

RSS for Educators

This guide is intended to help any teacher that wants to set up a feed reader from scratch. I will be showing how to do this within the Firefox browser using the RSS reader 'Google Reader' which is free to use.

So what is RSS?



RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication" It allows users to subscribe to online content. Using RSS, readers can have online content come to them, rather than having to constantly check dozens of websites for information . The RSS symbol (generally orange but can be other colours) shows that a page has an RSS file associated with it

What is a Feed Reader?

A feed reader is a place to gather all of your subscriptions to sites that use RSS. I particularly use it to stay in touch with blogs I follow. When you subscribe to a site, that site is added to your list of subscribed sites within the reader with the number of unread items showing next to the name of the site. You can organise your subscribed sites into folders inside the reader. When you click on a site name, all the unread items will appear within the reader so that you can read through them without visiting the site itself. You will still need to visit the original site to leave comments on a blog post or to see an item that hasn't displayed within the reader (eg some images don't always display). You can go to the original site by clicking on the title of the content in the reader.

Why should I care about RSS as a teacher?

Widening your perspectives as a teacher

One of the key competencies in the New Zealand curriculum is to 'Manage self' and this is exactly what a feed reader helps you do. There are many wonderful teachers blogging about their experiences in the classroom and the latest resources they have found on the world wide web. As a fellow educator, you can read these blogs and engage the authors in dialogue through the use of the comment feature. The blogs that you find the most useful, you will want to keep in touch with as they add new posts. A reader helps you to manage this. You can also subscribe to other things such as additions to a person's delicious account, podcasts, online newspaper sections and additions to a Flickr account. Many sites on the web now have built in RSS feeds.

Helping students to stay connected

Many teachers have now set up a class blog or individual student blogs where children publish content and reflect on their learning. You can set up a class feed reader account which is subscribed to all of the blogs within the classroom and blogs by students in other classes/schools/cities/ countries. You could also subscribe to topical content such as information on the latest NASA mission so that the children could stay up-to-date or a YouTube channel such as National Geographic.



Feed reader options

Online Feed Readers

Google Reader (<http://reader.google.com>)

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

Desktop applications

Firefox, IE7, Safari and Flock– you can subscribe to feeds within these browsers
SharpReader (<http://www.sharpreader.com>) – Windows application to subscribe to RSS feeds

NetNewsWire – OSX application for reading RSS feeds

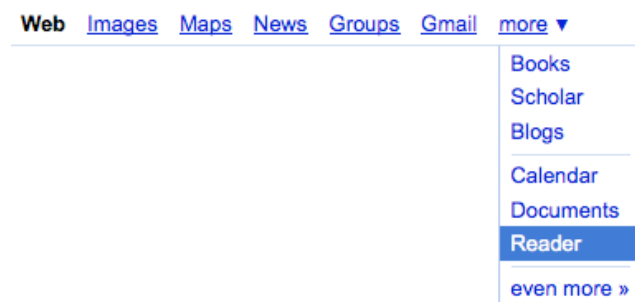
Getting set up with Google Reader

As I personally use Google Reader, this is the one that I am going to show you how to use. There is a really useful FAQ about Google Reader written by Google at this address: http://www.google.com/help/faq_reader.html

To get Google Reader, you need a Google account. This is free and very easy to set up. Fill in the form at this address:

<https://www.google.com/accounts/NewAccount>

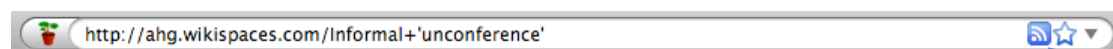
Once you have an account, make sure you are signed in (there is always 'Sign In' option in the top corner of google.com – if you are signed in, you will see your username in the top right corner). Then you can simply click on 'Reader' which is in the drop down list of options under 'more' on the top left side of the Google page. This will create your reader account and take you there.



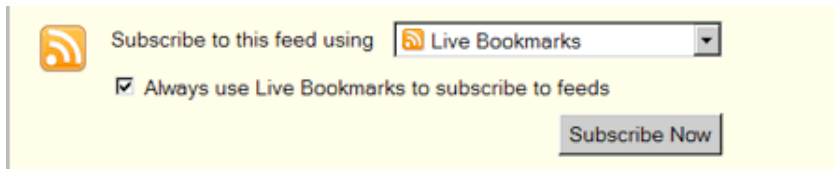
Subscribing to Feeds using Google Reader

I am going to focus on what I consider the simplest way to subscribe to feeds – through Firefox when you are on a site that has an RSS feed.

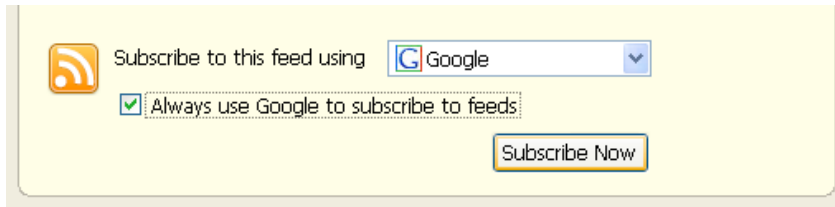
The first step is to make sure you have an updated version of Firefox – earlier versions don't allow you to use RSS readers outside of Firefox.



When you are on a site that contains an RSS feed, you will see an RSS symbol appear on the far right on the address within Firefox. When you click on this for the first time, you will see a message appear like this one:



If you click on the drop down menu next to 'Live Bookmarks' you can change this to 'Google' and then tick 'Always use Google to subscribe to feeds'.

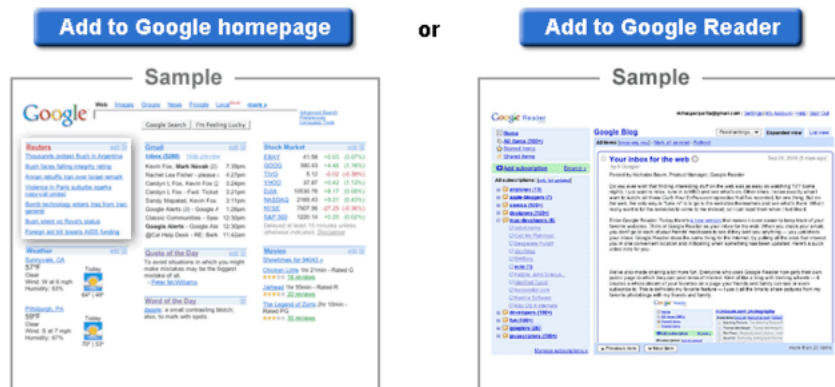


If you click the 'Subscribe Now' button, it will take you into your Google Reader and that feed will be listed in the left hand menu with the number of unread posts for you to read. Try out scrolling down through the posts in Google Reader and notice how it changes the number of unread posts as you scroll.

You will only see the above screen the first time you subscribe to a site this way. From then on, when you click the RSS symbol in the address bar you will see this:

Your Google homepage brings together Google functionality and content from across the web, on a single page.

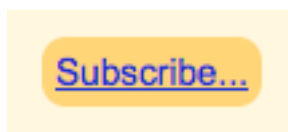
Google Reader makes it easy to keep up with the latest content from a large number of sites, all on a single reading list.



Choose 'Google Reader' to continue adding feeds to your list.

Even easier way if you always want it to point straight to Google Reader

I've just found out about an even easier way to subscribe to a feed. Follow the instructions below .



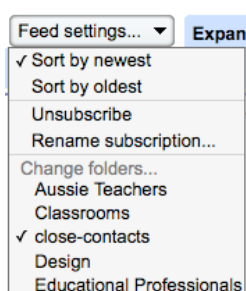
Use Google's "subscribe" bookmarklet. In Google Reader, go to "Settings" and then the "Goodies" tab. There you will find the "subscribe" bookmarklet — drag the link into your browser's bookmark section of the toolbar. A new button will be created; whenever you are on a site you'd like to subscribe to, click the button and Google will look for the RSS feed and open it in Reader. This is a preview; to add it permanently, hit the large "Subscribe" button at the top of the page. This works in IE7 and Firefox, and likely other browsers as well.



What is Google Homepage?

Google homepage can be used as your own personal startup page – if you do start using it you would normally set this to be the homepage of your browser. Here you can add RSS feeds as well but they get put into boxes within a single page. You might want to put RSS feeds here that are the most important to you so that you can see the content at a glance (the box with the feed in it will show the titles of recent additions to that site) or have more pictorial RSS feeds such as the weather report that uses images to represent the weather. Some teachers I have worked with have set up an iGoogle page to be the homepage for their class as you can also add boxes with internet links to this page as well as feeds and other tools. Meanwhile Google Reader can be a more comprehensive list of all blogs you follow. To get an iGoogle page, go to <http://google.com/ig> When you are already logged into your Google Account, this will automatically generate you an iGoogle page

Organising your feeds in Google Reader



As you start to add more and more feeds to Google Reader, it will become difficult to find a particular feed just as it is to find a document if you don't start organising them into folders on your computer.

You can organise your feeds in Google Reader into folders as well. The fastest way to do this is to click on the drop down menu next to 'Feed Settings' in the tab on the right hand side

From here you can rename your feed to make it easier to find, add it to a folder or create a new folder to add it to. Another way to add a feed to an existing folder is to drag the name of the feed on the left onto the top of a folder and drop it there.

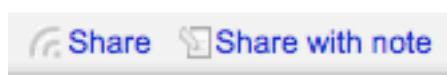
Folders are organised alphabetically on the left but you can change their order by dragging a folder to where you want it to be.

Starred items



You can click the hollow star next to the title of an item in your reader account and this will then turn yellow and be added to your starred items. I find this a really useful way of finding the items I consider to be the best. To access all the starred items, click on the 'Starred Items' link above the list of your subscriptions.

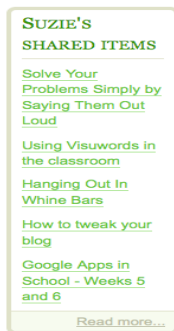
Shared items



You can also have items in a shared area where anyone on the web who knows the address where these items are published to can go and read them. The address for my shared items is:

<http://www.google.com/reader/shared/01024519299116539523>





To find your own address, click on 'Shared Items' under 'Your stuff' above the list of your feed subscriptions on the left. There will be a link to the site your items are stored on at the top of this page.

You can even add a widget to your blog or website with these the latest items you have shared (like the picture on the left). When a person clicks on one of the shared items, it will take them into the original site to read that item.

A couple of my favourite sites with feeds

This is by no means definitive and is just a quick assortment of some bits and pieces. You will soon find your own feeds to subscribe to!

<http://tbarrett.edublogs.org/> - Tom has an excellent blog where he gives detailed outlines of the web 2.0 tools that he is using in class and how he has managed their use and the impact that they have had. Definitely one to watch!

<http://blog.core-ed.net/derek/> - Derek often talks about the 'big picture' stuff in relation to ICT but also has a number of useful bits and pieces for the classroom teacher.

<http://janeknight.typepad.com/pick/> - Jane is an ICT consultant in the UK and blogs about useful web 2.0 tools that can be used in education. A great resource.

<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/> - Nothing to do with education! This e-zine focuses on different aspects of design. I find some great free fonts, textures, images, wallpapers and screensavers this way.

<http://stuff.co.nz> - A New Zealand website with online news articles from all around the country and overseas. Click on their RSS page to get a list of all the different types of information you can subscribe to such as world news headlines.

Other Tips for Google Reader

<http://www.mitchelaneous.com/2007/01/05/get-more-from-google-reader-guide/> Lots of ideas and useful links in this online article.

Other RSS tools

FeedBurner (<http://www.feedburner.com>) – allows publishers to customise RSS feeds and monetise them by including advertisements

InstantFeed (<http://instantfeed.biggu.com>) – sends RSS feeds to an Instant Messaging client

SocialMail (<http://socialmail.biggu.com>) – sends RSS feeds to an e-mail address