

404 – Not Found

When Internet Information Disappears (and What You Can Do)

Information on the Internet is constantly being created, modified, or deleted. When you are online and are using a web browser to view or search for websites, you are likely, at some point, to encounter a fairly common error message: **404: Site Not Found**. What does this mean? There are four basic possibilities:

The information (website or web page) you want...

- **is still physically at the location you expected it to be, but it is temporarily inaccessible** to you because of technical problems or because a website is being updated. Sometimes websites switch from free to paid-access systems, requiring you to purchase the ability to view certain pieces of information.
- **has been relocated to another location** (and possibly under a new title) on the Internet.
- **is incorrectly linked to** (for example, there could be spaces or misspellings in a “hyperlink” – i.e. the words, buttons, or images you click to jump from one website or Web page to another).
- **is gone**, possibly forever

What are your options? You can:

- **wait and try back later** (as in *hours* or *days* later) to see if the page or website ever reappears.
- return to the **website’s home page** (the very first page) of the website you are attempting to access and use the website’s own **search box** (if it has one) to see if you can search for the information you need.

To try this, look at the link – the **URL** (Uniform Resource Locator) – in the **Location** box of your web browser (where you type in *www...*). See where the **first forward slash** (“/”) symbol is within the actual web address (not the “http” part), as in this link: **<http://www.thrall.org/readyref/Arts.html>**

The first “/” occurs after the **.org** part (known as the “top-level domain”). After we trim the URL back (by clicking in the Location box and pressing the **Backspace** key) it should look like: **<http://www.thrall.org>**

Now we can try that URL in our web browser. Once at the website’s **home page**, you can now use the website’s “site search” to look for Art or Arts, or you can browse the website as well.

Sometimes you can trim URLs partially (up to the next-to-last “/” symbol) and find useful information or hyperlinks to other areas of a website, as in this example: **<http://www.thrall.org/readyref>**

More Options

Check URLs for any spaces (there should be none) or capital letters (URLs are “case-sensitive” and will usually fail if *just one letter* is incorrectly CAPITALIZED or in lowercase). Retype part or all of an URL if necessary.

Some URLs point to web pages ending in **.htm** when the page might be located at **.html** (or vice-versa). Some URLs point to “index pages” (as in **www.thrall.org/readyref/index.html**), and such pages can change over time. You can try to trim URLs (as described above) in an attempt to locate the latest “index” or home pages.

Many websites use **subdomains** in their Web addresses, as in **memory.loc.gov**. Where the word “memory” appears (in place of the usual **www.**) is the subdomain. Subdomains can change or be discontinued, producing “404” errors. You can try changing a subdomain to **www** to see, at least, if that website’s home page exists.

There is also something called the **Internet Archive** (**www.archive.org**), which has something called the “Wayback Machine.” You can type (or copy and paste) a URL into the Wayback Machine’s search box to see if there are any archived copies of a web page or a website.

A number of search engines and Internet directories (such as **Bing**, **Google**, and **Yahoo!**) keep **cached copies** of web pages in their searches. To get to these cached copies, search for the website or web page – either by the name of the site or page or by the URL, then look at the search results. If any page related to website or page you want appears along with a “**cached page**” link, click that link to see if what you need appears.

Other Things to Consider...

If you were looking for an article, it might have been published elsewhere, or it might be available in one of your library’s **article databases**. Thrall members can go to **www.thrall.org/databases** and search there.

It could very well be that the information has disappeared for **good reasons**. Perhaps the information was **inaccurate**, **out of date**, **improperly provided**, or **legally questionable**. Consider the possibility that there might actually be **better websites or sources elsewhere**.

Check with Reference librarians at your local library for assistance on that as well as to discover even more research options freely available to you.