

# Virginia Goes Fer Gopher

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**gopher** n. 1. Any of various short tailed, burrowing mammals of the family Geomyidae, of North America. 2. (Amer. colloq.) Native or inhabitant of Minnesota: the Gopher State. 3. (Amer. colloq.) One who runs errands, does odd-jobs, fetches or delivers documents for office staff. 4. (computer tech.) Software following a simple protocol for tunneling through a TCP/IP internet.

--The Internet Gopher Software Development Team in the Distributed Computing Services Department at the University of Minnesota

Picture yourself in a restaurant. When you select an item off of the menu, that item is then delivered to your table. You aren't required to find your way into the kitchen and retrieve the item yourself, nor do you need to know what utensils were used to prepare the item, or what the ingredients were... The entire culinary operation is seamless. You request, and a finished product is delivered to you. That is why we enjoy going out to eat. A "gopher" works pretty much the same way, and can be just as delightful.

Gopher is one of those things that we are hearing about constantly in our profession. We may know that gophers provide electronic information through the Internet; but what exactly is a gopher, and how does it differ from other providers of electronic information?

Gopher is a hierarchical menuing system that is reshaping campus-wide information systems. All gophers perform the same functions--the principle one being to make your life easier by making it unnecessary for you to know and remember Internet, telnet and ftp (file transfer protocol) addresses, yet still deliver information to your desktop. The gopher software was developed at the University of Minnesota and is provided to universities around the United States for free (the name "gopher" comes from the University mascot, the Golden Gophers.)

Gopher's greatest strength is the ease in which it provides information. Gopher servers allow the user to select from a menu the items s/he wishes to see. The items may be across campus, across the state, or around the world. The gopher software "goes fer" the information requested, and brings it back to the user's computer screen, where it can be read, printed, or downloaded. In short, gopher eliminates the need for the user to know exactly where the desired information is and how to get it. Gopher finds and fetches the information. No muss, no fuss.

But in addition to delivering documents, a gopher also provides addresses and connections to Internet sites around the world. It is possible to select a menu option to connect to and search a library's online catalog, or an electronic encyclopedia or phone book. It is also possible to locate and search other gopher servers at other universities.

A gopher menu is a list of directories and resources (directories are also referred to as "gopher holes"). Opening a directory leads to another menu, with files or more directories or both. Some menu items are indexes searchable by keyword. These offerings on a gopher menu are sometimes consistent with other gophers, but every gopher has some unique information contained within it.

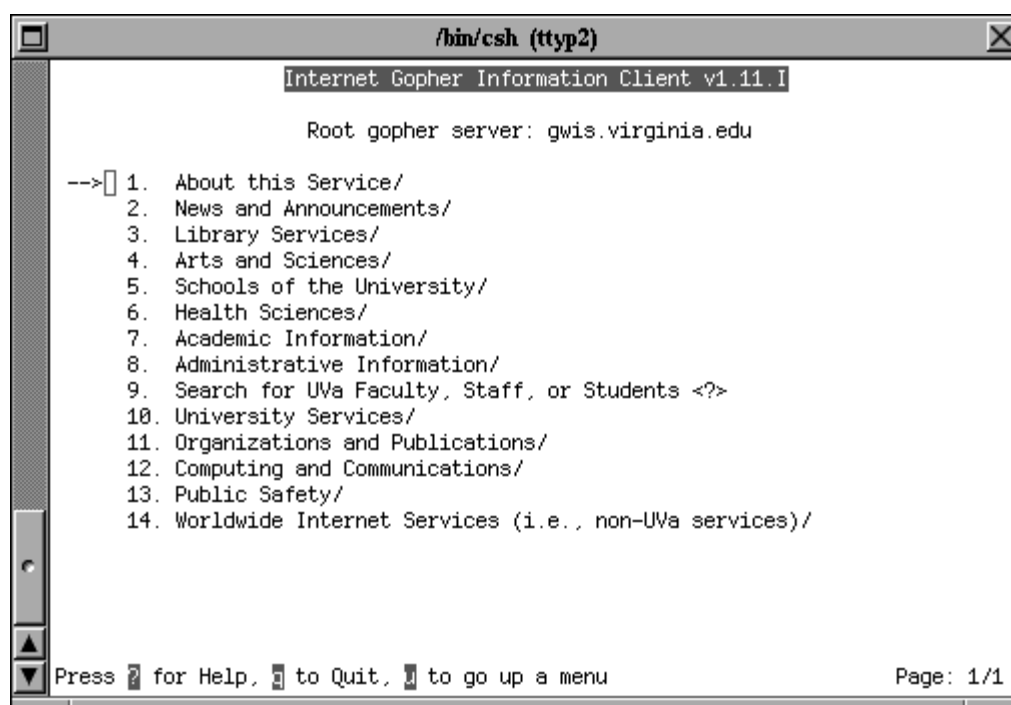
Now, for the tough part: not every gopher menu looks the same, and how a menu looks on your screen may look different from what it looks like on mine. Some users operate a "gopher client," or interface, that makes the appearance of the screen differ from that of users who access gophers using a UNIX VT100 client. (Note: The figure below is an example of a what a gopher menu looks like when accessed with a VT100 gopher client.) Microsoft Windows-based gopher clients such as Mosaic or Hgopher offer the same menu items as a VT100 client but allow the user to use a mouse to move in and out of gopher holes and present the menu items pleasingly in bright colors with graphical icons and a variety of fonts. But the important thing to know is that although a gopher menu appears differently to different clients, the client you use will consistently present a gopher menu to you that looks and behaves in a familiar way.

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## GWIS, the University of Virginia Gopher

The University of Virginia has maintained a gopher server since 1992. The graphic below shows what the UVa gopher server offers at its main menu:

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The University of Virginia gopher is known locally as GWIS (pronounced GEE-WIZ), or Grounds-Wide Information Server. It holds an abundance of local administrative and academic information, where students can find course descriptions and exam schedules or how to get an e-mail account, while other offerings include press releases, meeting minutes, and full-text of some campus newspapers. GWIS also has a searchable directory of students, staff, and faculty.

The GWIS also has a Library Services directory that provides local information as well as connections to national and international gophers and ftp and telnet sites. There is a connection to our online catalog, VIRGO, as well as connections to our Electronic Text Center, Digital Image Center, and Social Science Data Center. A user can also access Interlibrary Loan, electronic journals, Special Collections information, reference sources such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Grolier's Encyclopedia, or submit a course reserve request. There is an abundance of information on the UVa library system itself, including pathfinders and guides to using various reference databases, and the full-text of the library newsletter, [LIBRA](#).

A directory for Worldwide Internet Sources has documents about the Internet, such as a full-text copy of Brendan Kehoe's Zen and the Art of the Internet, fact sheets on network etiquette, bibliographies, and glossaries, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Users can find out the weather prediction for Alaska via the National Weather Service; access the Library of Congress catalog; look up a phone number or e-mail address of a colleague at another institution across the globe; or query "Veronica" (another Internet finding software) as to what else is out there on the Internet.

## Other Virginia Gophers

My research for this article began in UVa's gopher hole, Other Gophers and Information Servers. Using the menus, I selected North America, and then narrowed down to U.S.A., and then to

Virginia. A listing of about 20 gophers appeared. A click on a menu item created a connection to that gopher, no matter where in the state.

The contents and organization of a gopher server is determined by individual institutions. Most gopher servers have an administrator or task force designed to organize and maintain the server. Gophers usually have a file called "About" that describes the gopher contents. Sometimes the "About" file says that the gopher is a test gopher or is under construction (in this case you are sometimes warned to wear your hardhat and be prepared for faulty connections). The "About" file is frequently a single document, but sometimes offers a complete menu of documents and directories.

Virginia gophers can compete with the best of them. Take a look at a sampling of the kinds of documents available on Virginia gophers:

- Concert schedule for Eric Clapton or Madonna (Christopher Newport University)
- College of Science and Technology)
- Queer Resources (Casti Collection, Intercon Systems)
- Political Contact Information (Casti Collection)
- Online Career Center (Casti Collection)
- AIDS and HIV Information (Mary Washington College)
- Special Education (Teacher Education Network)
- Virginia Commonwealth University Strategic Plan (VCU)
- Software site licenses at Virginia Tech (VPI)
- Bibliography of East Asian Resources at Washington & Lee (W & L)
- Environmental Programs (Ecogopher at the University of Virginia)
- Full-text of Aesop's Fables or Alice in Wonderland (George Mason)

All in all, Virginia is doing some pretty exciting things with gophers. Exploration is the best way to learn and understand. So burrow your way into a gopher hole and see what you can dig up.

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## Accessing the University of Virginia GWIS:

The University of Virginia maintains its gopher at the addresses gwis.virginia.edu or gopher.virginia.edu. Telnet to one of the above addresses and log in as "gwis." Those users familiar with this procedure are using a gopher client called VT100 (whether you knew it or not!) This gopher client is a "low-level" client but unfortunately is all that many of us have access to at this time. Preferably, some users have more complex gopher clients (Mosaic, Hgopher) loaded on their workstations, and can "point" their gopher client to one of those addresses to access GWIS. Either method will allow you to sit back to enjoy a sumptuous feast.

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## Gopher Definitions:

client: A computer that attaches to a server--across the room, across campus, or across the state--to receive access to documents and software.

gopher hole: A directory within a gopher server.

GWIS: The University of Virginia's gopher (Grounds-Wide Information Server)

server: A computer that stores and delivers documents and software and can be accessed by your desktop computer (client) via a network. Many clients attach to a single server.