

With a little help from my friends the internet

Okay guys, I'm going to share some big news: I have all the answers.

That sounds amazing, right? Let's do that again. I HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS.

Before you think I've gone off my rocker and become the power-hungry megalomaniac I've been in danger of becoming since killing all my Little Pony soldiers in the Sisterly Playroom Wars of '88* – let me explain.

I do not know your bank account number. Also, I do not have the answers to life, the universe and everything (though 42 and [we apologize for the inconvenience](#) still sound pretty spiffy). What I have are all the answers I needed to finish chapter two. This makes me incredibly happy – and I have a bunch of strangers on the internet to thank for it.

*= I love my sister now and I loved her back then. But she had Barbie dolls, yo. ARMED Barbie dolls.



The limits of Google

Research is great, and I'm a big fan of doing your homework. But if you're in Holland, writing a book set in the USA,

you're still bound to run into a few problems you can't fix on your own.

To give you an example: In chapter two, my protagonist goes to an exclusive Art Festival hosted on the property of a ranch. My problem was that I couldn't decide on a location. I combed through Google maps and population density maps, but it's really hard to tell if that empty green spot on the map is a) a poverty stricken area, b) privately owned land or c) a tourist hotspot with hot dog stands. Not only that – if all the provinces in Holland are considered to have their own personalities, I bet that's true x 10 for states in the USA. And unfortunately, *couleur locale* is not indicated on Google maps, so I needed a general direction if I didn't want to comb through a million regions at random.

ASK

Or: it's the internet, stupid!

'Ask a friend' is one of the helplines gameshows offer in these cases. But I have almost no friends overseas, and even if I did, the information I'd receive that way would be highly limited and subjective. What I needed was a diverse group of people willing to answer the random research questions of a stranger. In short, I needed some incredibly nice folks.

This is where I had a good idea: **I posted my questions in the forum of an advice website.** Did that ever turn out brilliantly! Nearly 20 different commenters from different parts of the US reacted to my questions and came up – among other things – with some great suggestions for the right location. And the great thing is, now that I've settled on a location, I can research the details online by myself. I just needed a few choice pieces of information – and asking the internet was just the way to get them.

In fact, I'm writing this post for two reasons: a) because I want to pass this tip on to you as a writer, but b) also because I continue to be baffled by the power of the internet

and the immense potential for good-heartedness –next to the trolling and nasty – that’s out there. THANK YOU, all the people who reacted to my post!



Ask the right way

There are a few last remarks I have to add. First of all: The forum I posted in is part of a website I follow religiously and admire the general tone of voice of. I feel very much at home with its community, even if I don't participate often, and had a good sense of how to formulate my questions and what kind of answers to expect, even before I posted.

I think this is important. Not just because you don't want to feel like randomly milking people for information – that's something I'd feel uncomfortable with, but you might not – but also because you want to set yourself up to receive the answers that will benefit you most. So a few extra pointers:

- * don't ask a question you can easily research another way. People are taking the time to reply to you; the least you can do is take them seriously.
- * take *yourself* seriously, too. No question is too silly to ask, if you really want to know the answer. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there.
- * be specific. Make sure you narrow down what you want to know sufficiently. The more concrete your questions, the more concrete the answers will be.
- * know who you're asking. Of course, you can't know a 100%, but at least know the website and the tone of voice of the comments. You don't want to be bombarded by a load of cynicism

or be made fun of, so protect yourself where you can.

* show some restraint. Don't get over-excited and put stuff up for discussion that you kind of already know, like 'do you guys think this is a good motivation for my protagonist?' Someone might say no, and interfere with what you thought you knew. Be respectful of your story and believe in it; don't use a bunch of strangers to validate your story choices.

That's it, you're good to go! So now whenever you really really want the answer to something (and you don't have any friends (or they are dumb people (or they are annoyed because you ask them stuff all the time))): ask the internet!

Oh, and last but not least...

Don't forget to give back

[DEAR WENDY](#)

A wonderful advice website where Wendy Atterberry tells it like it is – speaking from the heart and shooting from the hip.

Go [visit!!](#)