

# techLEARNING

## The ABCs of RSS

By Will Richardson

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Just what is RSS and how can it be used in education? Depending on who you talk to, RSS stands for Rich Site Summary or Real Simple Syndication. Either way, RSS is an important technology that information specialists and educators would be wise to harness.

In simple terms, RSS is a format for aggregating Web content in one place. For instance, say you're a social studies teacher and you've found 20 or 30 Web logs and media sites consistently publishing relevant information. Finding the time to visit those sites on a regular basis would be nearly impossible. But what if you only had to go to one place to read all of the new content on all of those sites? Well, that's exactly what an RSS feed allows you to do. It uses a type of software called an "aggregator" or feed collector to check the feeds you subscribe to, usually every hour, and collect all the new content from those sites. In other words, you check one site instead of 30 — not a bad trade-off for a harried teacher.

Here's another scenario: you currently get headlines from *The New York Times* via an e-mail message that arrives each morning. But more and more, you're finding that your in-box is clogged up by spammers selling everything from pornography to mortgages. That *NYT* content is getting lost in the morass that e-mail has become. Not so with RSS. The *NYT*, as well as hundreds of other newspapers, has a number of virus-free "feeds" your aggregator can collect. No ads, no spam—just new content from the sources you read.

### Setting Up a Feed Reader

Ready to start? First, you need to set up an aggregator to collect your RSS feeds. I would suggest the Web-based service from [www.Bloglines.com](http://www.Bloglines.com). Why? While there are a number of great downloadable newsreader packages that can do wonderful things, Bloglines has the advantage of being accessible anywhere you have an Internet connection. If you do only use one machine, however, check out [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News\\_aggregator](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News_aggregator) for a list of alternative aggregators.

Setting up a Bloglines account is easy. When you get to the site, use the "Click Here to Sign Up!" link in the middle of the page and follow the procedures. You'll get a confirmation e-mail to which you'll need to respond, and then you should be ready to go.

Bloglines gives you a few ways to subscribe to feeds. First, you can look at their listing of the most popular subscriptions by clicking the "Top Blogs" link under the "What's Hot" section of the Bloglines homepage. You can preview the content, and then, while you are logged in, subscribe to any of the blogs on the list by

clicking the "Subscribe" link under each feed description. Then, click the "My Feeds" link at the top left of the screen to see the feeds you subscribed to with the number of messages waiting to be read in parenthesis next to the name.


The other way to subscribe to feeds is to manually add them to your list by using the "Add" link at the top of your subscription list. To use this, you'll need to paste the address of the feed you want into the subscribe form that appears on the next page. For instance, if you wanted to track the new content on my blog, here is the feed to my site: [www.weblogg-ed.com/xml/rss.xml](http://www.weblogg-ed.com/xml/rss.xml). (More about finding feeds in a second.)

Once you paste in a feed, Bloglines will ask you if you want to make a folder and whether or not you want other people to see your feed. And, when you have some feeds to work with, Bloglines lets you rename them (among other things) by clicking on the "Edit" link. It's pretty intuitive, and if you start getting quite a few feeds in your list, you might want to take the time to get organized. The "Reorder/Sort" link is useful for that as well.

Finally, throw a link to Bloglines on your toolbar or in your Favorites folder. If you want up-to-the minute results, add the "Bloglines notifier" to the bottom of your screen, which will let you know when new content has been posted to any of the feeds to which you're subscribed. Either way, remember to check back often. Collecting feeds only works if you read the new stuff regularly!

### **Finding Feeds**

Once you have your aggregator set up, it's time to find some relevant feeds to stock it with. Luckily, news outlets and standard Web sites are increasingly adding feeds for their content, so there will be more and more to choose from in the future. The best newspaper list I've found so far is at [The Media Drop](#), which lists feeds from over 125 national, local, and university papers.

But for now, let's just deal with Web logs. First, understand that most blogs have a link to their feeds on their homepages. On many, it's a text link in one of the side columns that says "Syndicate this site (XML)." Or it might be a link that says "RSS 1.0 (or 2.0)." But most often, it's a pretty orange icon that looks like this: . No matter which type it is, you'll need to click on it in order to get the address of that site's feed. Don't worry if the page that comes up is a scary looking mass of code that you can't make heads or tails of. All you really need is the Internet address of that page. Just copy the URL, go into Bloglines, click the "Add" link, paste the URL into the subscribe line, and subscribe. The next time you visit your "My Blogs" page, the feed for that site should show up.

If you're not sure which blogs to subscribe to, use one of the blog search engines to find sites relevant to your interests. Some of the better search sites include [Technorati.com](#), [Feedster.com](#), and [Daypop.com](#). And once you find a few, Bloglines will also recommend some other feeds that might interest you based on what you're already reading. Isn't that nice of them?

*Will Richardson is supervisor of instructional technology at Hunterdon Central Regional High School in Flemington, New Jersey. This article is adapted from his RSS Quick Start Guide for Educators, available at [www.weblogg-ed.com](http://www.weblogg-ed.com).*

### **Real Simple Applications**

**Here's a sampling of ways RSS feeds can add to your knowledge base, help you communicate, and make your teaching better.**

- 1. Collecting Student "Blogwork":** Instead of checking out all 25 (or 30, or more) of your students' blogs every day, collect their work in your aggregator using their RSS feeds. You can scan through class content in one place, make sure it's all appropriate, and click through to particular posts to make comments.
- 2. Topic-Specific Research:** Even if your students don't have blogs, have them set up their own Bloglines account. The breadth of current events and even topic-specific research that students could collect could go a long way to assisting them with research or further study.
- 3. Targeted Searching:** The idea of creating RSS feeds for search terms is especially interesting. Say you have a student that is doing a project or a paper on global warming. That student could actually create an RSS feed that would bring any news about global warming to his aggregator as soon as it was published. Kind of like doing research 24/7, only the RSS feed does all the work. (Editor's note: for a detailed description of how to set up RSS search feeds, check out the RSS Quick Start Guide for Educators at [www.weblogg-ed.com](http://www.weblogg-ed.com).)
- 4. Bookmarking:** One of the more recent uses of RSS has been to syndicate the Internet bookmarks you keep of your Web wanderings. You can do this using a site called [Furl.net](http://Furl.net). With a free Furl account, you can save, annotate, rate, organize, and share the best links that you find on the Internet.