

RSS (Really Simple Syndication): news feeds, blogs and podcasts

Q. What is RSS?

A. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is an easy way to keep up to date with news from many web sites. Many sites publish continually updated headline feeds from its web site, called RSS feeds. These are delivered directly to your desktop news reader, or aggregator, as these readers are most frequently called.

Q. What news aggregator should I use?

A. There are two types: web-based readers and installed software readers. If you do not wish to install software, use a web-based reader, which also has the advantage of being accessible from any computer. There are a couple very good web-based readers:

Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com>)

My Yahoo! (<http://my.yahoo.com>)

Newsgator (<http://www.newsgator.com>)

Feedster (<http://www.feedster.com>)

There are many installed software readers. The following are good for the Windows world:

AmphetaDesk (<http://sourceforge.net/projects/amphetadesk>)

FeedReader (<http://www.feedReader.com>)

RSS Bandit (<http://www.rssbandit.org>)

RssReader (<http://www.rssreader.com>)

SharpReader (<http://www.sharpreader.com>)

For Mac:

NetNewsWire

(http://www.apple.com/downloads/macosx/internet_utilities/netnewswire.html)

Q. How do I subscribe to an RSS feed?

A. After installing the news aggregator, (or creating an account in one of the online services) add each feed from the feed's web site by right-clicking on the orange "XML" (or "RSS" or "ATOM") button, copying the URL, and pasting it into the subscription window in your aggregator. From then on the aggregator will download the latest headlines for you.

Exercises:

1. Go to www.newsgator.com and create a free account. Subscribe to the Academic Technology RSS feed at <http://www.palomar.edu/atrc>. Subscribe also to the Atom feed for Terry Gray's Academic Technology Blog.

2. Subscribe to an NPR technology feed at <http://www.npr.org>, and a news feed at MSNBC.

Subscribe to the same feeds in RssReader, which we have installed on the laptops we will be using today.

Q. Can I move my subscriptions from one reader to another?

A. Yes. By exporting from one as an OPML file (Outline Processor Markup Language—the file will have an .opml or .xml file extension) and importing the file into another. Be sure your news aggregator supports this functionality.

Q. How do I create my own RSS feed?

A. An RSS feed is nothing more than a regularly updated XML file that contains information about each item in the feed. While it is possible to create the feeds using nothing more than a text editor, we do not recommend this for anyone in their right mind. There are several free web-based services for creating feeds (all but one hosts the feed also) and there are a couple good for-pay tools to create feeds. We recommend using FeedForAll as the simplest way to create a feed. It costs \$29.95 and can be obtained at www.feedforall.com.

Free online services:

UKOLN Express is a web-based tool that will create RSS 1.0 feeds, containing up to 15 items.

<http://rssxpress.ukoln.ac.uk>

The following web-based services are free and will host the RSS feed you create there:

IceRocket (<http://rss.icerocket.com>)

Shared RSS (<http://sharedrss.com>)

There are also for-pay services, like My RSS Creator, that will host your RSS feed (www.myrsscreator.com).

The following for-pay products are inexpensive, and will create correctly formed XML RSS feeds:

NewzAlert Composer (\$29.95) <http://www.castlesoftware.biz/newzalertcomposer.html>

FeedForAll (\$29.95) <http://www.feedforall.com>

Exercise:

Go to <http://www.palomar.edu/atrc> and click the XML button near the bottom of the page for the Academic Technology RSS feed. Examine the XML code. We will go over how it works in class.

Q. How do I know that I have created a correctly formed RSS feed?

A. Use the free Feed Validator service to analyze your feed: <http://www.feedvalidator.org>.

Q. Are there different kinds of RSS feeds?

A. Yes. RSS 0.91, RSS 0.92, RSS 1.0, RSS 2.0 and Atom (with its own sub-version numbers!). None of this matters, fortunately, because most RSS readers understand them all.

Blogging

Q. What is a blog?

A. A personal, online diary, updated periodically, that can address anything you want. It is “the ultimate democratization of publishing.” There are millions of blogs updated daily on the Internet.

Q. What is the connection between blogging and RSS?

A. Most blogging software create an RSS feed so that readers can easily be informed of updates to the blog.

Q. How do I subscribe to a blog’s RSS feed?

A. The same way you subscribe to any RSS feed. Paste the subscription URL into your news aggregator’s subscription tool.

Q. How can I create my own blog?

A. A blog is really nothing more than a regularly updated web page. If you don’t want features like user comments, URL trackbacks, Blogrolls, email notification of comments, archiving, etc. then you can simply update a web page each day. Most people, however, want these extras and also want an auto-generated RSS feed for their blog and a good looking blog to boot—without having to know how to design a good looking web page. The free blogging services are the answer.

The oldest (and best, in my opinion) of these services is Blogger.com. It is extremely easy to use, has lots of extras, and looks really good. It even let’s you use it’s creation engine, and then FTP the content to your own server. Go to <http://www.blogger.com/start> to get started.

The only down side to blogger.com, if you consider this a down side, is that it only creates Atom RSS feeds, but it does have a tool to convert the feed to standard RSS through feed demon.

Other services similar to blogger.com are:

Live Journal (<http://www.livejournal.com>)

Type Pad (<http://www.typepad.com>)

Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com>)

Exercise:

Create a blog at blogger.com. Go through the process of configuring it, choosing a template, and generating an Atom RSS feed.

Podcasts

Q. What are podcasts?

A. Podcasts are an RSS feed with an attached mp3 file. When a user subscribes to the RSS feed, she also receives the audio file as an “enclosure” to the feed. The mp3 file can be played on your computer or on a portable mp3 player. Many people use iPods, from Apple computers, to play podcasts—and in fact, that’s where the name comes from—but having a portable player is not necessary.

Q. Can I use a standard RSS news aggregator to subscribe to a podcast?

A. Not necessarily. Surprisingly few are designed to receive podcasts. You typically subscribe to a podcast using “podcatcher” software. We recommend iTunes (<http://www.apple.com/itunes>) Juice (<http://juicereceiver.sourceforge.net/>), or Doppler (<http://www.dopplerradio.net/>). They all work well and are free. Juice will download podcasts automatically, but will not place them in a media player for you. Doppler will place them in a media player. iTunes does it all. We recommend that you use iTunes.

Q. What are those iTunes and My Yahoo! buttons I’ve seen on web pages?

A. One click subscription buttons. (Ok, it’s really more like three clicks, but they make it really easy to subscribe to a podcast).

Q. How do I find the “program notes” for podcasts?

A. Academic Technology makes this easy by having a “Podcast Index” on all it’s menus. At other sites, you may have to hunt. In any event, from within iTunes, click the website button, and find the notes on the host web site. From within Juice, simply right-click and choose “show notes.”

Q. How can I find podcasts to listen to?

A. Use one of these directories:

Podcast.net (<http://www.podcast.net>)

Podcast alley (<http://www.podcastalley.com>)

AllPodcasts.com (<http://www.allpodcasts.com>)

There is also a searchable podcast index within iTunes

Q. How can I produce my own podcast?

A. Call or write to Terry Gray, in Academic Technology: (760) 744-1150 ext. 2877, tgray@palomar.edu).

Exercise:

Subscribe to the Academic Technology Podcast using iTunes by clicking the iTunes button on <http://www.palomar.edu/atrc>.