

Internet Services: Usenet Newsgroups

Discussion groups (sometimes called news groups) are worldwide electronic forums where people with common interests exchange information, discuss topics, and ask each other questions.

The most common form of discussion group is Usenet. (Usenet is the section of the Internet over which the newsgroups are distributed.) There are, however, many Web-based discussion groups as well. This guide focuses on the Usenet newsgroups.

Newsgroups are much like mailing lists. Both allow people to communicate electronically on a topic of interest. Unlike mailing lists, where messages come into your email account, groups require use of software called a newsreader to log into a special server (news server) and read the messages. For more information on electronic communication, consult the Library help sheet *Internet Services: Electronic Communication*.

Accessing Newsgroups

The easiest way to access newsgroups is using Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com/>). Google Groups is a free usenet service that offers a variety of features:

How to find a group

Search

From the Google Group's page, type your desired topic in the search box and click "Search Groups". Your result list will show green links for groups and blue links for postings. To complete an advanced search, click the "Advanced Groups Search" link from the main Google Groups Page or go to <http://groups.google.com/advancedsearch>.

Browse

To browse Google Groups, go to the Google Groups homepage and click on the "Browse Group Categories" link. On the resulting page, choose from the options provided or click on "Browse all of Usenet." After you make your selection, you have the option of searching within a group. Once in a group's page, type your topic in the search box on the top of the screen and click on "Search this Group."

In the browse mode you are able to keep track of your favorite topics by clicking the star icon next to your desired topic and then add that topic to your "My Starred Topics" page. Also in the browse mode, you have two viewing options: message and title. In message view you will be able to see a brief section from one of the topics and with title view you will only see a list of titles to choose from.

How to Join

To join a Google Group, begin by signing up for a Google account. Please note that you will need a valid email address. From the main Google Groups page, click the "Sign Up" link. After filling out the online form, account verification will be sent to your email address.

After finding a group to join, on the top of the screen, click on either "Join this Group" or "Subscribe to this Group" from the top of the screen and follow the step by step instructions.



Messaging

Receiving

Once your account has been set up, you have the option of having email messages sent directly to your groups email account or you can read your messages on your group's page. If you want to remain a member of the group but do not want to receive messages, click on the "No Email" link on the "Change My Membership" page then click the "Save these Changes" link.

Replying

To reply to any message, click on the "Reply" link below the message and in the next box type in your message. You also have the option to retract messages you send.

Creating your own group

From the Google Groups home page, click on "Create New Group." You will then be prompted to name your group, create your group's email address, determine your group's privacy level, and finally add people to your group. To add people to your group, you will need their email addresses. After you complete this process, you have the option to customize your group (making your group available to the public or keeping the group private).

To Unsubscribe

To unsubscribe from any group, go to the group's homepage and click on either the "Unsubscribe" or "Change Membership" link.

Additional features

To learn about additional features such as Group Alerts, rating posts, creating your own profile, or hiding duplicate content, click on the "Take the tour to learn more" link on the Google Groups homepage.

Finding Interesting Newsgroups

- Surf** Visit dir.yahoo.com/Computers_and_Internet/Internet/Chats_and_Forums/Usenet/By_Subject/ for lists and descriptions of newsgroups.
- Search** Within the newsreader's subscribe function (see below), there is a search engine for newsgroup names. Use this search engine to find newsgroups that include the search term. Searching is a better initial strategy until you become familiar with the newsgroup hierarchy.
- Browse** Newsgroups are arranged in a hierarchical fashion. Some of the top-level categories are: **alt** (alternative system), **bionet** (biological sciences), **biz** (business), **comp** (computer sciences), **news** (Usenet news information), **rec** (recreation), **sci** (science), and **soc** (social issues). Beneath each top-level category, there are subcategories, sub-subcategories, etc. **sci.med.immunology**, **sci.med.nursing**, and **alt.support.asthma** are examples of health-related newsgroups. The names are pronounced like email addresses, where periods are "dot": "sci-dot-med-dot-immunology".

“Subscribing to” / “Unsubscribing from” Newsgroups

The newsreader provides a option to subscribe to newsgroups of interest. *This is not the same as subscribing to a mailing list.* Subscribing to a newsgroup only designates that group so it is easier for you to access. For newsgroups, there are no “subscribe” or “unsubscribe” messages to be sent; it is all accomplished with the newsreader software. Refer to the newsreader documentation for details regarding subscribing and unsubscribing to newsgroups.

Reading/Replying/Emailing/Posting

The newsreader will present a list of all newsgroups to which you are subscribed. Select one and the reader will present a list of current articles. From the list of articles, select the one you’d like to read. Most newsreaders give at least two reply options: post to the newsgroup or send personal email. When you post or reply to a message, carefully consider if it would be of interest to the whole group. If not, a personal email is more appropriate.

Helpful Hints for Newsgroup Usage

- There are special newsgroups (such as **alt.test**) that can be used to test your newsreader. Don’t waste other people’s time by posting test messages to a non-test newsgroup.
- It is a good idea to lurk on a newsgroup for a couple of weeks to get an idea of the atmosphere of the group. You may find that the newsgroup is off-topic more than it is on-topic and not worth your time.
- Most newsgroups periodically run one or more messages of frequently asked questions (FAQ; pronounced “fack”). Reading them will give you basic information about the newsgroup topic.
- Messages do not stay on a news server forever. Depending on the size of the server, messages could be deleted from three to seven days after posting. (There are, however, many newsgroups that are archived. The location of the archive is usually covered in the FAQ.)
- Newsgroups are often considered the “renegades” of the Internet because of a handful of groups that could be offensive to some people. Be aware that you may discover groups that you find offensive. Simply stop viewing the group and remember the name of the group (so you don’t look at it again!). Remember that the usefulness of newsgroups as a whole outweighs the potential problems.