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Web Feeds Delivered to Your Digital Doorstep

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Walk into most school libraries and you'll see magazines and newspapers on a rack in a cozy reading area. Whether it's **Scientific American** in the high school or **Cobblestone** in the elementary school, periodicals are a mainstay of library collections. Although electronic databases have dramatically increased access to timely information and resources, budgets for both periodicals and subscription databases are often limited. A growing number of media specialists are wondering about the value of web-based sources for timely information.

The Basics of Web Feeds and Information Aggregators

From webmasters and podcasters to bloggers and e-journalists, the Internet is overflowing with text, graphic, animation, audio, and video content that can be delivered to your desktop through web feeds and aggregators.

How does this work?

Many Internet information providers including news organizations, bloggers, and podcasters frequently update their content. Rather than asking readers to remember to visit their website regularly, many webmasters are syndicating their content through a subscription system. The webmaster publishes a simple computer program known as a "feed" on their website. The end user links to this feed through an aggregator program also known as a feed reader. This software checks for new content and helps the end user organize this flood of information. Unlike a traditional periodical that must be printed and mailed to each subscriber, a web-based feed reaches the end user almost instantly. Think of your aggregator as a virtual periodical collection.

You might create a news folder containing the latest news feeds from **Reuters**, **USA Today**, **CNN** and **BBC** for older students and **CBBC Newsround** and **PBS Newshour Extra** for younger students.

How do I know if a feed is available?

When you find a website that is updated regularly, look for the web feed logo. The icon is generally an orange square containing a dot and 2 curved lines. You might also see a rectangle with the letters RSS which stands for Real Simple Syndication or Rich Site Summary file format. In most cases you can simply drag the RSS link from your web browser into your aggregator. Or, you can copy and paste the RSS link. If you want more information, many websites provide directions for using their RSS feeds. **NASA RSS feeds** <<http://www.nasa.gov/rss/>> page contains information about linking to feeds for breaking news, image of the day, and many other information sources.

What do the web feeds contain?

The information presented in a web feed varies depending on the content of the website. For example, a news-oriented website might provide a feed for short, breaking news-type feeds, while a podcasting site would link to MP3 audio files.

With young people, consider starting with simple, regular feeds such local news or weather feeds. Also try **Yahooligan's Joke of the Day** or **Yahoo! Education: SAT Tip of the Day**.

How do I choose an aggregator?

You need an aggregator to download, organize, and read your web feeds.

Web Browser. The easiest approach is to simply use your web browser. For instance, **Firefox** and **Internet Explorer 7** have a built-in feed reader. When you go to a website containing a feed, the web feed logo will appear in the menu bar known as a "live bookmark". You can set up your feeds much like bookmarks. The problem with this approach is that it's computer specific, so you'd end up with

different feeds marked on each computer in your library unless you have a system for mirroring your hard drives.

Web-based Tools. Personalized web home pages contain feed readers, so if you use **MyYahoo** <<http://my.yahoo.com/>> and **Microsoft's Live** <<http://www.live.com/>>, you've already got what you need. However if you want a tool designed specifically as an aggregator, consider **Bloglines** <<http://www.bloglines.com/>> or **Google Reader** <<https://www.google.com/reader/>>. This approach works well if you plan to share your feed reader with other teachers or students. Consider establishing a Bloglines account and linking it directly from your school library website.

Desktop Readers. Many stand-alone feed readers such as **FeedDemon** <<http://www.newsgator.com>> can be downloaded to your desktop. Different desktop readers are sometimes required or preferred for different operating systems, such as **Newsfire** <<http://www.newsfirerss.com/>> for Macs. The main drawback of desktop readers for the school library is that the software must be installed on any computer using the reader.

Keep in mind that feeds can also be downloaded to multimedia programs such as **iTunes** for use on portable devices like an iPod. For example, a series of foreign language lessons downloaded as podcasts could be saved on an iPod and checked out by your library.

Once you've chosen your reader, simply subscribe to the content that you want to receive. In a July 2006 article in **School Library Journal**, Will Richardson suggests that school librarians proceed slowly. He states: "it's pretty easy to load up on RSS feeds, only to find that you can't keep up with the resulting flood of content." He suggests limiting subscriptions to 20 feeds or less until you get a feel for the volume of content you can handle.

How do I select quality feeds?

The selection policy you use to select print periodicals also applies to virtual materials. In other words, you need to consider the timeliness, accuracy, authority, bias, and the other criteria used in evaluating other types of subscriptions. Remember that most websites are

designed for adults rather than young people. Think about reading level and age appropriateness. Also consider how the feeds align with curriculum standards.

Why not just go to the website directly?

Many people maintain bookmarks and pathfinders that contain links to content-rich websites or use email for breaking news. Why bother with news aggregators? First, you don't need to wade through a website to find the latest information, it's sent to you directly. Second, files such as podcasts can be downloaded in the background to save time. Third, aggregators can notify you immediately of new content such as breaking news. Fourth, you don't have to worry about giving out your email address. Fifth, if you no longer wish to receive the feed, you simply remove it from your list. Sixth, you can create a news aggregator for your class rather than messing with individual access to bookmarks and email accounts.

Many school districts are concerned about student surfing and have filtered many of the blogs and other dynamic websites. In most cases, the content of blocked websites can still be accessed through RSS feeds allowing the school media specialist to select quality resources that might otherwise be unavailable to students.

How do I publish my own feed?

If you already maintain a website, a blog, or other web-based content such as podcasts, then consider making your content available through an RSS feed. If you are using one of the many blogging hosts such as **Blogger** <<http://www.blogger.com/>> or **eduBlogs.org** <<http://edublogs.org/>>, then an RSS feed is automatically generated. If you maintain your own website, you need to add a simple XML file to your website and let people know an RSS feed is available.

The **Mabry Middle School Media Center** blog <<http://mabryonline.org/blogs/media/>> and **Kellogg Middle School Library** <<http://learn.shorelineschools.org/kellogg/lhebgen/>> website are two school libraries that generate an RSS feed.

Web Feeds in the School Library Media Center

According to Will Richardson, RSS is “one of the powerful new technologies that are allowing users to manage, create, and share online content as never before.” Keep in mind that young people of all ages can engage in learning experiences using RSS feeds. Cindy Newton set up an **Indiana Mysteries** blog <<http://authorvisitsindiana.blogspot.com/>> for her elementary class to interact with children’s book author and scientist. Students everywhere can trace their progress using the blog’s web feed.

Reading and Writing in the Information Age

Students need experiences and tactical skills for optimally reading on the Internet (Parry, Oct. 2006). These include ways to find material worth reading and strategies to analyze the content. RSS feeds facilitate receiving chunks of information that are easy to scan and quickly select what they want to read.

Think about interdisciplinary approaches that might use web content. For example, a language arts class reading and writing science fiction stories might look for parallels in today’s science news by subscribing to the **Science News for Kids** <<http://www.sciencenewsforkids.org/>> web feed.

Use current topics and articles in magazines such as **Popular Mechanics** <<http://www.popularmechanics.com/rss/>> to promote non-fiction reading in areas such as robotics, science, industry, transportation, gardening, and woodworking.

As students use online resources in their written work, be sure they are properly citing sources. Consider a focused activity that asks students to apply information from a specific feed such as **Yahooligans: Ask Earl** and properly cite the source.

Provide children with virtual experiences that can be used in writing. For example, many blogs track animal migrations or journal about their work with endangered animals. Some classroom blogs like **Duck Diaries** <<http://duckdiaries.edublogs.org/>> write about their

class pets. Get students involved with reading and writing about these wildlife experiences.

Web Feeds in the Content Areas

Look for ways to connect specific standards to online content. For example, many history outcomes ask students to connect historical events to present situations. Math standards require students to apply mathematical formulas to authentic data sources.

Consider some of the following ideas for using content-area web feeds in teaching and learning:

Catalyst. Use current issues to generate interest in a new topic. For example, use a news item on a recently identified deep ocean creature to engage students in a discussion of the possibility of life in extreme environments such as the polar regions, deep sea, or outer space. Numerous science blogs, journals, and websites such as the journal **Nature** <<http://www.nature.com/webfeeds/>> and **National Geographic News** <<http://www.ngnews.com/>> provide web feeds on the latest research.

Collaboration. Many web-based projects are using web feeds as a way to update participants on the progress of their project. Participants blog about their virtual field trip, science investigation, or other activity, then use the feed for quick access to the data.

Comparison. Students need experiences in comparing information sources. For example, you might ask students to compare articles on the same topic from **Discovery News** <<http://dsc.discovery.com/news/>>, **Why Files** <<http://whyfiles.org/>>, **National Wildlife** <<http://www.nwf.org/>>, and other online magazines.

Connection. Identify web feeds generated by professionals in specific disciplines to provide a real-world context for subject-matter content. Show students the enthusiasm of a mathematician or the hard work of an author. Many authors such as **Neil Gaiman** <<http://www.neilgaiman.com/>> maintain blogs that can be accessed through an RSS feed.

Critique. Critically evaluate an article, piece of literature, or work of art. Ask students to read a poem and discuss its message or judge the quality of a podcast. Try **Arts and Letters Daily** <<http://www.aldaily.com/>> for ideas in literature and the humanities.

Web Feeds and Information Fluency

To become information fluent, today's students must be able to apply their information skills to real-world situations. Web feeds provide authentic, timely information that students can analyze, critique, and discuss. Focus on assignments that involve students in web content evaluation. Ask students to compare the information found on different feeds. How is the same topic treated by different news sources? Why is their coverage alike or different from each other?

Also engage students in activities that involve analyzing content for facts, opinions, and arguments. Use web feeds from newspaper opinion sections and blogs for these types of activities.

Web feeds offer a variety of perspectives on timely topics. Use web feeds to compare points of view on topics in the news.

Web Feeds for Professional Development

The best way to learn about web feeds is to use it for your own professional development. Activities such as browsing the latest book reviews or keeping up-to-date on the activities of professional organizations can be time consuming. Using an aggregator, you can quickly skim the latest news and information without having your email box clogged with messages.

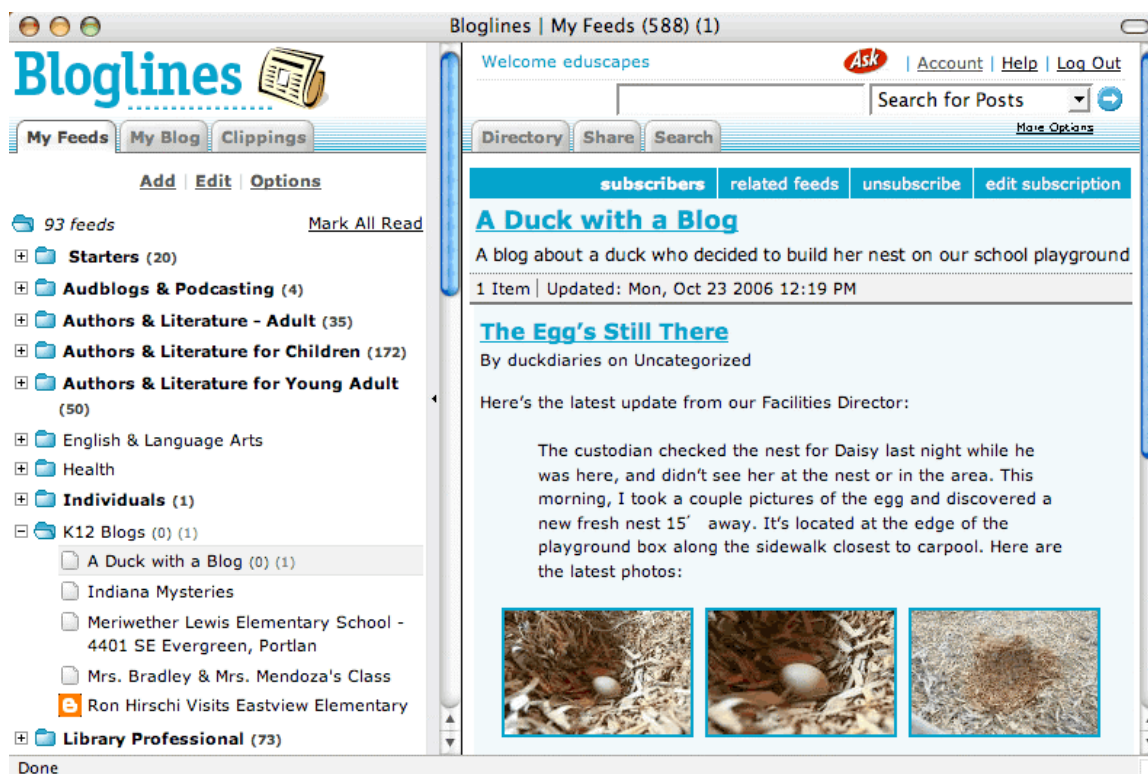
Start with few feeds in each category. Try adding a couple feeds for libraries with book reviews such as **Menasha Library Kids Lit** blog <<http://kidslit.menashalibrary.org/>> or **Ms. Hickson's BookBlog** <<http://nhhslibrary.blogs2teach.net/>>. Also, add links to professional association news such as the **AASL blog** <<http://blogs.ala.org/aasl.php>>.

To see the web feeds discussed in this article and many more examples of RSS feeds across the curriculum, go to our example at **Bloglines** <<http://www.bloglines.com/public/eduscapes>>.

References

Parry, D. (Oct. 2006). The Technology of Reading and Writing in the Digital Space: Why RSS is crucial for a Blogging Classroom at **Blogs for Learning**. Available <<http://blogsforlearning.msu.edu/articles/view.php?id=6>>

Richardson, W. (July 2006). Merrily Down the Stream. **School Library Journal**, 52(7), p.40-42.

A screenshot of the Bloglines website interface. The browser window title is "Bloglines | My Feeds (588) (1)". The page features a navigation bar with "My Feeds", "My Blog", and "Clippings" tabs. Below this is a sidebar with a tree view of feed categories, including "93 feeds", "Starters (20)", "Audblogs & Podcasting (4)", "Authors & Literature - Adult (35)", "Authors & Literature for Children (172)", "Authors & Literature for Young Adult (50)", "English & Language Arts", "Health", "Individuals (1)", "K12 Blogs (0) (1)", and "Library Professional (73)". The main content area shows a feed for "A Duck with a Blog" with a description: "A blog about a duck who decided to build her nest on our school playground". It includes a search bar, a "Welcome eduscapes" message, and a "The Egg's Still There" update with three small photographs of a duck's nest.

Bloglines | My Feeds (529) (1)

Bloglines

My Feeds | My Blog | Clippings

Add | Edit | Options

93 feeds [Mark All Read](#)

- Starters (10)
 - Yahoo! Education: SAT* Tip of the Day
 - Yahooligans! Ask Earl: Question and Answer
 - Yahooligans! Jokes: Joke of the Day (10)
- Audblogs & Podcasting (2)
- Authors & Literature - Adult
 - NYT > Sunday Book Review
- Authors & Literature for Children (158)
 - A Fuse #8 Production (33)
 - Big A little a (12)
 - bookshelves of doom (3)
 - Chicken Spaghetti (4)
 - Jen Robinson's Book Page (10)
 - Kids Lit
 - Kids Reviews (15)

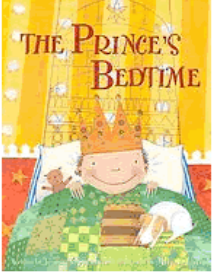
Kids Lit

Books and More for Children and Teens

15 Items | [Sort Oldest First](#) | Updated: Mon, Oct 23 2006 12:56 PM

The Prince's Bedtime

By Tasha Saecker



[The Prince's Bedtime](#) by Joanne Oppenheim, illustrated by Miriam Latimer.

The young prince simply will not go to bed! His royal parents try everything from warm milk to a soft quilt. Finally they call out to the kingdom for help. The doctor tries to give him sleeping draughts, but he refuses to take them. He ends up the only one awake after everyone else gives them a sip. Then dancers perform to get him tired, but again the prince is the only one still dancing at dawn. The ideas continue from magic to large pillows, but no luck... Until an old lady comes to the castle and pulls out a book... A bedtime

Done

My Yahoo!

MY YAHOO! Welcome, eduscapes [Sign Out, My Account]

Yahoo! Mail More Yahoo! ? help

Mon, Oct 23, 01:49 pm

[Wells Fargo Home Equity Financing!](#)

+ Add Content | Change Layout | Change Colors | Select Page: [My Front Page](#)

Weather

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|--|
| Branson, MO | 30...60 F | |
| Charleston, IL | 29...48 F | |
| Dallas, TX | 49...71 F | |
| Emporia, KS* | 32...56 F | |
| Estes Park, CO | 29...55 F | |
| Tucson, AZ | 58...88 F | |
| Virgin, UT | 50...78 F | |
| Torrey, UT | 35...59 F | |
| Kalispell, MT | 34...56 F | |
| Santa Fe, NM | 37...62 F | |

* indicates severe weather alert

Reuters: Top Stories

- [U.S. says has set no deadlines for Iraq](#) - 43 minutes ago
- [Iran won't retreat from atomic rights: president](#) - 5 hours ago
- [Diplomacy but still no end to Korean crisis](#) - 1 day ago

Reuters: World News

- [Hungary police battle protesters](#) - one hour ago
- [Iraq's PM under pressure as U.S. frustration mounts](#) - 10 hours ago
- [Far-right partner set to join Israeli government](#) - one hour ago

Reuters: Business

- [Ford posts loss of \\$5.8 billion](#) - 59 minutes ago
- [IBM sues Amazon over Web patents](#) - 2 hours ago
- [AT&T profit tops views](#) - one hour ago

Reuters: Politics

- [Republicans face uphill fight in bellwether Ohio](#) - 7 hours ago

Done

 <http://blogs.ala.org/aasl.php>

