major competitor against RealPlayer. Although both companies claim victory in the *how many people use us* online music contest, Media Player probably holds an edge, thanks to its bountiful free content and well-connected corporate parent.



RealPlayer and Windows Media Player work (and play) well together, so the best of all solutions involves installing both of them on your system. That way, you never worry about bumping into a media source that supports only the player you didn't install. (Whoops.) Because neither one costs anything, you lose nothing but disk space by sitting on the fence and choosing them both. RealPlayer arrives on its own with the new America Online software, so just visit the Microsoft Windows Media Player site to add it to your collection.

Tuning the Online Radio



To reflect how proud the programmers feel about their accomplishments, Radio@AOL sits front and center (well, a little right of center) on the America Online 9.0 software's toolbar. Open the player by clicking the button. After a moment or two of whirring thought, the Radio@AOL player window pops up, looking a bit like Figure 18-1.

The stations list displays the various types of music Radio@AOL offers. A catchall category called Soundtracks & More includes really unique stuff, such as audio books, an all-comedy channel, and the ever-popular 1-Hit Wonders channel.

Figure 18-1: For the best in pop, country, hip-hop, salsa, classical, and just about any other musical genre, tune your computer to Radio@AOL.





Building a station of your own

During my stints at radio stations in high school and college, the love of broadcasting got into my blood. (I'm sure that some obscure homeopathic treatment might get it back out, but I kinda like it in there.) I still miss radio — mixing the music, confusing the song titles, and laughing inappropriately during somber news stories — but never gave up hope of hitting the airwaves again someday.

Thanks to the Internet, my return to broadcasting could happen at any time. (Frightening thought, isn't it?) Several pieces of software and at least one site on the Net go beyond just offering channels by giving you the tools to make your *own* online radio shows, live from your personal computer. Even more amazing, most charge very little for the service — and some let you try everything for free. You need a computer with a sound card, special software from your broadcasting service (free for the downloading), and the desire to come up with something cooler than yet another collection of easy listening tunes from the mid '80s.

Live365 offers the *real* online radio experience. It focuses on musical programming instead of chatter and gives you several options, depending on how technically involved you want to get. The simplest option, its Basic Broadcast model, gives you more than 100MB of space on the Live365 servers for storing MP3 files to play on your new music channel. The Live365 software

helps you convert your favorite songs into MP3 format and upload them through the Internet to the system's computers. You can choose an order for the songs, or just let Live365 play them in whatever order the computers choose. From there, tell your friends about your new music channel, and enjoy the fame!

Want to do the live DJ thing instead? Live365 handles that too with its Live Broadcast feature. Whether you just want to insert a few voice-over announcements or perform the whole thing live on the air, Live365 walks you through the steps of using its software or an assembly of packages you gathered from the Net. Either way, Live365 brings the fun of broadcasting to everybody with an Internet connection.

If you feel a bit more adventurous, try do-it-yourself online broadcasting with ShoutCast from Nullsoft (the corner of AOL that brings you WinAmp). ShoutCast gives you a whole box of tools for building an online radio station, but it takes a little more effort than the nicely packaged Live365 option. Still, it's very popular and very much worth the time to look into it. For all of the details, read the broadcaster documentation at www.shoutcast.com. To find a ShoutCast-capable hosting service, type **shoutcast server** into the search bar at the top of the AOL software, and then hit Enter. The AOL Search system delivers a whole slew of information, resources, and hosting options. Enjoy!



Radio@AOL comes as part of your basic America Online membership, so you pay nothing extra to enjoy the tunes. Of course, you *still* pay long-distance costs if your local access number sits outside your range, but otherwise the music is free.

Jamming to the Music Videos

Which came first, the music video or MTV? Darned if I know, but perhaps future generations might care enough to find out. For now, just give me an unending selection of online music videos, and let me sit back and watch!

A few companies tried offering music videos online back in the mid-'90s, but the experiment didn't quite work. The video looked like animated postage stamps, images often didn't synchronize with the music, and communication speeds couldn't deal with that mass of information, so the whole experience jerked, squawked, and generally failed to entertain.

Luckily, six years of software and hardware upgrades changed the video landscape in wonderful ways. Internet connections — and even the Net itself — move data a lot faster, and a constant stream of multimedia software upgrades enhanced video playback to the point that it looks almost as slick as the real thing. It's a wonderful new multimedia Internet out there — and this is a great time to try it for yourself.



Unfortunately, modems still bottleneck the process. Because playing video *and* music at the same time requires a lot more information than just playing music alone, music videos don't work terribly well when you connect to the Internet with a modem. (I wish I had better news, but that's just how these things happen.) Although music videos *might* work through your modem connection, don't expect miracles. Well, honestly, don't even expect FM-radio quality. The video player shrinks the image to a few inches or less, and sometimes blurs parts of the picture in a valiant attempt to keep the music going when the Internet connection slows even further.

All that changes on a high-speed Internet connection. Music videos look a lot more like videos (and a lot less like convulsive slideshows). The faster your connection, the bigger the video image grows. The video's sound gets better too, because faster speeds mean more information, which translates into sweet stereo flowing freely from your computer. Without a doubt, DSL and cable connections deliver the best online music experience.

Regardless of your connection speed, watching music videos requires some player software, but if you already listen to online music, you probably have everything you need. Both Windows Media Player and RealPlayer play videos and music without any extra downloads. (At last — software that makes your life *easier* by doing two things at once!)



Just to complicate matters, some sites use the Apple QuickTime player instead of the normal software supported by the rest of the world. If your favorite videos work only in QuickTime, download the free player at www.quicktime.com (or www.apple.com/quicktime if the other address doesn't work for some reason). Why do some sites prefer QuickTime over the more popular programs out there? It beats me. I tried all three players head-to-head over high-speed and low-speed connections with a variety of media types. QuickTime Player performed so pathetically in every test that I'm amazed Apple bothers offering it as a product. Fuzzy video and choppy sound quickly condemned QuickTime Player to the *uninstall it now* list. The moral of today's story: For music videos, stick with either RealPlayer or Media Player unless you have no other choice.

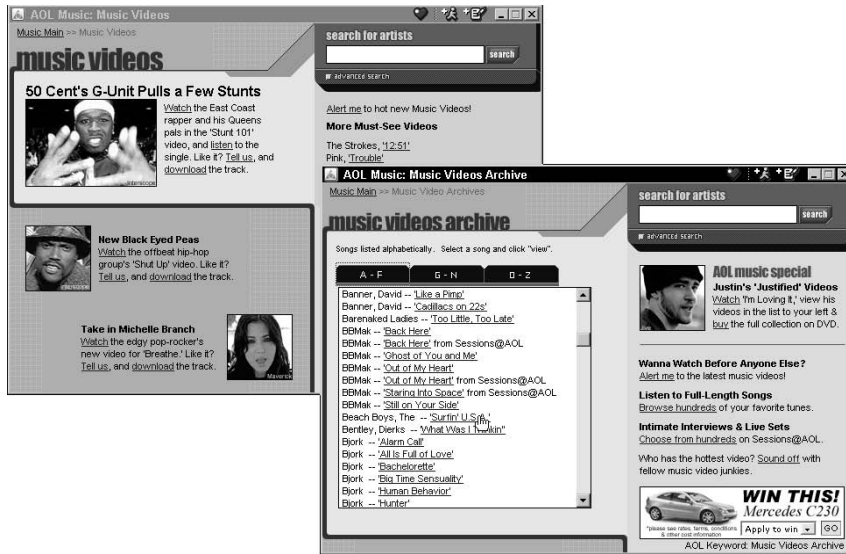


With the software thing out of your way, move on to the bigger (and more fun) question of the day: Where do the music videos live? With standard online frustration, the answer is *all over the Net*. Lots of sites offer music videos, but few central repositories exist out there to help you find them. For a great start visit AOL's very own Music Videos area at keyword **Music Videos**. It includes a constant selection of new music offerings in all genres, plus a link to AOL's Music Video Archive (keyword **Music Video Archive**, shown in Figure 18-2). The area definitely earns a two-thumbs-up rating!

Turning outside of AOL, the following sites serve up a good selection of music videos, as well as music news, movie trailers, and other sundry goodies. Launch remains my favorite of the group, thanks to its extraordinary video library and support for both new and classic musicians, plus its great library. And now, for the promised list:

- ✔ **Clipland** (www.clipland.com): This site gives you the broadest selection of multimedia stuff, including music videos, movie trailers, and TV commercials. Unfortunately, many of its music videos rely on QuickTime Viewer, so expect a lot of problems and poor viewing quality.
- ✔ **Launch** (launch.yahoo.com): Launch delivers the largest selection of music videos at various streaming speeds to match how you connect to the Net. Launch includes videos from brand-name groups you recognize, plus a wealth of material from bands still working their way toward one-hit-wonder status.
- ✔ **Video Music Network** (www.videomusicnetwork.com): Courtesy of the friendly folks at Sony Music, Video Music Network puts a variety of music videos and musician interviews in your hands. Like Clipland, Video Music Network relies on the questionable skills of QuickTime Viewer for its video content, although it recently added Real Player support (probably to quell the complaints about QuickTime).

Figure 18-2: AOL's Music Video and Music Video Archive areas keep music lovers fully stocked on their favorites.



Looking for a little more online video fun after the music videos? (No, not *that* kind of fun.) Check out the previews for upcoming movies at Hollywood.com (www.hollywood.com) or Moviefone (www.moviefone.com). Both sites make great diversions for those times when you really should work on something else — er, when you need more entertainment options. Yeah, that's it.

Turning Your Computer into a Jukebox with MP3s

Nobody ever thought that two little letters and a number — assembled into the innocent-sounding computer term *MP3* — could single-handedly turn a whole market on its head, create a new industry out of thin air, and start one of the most ground-shaking moves seen in the music world since the debut of the compact-disc format 20 years ago. Nope, I don't think anybody saw this one coming.

If you missed the tidal wave, don't worry — MP3 files only started changing the music world in the last few years. The truly wild changes are still to come, and you'll be there for everything.



What is MP3? Technically, it stands for *MPEG Layer 3*, which in turn stands for *Motion Picture Experts Group Layer 3*. So what do a bunch of motion picture experts have to do with music? Surprisingly, a lot more than you might think. The folks at MPEG create the international multimedia standards used by companies when developing all kinds of technology relating to images and audio. Specifically, MP3 describes a way of squashing audio file sizes without losing sound quality.

Thanks to the combination of tiny file size, huge sound, software that lets you create your own MP3 files from CDs and tapes, and the connectivity of the Internet, the MP3 format took off like a rocket and never looked back. People started recording their favorite albums and swapping them with other friends through the Net. As that grew in popularity, online swapping sites like the now pay-for-play Napster (leave your credit card at www.napster.com) burst onto the scene.

At about the same time, some musicians and music companies started worrying about file swapping, because nobody got paid from a swapped file. The whole thing blew up into a seriously large court battle, where the record companies currently came out on top, although the battle continues.



Why do I bring this stuff up now? Understanding a bit of history helps you comprehend why some people go absolutely ballistic when you mention MP3 files. Whatever way they lean in the debate, everybody has a heart-felt opinion, usually worn on the sleeve for quick and easy access.

For you, all the controversy means that MP3 won't go away any time soon, so you should learn more about it. The best place for that is the aptly named MP3.com site, at www.mp3.com. In addition to its amazing library of downloadable MP3 files, the site gives you a good introduction to the entire MP3 world. Get the software you need to join the revolution, learn more about making your own MP3 files, and stay abreast of the hottest music trends — it all happens at this one site.

Start dabbling in the MP3 world by downloading one of the player programs out there. Although lots of programs handle MP3 files, two applications stand out above the rest. The first, WinAmp (www.winamp.com), holds the lead as the best MP3 player. It's free for the downloading, and it handles everything you need for exploring and enjoying the world of MP3 music. (Also, America Online owns WinAmp, so there's some kind of appropriateness to using WinAmp on top of your America Online connection.)

For a spin at recording (or *ripping*, as the techno-geeks say), turn your attention to MusicMatch Jukebox (www.musicmatch.com). It plays MP3 files like a trooper, but it also includes a full-featured recording system for turning CDs, tapes, and even LPs into high-quality MP3 files. I even used it on a laptop to record live seminars!

MusicMatch Jukebox comes in a free version, as well as a feature-laden Plus version that costs \$19.95. Go ahead and try the free version, but come back and get Plus later. It makes a huge difference.

Buying and Burning Your Favorite Songs

After a lot of hesitation, many arguments, and a few well-placed lawsuits, the music industry seems to finally understand that people want access to their music online, and that they might actually pay for the privilege if some way existed for them to do that. Granted, this thought went through a long gestation period, but at least the industry finally birthed it. If human babies took this long to emerge, women would never get pregnant.

This great online birthing brought many new music services into the world, including everything from a new, improved, and payment-oriented Napster (www.napster.com) to the impressive-looking Real One Rhapsody system (www.listen.com) from the Real Audio folks.

Not to be outdone, America Online introduced its own pay-for-play music system, integrated directly into the AOL service. AOL dubbed the service MusicNet (keyword **MusicNet**), presumably in honor of the system's mixture of music and the Internet, or maybe because they thought the clever name might simply sell better. (Who knows what goes on in the minds of marketing people?)

MusicNet's broad selection sets it apart from the other online music systems. Drawing from all corners of the music world, MusicNet puts a little over 400,000 songs at your beck and call. Like all of the services, MusicNet offers CD-quality sound for a great listening experience.

You sign up for this premium service separately from your regular AOL membership fee, just like all of the other online music services. Rather than leave you with just a couple of subscription options, MusicNet puts four tasty musical platters on the table, letting you pick and choose exactly what you want:

- ✓ The **Basic** subscription sets you back a paltry \$3.95 per month, but it only gives you access to 20 songs a month.
- ✓ With the **Standard** level, the price goes up to \$8.95 per month, but now you get to enjoy as many songs as you want, either online or by downloading them to your computer.
- ✓ The service's two top-priced options, **Deluxe** at \$13.95 and **Premium** at \$17.95, let you burn music onto CDs.



Like so many other subscriptions in the world, remember that MusicNet's goal involves hooking you into the service and getting you to pony up some money each month. The free limited-time offer automatically morphs into an \$8.95 per month Standard level membership after the trial period ends. If you decide that you love MusicNet, then all's the better. However, if you tried MusicNet but you didn't love it, call AOL's famous Customer Service department at 866-278-6582 and cancel your subscription.



What could make a music-loving AOL member's heart even happier than MusicNet? How about a direct connection to Apple's popular iTunes system (www.itunes.com, and probably keyword **iTunes** by the time you read this) as well? Yes, as I write this, America Online and Apple just announced a partnership that promises to roll out iTunes to the many millions of America Online subscribers. Look for delightful goodies such as a single-click registration system to join iTunes, plus direct song links throughout the whole AOL Music area (keyword **Music**). This service looks really promising (and that's from someone who's barely on speaking terms with his Mac laptop).

But here's the big question: Why would AOL promote iTunes when it directly competes with MusicNet? At first, my inside sources offered the official company line about "offering increased choice for the members in the midst of an uncertain time in music technology." Translated, that means nobody knows where the whole online music business will go in the future. Rather than stake a claim to what might be a tiny slice of the market, AOL decided to broaden its offerings in hopes of landing a winning technology. Very clever work, AOL — that's good thinking.

Chapter 19

Tracking News, Weather, Markets, and More

In This Chapter

- ▶ Browsing through the news
 - ▶ Checking on the weather
 - ▶ Examining the business side of news
-

News plays a big role in our lives. It's our link to the community, the country, and the world. (I can almost hear the national anthem playing!) From the looks of the News channel lineup, America Online values news pretty highly as well because it offers so many kinds of news — international, business, technology, feature; the list goes on — and costs you nothing extra because it's part of the regular America Online service.

Thankfully, America Online gives you lots of tools for dealing with the influx of news, weather, sports scores, and stock prices. This chapter looks at your options for getting the news, ranging from a casual romp through the News Channel to a detailed analysis of the markets.



Look back at this chapter two or three times over the coming months. Your information needs change over time, and a quick peek here may open up precisely the news source that you need.

Getting the News

Most of the online news lives (no surprises here) on the News Channel (keyword **News**), as shown in Figure 19-1. It displays top headlines from business, politics, entertainment, and the world in general. The News Channel also provides links to in-depth coverage in the various news departments. Each department, in turn, narrows the focus, giving you an ever more carefully winnowed collection of stories.



Filling your mailbox with the news you want

A little-known feature of the America Online news system can save you a *bunch* of time if you like to watch for stories about particular topics or companies. Considering all the resources on the News Channel, you often don't have time to sift through tons of stories to find that all-important informational nugget. The America Online News Profiles service (keyword **My News**) solves this problem for you by delivering directly to your mailbox the latest stories about the topics you choose.

To build a news profile, go to keyword **My News** and follow the instructions. Start with something

simple, such as a single topic (I tried *espionage*) or a company name. Let the profile do its thing for a couple of days so that you can judge how many new e-mail messages it adds to your box. Adjust the items in your profile or the story-limit setting to manage the incoming story flow.

The News Profiles service comes at no extra charge with your America Online account, so it's definitely worth a look. One word of caution: If you track an active topic (such as *Microsoft* or *unemployed corporate auditors*), your mailbox fills in no time!

Figure 19-1:
The News Channel hosts top stories and links to specialized online news areas.



Some of the most interesting news areas sit deep inside the News Channel. Reading a two-paragraph news-wire story about massive changes in how investors view online businesses, for example, is one thing, but reviewing an in-depth analysis of those same events in *The Wall Street Journal*

(www.wsj.com) or the *Financial Times* (www.ft.com) is another thing entirely. America Online gives you quick access to plenty of other sources as well — such as *Time* (keyword **Time**), ABC News (keyword **ABC News**), *Business Week* (keyword **Business Week**), the *Nightly Business Report* (www.nbr.com), and National Public Radio (keyword **NPR**) — offering equally deep and unique perspectives on the news beyond what the wire services have the time and capacity to provide.

Looking for something specific or perhaps for a cool news photograph? Try the News Search system at keyword **News Search**. Describe the topic you want to find and tell the system where to look (business news, entertainment news, photos only, or everything). After that, just click the Search button. Getting the most from the system — or, more specifically, the best results from the system — takes some practice. These tips increase your odds of finding the most useful goodies:

- ✔ If the system can't find any stories that match your search, try searching for something more general (*music* rather than *new rock groups*, for example).
- ✔ Likewise, if you're suddenly the proud owner of hundreds of matches, narrow your search terms (such as *small business* rather than *business*) to cull the reports you really don't want. Searching for a phrase always brings better results than plugging in a single word.
- ✔ For a really detailed search, try using the advanced searching tools AND, OR, and NOT. Table 19-1 shows you how they work and what they do.

<i>Command</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Description</i>
AND	government and waste	Links two words or phrases; finds only articles that contain <i>both</i> examples
NOT	software not buggy	Finds only articles that contain the first word or phrase and don't contain the second; prevents unwanted matches (and occasionally provides moments of humor)
OR	Windows or Macintosh	Finds articles that contain either example <i>or</i> both of them



If you enjoy a high-speed connection to America Online through a cable modem, DSL line, satellite dish, or something else (you lucky thing!), enjoy the TV and radio news services available throughout the service with High Speed AOL. High Speed AOL automatically delivers CNN, ABC, E! Online, the Weather Channel, and NPR news stories straight to your monitor (and speakers, too).

Thanks to the America Online 9.0 software's new bag of multimedia goodies, your computer already has everything it needs to display online video and play online audio. Just sit back, click the links, and enjoy (or endure) the news.

The Weather Outside — Is It Frightful?

How much you care about the weather seems to depend directly on where you live (I wonder whether anyone in Hawaii, for example, *really* checks the forecasts, except during storm season) and which generation you belong to. My parents, for example, were denied weather forecasts as children, so they watch the cable-TV Weather Channel radar for fun. I, on the other hand, took off on a trip to Canada without stopping to realize that late-fall-leaning-toward-winter means a much different thing if you're 700 miles farther north. (Although my cotton jacket froze solid on that trip, I managed to survive by wrapping my head in socks.)

To avoid problems such as this one in your life, check out the America Online Weather area, at keyword **Weather**. It's one-stop shopping for every kind of weather information imaginable (plus some you just don't *want* to imagine). You even find the Weather Channel store, where, presumably, you can purchase your very own cumulonimbus cloud and whip up a storm in the privacy of your own home.

Among other things, the Weather area (see Figure 19-2) offers a quick forecast for anywhere in the United States, plus detailed forecasts for both the United States and the world. It even includes satellite and radar images for you to look at and download. (They're great for school projects or as practice maps for budding meteorologists.)

Figure 19-2:
No matter what kind of weather you want, it's available in the Weather area.

AOL NEWS: Local Forecast for San Diego, CA

News Main Help Look up Forecasts by Zip, City, or Country Search THE WEATHER CHANNEL

Local Regional National World Local Weather Video weather.com

San Diego, CA Change Home City Fall Lawn Tips sponsored by

Reported from Lindbergh Field 10/13/2003 9:25PM ET

Current Conditions	Detailed Forecast	Six-Day Forecast
Temperature: 68F	Monday: Mostly sunny. High near 75F. Winds High near 75F. Winds SSW 5 mph.	TUE WED THU FRI SAT SUN
Conditions: Partly Cloudy	Monday night: Cloudy intervals. Areas of dense fog developing. Low 64F. Winds NE at 5	75 72 72 72 73 73
Winds: SSW 5 mph		63 61 61 62 63 62
Relative Humidity: 87%		
Barometer: 29.93		
Local Doppler		
Averages, Records		
Regional Satellite		
Hourly Forecast		

Plan your events with our local guide

Maps Index Current U.S. Temperatures
Check Highways Weather Watchers
Plan for Golf
Health Reports More Weather Resources Go

WIRELESS PLANS STARTING AT \$19.99 GO AT&T Wireless AOL Keyword: Weather

Watching the Markets

Considering the amount of work and worry some people put into fretting over their stock market investments, stuffing all your cash into a mattress suddenly looks like a marginally attractive idea. At least you don't spend all your time wondering whether your funds are safe, because what kind of thief is going to walk off with a big . . . um . . . did you happen to see where my bed went? Hmm — perhaps something's to be said for putting your money in stocks, after all.

If you parked some money in stock investments, you probably want to see how your investments are performing. America Online offers two unique tools for tracking your stock market money. The first is the Quotes system, which pulls up the almost current (delayed by 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the market) price for whatever you want. The other system is Portfolios, which makes short work of watching a group of stocks. This section looks at each of these tools individually.

Quotes (keyword Quotes)

The only way that checking stock prices could be easier than the America Online Quotes system is if the system could read your mind — but if it did that, who knows *what* it may discover? Perhaps the world is a better place if we just keep the Quotes system the way it is and not let computers peer into our thought processes.

Getting a stock quote takes only a moment. Here's what to do:

- 1. Open the Quotes window by using keyword Quotes.**

The boring and sedate Quotes window hops into action.

- 2. In the Quotes box, type the company's stock-ticker symbol, and then click Get Quote.**

After a moment or two, the stock's information appears in the lower section of the Investment Snapshot window (see Figure 19-3).



If the window mechanically mutters that no quote information is available, double-check the spelling of the ticker symbol you entered. If worse comes to worst, click the Lookup Symbol link to find the symbol that you need.

Repeat the process for however many stocks you want to see. To track a number of stocks, using the Portfolios system is easier, as I discuss in the next section. That system gives you some perks by offering more information about your particular investments.



Figure 19-3:
Things are
looking
good for
the stock of
the day!



In addition to the stock-price search system, the Quotes window offers a host of newsy goodies of interest to both serious investors and part-time plunkers. Here's a quick rundown of what's waiting there:

- ✔ The Market News Center (keyword **MNC Stocks**) offers quick graphs for everything from the Dow Jones Industrials to the Japanese Nikkei 225, plus selected news headlines.
- ✔ The Quotes window automatically includes a search of news articles relating to particular ticker symbols. To see the headlines, pull up a price quote for your favorite stock. The Quotes window delivers recent articles from Reuters, the Associated Press, the PR Newswire, and the Business Wire for any company you choose.
- ✔ AOL MarketDay (keyword **MarketDay**) wraps the day's financial news in one easy-to-use window. It includes a blow-by-blow description of the day's stock-price moves and links to several other AOL-based financial information areas.
- ✔ AOL Business News (keyword **Business News**) takes you to the Business window of the News Channel, for the latest in wire stories of business deals and the companies that make them.
- ✔ Historical Quotes (keyword **Historical Quotes**) doesn't tell you what Patrick Henry said (although that's how I accidentally found the area). Instead, it sends you to the Charts tab on the Quotes page, where you can thumb through previous years of pricing to clearly show how a stock performed in the past. (Remember, as the gurus say, that previous performance is no guarantee that you're not going to all lose your socks on this sucker the next time around.) Just plug a ticker symbol into the Enter Symbol box, and then pick a timeframe for your historical chart.

- ✔ Stock Research (keyword **Stock Research**) delivers stock reports, financial statements, earnings reports, and the EDGAR 10K and 10Q reports directly to your hot little hands — for free.
- ✔ For moments when you want another opinion or want to buy something now, the Stock Center (keyword **Stocks**) and the Mutual Fund Center (keyword **Mutual Funds**) supply everything that you need, from final analysis information to links to online brokers.



Invest carefully, and don't believe everything that you hear on the Personal Finance discussion boards. (Really: Do *not* believe all the chatter on discussion boards *anywhere* on America Online or the Internet itself. For mounds of support for that warning, check out the latest edition of Eric Tyson's *Personal Finance For Dummies*, yet another Wiley publication.)

Portfolios (keyword **Portfolios**)

The other side of the America Online built-in stock-tracking tool is the Portfolios system, at keyword **Portfolios**. Unlike its little brother the Quotes window, Portfolios easily handles a whole, well, portfolio of stock investments. Your portfolio shows, at a glance, your positions for all stocks, including the number of shares, the stock's current price, the price you paid for it, and your total gain (or, horrors, loss).

All the tools that you need for creating and managing a portfolio live in the Portfolios window. Your first portfolio, cleverly named Portfolio #1, is automatically created after you tell America Online that you want to add a stock to your portfolio. Open your portfolio by either double-clicking it or clicking once to highlight it and then clicking Display.

With your portfolio open on-screen, you can do any of the following:

- ✔ **Add another stock to the portfolio:** Use the Add Item button. You need to know the stock ticker symbol, the number of shares, and the price you paid for the stock.
- ✔ **Remove a stock:** Click the stock you want to get rid of and then click Delete Item. When America Online asks whether you're sure, click OK.
- ✔ **Transfer a stock to a different portfolio:** Click the stock and then click Transfer Item. America Online displays a nice dialog box asking to which portfolio you want to move the stock. (Of course, you need at least two portfolios before trying this little trick. For more about making a new portfolio, see the text following this list.)
- ✔ **Edit an entry:** Click the entry you want to change and then click Edit Item. You can adjust the number of shares and the purchase price, but you can't change the ticker symbol. To do that, you need to delete the entry entirely and then create a new one.

- ✓ **Check the details:** Double-click the stock entry that you want detailed information about. After a moment or two of serious consideration, the system displays a window filled to the brim with expanded price information, links to recent news stories, and buttons to create historical charts.
- ✓ **Look up a ticker symbol:** Stock ticker symbols leave me scratching my head (I have trouble linking AT&T to the mono-consonant symbol T, or AOL to its new TWX symbol). If you suffer from the same problem, click the Lookup Symbol link to bring forth the Symbol Lookup page. Use this little tool to find ticker symbols by company name or market or to uncover the company behind some obscure symbol.
- ✓ **Download:** Copy your portfolio information into a file for use with financial programs such as Quicken and Metastock or with any other program that understands comma-delimited or tab-delimited files. (Check your spreadsheet or database documentation to see which format your program prefers.)
- ✓ **Refresh the display:** Click Refresh to get the latest prices for all stocks in your portfolio.



You can create and manage multiple portfolios through the system, as well. To do so, go to the main Portfolios window at keyword **Portfolios** and then choose your task from the following items:

- ✓ **Create a new portfolio:** Click Create. When AOL asks for a portfolio name, type it and then click OK. The new portfolio appears in the Portfolios window.
- ✓ **Delete a portfolio:** Click the portfolio you don't want anymore and then wave solemnly at it while clicking Delete. After the system asks whether you really, really want to delete the portfolio, click OK.
- ✓ **Rename a portfolio:** Click the portfolio with the weird name and then click Rename. After America Online asks you for a new name, type it and click OK.



Be careful when you're deleting a portfolio. Make doubly sure that you click the correct portfolio: After you click that fateful OK button, that portfolio is gone forever. You have no Oops key, so don't let mistakes happen to you.

Part V

Secret Tricks of the AOL Gurus

The 5th Wave By Rich Tennant



“Remember if you’re updating your AOL page, no more animated GIFs of your sister swinging from a tree, scratching her armpits!”

In this part . . .

In addition to its great content areas, strong Internet links, and dandy little triangular logo, America Online harbors secret powers known only to a select few. In the past, only the Acolytes of the Great Circle-Triangle-Thingie knew the twists and turns of the system's hidden paths — only they gained entry to the powerful inner sanctum of America Online, where customized profiles, Internet software tricks, and personalized menus are part of everyday life.

The chapters in this part tear away this veil of secrecy, exposing the steps that bring these extraordinarily cool extras into your online life, too. From using America Online through your PDA to building your own Web site, these chapters explain stuff that you probably wondered about but never knew how to find. With these powerful techniques in hand, you, too, are ready to join the ranks of the initiated — the ranks of the AOL Gurus.

Chapter 20

Customizing Your Online Persona

In This Chapter

- ▶ Unlocking the secrets of the custom profile
 - ▶ Personalizing your profile
-

The basic America Online account looks so, well, basic. Your Instant Message window looks plain and sounds boring. Your profile reads like a tax form: Please state your name, birthday, occupation, marital status, blah, blah, blah. The whole thing feels like a green-tinted walk down a sterile tile hallway.

To avoid that disinfected institutional feeling, spice up your online world with some custom color, neat sounds, and a look that's all your own. Put some jazz into your profile with extra categories and simple formatting. Or get really wild by throwing in some pictures and a clickable link or two. Make your IMs sing a tune and emote as you type. With the customization tools built into AOL 9.0, you can make things as cool (or as simple) as you want.

Thanks to careful research and lengthy undercover investigation (okay, so I accidentally bumped into someone in a chat room, and he willingly shared the secrets), this chapter reveals the details of making a cool profile and a unique instant message layout. Best of all, thanks to updates in the new America Online 9.0 software, all of this customization works very easily. You don't need to type arcane codes, copy and paste geeky formatting characters, or do anything strangely technical like that. It's all driven by menus and dialog boxes now, so you can freely change things anytime you want without driving yourself nuts in the process.

Designing the Profile of Your Dreams

After joining the digital world of America Online, one of your first meet-the-neighbors tasks is filling out your member profile with the My Profile button at

keyword **Profile**. Depending on how you fill it out, your online profile may describe who you are and what you do when you're not online (you know — in that other world), offer a little peek into your cyber-psyche, or paint a picture of your character in a role-playing game. The space is yours, so use it well!

A house needs blueprints, coffee cake needs a recipe (at least if you expect anyone except the dog to eat it), and you need a plan before diving headfirst into a massive profile-customization project. Before signing on to the system and starting profile rebuilding, take a few minutes to jot down your profile ideas on a handy piece of paper. Good plans keep any project on track, so knowing precisely what headings and information you want to put in the new profile makes creating the profile much easier.

Need some idea of what you can do in your way-cool customized profile? Take a look at the profiles for screen names JKaufeld and my friend ImTheFamilyDog. Press Ctrl+G to display the Get a Member's Profile window. Type one of the screen names and press Enter. Both profiles feature new headings on the left side of the window, extra information lines on the right side, and blank space to keep everything nice and neat. The ImTheFamilyDog profile goes one step further by including live links that send e-mail, pop off an instant message, find out whether the screen name is signed on to America Online right now, and go to AOL areas. Both profiles include a picture or two (although you might not want to look at my picture right before mealtime, unless you plan to diet a bit).

You can add any or all of those things to your online profile. The only limitation you face (apart from keeping things in good taste — remember, this is a family show) is the amount of space available in each of the profile categories.

When the America Online programmers built the profile system, they gave each category a certain storage size that is measured in how many characters it holds. Table 20-1 lists the eight profile categories and how many characters each one holds. Keep these limits in mind when figuring out what goes where in your new profile. Lengthy dissertations work best in the Location, Hobbies, and Personal Quote sections, while smaller additions fit into Name, Favorite Gadgets, and Occupation. Any links that you include count against the total number of characters, too, so you get less text on the page if you add a bunch of clickable links.

Table 20-1	Category Sizes
<i>This Category</i>	<i>Holds This Many Characters</i>
Name	128
Location	255
Gender	n/a (must choose from preset options)

<i>This Category</i>	<i>Holds This Many Characters</i>
Marital Status	32
Hobbies & Interests	255
Favorite Gadgets	128
Occupation	128
Personal Quote	255



Everything you type on the Hobbies & Interests page of your profile gets automatically fed to the Buddy Match system, so be careful what you type. Buddy Match looks for action words (*fly, run, write, read, draw*, and such) and assumes that they describe specific activities (*flying, running, writing, reading, drawing*, in this example). Buddy Match can lead to some interesting misunderstandings. For instance, if you type **I run a retail store** into your Hobbies & Interests page, the Buddy Match system looks for people who like *running*. Oops. To see what Buddy Match inferred about you from your entries, open your profile by pressing Ctrl+G, typing your screen name into the dialog box, and then pressing Enter. When your profile appears, look at the Buddy Match Shared Interests section in the lower-left side of the window. You might be surprised by what you find there!

Doing the dirty deed

With your paper-based plan in hand, get ready to join the ranks of Those With Cool Profiles. At this point, you can follow the next set of steps to create your new ultracool profile.

The process may look a little long with its step-by-step format, but it isn't bad after you work through the procedure once or twice. (Of course, you can say the same thing about space flight and gene splicing, but I digress.)

Here's how to build your nifty profile:

1. Sign on to America Online.

Because the profiles live on the big America Online computers out in Dulles, Virginia, you can't do a thing with the profile before signing on. (Alas!)

2. Select Community->Member Directory from the main menu, or go to keyword Profile.

Whichever way you go, the Member Directory window jumps onto the screen.

3. Click the **My Profile** link to bring up your profile editing window.

The profile editing window appears, with the Name tab (on the left side of the window) highlighted.

If this is your first trip into the profile creation system, a privacy and security dialog box also appears, duly reminding you that everyone on AOL can see whatever you post in your profile, so you shouldn't post personal information in there. Nod sagely, take the advice to heart, click the Please Do Not Show This to Me Again check box, and then click the OK button to make the little dialog box go away. There — now everybody feels better.



Never post detailed personal information such as your home address or telephone number. (It's worth saying again.)

4. Type whatever information you want to appear on this page of your profile. Use the formatting buttons along the top of the profile window to pretty everything up a bit with various font, format, alignment, and color settings (like Figure 20-1 demonstrates).

Figure 20-1:
A little formatting goes a long way toward a beautiful profile.



Like the other text editing windows in America Online, the profile system gives you all of the rudimentary formatting options. Change the font and font size, add bold, italic, or underlines to your text, line it up on the left, center, or right, and change the color of the text, the text background, and the whole profile page background.



To add a link, a new category, or just some blank space to your profile entry, refer to Table 20-2. Remember to replace the SCREENNAME placeholder with your screen name, and the KEYWORD placeholder with an AOL keyword. If your keyword includes a space (like **African American**

Poetry), just type it with the spaces. The AOL software automatically figures out how to handle that. For the description in your link, type any text you want. Figure 20-2 shows a finished instant message link, ready to go into a profile.

5. After finishing each entry, add a blank line by pressing Return.

That puts extra space between the lines in your finished profile, which makes the finished profile a whole lot more readable.

6. To add text for a different category, click the category tab on the left side of the profile creation window, and then go back to Step 4.

The main text area displays the contents of the new category.

7. See how your profile looks at any time by clicking the Preview button.

The profile system displays your current work, complete with links, text formatting, and the works. To exit the preview pane, click the Back button on the window.

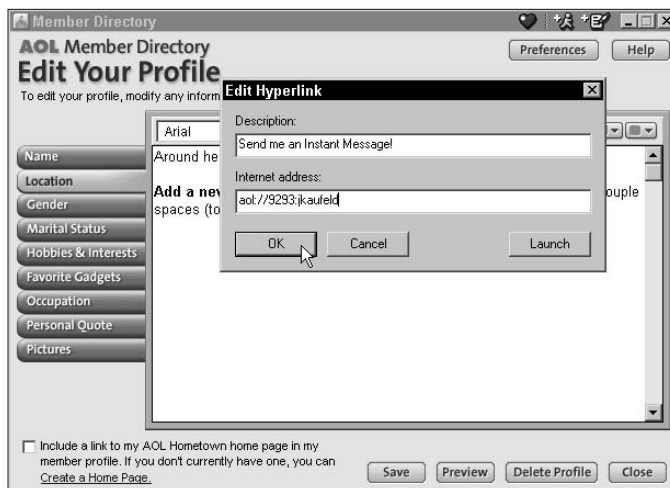
8. Save your work by clicking the Save button at the bottom of the profile editing window.

After a moment, America Online announces that your profile has been updated. (And there was great rejoicing.)

If you left any tabs blank, the profile system displays a rather snippy message asking if you *really* want to save your work. If you're truly done, click Yes. To keep adding more information, click No and return to Step 4.



Figure 20-2:
Links need a simple description plus the behind-the-scenes code for the link itself.



As one final check, take a look at your completed profile from everybody else's perspective. To do that, press Ctrl+G (the shortcut key for the Get Member Profile dialog box), and then type your screen name into the dialog box and press Enter. Your new profile appears on-screen. If it looks perfect, then you did a great job! If it needs a little bit of tweaking, don't worry — just dive back into it and change what needs changing.

Table 20-2	Cool Things to Do in Your Profile
<i>If You Want This . . .</i>	<i>. . . Here's How to Get It</i>
New line	Press Enter (yup, that's all).
Blank separator line	Press Enter twice.
New category	Press Enter, type your new category heading, add a colon and a space or two to make the heading stand out, and then type the rest of the entry's text.
Insert a link	Position the blinking cursor where you want the link, right-click the mouse, and then select Insert Hyperlink from the pop-up menu. Fill out the entries in the dialog box to finish the process.
"Send me an IM" link	Insert a link, type a description (such as "Send me an IM"), and then type <code>aol://9293:SCREENNAME</code> into the Internet Address box. Replace SCREENNAME with your screen name.
"Locate me online" link	Insert a link, type a description, and then type <code>aol://3548:SCREENNAME</code> into the Internet Address box. Replace SCREENNAME with your screen name.
"Send me e-mail" link	Insert a link, type a description, and then type <code>mailto:SCREENNAME</code> into the Internet Address box. Replace SCREENNAME with your screen name.
Link to a Web page	Insert a link, type a description, and then type the Web page's complete address, such as <code>www.morethangames.com</code> or <code>www.shippertools.com</code> .
Link to an AOL keyword	Insert a link, type a description, and then type <code>aol://1722:KEYWORD</code> into the Internet Address Box. Replace KEYWORD with the keyword for the online area.



Get one-stop personalization at keyword **About Me**

Do you feel frustrated because you can't find the obscure setting that customizes part of your America Online software? Don't worry — I feel that way a lot, too. In the name of making our lives easier, the designers added the very clever About Me window (keyword **About Me**) to the America Online software. About Me collects all kinds of customization features from all over the system into a single stop. It's truly a miracle of usefulness.

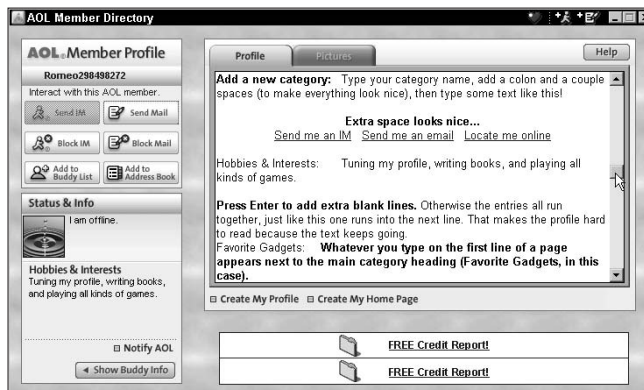
From this one window, you can build your online profile, adjust your Hometown Web site, change your instant message expressions, make your screen name look cool in people's Buddy Lists, and customize both your e-mail and message board signatures. In short, it's amazing!

Poke around in this area to see what you can find. You might surprise yourself with the possibilities!



I really meant that bit about putting blank lines into your profile. Breaking up the text with plenty of white space gives your readers a nice break and makes things look more appealing. See the difference for yourself in Figure 20-3. The text in the middle of the profile almost leaps off the screen at you, but the run-together section at the bottom looks muddled and unfriendly. Blank space is the key.

Figure 20-3:
Including some blank lines makes your profile easy to read.



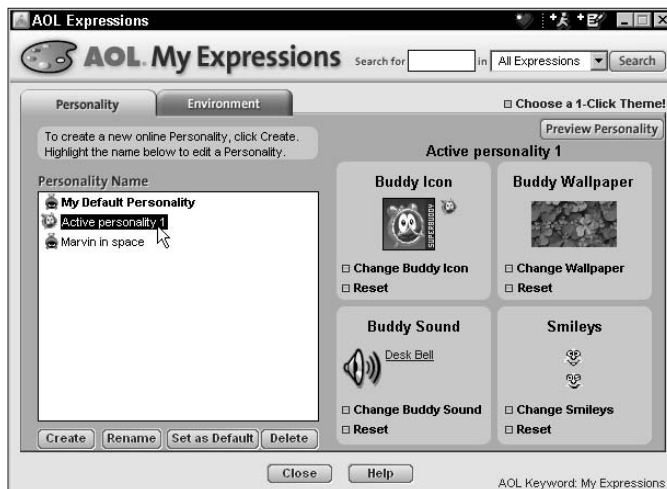
Expressing Yourself in IMs, Desktops, and Toolbars

For a long time, your America Online software looked like everybody else's America Online software. Your instant messages looked the same, and your toolbars looked the same. It was a vast reservoir of sameness. Then, one of the AOL programmers decided to let us, the customers, add our own buttons to the toolbar. That crack of individuality spread through the dam of software sameness, letting personalization explode in the new AOL 9.0 software. Customizations abound in here, and always under the software's helpful guidance (and sometimes, a bit of its over-protective paternalism).

AOL 9.0 lets you mess around with the color schemes for the interface (the desktop and toolbar). It also gives you *lots* of leeway in what your Instant Message windows look and sound like. Many of these customizations carry over to other areas of the online experience, too. For instance, the background image for your instant messages also decorates the window when someone looks at your member profile.

In a bold stroke of usability, all of this customizable goodness lives in one area of your software: keyword **My Expressions**, shown in Figure 20-4. A pair of tabs at the top of the window let you switch between the Personality side (which governs your instant messages) and the Environment (including the desktop, toolbar, and the three main AOL sounds — Welcome, You've Got Mail, and Goodbye). The window always starts on the Personality page, but you can switch to Environment at any time by clicking its tab.

Figure 20-4:
Want to customize the look of your online world? Start here, with keyword **My Expressions**.



On the Personality side of the window, you can put your unique fingerprints on any of these areas:

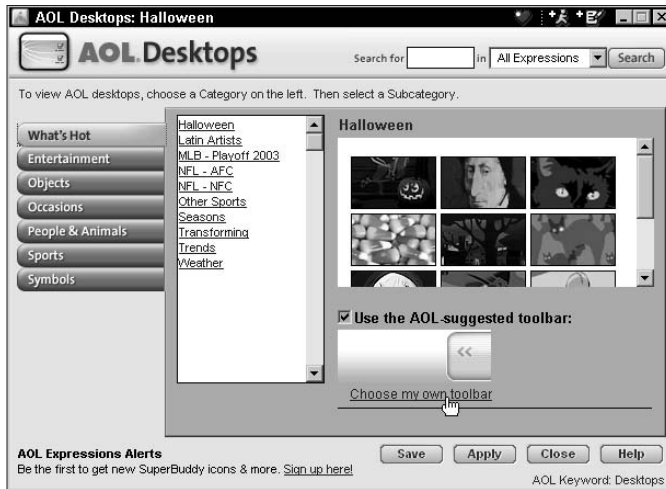
- ✔ **Buddy Icons:** Your Buddy Icon appears on instant messages, in your member profile, and next to your name in the Buddy List. You can select standard icons (just a picture), animate icons, or the new SuperBuddy Icons, which go through little animated tricks depending on what you type in your messages.
- ✔ **Buddy Wallpaper:** This image backs up your instant messages and also appears behind your member profile and as a border around any chat rooms you create.
- ✔ **Buddy Sound:** Pick something to replace the standard *duh-di-ling* instant message chime. Your Buddy Sound also plays automatically when you enter a chat room.
- ✔ **Smileys:** Want something a little different than the standard yellow smileys? This setting puts a whole army of smileys at your command. Pick some dice-shaped smileys, music note smileys, snowman smileys, or even baby-face smileys. Many of the smileys go through little animations in the new America Online software, too. (Isn't that cute?)

To change one of the options, click the appropriate [Change](#) link (such as [Change Buddy Icon](#), for instance). A new window appears, offering a smorgasbord of options, and the requisite Save, Apply, and Close buttons. Save remembers your changes, Apply saves your change, but leaves the window open so you can continue looking for other nifty options. Each area also includes a [Reset](#) link that takes everything back to the standard default values

Clicking the Environment tab takes you to the Desktop and AOL Sounds options. Here, you can:

- ✔ Put a different graphic on your AOL Desktop, and choose a color scheme for your software's toolbar. The toolbar color options live behind the [Choose My Own Toolbar](#) link inside the Desktops page, as Figure 20-5 shows. (For some reason, toolbars don't qualify for their own separate entry in the Environment. Go figure.)
- ✔ Tired of the same person speaking every time you begin and end your America Online sessions? Substitute your favorite celebrity's voice instead! Click the [Change AOL Sounds](#) link, and then pick from the rather amazing collection of celebrity voices, including Cher, David Letterman, and even Dr. Evil. Preview each celebrity's vocalizations by clicking his or her link, and then clicking the Listen buttons next to each of the three sounds. When you find one that you like, click the Download button for that sound. Reset your sounds to the default guy with the [Reset](#) link in the AOL Sounds section on the My Expressions page.

Figure 20-5: Click this unassuming link on the Desktops customization window to change your toolbar colors.



For a quick and complete collection of matching expression settings, try one of the 1-Click Themes at keyword **1-Click Themes**. Each of these includes a Buddy Icon, Buddy Wallpaper, a Buddy Sound, Smileys, and an appropriate Desktop color. Tell the world you're happy or sad, that you love movies or marine life, or whatever else you want to convey. The 1-Click Themes make a nice solution to those moments when you want something different, but don't feel like going item-by-item to make it happen.

Chapter 21

Dressing Up Your Software with Fresh Buttons and a New Menu

In This Chapter

- ▶ Building a better toolbar
 - ▶ Welcoming your choice of Welcome windows
 - ▶ Creating a menu one item at a time
-

Customizing means extraordinarily different things to different people. To one person, it means adding a pinstriped dash of color to the exterior of a car; to another, it involves some lighthearted reorganization of the vehicle's body parts with the help of a handy acetylene torch. (Okay, maybe that's *art* rather than customization, but you get the point.)

In the world of software, customer-customizable features started out small ("You want to change the color of your screen? You got it!") and gradually grew to the point where we are today. With many applications on the market, you can adjust almost anything — including the menus and the toolbars.

The America Online software rides this trend by including those two big customization features. You, the non-programming America Online member, can add new buttons to the toolbar and create your own navigational menu system (complete with hot keys). This chapter explores the ins and outs of these two great customizing features, first tackling the toolbar and then illuminating the My Hot Keys menu.



Although building your own toolbar buttons and menus isn't hard, the task is easier if you know about the Favorite Places heart icon and understand how keywords work in America Online. To find out about them both in one easy step, flip to Chapter 8.

Dancing the Toolbar Tango (Or Is That the New Button Bop?)

When it first arrived on the scene, the toolbar just sorta hung out at the top of the screen and stared at you. Granted, it was useful (and colorful), but it wasn't terribly interactive. The America Online programmers put a great deal of thought into precisely which buttons should appear on the toolbar, and they put them there carefully. So, if you didn't like one or another of them (my personal nemesis was the Quotes button — the stock market and I just don't mix), you couldn't do anything about it.

In the latest America Online software, the programmers embraced customization, turning the toolbar (or at least a little corner of it) into your personal navigation playground. Although they still lock most of the toolbar in place, the scrollable area on the right end of the toolbar (see Figure 21-1) belongs to you. Fill it with buttons pointing to your favorite America Online areas, chat rooms, or Web sites.

Figure 21-1:

The customizable toolbar buttons live on the toolbar's right side.



Exactly how many buttons can you put there? With America Online 9.0, the answer is 18. When you reach the magical limit, you have to delete one or two of your favorites before you can replace them with new toolbar buttons.



Making a toolbar button takes only a moment, but the exact process depends on one tiny little thing — a Favorite Places icon:

- If the online area for your prospective toolbar button has a Favorite Places heart icon at the top of its window, you're only a few moments away from adding that area to your toolbar. Just cruise through the following steps for all the details.
- If the window *doesn't* have a Favorite Places heart icon, you can't create a toolbar button for the area. Sorry, but that's how it goes. (Even flexibility has limits.)

To put a button of your own on the toolbar (or to replace an existing button with a new one), follow these steps:

1. **If the customizable area of the toolbar is full, decide which of the customizable buttons you don't need anymore.**

If you have an open space in the toolbar's customizable section, skip ahead to Step 4.

Granted, losing a button to gain one doesn't seem fair, but unless you have open space in the customizable section of your toolbar, that's how things go.

2. **Right-click the button that's going bye-bye and then click the Remove from Toolbar option (it's the only one, as you can see in Figure 21-2).**

The Are You Sure dialog box appears.

Figure 21-2:
Just one click, and the button is history.



3. **Click Yes.**

Quick as a wink, the toolbar button vanishes, leaving an open space on the right side of the screen for your button.

4. **Using whatever method you usually use (keyword, Favorite Place entry, or menu browsing, for example), view the online area destined for its own toolbar button.**

The online area of your heart hops on the screen.

5. **Drag and drop the little heart icon into the customizable toolbar area (see Figure 21-3).**

After releasing the mouse button, the Icon Selector dialog box hops on the screen.

Drop the heart icon wherever you want it to appear in the toolbar. The America Online software adds it right there — your new button can fall at the beginning of the list, somewhere near the middle, or way at the end.

If you drop the little heart icon on top of the Favorite Places entry in the navigation bar, the AOL software assumes that you want to add this online area to your Favorite Place list, *not* that you want to make a toolbar button out of it.



Figure 21-3:

Drop the icon on this end to make a new button.



6. Scroll through the collection of pictures until you find one that looks vaguely like what you want, and then click it.

The icon you click highlights with pride.

You can't add your own pictures to the icon list. For now, you simply enjoy the opportunity to use the artwork graciously provided by the America Online developers.

7. Click in the Label box and then type a one- to eight-letter label for your new toolbar button. Then click OK.

The button proudly takes its place on the toolbar, looking something like Figure 21-4.

**Figure 21-4:**

The shiny new toolbar button.



Each screen name gets its own custom toolbar buttons, so don't be surprised when your new button vanishes the moment you switch to a different screen name. When you change back to the original screen name, the custom button comes back.

To use the button with other screen names on your account, sign on with each of the other names and go through the make-a-button process for each one. If you have multiple copies of the America Online software (one on your home computer and one at work, for example), you need to add the buttons in both places. Custom toolbar buttons aren't stored in the America Online computers; they're stored on your computer.

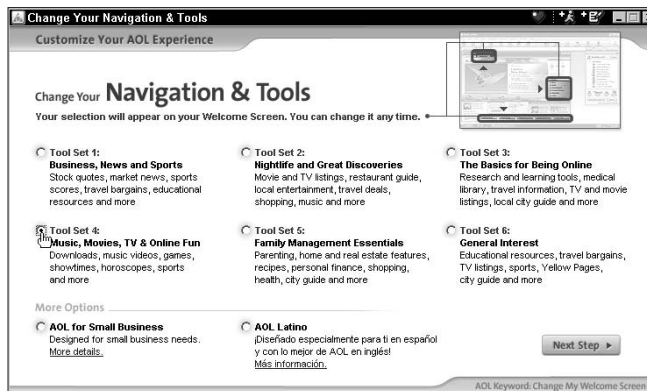
Also, you can't create custom toolbar buttons if you signed on with the Guest option — it works only on your very own copy of America Online.

Building a Welcome That Matches Your Mood

I never imagined that this book would include a section about customizing the AOL Welcome window. Never. Never ever. Never ever, *ever*. (Well, you get the idea.) The Welcome window sits like a jewel, central in AOL's crown of online content. And now members get to choose a screen of their very own to put there. Amazing.

Because the developers gave you the opportunity to make a change, run with it! As Figure 21-5 shows, you can choose from six Welcome window layouts. All six layouts bring you news, weather, e-mail, and such, but they do it with individual twists. For instance, screen #2 features entertainment news and nightlife information, and screen #4 includes extra shopping content (that one's bad for my credit card!).

Figure 21-5:
Many layouts may try, but only one can be your Welcome window.



To choose a new Welcome window, follow these steps:

1. After signing on to AOL, click the tiny **Change This Screen** link in the lower-left corner of the Welcome window.

The Change Your Navigation & Tools window (which you met in Figure 21-5) appears.



For keyword lovers in the audience, try keyword **Change My Welcome Screen**. It *should* display the window as well, provided the developers didn't change the keyword on me after the book went to press.

2. Look through the available screens until you find one that tweaks your fancy, select that screen, and click the Next Step button.

The system accepts your choice, and the window disappears, replaced by a new dialog box asking about your Stories and Features selection.

3. Click the radio button next to the type of stories you want to see on the Welcome window, and then click the Next Step button.

A congratulatory window appears, reminding you of your choices for the Welcome window and your news and features lineup. If you want America Online to welcome you with a name other than your screen name, fill it into the text box. Otherwise, leave it blank.

4. Click Finish to accept your screen choice.

The selection screen goes away, leaving room for your newly chosen Welcome window's debut in the middle of your AOL desktop.

Change your Welcome window as much or as little (and as often) as you like. I suggest trying *all* the options to see which one really suits you best.



For a truly custom look to your AOL experience, combine your new Welcome window with a colorful change to the entire AOL desktop and toolbar at keyword **Themes**. Set your inner artist free (and then put the little buggar to work) with these new tools!

A Menu to Call Your Own

My Hot Keys is your very own customizable menu space. Load it with as many as ten of your favorite online destinations. This menu comes preloaded with entries for ten popular parts of America Online (or at least parts America Online wants to be popular, such as Member Rewards), but you can easily change those entries to things you're interested in:

- ✓ Why go to the trouble of putting something in My Hot Keys when adding things to your Favorite Places list is easy? I'm glad you asked. In addition to appearing in My Hot Keys, every item in this special menu is assigned a hot key — something that Favorite Places can't have. Rather than work your way through the menu or manually type the area's keyword, you can press a Ctrl-key combination (Ctrl+0 through Ctrl+9, depending on which position the item holds in My Hot Keys) and go there immediately.
- ✓ You need to keep just one rule in mind: Only America Online areas with a keyword or Web sites can be on the special My Hot Keys menu. If you can't get there with a keyword or through a Web address, you can't get there with the My Hot Keys menu, either.

- Some of my picks for a starter My Shortcuts menu include *Business Week* magazine (keyword **BW**), the very fun Moviefone area (keyword **Moviefone**), the multiplayer game shows from BoxerJam games (www.boxerjam.com), and the ever helpful ShipperTools.com site (www.shippertools.com), which continually simplifies my life as an eBay seller and small-business shipper.

Here's how to customize the My Hot Keys menu with your Favorite Places:

- 1. Find something you want to add to the menu and get its keyword or Web address and name.**

Make sure that the keyword or address is correct; otherwise, the menu option doesn't work (and the programmers of the world don't need *any* help developing software that doesn't work).

- 2. Click the down-arrow attached to the Favorites button and choose My Hot Keys→Edit My Hot Keys from the menu that appears.**

The Edit My Hot Keys dialog box displays.

- 3. Decide which key you want to use for the new item and click in the Shortcut Title box for that key.**

If the box already has an entry, press Backspace or Delete to remove it (see Figure 21-6).

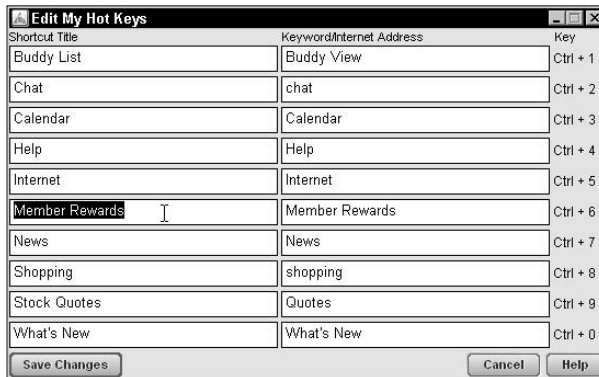


Figure 21-6:
Take out the current entry to make room for your new one.

- 4. In the Shortcut Title box, type the name of the item.**

Whatever you type appears in the My Shortcuts menu, so keep it kinda short — one to four words, at most.

- 5. Press Tab to move to the Keyword/Internet Address box.**

If you're replacing an existing entry, press Backspace or Delete to remove it.

- In the Keyword/Internet Address box, type the keyword or Internet address for your new menu item (see Figure 21-7).**

Double-check your typing to make sure that the keyword is correct. If you entered a Web site address, just type the address itself, such as `www.shippertools.com` — don't worry about including the obnoxious `http://` thing at the beginning of the address. It still works if you include it, but why bother?

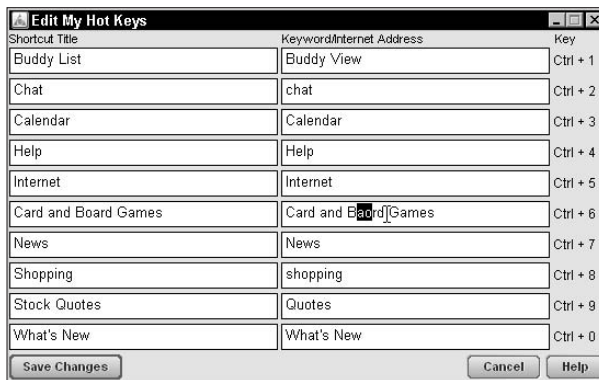


Figure 21-7: Watch your spelling (after all, nobody else will).

- Click the Save Changes button to make the new entry part of your My Hot Keys menu.**

Your new menu item is ready to test!

If you have a sudden desire to forget that you ever considered changing the menu, click Cancel.

- Click the Favorites arrow button again, and then choose your new item from the My Hot Keys drop-down menu.**

If a browser window full of the AOL Search system pops up after trying your new menu item, go back to Step 6 and check the entry in the Keyword/Internet Address area. The odds are high that it's a little spelling challenged.

Dressing Up Your Menus with Favorites

Your toolbar reached its limit, you filled all the My Hot Keys spots, your Favorite Places list becomes more unmanageable every day, and you still have a few really-really favorite spots that you hit each time you travel the

online highway. Well, you have a couple options. You can either whittle down the fore mentioned spaces so you can squeeze one or two new keywords or Hot Keys or whatever, or you can investigate the other almost-super-secret favorites lists.

You guessed it. America Online gives you three more places to squirrel away those places of your heart. They're called AOL Menu Favorites sections, and they hang out at the bottom of the Mail, Community, and Services menus on the menu bar. Fill these menu sections with your favorites, and they're a simple click-and-scroll away — much easier than wading through all the folders and items you stuffed into your Favorite Places menu.

Handy as they are, getting your favorite places to cling to the bottom of these menus isn't a transparent process. Here's how to do it:

1. **Click the Favorite Places button on the navigation bar.**

The Favorite Places window opens, with the AOL Toolbar Menu Favorites folder open near the top of the window (see Figure 21-8).

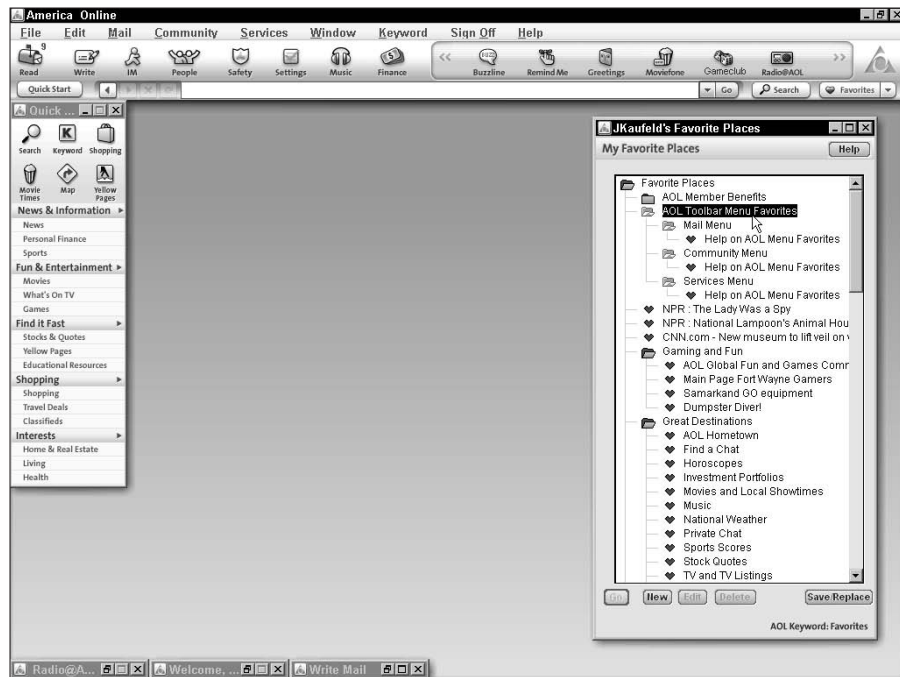


Figure 21-8:
Yee-haw!
Three new
ways to
open those
Favorite
Places!

- 2. Scroll through your Favorite Places list, and then click the one destined for your favorite menu.**

The Favorite Place appears highlighted in your list.

- 3. Drag the item to one of the three open folders: Mail Menu, Community Menu, or Services Menu.**

As you drop it into one of the folders, your favorite item settles into its new home.

Now when you want that item, you find it nestled at the bottom of whichever menu folder you dropped it into.

While you can stuff the Mail Menu, Community Menu, and Services Menu folders as full of items as you like, each menu shows varying numbers of items, depending on which version of Windows your computer uses. Don't be surprised if, after adding more than two items, you suddenly see a More Favorites option on the menu that opens the very same Favorite Places window you are trying to avoid in the first place. Unless you really want three new ways to get into the Favorite Places window, selectivity is a very good thing.

Chapter 22

Spinning a Web (Site) of Your Own

In This Chapter

- ▶ Deciding about the whole Web-site thing
 - ▶ Designing the site of your dreams (instead of your nightmares)
 - ▶ Comparing America Online's two site-building tools
 - ▶ Doing a site on your own
-

Although some technologists might nuzzle over the details, I credit Johannes Gutenberg (of *Gutenberg Bible* fame) with inventing the World Wide Web. Granted, the only web he recognized came from hungry spiders, but the Internet's Web unmistakably bears the stamp of his creativity, his ingenuity, his self-expression, and his simple desire to make money — lots of money. (And, come to think of it, hungry, carnivorous spiders bear a certain resemblance to the venture capitalists behind many Web-based projects — but I digress.)

In Gutenberg's day, few people read books, and even fewer physically owned some titles. Self-expression existed for those rich enough to afford it. Gutenberg's printing press planted the seeds for change by making books easier and less expensive to produce. Over many years, new ideas flourished and grew, thanks in part to the technology of movable type pioneered by Gutenberg.

It almost makes me want to run out and hug a printing press. *Almost.*

The Web picks up where Gutenberg's press left off and takes self-expression to dizzying new heights. Instead of scrawling cryptic philosophy on bathroom walls, the Internet lets people neatly type cryptic philosophy in electronic form and present it to the entire world.

Whether your heart beats for enigmatic philosophy or you feel like telling everybody about your hamster, America Online gives you the online storage space and flexible tools to create your digital version of Gutenberg's press. This chapter starts with a few thoughts about making a Web site and then dives straight into design, creation, and hosting.

Why You Might (Or Might Not) Want Your Own Web Site

What about you? Why would *you* build a Web site? The reasons vary, depending on personalities, goals, beliefs, and total amount of free time. Some sites speak of personal beliefs, family life, or unusual hobbies. Others exist for no particular reason beyond making the Web the rather odd place that it is. Whatever your motivation, the Web offers the perfect palette for expressing yourself, and America Online provides the tools and space to bring your dream into reality.

So, what does your heart need to communicate? Anything come to mind? That's okay — I still haven't figured out what I want to put on a site, either. Maybe you just need some priming to get the ol' mental pump running. Check out the following list for some great starting points, and then grow something that's uniquely your own:

- ✔ **Talk about your hobby.** Whether you love model airplanes, radio-controlled boats, or stamp collecting, hobby-oriented sites make great starting points in your Web adventure. Try including articles about the hobby in general, photos of the items in your collection, stories about events you attended, and links to related hobby sites around the Net. This makes a great way to virtually meet like-minded folks elsewhere in the world.
- ✔ **Learn something new.** When was the last time you threw yourself into a project just for the joy of learning something new? Create a site that follows your journey behind the high-tech curtain and into the world of Web development. Start with simple pages describing your background and goals for this project, and then see where the project goes. This works particularly well if you do it while going through a tutorial book of some sort.
- ✔ **Help a community group.** More and more people look for things on the Web every day. Six years ago, nobody blinked twice if a company or organization didn't put up a Web page (although they probably blinked once or twice at you for asking the question in the first place). Today, people demand an online presence. Unfortunately, many small nonprofit and social groups lack the time and skill to create even a basic site. Why not polish your budding skills and do some good at the same time?
- ✔ **Support a cause.** Everybody believes in something. Whether it's ecology, economics, or elves, sites that explore beliefs make great reading material. Add your voice to a worldwide chorus with a Web site proclaiming your beliefs for all to see!

- ✔ **Announce something special.** Web sites also make great gifts for celebrating a special occasion. A friend of mine put together a site about his grandparents' 60th anniversary, including scanned pictures of their lives together and lots of memories from the family. New babies, a first car, an engagement, or a class reunion all make cool Web site content.
- ✔ **Share fun with far-flung friends and family.** Nothing says you can't make a Web site for just a few people — the Net cops won't arrest you for obstructing the Web-ways or anything. Family get-togethers, school plays, holiday gift ideas, and even family contact lists work well online.
- ✔ **Do it because you can.** Yes, it's the digital version of climbing the mountain because it's there, but compared to scaling Mt. Everest, the height of accomplishment on the Web costs significantly less money and puts a lot less strain on your body. And your zany Uncle Herm always said that nobody asked for his opinion about anything — use the Web to tell people what you think!



All this talk about cool Web sites sounds well and good, but keep track of how much time you spend working on your Web site. Ongoing Web sites eat time like crazy, thanks to updates, changes, additions, and more. You needn't change things every day or two, but your regular readers do expect new content every two to three weeks. Fun sites and *for the in-laws* sites don't require that kind of support, but they threaten a bit of time peril, too. Doing things on the Web is so much fun that getting lost in fiddling with the details is easy. (Of course, that never happens to me . . . goodness no . . . well, sometimes . . . just don't ask my wife about it.)

Stuff to Do Before You Build

Deciding what goes into your Web site gets you over the initial creative hump, but don't fire up your Web browser just yet. Before heading straight to the Web development tools and slapping something together, invest a few minutes into developing the design of your site. Fear not — I don't mean assembling a huge formal site plan, filled with figures, click-through projections, and more footnotes than a football team dancing on note pads. I do mean giving thought to what goes where in your site and how to organize everything so people can find it.



If this marks your first foray into the world of Web development, consider picking up a good reference book covering HTML, the language of the Web. Even though the America Online development tools do a spiffy job of laying out pages and generally hiding the confusing techno-speak, you never know when something in the process might go ping. Understanding a bit of HTML never hurt anybody (at least not seriously). I recommend *HTML 4 For Dummies*, 4th Edition, by Ed Tittel and Natanya Pitts and *Creating Cool HTML 4 Web Pages*, by Dave Taylor (both published by Wiley Publishing, Inc.).

Here's my step-by-step method for designing a Web site from the ground up. It's not guaranteed to cure the common cold or ensure a refund on tax day, but it does simplify the site-birthing process.

1. Turn the computer off, and get out some paper and a writing instrument.

Too many folks try designing in a word processor or straight into their development software. Those things just get in the way, particularly if you're designing your first site. I avoid frustration whenever possible, and sketching site ideas the old-fashioned way definitely helps my quest.

2. At the top of the page, describe your Web site in a few sentences. Keep refining the description until it fits your vision.

A goal statement helps you stay on track. In the next few steps, your creative process starts moving along at a rapid pace. Unless you rein it in with a goal statement, who knows what havoc it might wreak?

3. Brainstorm through ideas for the content available in your site, writing down everything as you go.

During brainstorming, no idea is bad. Turn off the judgmental corner of your mind, and let those ideas flow. Put down everything you think of, regardless of whether you know how to build it or not. If you want a chat room, write it down. Private message board for family discussions? Onto the paper it goes. Custom online photo gallery featuring the Class of '82? Jot it on the sheet.

4. Look over your list with a critical eye, and choose the best three or four ideas as a starting point for your site.

Don't throw away the rest of the list! Keep it for the future, because at some point those other thoughts may come in handy as well.

5. With your best ideas in hand, sketch a simple organization, showing what stuff appears on which page, and how they all link together.

Links form the backbone of the Web, so they take on great importance during the design process. Make sure your visitors can move forward into new pages, as well as backwards away from their choices. Also include a home link on every page; then if all else fails, visitors can pop back to the first page in the site.



Above all else, don't start your site with a fancy graphic page that simply says "Click here to enter the site." When visitors type your Web address, they're standing at the front door of your shop or in the visiting parlor of your '60s retro Beverly Hills mansion. Don't erect a new door for them to go through — just let them into the darn Web site. (As you might suspect, Click Here to Enter pages truly gall me.)



Should your site settle in Hometown?

Everything and everybody needs a place to call home and a community to join. Children, ferns, ferrets, and programmers all need a roof over their heads, a floor beneath their feet, and friends to enjoy. (Some need electricity, board games, and satellite TV as well, but I digress.) Even Web pages need space on a friendly server to really feel settled.

But how does a single Web site find friendship and happiness in the vastness of today's Internet? Don't let your site risk the impersonal rejection of a big search system (you know how sensitive Web sites are). Instead, introduce it to the world through America Online's Hometown system (keyword **Hometown**). In Hometown, your site joins thousands of other America Online member sites, forming a community that spans the world. By listing your site in the system by its subject and a few keywords, anyone on the Net can view your pages, which gives your site that warm, loved feeling. Hometown is digital Nirvana for your HTML code.

Registering your site in Hometown costs nothing, and only takes a few minutes. As an added incentive (okay, it's an outright bribe), America Online doubles your Web storage space from

2MB to 4MB when you add a page to Hometown. If you put all your Web pages into Hometown, your Web space grows to 12MB!

What's the catch to all of this free space goodness? Every page you register in Hometown automatically inherits a "Hometown" banner across the top, complete with search links and a few advertisements. In addition, the Hometown servers don't exactly burn online rubber with their speed. They've improved, but during peak times (such as in the evening), Hometown Web sites spend more time crawling than walking.

Still, Hometown makes a good starting place to sample the world of Web design. Try creating a page in Hometown with 1-2-3 Publish or Easy Designer, and see how you like the outcome. If the banner doesn't bother you, take the storage space and run with it. Otherwise, stick with your basic 2MB of space and build a page on your own with one of the HTML tools discussed at the end of this chapter. If you fall in love with building Web pages, look for something bigger and better than Hometown in the "Doing It Yourself in the Great Out There" section later in this chapter.

Building a Place to Call Homepage

With your design ideas in hand (and on paper), it's time to focus your attention on the technology side of the site-creation process. Converting your visions of Web-based wonder into a fully functioning online site takes two things: a tool for creating your pages and a place to store the finished product. America Online covers both bases, but like so many things with the system, it does it in its own unique way.



First on the agenda is a place to put your site. Your America Online screen names get 2MB of Web storage space each, which gives you plenty of room for a good-sized personal or business Web site under any of them. Contrary to what the artsy-fartsy Web designers preach, there's no reason for a Web site to take tons of space — you can say a lot in just 2MB, believe me. For a great example from a fellow America Online member, check out Jeff Miller's wonderful broadcasting history pages at members.aol.com/jeff560/jeff.html.

For creating your Web pages, America Online offers a pair of Web-building tools, but they both come with a possibly unpleasant catch. Its basic tool, 1-2-3 Publish (keyword **123 Publish**), helps you create a simple single-page site. For a fancier site, turn your attention to the more advanced tool, Easy Designer (keyword **Easy Designer**). This system builds Web sites with several pages, images, and plenty of links.



Okay, so what's the catch? Both tools live inside America Online's Hometown area (keyword **Hometown**), so any pages you build with them *automatically* get registered as part of Hometown. That gives you some cool benefits, such as extra Web storage space but also carries a price. Every page that lives here also gets a big banner across the top with links to Hometown's main page and search system, plus a few advertisements for goodness only knows what. Unfortunately, you can't use its Web-design tools without putting your site into Hometown. (I know — it frustrated me, too.) If you hate the idea of someone else's banner running on your page, flip ahead to the do-it-yourself Web tools section at the end of this chapter and find a good design program there.

1-2-3 Publish reduces the site-building process to a fill-in-the-blank exercise. You choose one of its 90-plus basic templates, type the text where the system tells you to (like Figure 22-1 shows), and let 1-2-3 Publish worry about the details. Granted, you can't churn out a wildly beautiful site with this tool, but it is a fast, simple, and painless way to get your feet wet in the Web-site process.

If you crave a cooler-looking site, take a spin with America Online's other Web-site-making tool, Easy Designer (keyword **Easy Designer**). Where 1-2-3 Publish boxes you into a simple layout, Easy Designer puts the whole world of HTML power at your command, as you can see in Figure 22-2. You can start with a template or a blank page, and then add whatever text, links, and pictures you can imagine. On top of that, Easy Designer helps you add a chat room link, guest register, and other top-notch Web doohickeys with just a few clicks.



Because both tools run inside your browser, they work only while you're signed on to America Online. That makes the time you spend designing your site all the more important, because your design work makes the actual site-building steps go all that much faster.

Figure 22-1:
1-2-3
Publish
steps you
through the
building of a
Web-site
process
slow and
easy.

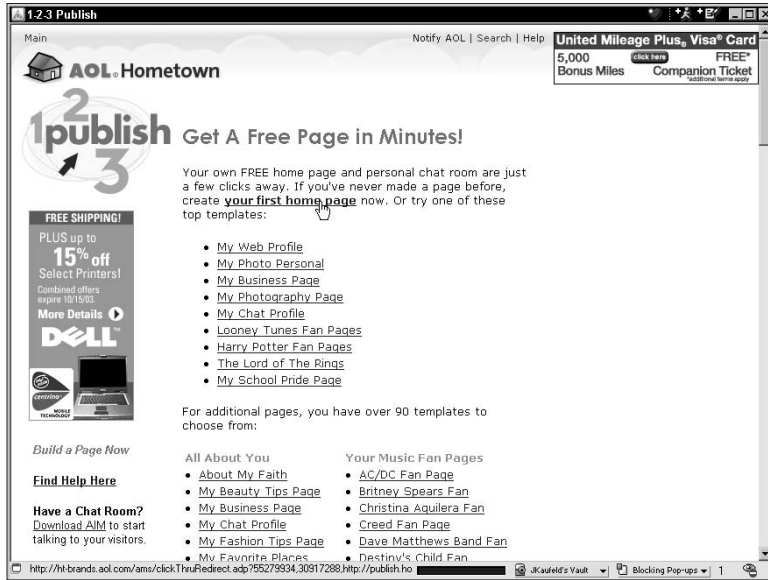
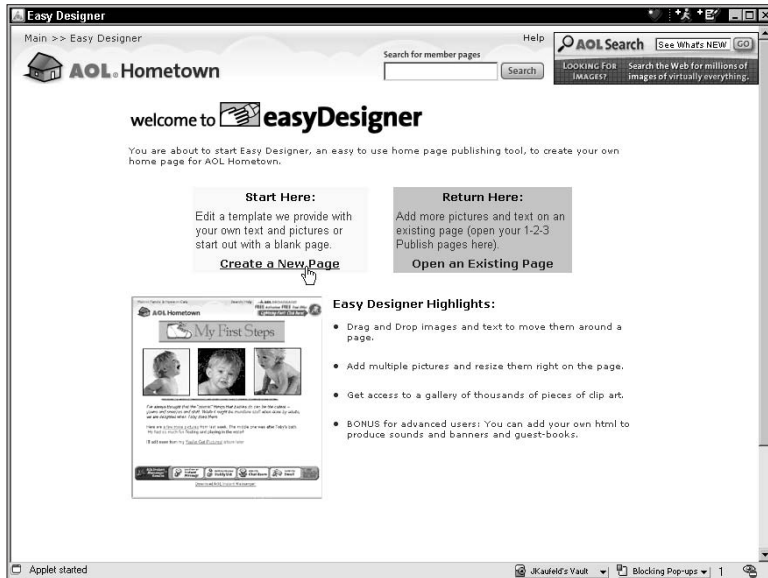


Figure 22-2:
Add,
expand, and
create with
the power
of Easy
Designer.



Doing It Yourself in the Great Out There

If you need more space, features, flexibility, or freedom than what America Online offers with its development tools or free hosting service, strike out on your own with some specialized site-building software or one of the Net's free hosting services. Literally hundreds of programs out there help you create cool pages, and almost as many companies offer free Web space (up to 50MB or more) to store the results. As a bonus, many hosting companies put the entire thing together for you with a great collection of site-building and enhancing tools, such as ready-to-use templates and scripts.



Nothing, including free Web services, comes for free in this world. To pay the bills and keep the servers running, these hosting companies place a banner ad across your Web site. If the idea of advertising for goodness-only-knows-who leaves you a little concerned, either stick with America Online's free hosting services or just bite the bullet and pay for hosting somewhere. After all, many places offer full-featured hosting for \$9.95 or less per month, which doesn't take much of a bite out of anyone's budget.

Although the Net seems awash in free hosting systems, a few stand out from the rest. (At the rate the dot-bombs keep falling, anything still standing stands out.) These companies give you lots of space, great tools, and plenty of help. They include the following:

- ✓ **ProHosting** (free.prohosting.com) makes a great home for serious Web hobbyists. Every account includes plenty of space (50MB), plus full CGI-scripting services. (In case you wondered, CGI scripts help you do extraordinarily cool things with your Web site, but hosting services often charge extra to use them.)
- ✓ Both **50megs** (www.50megs.com) and **20megs Free** (www.20megsfree.com) give you plenty of space — you probably figured out how much they respectively offer by now — and sweeten the deal with a slew of extras, such as site builders, ready-to-use templates, guest books, and hit counters.
- ✓ Planning an online business? If so, try **HyperMart** (www.hypermart.net). It focuses on small-business hosting, with great tools such as CGI scripting, Microsoft FrontPage support, and even autoresponders for answering e-mail queries. Its basic package costs a mere \$99 per year, while the Advanced Hosting and Professional Hosting options pour on the extras without sending the price sky-high.
- ✓ **Angelfire** (angelfire.lycos.com), one of the longest running free hosting sites on the Net, shows its maturity with an incredible set of services for beginning, intermediate, and advanced Web-site creators. Start with its library of prebuilt site templates, and then move on to its collection of scripts and other site add-ons. Want to use the cool features of Microsoft FrontPage 2000? Angelfire supports that, too. Considering that the whole thing still costs you nothing, it's an amazing service.

You can build a decent site with the built-in tools offered by most of these hosting companies, but to spin up something truly wonderful, you need a real Web-development tool of some kind. These programs include tutorials to get you started and help files to keep you rolling, plus clip art, backgrounds, and a ton of features that go well beyond the best free tools available from your favorite hosting service. Some of the top choices include:

- ✓ CoffeeCup HTML Editor (www.coffeecup.com, \$49)
- ✓ Microsoft FrontPage (www.microsoft.com/frontpage, about \$190)
- ✓ HotDog Pagewiz (www.sausagetools.com, \$69.95)
- ✓ Cool Page (www.coolpage.com, free to \$79.95 depending on the version)



Each of these programs works with most any hosting service on the Net, including the America Online space. The details of moving your site to the Web storage space depend greatly on your hosting service, so expect some trial-and-error efforts before your pages land successfully. Each piece of software includes documentation designed to help you through the all-important publishing step of your Web project, but if all else fails, e-mail the company's technical support group and ask for guidance.

Possibly the best thing about these programs is that they live on your hard drive — not on your host's Web site — so you needn't sign on to America Online if you feel like working a bit on your Web site. These programs work more like your word processor or other standard office application. You start the program, open your Web site file, and start whacking away at it. After finishing your work, you sign on to America Online and send the finished file off to your host. Working without being signed on to AOL saves you lots of time (and keeps the phone line open as well).

Some hosting services support the special features of these packages. For instance, Angelfire lets Microsoft FrontPage users enjoy all the special tricks that the program allows for Web sites. Services occasionally charge extra for things like that, but it's a nice benefit if you truly fall in love with a particular program's capabilities.

All of these programs give you room to grow as your needs (and knowledge) increase. Best of all, you can try every one of them before you buy! Just visit the program's Web site for more information about its demonstration offers. I also included the approximate street price for the programs so you know how much each one will set you back.



Don't let price alone guide you in the purchase decision. Cool Page, which even comes in a free version, might work better for you than FrontPage (but don't tell Microsoft that). On the other hand, you might bond with the more expensive FrontPage instead. Either way, the choice remains yours.



For an ever growing list of the wildest, newest, and oddest Web-site-building programs known to the Net, check the shareware section of the Publishing Tools area (keyword **Publishing Tools**, click the Shareware link), or visit your favorite search system and look for **HTML editors**. For help with the basics of building a site, see the Computer Community's Building Web Pages message board (keyword **Computer Community**, click the link for the Computer Community boards, and then click the Building Web Pages link).

Chapter 23

Sampling AOL's Advanced Tools

In This Chapter

- ▶ Enlisting the AOL Communicator in your e-mail battles
 - ▶ Using Personal Digital Assistants for e-mail and more
 - ▶ Doing your work through a handy Web browser
 - ▶ Checking in with AOLbyPhone
-

Sometimes, you just want to get away from it all. You need peace, quiet, and the gentle warmth of the sun on your face. But thanks to our world of endless activity and constant corporate back watching, heading into the deep mountain woods for a few well-deserved months of rest isn't as easy as it used to be. If your mental state demands some breathing space but your boss can't survive his or her next lunch break without your insight, try applying one of America Online's mobile tools to keep yourself in touch (but blissfully out of range).

The My Mobile window (Keyword **My Mobile**) puts a collection of high-tech communication products at your disposal. Check your e-mail from any telephone, trade instant messages through your mobile phone, or zip off a quick e-mail through your Palm or Pocket PC — AOL's My Mobile toolbox handles it all. If you have the right equipment at hand, these systems deliver all the information you need (or that your boss *thinks* you need) to wherever you find yourself.

Journey through this chapter for a good overview of everything AOL Anywhere has to offer. The chapter covers AOLbyPhone, AOL on your handheld computer, AOL in your mobile phone, AOL through an odd-looking combination PDA and mobile phone, AOL through the Web, and even AOL on your desk at home but *without* your computer — truly, AOL Darned Near Anywhere. I hope you won't need *all* these options, but maybe the right application of one or two could spring you from Cubicle Jail and send you toward a glorious (and restful) sunset.



Incidentally, if your boss *suggested* that you explore the AOL Anywhere products — and perhaps even *test* some — for your next vacation, take heart. Even though the AOL Anywhere tools work just wonderfully, they all still depend on batteries in your sundry high-tech devices . . . and we *all* know how easily little things like that get (ahem) *misplaced* during the frazzled rush of packing for a looooong vacation. (Just remember to misplace them somewhere handy so it only takes a moment to “find” them when you return.)

Taming Your E-Mail with Communicator

Not too terribly long ago, merely getting an e-mail sometimes made your whole day. During those first few months of using America Online, your e-mail box probably looked pretty darned lonely (except for the occasional junk e-mail message, of course). All of that changed as you got to know more people and passed your e-mail address out to your new-found friends. Messages started trickling in, and then flowing in — and then one day you wondered where this overwhelming daily torrent of mail could possibly come from and how on Earth you might deal with it.

After sifting through millions of their own messages, the programmers at America Online apparently felt the same mail control frustration that you experience, so they solved the problem by creating the AOL Communicator (keyword **AOL Communicator**). This stand-alone program helps you handle, reply, track, organize, sort, and search your AOL e-mail, as well as messages from pretty much any other e-mail system on the planet.



Although the Communicator works best and easiest when handling messages from your various AOL screen names, it also understands the peculiar technical lingo of Internet e-mail systems. If you use an e-mail address on a system that supports either the IMAP or POP e-mail protocol, then you can configure Communicator to manage mail heading to that address. Granted, this feels a little technical, but with the AOL Communicator documentation and the system’s handy video-based tutorial system, you’re definitely up to the challenge. And if all else fails, you can always rent a few minutes of time from your favorite computer techie for a warm plate of brownies.

In addition to its e-mail features, the AOL Communicator also brings along some very useful add-on tools:

- ✔ **You get a stand-alone version of Radio@AOL**, so you can tune into your favorite AOL music channel without running the whole darned America Online program just to do it. (Given the amount of time I spend listening to Radio@AOL, this tool is my single favorite part of the AOL Communicator package.)

- ✔ **Communicator also delivers an Instant Messaging tool** that works just like AOL Instant Messenger (also known as AIM).
- ✔ **Plus you get a news ticker system and a slick screen saver** that displays the current news as well.

These parts of AOL Communicator add up to a very nice package that promises enhancements to just about anybody's online life.

To get your own copy, go to the AOL Communicator window at keyword **AOL Communicator** and click the big Click to Download Now button, shown in Figure 23-1. The system asks if you want to register your current screen name with the AOL Communicator (which you probably want to do), and then inquires where you want to store the software when it finishes downloading.

Figure 23-1: Download the AOL Communicator for free from keyword **AOL Communicator**.



After a few minutes of downloading (or many minutes if you use a modem connection), the AOL Communicator lands on your system. You still need to install the program, though — this first round of activity only copies the software from AOL to your computer's hard drive. Just find the program and double-click it to start the installation process. Communicator walks you through the whole thing, and automatically starts itself at the end.



Start your exploration of Communicator by setting it to work with one of your lesser-used, backup screen names. That way, you don't risk misplacing any important e-mail messages as you learn your way around the program. After you feel confident with the buttons and window panes, add your other screen names to Communicator's list and start using the program to manage all your in-bound mail.



Relying on your trusty Sidekick

If you simply *must* use e-mail and instant messages on the run, consider getting (or, better yet, having your employer buy for you) a T-Mobile Sidekick. The device looks like a combination PDA and pager on steroids. A small but complete keyboard sits across the front of the Sidekick, underneath the swivel screen. It doesn't *look* much like its science-fiction namesake, but it sure works like it's from the future!

The device combines phone and PDA functions, so you can use it pretty much wherever, whenever, and however you want. With its larger screen and full keyboard, the Sidekick makes on-the-run online computing an honest joy.

Feature-wise, the Sidekick lets you read and send e-mail, hold instant message conversations, and browse the Web. It handles work-sized messages with ease, both coming in and going out. America Online updates the unit's software on a regular basis, adding new capabilities and faster service.

Now for the bad part — how much does all this goodness cost? The Sidekick itself runs \$299.95, which isn't terribly bad considering everything it does. AOL sometimes offers discounts on the device itself to tempt the fence-riders into giving it a try. The service requires an account with mobile phone provider T-Mobile, but it's price-competitive with other companies.

Is it worth the cost? Frankly, it depends. I know some people who simply *couldn't* give up their Sidekicks, but I know other people who can't imagine parting with their moss and mold collections. If you *really* need instant messages anytime, anywhere, and anyhow, you can't beat the Sidekick, despite the hefty price tag. If your need doesn't live up to the price, try using your mobile phone's instant messaging capability as a (rather inadequate) substitute. For more about that, flip ahead to the mobile phone section later in the chapter.

Putting AOL in Your Palm (And Your Pocket PC)

Gather the children around, and I shall spin a tale of days gone by, when giant computers roamed the campuses of major universities. These gentle beasts commanded so much love and admiration (and demanded such excessive quantities of uninterrupted power and consistent air conditioning) that their caretakers often built giant enclosed paddocks for the creatures' comfort and security. Although these machines had the computing power of a solar-powered pocket calculator, nobody knew any better back then, so all was well and good with the world.

Today, the average entry-level Palm device, Pocket PC, or Internet-ready mobile phone packs more power and memory than any of those huge

university machines — plus it fits in your pocket, runs on batteries, and reminds you of impending anniversaries. To harness all that capacity, America Online developed a group of AOL Anywhere tools specifically for all kinds of handheld devices.

Using AOL with a Palm, Handspring, or Pocket PC device

The designer's first efforts centered on America Online software for *Personal Digital Assistants* (PDAs) using the Palm, Windows CE, and Windows for Pocket PC—operating systems. Because of the smaller screens on these little guys, the engineers didn't attempt to bring the whole America Online experience to them. Instead, they focused on the Big Kahuna applications that everybody loved. In no time at all, e-mail, Buddy Lists, and instant messaging appeared for all kinds of PDAs.



To check out what's available and download a copy for yourself, visit keyword **My Mobile**, and then click the PDA Center tab on the left side of the screen. This brings up the area that looks a lot like Figure 23-2. It offers software for both Palm systems and the newer Windows for Pocket PC gadgets. Strangely, AOL recently started charging for the mobile software. (No, I don't know why.) It only costs \$19.95 — and if you travel a lot, it's definitely money well spent.

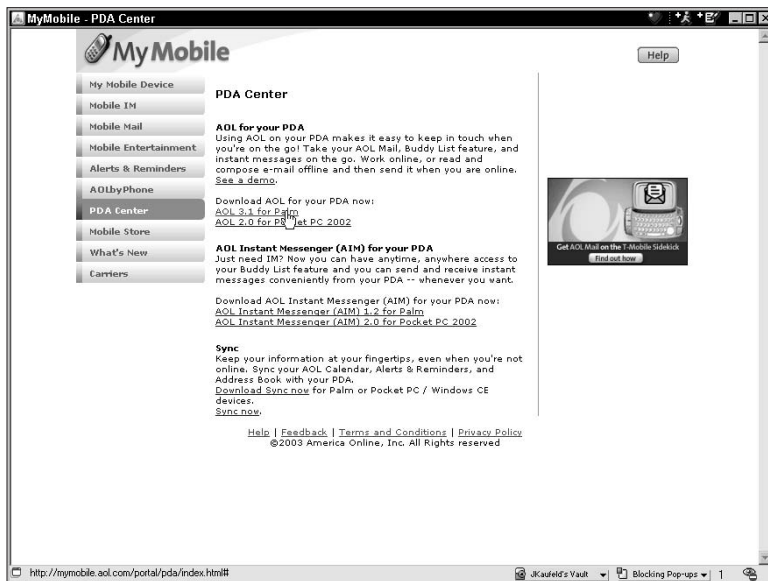


Figure 23-2:
AOL
Anywhere
comes in
flavors for
all popular
PDAs.

Overall, the programs work great — they really saved my bacon during some business conferences — but you need some extra equipment to make them really sing. First, get a modem for your device. You need that to make the communications link between your PDA and America Online. Check your PDA manufacturer's Web site for details on the modems available for your device. Expect to spend around \$100 to \$150 for a modem. (But it's worth every penny to a serious on-the-road professional.)



Thanks to some extra hardware in Windows CE and Windows for Pocket PC devices, these fellows can use the America Online software with either a modem or a network card. If you work in a large office environment, you might plug your handheld into the network instead of slapping in a modem and dialing the old-fashioned way. If you travel outside the office, definitely get a modem.

Next on your shopping list is a good text entry system for your PDA. It sounds odd given the portable nature of a PDA, but if you want to do anything serious (such as writing memos, taking notes in a meeting, or compiling your thoughts about a project), a keyboard of some kind greatly speeds up the process.

The single best PDA keyboard on the market comes from a little company called Think Outside (www.thinkoutside.com). Its Stowaway folding keyboard looks incredible, feels even better than it looks, and takes up less space in your travel bag than a paperback book. You never spent a better \$99 than this. It makes keyboards for all Palm and Handspring PDA, as well as selected Compaq, Hewlett Packard, and Sony models. Visit its Web site for the details.

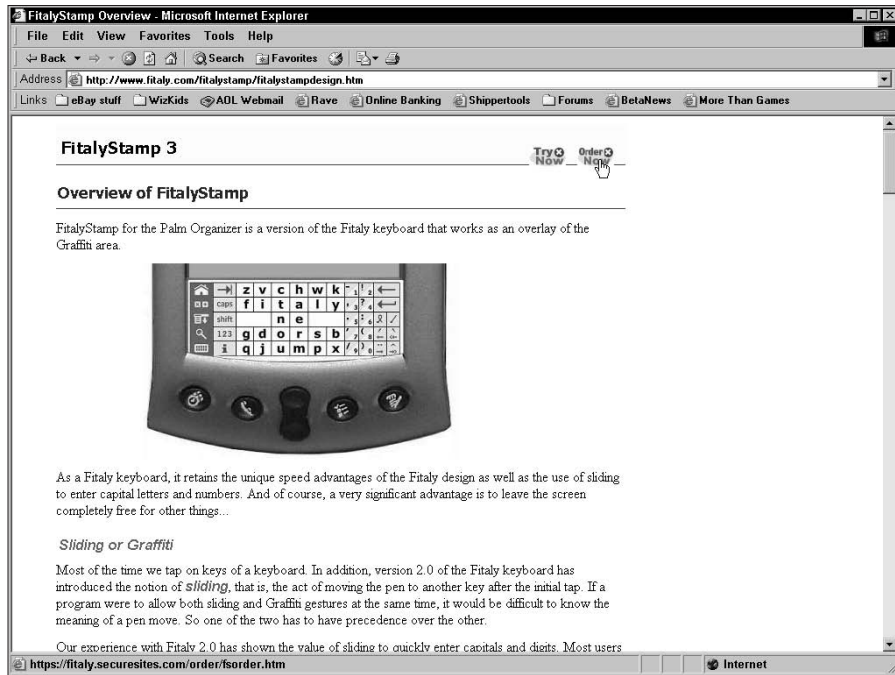


Although I thought that nothing would ever tempt my fingers to wander from my beloved Stowaway keyboard, the Fitaly Stamp system (www.fitaly.com, and then click the [Fitaly Stamp](#) link) completely won my heart for typing while on the go. Fitaly draws its name from the strange-looking letter layout shown in Figure 23-3. The researchers at Fitaly designed this keyboard for single-finger typing, which is precisely what you do with a stylus and your PDA.

After getting used to the layout, the Fitaly keyboard really amazes you. In no time at all, you're entering text *much* faster than you could with the standard handwriting methods, and with significantly greater accuracy. This little program is worth its weight in gold.

Try it by downloading the on-screen version of the keyboard. Thanks to Fitaly's try-before-you-buy approach to selling software, you can give the Fitaly software a solid test without risking any money at all. After falling in love with it (and you will, trust me), I highly recommend upgrading to the Fitaly Stamp version, provided it makes one that works with your PDA. As I write this, Fitaly Stamp offers a Palm version, but its Pocket PC version isn't quite finished yet.

Figure 23-3:
It takes
some
practice at
first, but
after a few
days with
the Fitaly
tap-typing
keyboard,
you won't
believe your
speed.



Toodling around with your mobile phone

Always a restless group, the designers built on their PDA success by testing the mobile phone market. By working with the folks at Sprint PCS and AT&T Wireless, America Online served up the first serious online access available to mobile phone users. In fact, America Online is even built right into the menus of Internet-capable phones for those two systems — just get into the phone's microbrowser, and choose AOL from the menu. From there, you can sign in, check your e-mail, and even exchange instant messages with your friends.



Before getting too awfully excited about this, remember that a mobile phone's tiny screen makes a Personal Digital Assistant look like a widescreen TV. On top of that, the microbrowser software — the main ingredient of navigating the online world through your phone — forces you to do everything with laborious menus. If you ever uttered words such as “#* & @!\$” while using one of those “Press 1 for an obscure department nobody ever talks to; press 2 for . . .” phone systems, prepare for the worst. Web browsing, e-mailing, and instant messaging on your mobile phone might just send you over the edge. (And you didn't even *try* typing on it yet . . . ewwww!)

If your patience rivals that of the saints, give your mobile phone Internet service a try. Among other things, it gives you wireless access to the news headlines, stock quotes, and sports scores of the MyAOL area (keyword **My AOL**), the wild shopping safari of eBay auctions (www.ebay.com), plus restaurant reviews, driving directions, traffic reports, movie show times, and flight information. Unfortunately, it gives you all that on a tiny screen accessed through a particularly painful interface.



Although I think mobile-phone access might eventually turn into the coolest thing since e-mail itself, right now it definitely wears the badge of Painfully New Technology. For a significantly better solution that uses your mobile phone, consider AOLbyPhone, covered in the next section.

Connecting through the Web

Like it or loathe it, the Internet seems determined to infiltrate every nook and cranny of the physical world. It started with computers at colleges and universities and then spread to homes. Internet-connected workstations appeared in airport gate lounges. Internet kiosks popped up at the local mall. Perfectly good delis turned into Net-dot-cafes (which, I hasten to add, suddenly forgot everything they knew about the deli business, including how to make a good turkey and Swiss on whole wheat, with just a touch of mayo and brown mustard to really bring out the flavor).

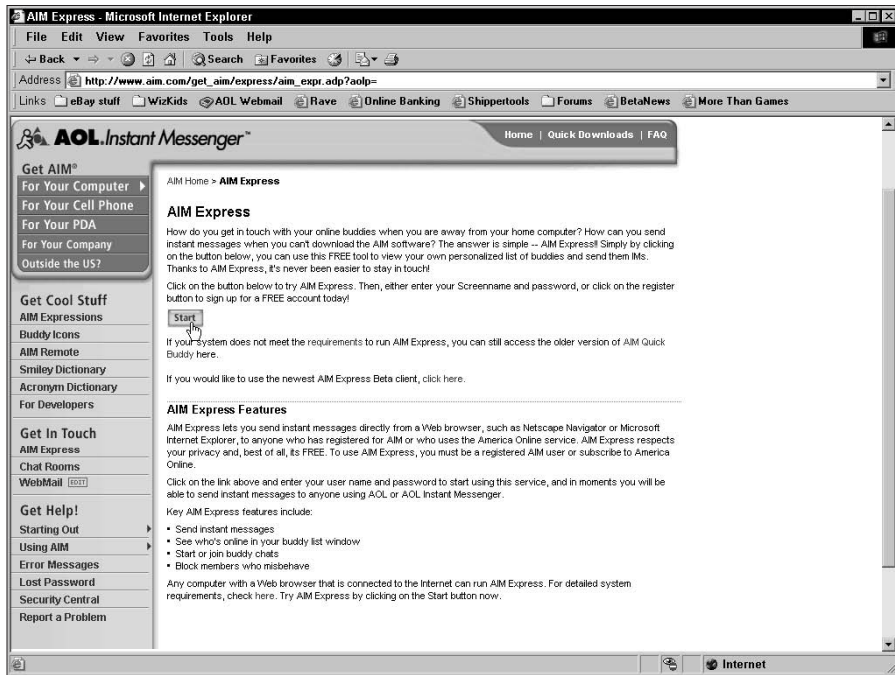
With all this Internet connectivity at your fingertips, you're never far from America Online. As part of the AOL Anywhere initiative, the engineers in Dulles completely revamped the main America Online Web site (www.aol.com), turning it from a somewhat average news site to a true information portal. By signing on to the Web site with your regular America Online screen name and password, you get full access to your e-mail box, a wonderfully customizable news system called MyAOL (keyword **My AOL**, or my.aol.com through a browser).



In addition to the e-mail and chat tools in the main AOL.com site, you can also hop into the Instant Messaging system while on the road without installing any special software. Figure 23-4 shows the Web-based AIM Express (www.aim.com, click the AIM Express option). You get full instant message capability — even your Buddy List comes along for the ride!

The most amazing thing about the Web-based side of AOL Anywhere is the price: It's completely, totally free. (I know — I barely believed it myself.) The next time you find yourself without your America Online software (like on your computer at work), visit www.aol.com and give the system a try.

Figure 23-4:
Just walk up
to any
handy Web
browser,
visit the AIM
Express
page, and
send instant
messages
right away!



Reach Out and Touch Your E-Mail

Cracking open your e-mail box with a Web browser, handheld computer, or even a souped-up mobile phone might represent the next iteration of the portable online experience, but it still depends on some kind of special technology — and *special* in that sentence translates into *wazoo-related costs*. To truly transcend the technological barriers and become one with the online world, do away with the high-tech stuff completely and reach for a simple, old-fashioned telephone.

With nothing more than a regular telephone and some relatively quiet surroundings, AOLbyPhone (keyword **AOLbyPhone**) serves up your e-mail box, plus lots of interactive information and the latest news. Thanks to a surprisingly good voice recognition system, you simply talk your way through the offerings instead of constantly punching away at keypad buttons. This makes AOLbyPhone particularly useful on a mobile phone (pressing the buttons as they snuggle against your cheek is tough).

Here's a look at what AOLbyPhone provides through its "speak your commands" interface:

- ✔ **E-mail:** Check your messages for the latest arrivals. Thankfully, the system starts with the newest messages and works backward from there. Unlike the other AOL Anywhere e-mail options, AOLbyPhone only reads your messages — it can't send a reply. (Even extremely cool technology bumps up against limits every now and then.)
- ✔ **Journal:** Make your next journal entry a voice recording! Wherever you find yourself in the world, call AOLbyPhone and say "Journals." The system records what you say and automatically inserts it as a new item in your online journal. When you get home, pop into the Journal editing system to add a title and any extra text you want.
- ✔ **Headline News:** Keep track of the top stories in the political, sports, business, health, and entertainment world, read to you by a particularly energetic group of CNN Radio broadcasters.
- ✔ **Sports:** Sift through stories and scores by team or by sport, including both professional and college teams.
- ✔ **Restaurants and Bars and Clubs:** Browse through restaurant, bar, and club listings provided by America Online's Digital City system. This works best in larger cities such as Chicago, Las Vegas, and Seattle. Beyond that, you might get a mangy little list; if you're on the road, you'd do better by simply asking a friendly hotel clerk for suggestions.
- ✔ **Weather:** Pick up the current conditions and forecast for any city around the world.
- ✔ **Movies:** Check the local movie listings with America Online's Moviefone. Find movies by title, theater, or the Top 10 list of most-requested information.

You can customize the offerings in Finance, Sports, Weather, and some other areas by setting the appropriate sections of MyAOL (keyword **My AOL**).



If you ever get stuck in the system (it happens more than I anticipate, but I also get distracted easily), you can always say "Help" for guidance. For those times when you really lose your train of thought, rely on the ever-helpful main menu command, which whisks you back to the top-level menu (and feeds you a quick advertisement along the way).

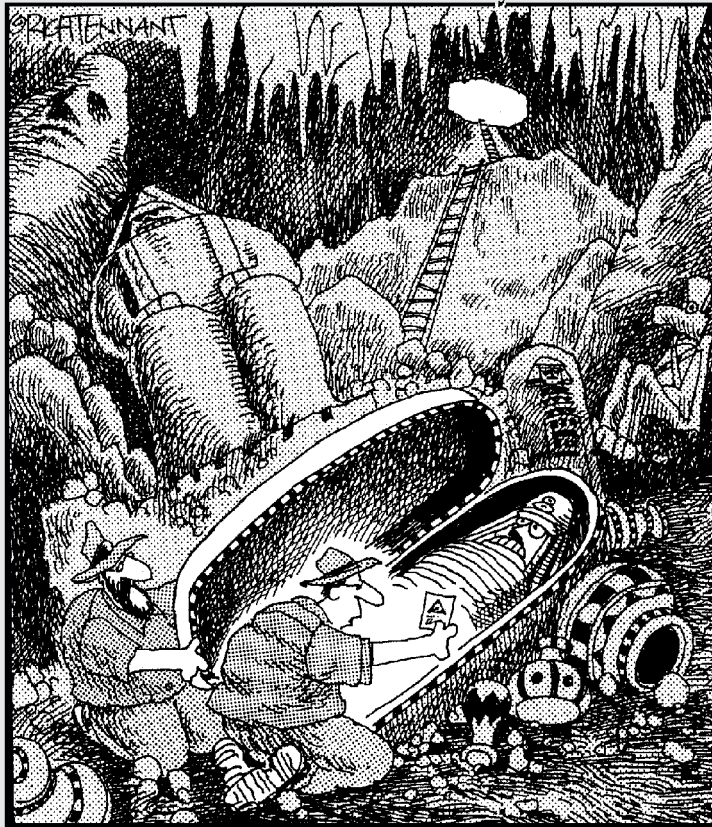
Like so many good things, AOLbyPhone costs money. Your first month is free (just long enough to try the service and get hooked), and after that it sets you back \$3.95 per month. If you travel extensively or spend your days out of the office, you quickly get that much use out of the service.

Part VI

The Part of Tens

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"It's a free starter disk for AOL."

In this part . . .

As expected, the book closes with The Part of Tens, Wiley's answer to all the silly things you had to memorize as a child in school. Don't memorize them — don't even try. Instead, read them, enjoy them, and put them to work for you.

Chapter 24

Ten Fun Things to Do Online

In This Chapter

- ▶ Deciphering obscure computer terms
 - ▶ Checking out some great young art
 - ▶ Tracking long-lost friends and online buddies
 - ▶ Exploring obscure online areas
 - ▶ Sending greetings
 - ▶ Expanding your play-power
 - ▶ Downloading great software
 - ▶ Keeping track of your packages
 - ▶ Sharpening your foreign language skills
 - ▶ Getting free stuff from Uncle Sam
-

Depending on who you ask, the online world and the Internet are either chock-full of the latest information about every topic under the sun, or they're factual mirages that look promising from a distance but disappear as soon as you arrive. Why do people hold such radically different views on the subject? Because the first person *found* what he or she was looking for, and the second didn't.

The key to finding stuff, of course, is knowing where to look. In the online world, that's quite a challenge because you have so many places to look. This chapter provides some starting locations as you search for fun people, nifty places, and various online features.



Always watch for new resources — you never know when you may find one. Feel free to jot down an area's keyword or address here in this book, too, so that you don't accidentally lose the address in the shuffle. (After all, it is your book, so you can write whatever you want.)

Decoding Digital Terminology

The computer industry turns out new technology quicker than you can say, “I just bought a new computer.” (I suppose the lesson here involves announcing our PC purchases with shorter sentences, but I digress.) But computers are the industry’s second most prolific products. More than anything else, computer nerds make amazing new names for things.

To keep a handle (or at least get a grip) on the wild world of computerese, visit Webopedia at webopedia.internet.com. Decipher specific terms by typing them in the Webopedia search box or browse a list of related terms by choosing a category. The site also features a Term of the Day, for those days when you need a cool new techno-term to impress the computer folks.

Strolling through the Children’s Art Archive

When children create art, there’s just something about it that makes even the most jaded adult crack a grin (except, of course, if the young artist selected a medium like “Mom’s new white sheets” or the ever-popular “living room wall”). To expand the reach of youthful art, the folks at PapaInk (www.papaInk.org) created a full-time, online art gallery dedicated exclusively to works by young artists. And it’s quite a place to see.

The site features works from all over the world — and, very possibly, from around the corner. Check out the collections area for some truly amazing and moving images. The international collections on the Historical Art page almost leave you breathless with a child’s eye view of things no child should need to experience. The When They Were Children area piques a lot of interest as well, with its look back at the childhood works of current adult artists.



Any young artist can submit works for display on the site. For more about adding images of your budding Rembrandt’s painting, sculpture, or whatever, click the [Exhibit](#) link on the site’s home page. It needs volunteer curators, too, so consider giving some of your time. What’s better than helping nurture a child?

Ferretting Out Long-Lost Friends and Businesses, Wherever They May Be

Want to find your old flame from high school? Interested in seeing your college roommates again? (Maybe they finally have the rent money they owe you!) You already searched the People Directory but found nothing. Is there anywhere else to turn? Yes!

Finding a person's e-mail address, street address, and phone number can't get much easier than the AOL White Pages (keyword **White Pages**) or the white pages area of The Ultimates (www.theultimates.com/white). To find a business, use the AOL Yellow Pages (keyword **Yellow Pages**), the yellow pages section of The Ultimates (www.theultimates.com/yellow), or simply look for the company in your favorite online search engine.

Tripping through the Coolest Online Areas

After spending some time on America Online, falling into a rut is easy. You find a few areas that match your interests, visit them regularly, and get to know the members there. After a while, however, you may long for something new — a change of pace and scenery, perhaps.

When the urge strikes, answer it with a quick trip to the Search system (keyword **Search**), the What's New list (keyword **New**), or the delightfully entertaining wheel of fortune at keyword **Explore**. Each of these resources presents links to both new and popular online areas. Presto — you have a never-ending supply of great places to go.

Sending Online Cards, Flowers, and Other Things That Smell

The online world brings people closer in amazing ways. Distance makes no difference on the Internet, so your circle of online friends quickly includes people from everywhere around the globe. Unfortunately, distance does make a difference when you want to send greeting cards and other gifts to your buddies. Popping an e-mail over to Guam is one thing, but shipping a batch of Chicago-style pizzas is quite another.

The good news is that programmers love these types of problems, and they quickly developed a solution. If your friends exist in the digital world, why shouldn't your cards and gifts live there, too? Thanks to these clever programmers, the Internet is chock-full of digital postcard, greeting-card, and flower-delivery services. With a few quick clicks, you can e-mail your sentiments to friends and family. Best of all, most of these services are free!

Table 24-1 includes a variety of greeting cards, postcards, and flower bouquets (well, at least pictures of flower bouquets — but at least they don't need any water). I couldn't resist including one off-the-wall delivery service, but I think that you can find it in the list without further explanation.

<i>What It's Called</i>	<i>Web Address</i>
All Yours Greeting Cards	www.all-yours.net/postcard/dp.html
Blue Mountain Arts	www.bluemountain.com
Corbis Picture Experience	ecard.corbis.com
Dumpster Diver	www.hoosiertimes.com/cgi-bin/HTdumpdive
Regards.com	www.regards.com
Virtual Florist	www.virtualflorist.com
Virtual Flowers	www.virtualflowers.com

To use one of these sites, just type its address in the address area on the navigation bar and then press Enter. America Online automatically starts your Web browser and sends you off to the site. Enjoy!



For a really nice selection of paid cards, check the American Greetings card center (keyword **American Greetings**). It offers a wide variety of high-quality animated cards for all occasions, all for yet another low monthly fee.

Playing with Your Mind (In a Good Way)

Although it doesn't look long or complicated, writing this section took me about an hour. I didn't wrestle with writer's block or get constantly interrupted by some manic army of delivery people — no, nothing like that. It was

inventionatplay.org. Do *not* visit this site unless you want to invest (yes, *invest*, not spend) a solid half-hour or more in stimulating your brain through clever puzzles, imaginative exercises, and, well, play! It's absolutely delightful.

Invention At Play comes to you from the fertile minds at the Lemelson Center for the Study of Invention and Innovation, a unique part of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. The site features all kinds of nifty gadgets to start those innovative juices flowing. Look in the Invention Playhouse for shape puzzles, a cloud maker, a ball-in-the-cup challenge, and other clever things. The Inventors' Stories area tells true tales of how current inventors got their start as clever children. And if you *still* don't think playing unleashes the power of the mind, visit the Does Play Matter section.

Just don't say that I didn't warn you about the whole *time investment* thing, okay?

Downloading the Best Software

You can't beat a huge, free collection of programs for bringing out the computer geek in anyone (free programs always work for me, but then again, I may not be the best sample population). Let your inner nerd run free in the AOL software libraries. Download some business programs, home-management tools, or even a few games — everything is yours for the taking.

To search the libraries' software, use keyword **Download Center**. By default, the system searches for Windows software, but you can find Macintosh or PDA goodies by changing the computer type setting right next to the search box.

For more about the perils and pleasures of downloading, see Chapter 17.

Tracking Packages All Over the World

Depending on what you do for a living, following the progress of little boxes as they wing around the world may (or may not) be of particular importance to you. If you ship a number of packages, though, or if you work from home, knowing the current location of a much-needed carton or document envelope often makes or breaks your whole day.

Thanks to the Internet, package-tracking information is only a few clicks away. Sign on to America Online, click in the address box on the navigation bar (right next to the Go button, near the top of your screen), and then type the appropriate shipping company address from the following list:

- ✓ Airborne Express: www.airborne.com
- ✓ DHL Worldwide Express: www.dhl-usa.com
- ✓ Federal Express: www.fedex.com
- ✓ United Parcel Service: www.ups.com
- ✓ United States Postal Service: www.usps.gov

America Online automatically launches your Web browser and opens the page. Carefully follow the on-screen instructions to find your package.



For a quick, all-in-one shipping destination, head over to ShipperTools.com (www.shippertools.com). It brings together all the popular package-tracking systems, plus offers some great services. (I love these guys!)

Practicing a Foreign Language

Whether you dialogue in Spanish, discuss in French, or even deliberate in Swedish, the online world offers plenty of places for you to practice your skills. If you want multilingual chatter, drop into the AOL Bistro (keyword **Bistro**) to talk with others in Arabic, Chinese, German, Russian, and a host of other languages.

To visit the world of AOL sites, which feature each country's primary native language, use keyword **International** to display the main AOL International window. Then scroll through the AOL in Other Countries drop-down list at the bottom of the menu to find the country (and language) of your choice.

While you're on a roll, you might want to also peruse one of the thousands of online newspapers available through America Online. Keyword **International** displays the International window; from there click the World Newspapers link. The small, unassuming AOL International Newspapers window opens. Browse through the many folders until you find a part of the world and language you like, and then keep clicking to fly away to that paper's Web site.

Collecting Free Stuff from the Government

The Internet offers everything under the sun, right? So why can't you locate that tax form or health and safety regulation you need *tonight*? Stress no longer.

The Government Guide (keyword **Government Guide**) offers state and federal facts to help kids finish school projects, tips to help you manage that green jungle you fondly call a front yard, and a list of currently elected officials for your area. Browse through the Guide for all kinds of government-related information. When you find something you like, be sure to mark it as a Favorite Place — otherwise, you might never locate it again!



The Federal Consumer Information Center Web site (www.pueblo.gsa.gov) offers hundreds of federal publications for free or for a very minimal charge. Many of its booklets now come in both a free Adobe Acrobat (PDF file) version as an alternative to the for-pay paper copy. Search the site for anything from gardening tips to business loan advice. (I *still* can't believe it's almost all free — this is just too cool!)

Chapter 25

Ten Things That Can Go Wrong (And How to Fix Them)

In This Chapter

- ▶ Contacting AOL Tech Support
- ▶ IM Catcher goes on strike
- ▶ Sign-ons that don't quite work
- ▶ An unresponsive host
- ▶ Unexpected disconnections
- ▶ The sounds of silence
- ▶ Downloading problems
- ▶ A MIME file is in your mailbox
- ▶ Undeliverable Internet mail
- ▶ Windows appear out of nowhere when you sign on
- ▶ A broken Favorite Places item

I often think that computers and software were invented by a cabal of psychiatrists and psychologists as a long-term project to ensure that Western civilization would have trouble coping in the twenty-first century (and therefore would need their services for many years to come). With that meaningful observation off my chest, it's time to consider the problem at hand — namely, the one you're having right now. Look for your problem in the following sections. If you find it (or one much like it), read the information in that section and try the solution I suggest.



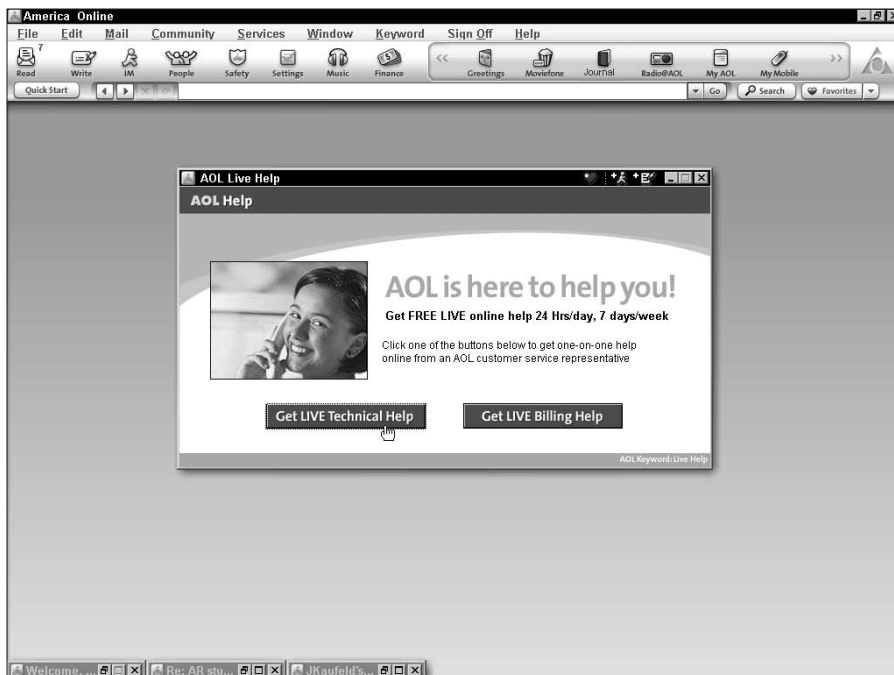
Before doing anything else, try Doctor Tapedbridge's Miracle Cure for Most Everything That Ails Your Computer: When things fail for no apparent reason, log off AOL, restart your computer, and try again. Believe it or not, this one simple process fixes computer problems about four times out of five. (And for this I went through computer troubleshooting school . . .)

If the universal cure doesn't solve things, check out the various solutions in this chapter, or try keyword **Help** for more detailed suggestions. You can also contact America Online's Tech Support folks in several different ways, which the next section explains. (Sadly, sending Morse code signals by beating your computer with a sledgehammer won't help you contact the tech support folks, but it might make you feel better anyway. Go ahead and try it if you feel *that* desperate.)

Yodeling to AOL Tech Support

America Online offers a pretty broad range of technical support for you. If you can sign on to the system, try the interactive help experience at keyword **Live Help** (appearing in Figure 25-1). This area connects you in a live, one-on-one chat with a helpful techie at the secret AOL Tech Support offices, located in some windowless basement far from civilization.

Figure 25-1:
No matter the time of day (or rain, sleet, or hail, I suppose), AOL Live Help stands ready to answer your cry.



The **Live Help** keyword opens a big window offering your choice of technical help or billing assistance. Click the button for the type of help you want, and then follow the on-screen instructions. In just a few moments, an AOL support professional (or at least someone who plays an AOL support professional on TV) lands in the chat area to assist you. Believe it or not, they keep those poor people available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so someone is always available no matter when you run into trouble.

If you can't get back online at all and you live in the United States, call the friendly America Online Technical Support folks at 800-827-6364 and share your pain with them. Folks living outside of the United States should call their respective country's technical support number.

The IM Catcher Doesn't Catch Anything

One of the cleverest tricks in the America Online 9.0 software involves a handy new feature called the IM Catcher. This little fellow intercepts instant messages from people who aren't on your Buddy List, and prevents them from interrupting your day.

For some inexplicable reason, the IM Catcher doesn't always start working the way it should — you might need to prod it a little before it works just right. If you find that incoming instant messages from people you don't know (particularly messages sent through AOL Instant Messenger) still appear with the old-fashioned *knock-knock* window, it means that the IM Catcher took the day off, and needs a couple clicks of motivation before it starts working again.

To kick-start the IM Catcher, follow these steps:

1. Open the IM Catcher window with keyword IM Catcher.

The IM Catcher window that you know, love, and aren't seeing regularly comes to the front.

2. In the lower-left corner of the window, click the Automatically Use the IM Catcher check box. The check mark disappears from the box.

Yes, this seems counterintuitive, but work with me.

3. Click the same check box again to make the check mark reappear, and then close the IM Catcher window by clicking the X button in the upper-right corner.

Usually, if you want something to work, you turn it on. In this case, you need to turn it off and *then* turn it back on before it realizes that it's on. Go figure.

4. Restart your America Online software and sign on again.

At this point, the IM Catcher should work just like you hoped.

If your IM Catcher *still* doesn't do anything, try reinstalling the America Online software or call AOL Technical Support.

The Computer Almost Signs On

Your password is in, the modem is singing, and all is well with the world. At least it was until you couldn't complete the connection to America Online.

Usually, this failure to connect happens at Step 5 or 6 of the connection process — the ones labeled *Preparing Network Connection* and *Connecting to America Online*. This problem isn't your fault; the fault belongs to America Online. For some reason, the America Online computers didn't acknowledge your existence. Perhaps the computers have so much going on that they can't spare a moment from their busy schedule for you. Perhaps the computers aren't running. Whatever the reason, wait a while (15–20 minutes) and then try to sign on again. If this behavior keeps up for more than an hour or two, call the America Online support number (800-827-6364) and find out what's happening.

The Host Isn't Responding to You

This “Host isn't responding” message is nerd lingo for “The computer didn't answer your request,” usually expressed in human terms as “Huh? What? Were you talking to me?” You wanted to do something simple (such as display the News window), but the big computers at America Online weren't paying attention, so your America Online software got into a huff and displayed the “Host isn't responding” message on your computer screen. Isn't that just like computers? Give them a little power, and they walk all over you.

Stuff like this happens when a large number of people are using America Online at the same time. Don't be surprised if you get these errors in the evening, because that's when *everybody* is usually signed on. When this message appears (and if it hasn't yet, don't feel left out; it will eventually), the first thing to do is try again. This time, it should work. If you're still having problems, sign off, sign on, and try yet again. Beyond that, throw up your hands in defeat and go have some ice cream. (Sometimes, that's the only thing that helps.)

The System Rudely Kicks You Off

You're minding your own business, wandering online through this and that, when WHAM! — Dorothy, you're not in Virginia anymore. The technical term for this occurrence is being *punted*, as in the phrase, "Oh, crud-on-a-stick! I got punted."

It happens for no particular reason. It could be noise in the phone line, your call-waiting feature kicking in, a hiccup in your DSL line, or possibly the digital gremlins at work. Whatever the cause, try signing on again to continue your pleasurable online labors. If you get punted frequently (more than about three times a week), call the folks at the phone company, tell them in a confident voice that you recently lost numerous connections with your online provider (which is a fancy way of saying that you get punted a lot), and ask them to check your line for interference.

There's usually no charge for checking your phone line, but the phone company tests your line only to the point where it comes into your home or apartment. If the technician finds a problem in the Great Out There, the phone company fixes it for free. If the problem is inside your walls, someone else (probably you) pays for the repair.



This same advice holds true if you use a high-speed DSL Internet connection, as I discovered earlier in the year. My DSL line worked great most of the time, but the connection consistently reset itself every day around 2 p.m. for a week or more. I called the phone company support people, but they couldn't figure out what was going wrong, and suggested that it was my equipment. Thanks to some further investigation by them (brought on by continued prodding by me), they discovered a bizarre problem in their nearby switching office involving an air conditioner, a circuit breaker, and a backup power supply. They fixed the air conditioner, which, in turn, fixed my connectivity problem. The moral of the story: It pays to keep reporting your problem, even when it seems a little weird to the outside world.

America Online Doesn't Say a Word

Your friends said that America Online would talk to you. They even demonstrated it to really sell you on the point. So you went to the local computer store and spent big bucks on a sound card and speaker system. For that much money, America Online should say, "Welcome" or, "You've got mail" once in a while, if not perform Wagner's four-opera *Ring* cycle. Instead, the service is mute — nothing changed. This situation quietly bothers you (as well it should).

First, make sure that your speakers are turned on and that the computer's sound system works with other programs. If your favorite game or multimedia program brings forth glorious melodies, the sound card works just fine. If those other programs don't make a peep either, double-check your new sound card to make sure that it's working. (Look for troubleshooting information in the sound card's documentation.)

If, after troubleshooting, you're sure that the sound card is okay, make sure that the America Online access software knows that it's supposed to use sounds:

- 1. Sign on and go to keyword Settings.**
- 2. To enable general event sounds:**
 - a. Click the By Category tab in the Settings window, and then click the Multimedia option in the list. You see a second list of options. Click the Multimedia entry again.**
 - b. Click the Enable AOL Sounds option (last one at the bottom of the window) to turn on the various AOL sounds.**
 - c. Click Save to record your changes.**
- 3. To enable chat room sounds:**
 - a. Click the A-Z tab in the Settings window, and then scroll down and click the Chat Preferences item in the list.**
 - b. Click the check boxes next to the Enable Chat Room Sounds and Play Member's Buddy Sound When They Arrive options.**
 - c. Click Save to keep your changes.**
- 4. Close the Settings window and sign off America Online.**

When you sign back on, the software should greet you with a friendly "Welcome" just before the Welcome window appears. If the sound still isn't working, try completely exiting and restarting the AOL software.

If all else fails, try resetting your AOL sound files. To do that, go to keyword **My Expressions** and then click the Environment tab. In the AOL Sounds section on the right side of the window, click the [Reset](#) link. After a moment, AOL responds with the simple statement "Your default AOL sounds have been restored." Close and restart your AOL software to give it a try. If the AOL sounds still don't work after that, call AOL Tech Support.

File Downloads Take Too Long

When you look at a file description, it displays a statistic labeled *DL time*, which is the approximate time the file takes to download in a perfect world with whatever speed of modem you're using right now. The most important phrases in that sentence are "approximate time" and "in a perfect world." You see, approximations are rarely correct, and the world is most certainly not perfect. Don't computers make stupid assumptions about real life?

Here's the reality of this download-time thing: The actual time to download something depends on how busy America Online is, how noisy the phone line is, and sometimes the current phase of the moon (or at least it feels that way). If the file you're downloading is *really* big (like multiple megabytes in size), the AOL software may not even try to make an estimate, but instead present you with an approximate download time it chose out of thin air. (No, I'm not making this up.)

If a download seems to take forever, your first course of action is to be patient. Beyond that, go for a walk or spend some time tidying up the desk. Like fine wine and a 12-year-old cleaning his room, some things in life just can't be rushed.

A MIME File Starts Motioning from the Mailbox

You never know where a mime may show up next. At the amusement park, in the local shopping mall, or perhaps as a wandering entertainer during dinner, you can't beat a mime for hilarious hijinks (although sometimes you want to). But a mime in your online mailbox? Now that's another matter.

I'm not talking about a real mime, of course (although this book may prompt some adventuresome soul to create a routine called *You've Got Mime*). Instead, I mean a MIME file — a file that ends with a `.MIM` extension — attached to an e-mail message in your box.

The MIME tools (short for *Multi-Purpose Internet Mail Extensions*) work behind the scenes to send programs, documents, spreadsheets, and other kinds of files through Internet e-mail systems. When a friend outside America Online sends software, a document, or another type of file to you, his or her e-mail program translates the file with the special MIME tools, giving the file that funky `.MIM` extension in the process. Your friend's e-mail program then attaches the translated file to the e-mail message and ships the whole thing off to you.

When the message (and its attached MIME file) arrives at America Online, the e-mail system automatically converts the MIME file back to its original format (.EXE, .DOC, or .JPG, for example). At least that's how it *should* work.

Unfortunately, America Online's e-mail system sometimes gets confused and can't translate the MIME file back to its original form. Instead, the e-mail system shrugs and simply drops the MIME file into your mailbox without a single word of condolence, apology, or (worst of all) instruction about what to do next. This happens most often with older versions of the AOL software (such as 6.0 and 7.0) rather than the newer ones, but the problem still afflicts 8.0 and 9.0 on occasion.

When that happens to you, just download the file as you normally do, and then use WinZIP to translate the file back to normalcy. Yes, in addition to all the tricks that it does with ZIP files, WinZIP also knows the secrets of unlocking MIME files.



If you don't already own a copy of the handy WinZIP program, go to the AOL Download Center (keyword **Download Center**) and search for WINZIP. It's one of those *must-own* utilities for computer users everywhere.

Your Internet Mail Comes Back Undeliverable

The America Online Internet mail gateway is great if you have friends or business associates on the Internet. Unfortunately, the Internet is a technologically wild place. Mail messages misaddressed in even the smallest way come screaming back into your mailbox, sent by angry computers with names such as MAILER-DAEMON@mail02.mail.aol.com (which sounds like a character from *I Know Who You E-Mailed Last Summer*). The nice thing — if you can really say nice things about returned mail — is that these computers usually tell you what's wrong with the message.

If you have a friend whose e-mail address is `minstrel@linguaplay.com`, `minstrel` is the user part of the address (the person's screen name on that system), and `linguaplay.com` is the name of the computer (called a *host* by the computer people), just as `aol.com` is the system name for America Online. Such technical drivel is necessary for understanding the two most common mail errors, both of which mean that the address you entered has a slight problem:

- ✓ **User Unknown:** The problem is with something to the left of the @ symbol in the address.
- ✓ **Host Unknown:** The problem is to the right of the @ symbol. An error code appears in the subject area of the returned e-mail message.

Whatever is wrong, check and double-check the address to which you're sending mail. Be particularly alert for host names ending in something other than `.com` (such as `.org` or `.net`), because more and more of these sites appear on the Internet each year. Also, watch the difference between the number one (1) and the lowercase letter *l*, as well as the number zero (0) and the uppercase letter *O*. Computers get all hung up about this stuff.

If the address seems okay but the message still doesn't go through, try having the other person send a message to you. After you get that message, double-click it so that you can read what the person said (and see his or her e-mail address). Copy the address into your Address Book by clicking the address once and then selecting Add to My Address Book from the pop-up menu. Now you know that the address is correct.

An Extra Window Appears Every Time You Sign On

It's a nice day and you feel relaxed, so you sit down at the computer and sign on to check your messages, engage in a quick round of Cribbage, and generally catch up on the news. As your AOL software finishes connecting you to the system, you see the Welcome window, your Buddy List, the Quick Start window . . . and *that* window. Maybe a Web site, or perhaps an AOL keyword area. Whatever it is, it's driving you nuts. Your friends don't see this stupid window when they sign on to America Online. Why do you? Is it some kind of cosmic punishment for "adjusting" your golf score last week? (I know, I know . . . you *really* just took three swings on that hole.)

No, it's nothing so dramatic. This problem falls under the heading of *even helpful features drive you nuts sometimes*. In this case, you need to check the Start-up Settings.

The America Online 9.0 software includes a very cool, very new feature called AOL Start-up Settings (keyword **Settings**, and then click the [Start-up Settings](#) link on the Essentials tab). This helpful option's main purpose is to let you pick whether you want to see the Welcome window or the AOL QuickView window as you sign on. But at the bottom of the Start-up Settings window, you find a second option that allows you to specify another window that you want to automatically open. The choices include your mailbox, the AOL Search system, and a text box that accepts any AOL keyword or Internet Web address.



If the Radio@AOL window (keyword **Radio**) automatically hops into action and you want that to stop, you need to change the Radio@AOL Preferences. Curiously, you can't do change the preferences directly from the Radio@AOL window — you must go through the regular Settings window instead. Go to keyword **Settings**, and then click the A-Z tab. Click the [N-S](#) link. Near the top

of the list, click the [Radio Presets and Preferences](#) link. When the Radio@AOL window appears, click the Auto-Launch Preferences tab, and then uncheck the Play Radio@AOL Automatically When I Sign On to AOL option. Save your changes by clicking the Save button.

The New Item on Your Go To Menu Goes to the Wrong Place

In Chapter 23, you skirt the frightening realm of nerd-dom by creating your own items with the My Hot Key menu (click the Favorites button to find the My Hot Keys menu), as well as the customizable areas inside the Mail, Community, and Services menus. Now your new item appears in the menu, but it doesn't quite work. Don't let this little setback worry you. It usually takes a professional to make a menu item that doesn't work; you managed to do it with little or no training!

This glitch is relatively easy to correct. The problem is probably the keyword you entered to make the new menu item — the odds are high that it suffers from a slight spelling problem. Follow the instructions back in Chapter 23 to edit the menu item, and you'll probably discover that the keyword is just the tiniest bit misspelled. Correct the spelling error, and you fixed the problem!

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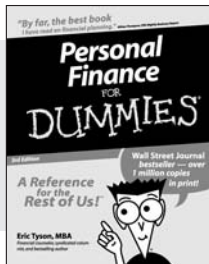
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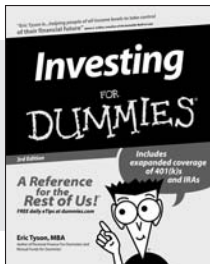
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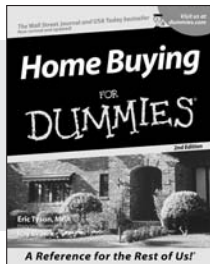
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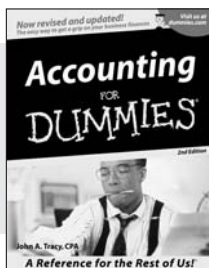
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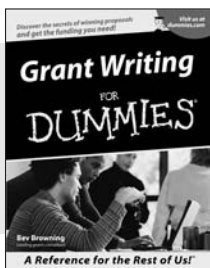
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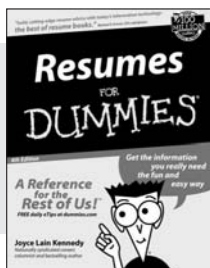
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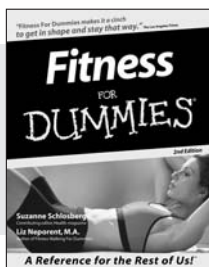
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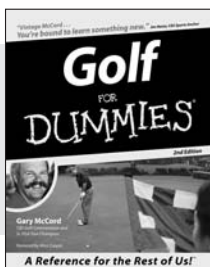
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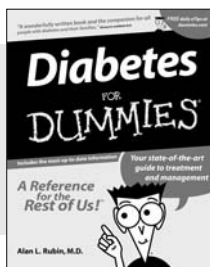
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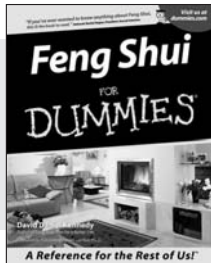




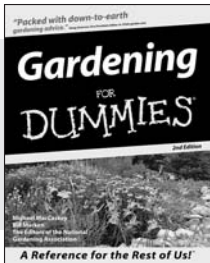
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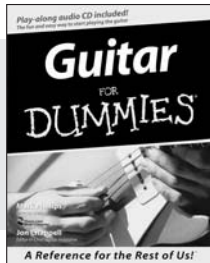
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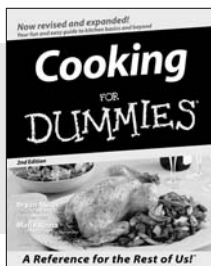
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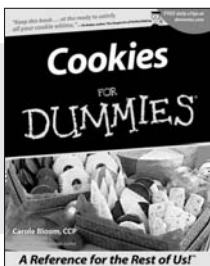
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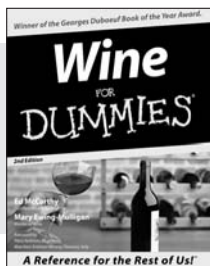
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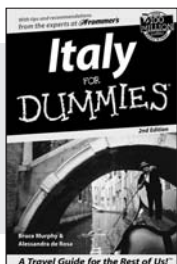
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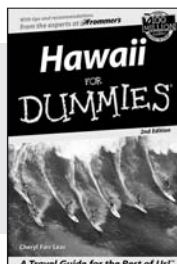
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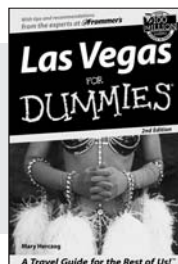
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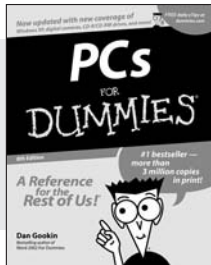
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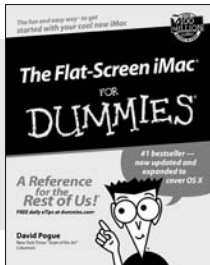


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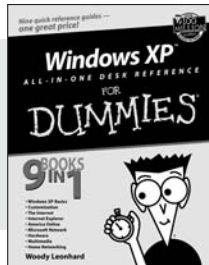
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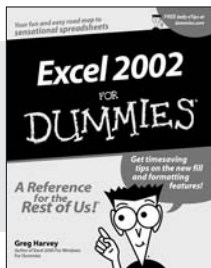
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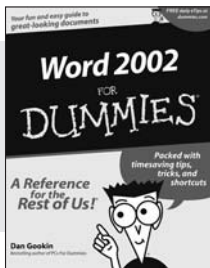
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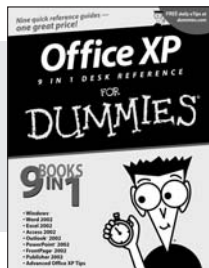
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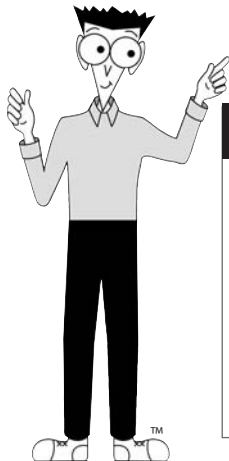
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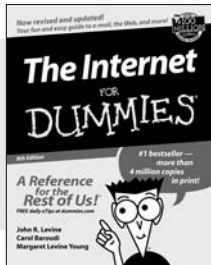
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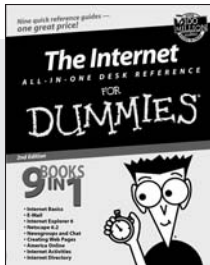
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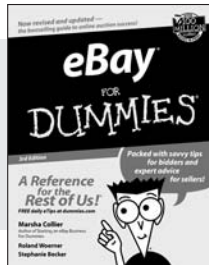
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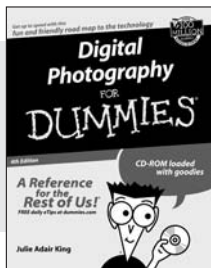
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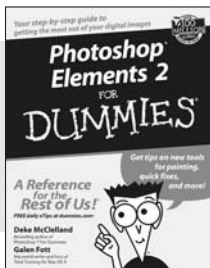
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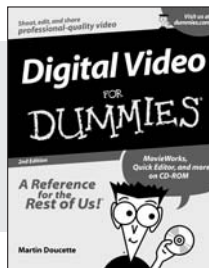
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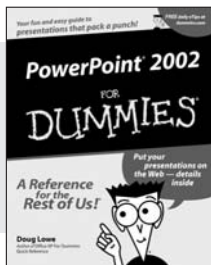
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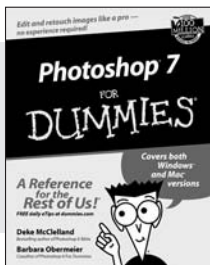
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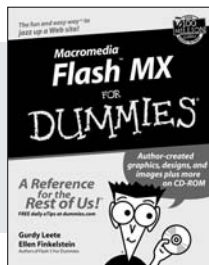
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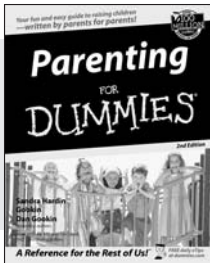


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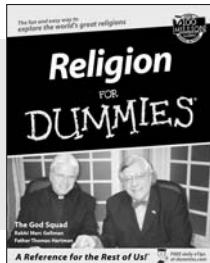
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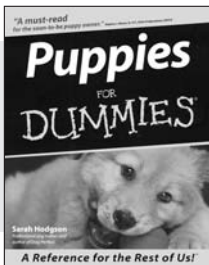
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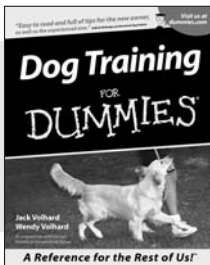
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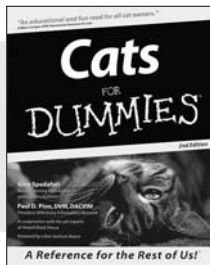
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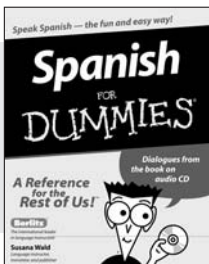
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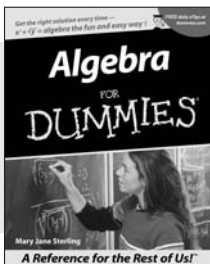
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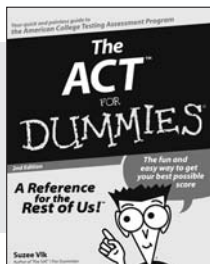
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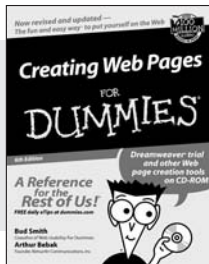
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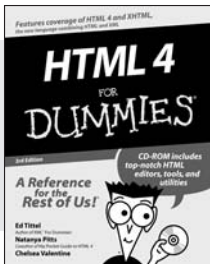
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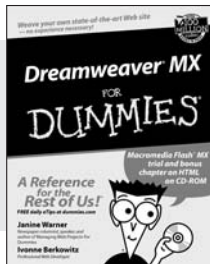
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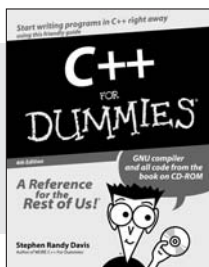
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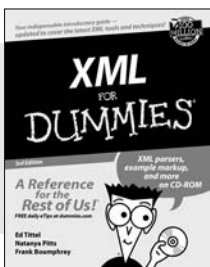
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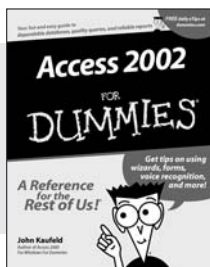
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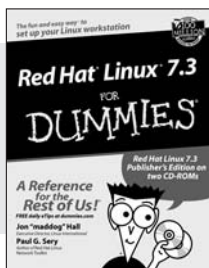
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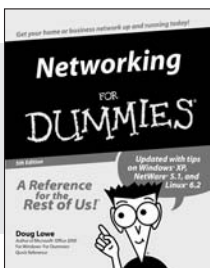
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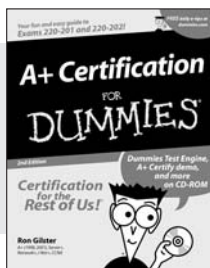
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