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The Basics of Email



By Faithe Wempen

Electronic mail, or email for short, is an online message delivery system. It delivers private messages to individuals and groups. These messages are delivered to the recipient's email inbox, usually within seconds. You can attach files to email messages and even put images within the message body.

Email addresses and mail servers

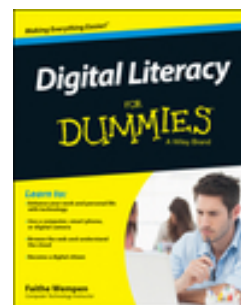
To participate, you need an *email address*. You can get this for free from your Internet service provider or from one of the many free web-based email services such as Gmail, Yahoo! Mail, and Outlook.com. Your email address is unique in all the world, like your postal address or phone number is unique.

An email address might look like this: myemailname@myprovider.net

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The first part (myemailname) is your user name on the mail server. The @ sign indicates the break between the username and the domain name. Everything after the @ sign is the domain name, which indicates the mail server.

Email is quick, with messages usually being delivered within a minute or two of sending, but it's not instantaneous communication like texting and instant messaging. Email relies on *mail servers*, much like postal mail delivery relies on the local post offices at each end of the transaction.

When you send email, it goes to the mail server belonging to the company that issued you your email address (for example, Comcast or Google). That mail server forwards it to the recipient's mail server, where it is stored until the recipient logs in and picks it up.

Most mail servers provide a web-based interface that you can use to send and receive mail. If you use the web interface, your mail is available from any computer, as long as you have Internet access.

You can also send and receive mail using an *email client*, which is an application that sends and receives email. Microsoft Outlook is an email client, for example, as is the Mail app in Windows 8. If you use a mail client, your previously sent and received mail is accessible even when no Internet access is available.

Types of email accounts

There are several different email account technologies, and you should know which type you have (or what kind you want, if you're still looking for an email provider) because the setup and the choices of email programs you can use are different for each:

- **Web-based:** This type of email account is designed to be used primarily with a web-based interface. Many of the free email services are this type, including Gmail, Hotmail (now part of Outlook.com), and Yahoo! Mail. This is the easiest, most no-fuss type, and is great for casual users who don't send many messages and don't want to fool with setting up an email program.

- **POP3:** This type of email account is designed to be used with an email client, although the provider may also allow web access too. This type of account downloads your received messages to your local PC when it connects to the mail server.

A POP3 account is tethered to a particular computer where the received mail is stored; it's best for someone who uses the same computer all or most of the time. POP3 stands for Post Office Protocol version 3.

- **IMAP:** This type of email account, like POP3, is also designed to be use with an email client. It does not download received messages, though; it reads them from the server, like web-based email does. That way, you can browse your mailbox from multiple computers and still see the full set of emails.

The downside is that you can't browse your mail if you aren't connected to the Internet. IMAP stands for Internet Mail Access Protocol.

- **EAS:** This type is similar to IMAP except it is used by Exchange servers. It is a popular type of account for groupware and corporate accounts, as well as for mail delivered to smart phones. EAS stands for Exchange ActiveSync.

About the Book Author

Faithe Wempen is an adjunct instructor at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI). She is the author of over 150 books on computer hardware and software, and an online technology courseware developer whose courses have educated over a quarter of a million people.

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