

Basic Guide to RSS and Feeds

RSS is a great, and simple, way for you to bring content from all over the web to easy to browse location - whether that's a media player like [iTunes](#) or a "[feed reader](#)", a kind of email inbox for the web.

Just like you might subscribe to the magazines or cable TV channels that interest you most, RSS allows you to subscribe to web content - be that news headlines, weather reports, podcasts or blog posts - and have that content delivered to you. No more visiting twenty different websites to check if they've been updated - with RSS, you are notified the minute new material arrives that might be of interest to you.

RSS has risen to become a standard way of syndicating and delivering web content, and you are likely to find the option of subscribing to an "RSS feed" for almost any blog, and many websites, photo sharing applications, video publishing destinations and a lot more besides.

This is made possible by a simple markup language called [XML](#), but you don't need to worry about technical details to make great use of RSS in making navigating the web and finding information a lot easier and a great deal more efficient.

Whether you want to get up-to-the-minute updates about stocks you've invested in, find out what bloggers and reviewers are writing about your business, or just create a custom filtered collection of the news that misses out all of the things you have no interest in, RSS can make a great deal of difference to how you use the web.

There are several ways of gathering all of your favorite content together with RSS, and these are roughly divided by function.

I have gathered here two of the most popular ways of collecting your RSS feeds - Feed Readers and Podcatchers:

Feed Readers

A [Feed Reader](#) is very much like an email inbox. Only instead of emails, the latest updates from the feeds you've subscribed to appear as their parent website is updated. These updates appear most commonly in reverse chronological order, again like an email application, with the latest at the top.

Just like [Outlook](#), [Thunderbird](#) or [Apple Mail](#) you can also sort the incoming information into folders to better organize your content, and have the option of viewing the latest items by the website they originated from (like sorting emails by sender), or as

a "river of news", flowing together and organized simply by the time that they were originally published.

If you compare this with surfing to different websites and manually checking for content, it quickly becomes apparent how convenient it is to have the content come directly to you. This way you can quickly scan through a great deal of information in a very short time, deciding if you'd like to read the full article, watch the full video, or listen to the full podcast, or move on to the next item in your list.

Whichever feed reader you decide to use - and there are a great many alternatives - you will see common features, such as a way of adding a new feed. To add a feed, you simply paste the RSS information you copied from a website feed icon into the appropriate dialog box, and click on subscribe. From then on, all of the latest content is updated in your feed reader.

Online Vs. Desktop Feed Readers

You can aggregate and read your web feeds from either an online feed reader, or one that you use from your desktop.

Online feed readers are a popular choice, given that you can access them from any computer, anywhere in the world, and still have access to your selection of RSS feeds. On the other hand, desktop readers don't require you to launch your browser, work offline, and often have the benefits of an extended set of features.

If you decide to try an online feed reader perhaps the most popular choice is the free [Google Reader](#), which is easy to use and can be accessed using the same Google sign-in as you would use for your [Google Mail](#), [Calendar](#) or [Documents](#) accounts.

If you'd like to explore some of the alternatives for reading your feeds online, [Frank Gruber](#) has put together [an excellent comparison of nine web-based feed reader applications](#) for Tech Crunch.

For desktop feed readers the choice is equally wide, and [Metacentric has compiled a extensive list of the possibilities](#).

My own favorite desktop feed reader is the excellent [NetNewsWire](#) for Macintosh, and I have heard great things about its Windows sibling [Feed Demon](#). Both offer extensive feature-sets, but retain a simplicity and ease-of-use, and are relatively inexpensive.

Another excellent desktop feed reader, and one that works on Mac, Windows *and* Linux is [Blogbridge](#). I [reviewed version six](#) of this simple but very powerful feed reading application recently, and found it to be an excellent solution, especially given that the reader itself is free.

It's also worth bearing in mind that if you use the latest version of [Apple Mail](#) (Mac only) or [Mozilla Thunderbird 2](#) (cross platform) that you already have a feed reader right inside your mail application. If you'd like to multi-task and have your information nicely gathered together, you might also consider giving these free options a spin.

Finally, a great many modern web browsers will allow you to subscribe to feeds right inside the browser itself. While the features are rather limited compared to a stand-alone feed reader, if you are only looking to subscribe to a small selection of news feeds, this might well prove sufficient for you. For superb integration of RSS feeds and other social media services, I highly recommend the free, cross-platform browser [Flock](#).

Podcatchers

While a lot of the above-mentioned feed readers will also download media enclosures for you, the process is a little more complicated than if you use a specific tool called a "[podcatcher](#)". A podcatcher is essentially a feed reader for media files, and most of the options available will have the capability to automatically download, organize and watch or listen to media files from a single application.

The two most popular options, besides the great many listed and compared at [Podcatcher Matrix](#) go slightly beyond the podcatcher functionality and actually present full media player capabilities - they are [iTunes](#) and [Miro](#).

On the surface they present a similar set of features - directories of media content to choose podcasts from, instant downloading of the latest episodes for podcasts you have subscribed to, and the ability to categorize, file and watch your media from a single application.

However, in my humble opinion, Miro goes way further than iTunes in both its feature set and its commitment to supporting open standards and the [open source](#) ethos.

As I pointed out [in my recent in-depth review of Miro](#), here is an open platform that makes it incredibly easy to search videos from [YouTube](#) and many other video sharing websites, download content via [BitTorrent](#), and subscribe to thousands of podcast feeds from a well stocked directory, before watching your downloaded videos in a high definition, full screen player. This is an unbeatable combination.

Creating Your Own RSS Feed

Many popular blogging platforms such as [Wordpress](#), [Movable Type](#) or [Blogger](#) will automatically assign your blog with its own RSS feed. But if you aren't sure where to find

it, or want to keep tabs on how many people are subscribed to your content feed, the easiest thing is to create a feed using [Feedburner](#).

All you have to do is type your URL into the box on the Feedburner frontpage and it will automatically discover and "burn" a Feedburner feed for you. You will then be prompted to create a "chicklet", a little icon that people can click on, and given instructions on how to place this inside your blog or website template.

From then on you'll be able to track how many people subscribe to your content, and make use of several other useful services, including optional updates. The basic Feedburner service is free.

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