

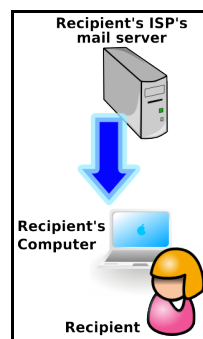
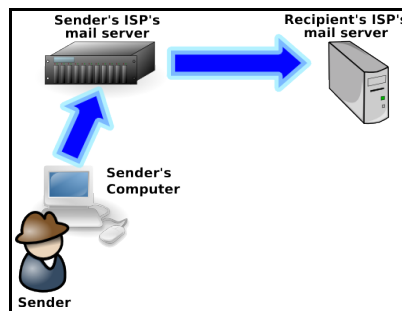
introduction to email

Ever since computers have been networked together, people have used the network to send messages back and forth. There are several ways to send messages over the internet, but email is the most popular. If you have an email account, you can send a message to anyone else who also has an email account, provided you know their email address. The really convenient thing about email is that it automatically adjusts to everyone's schedule: you send messages whenever you get around to it, and the recipients can read and answer them whenever they get around to doing so.

When you sign up with an internet service provider, one of the services they usually provide for you is an email account. Using your email account, together with software called a *mailreader* (see page 6), you can send and receive messages over the internet. The mailreader can get your mail, store it for future reference, show it to you, let you organize it, and let you write and send your own messages.

Once you have an email account, people can send you email at any time, even when you are not connected. When someone sends you a message, it goes to a special computer called a *mail server*, which your provider keeps connected to the internet all the time, waiting to receive mail. There the message waits in your *mailbox* until you connect to the internet and check your mail. Then your mailreader retrieves it for you, and you can read it at your leisure.

A normal mailreader runs on your own computer and so will store your mail there, on your own computer. There are also web-based mail services, however, which you use through a website; they store your mail in their own place. For example, if you use Google's Gmail service, it will store your mail on Google's computers. Even with a normal email account, which you usually use via a mailreader on your own computer, there may also be a way to access your mail via the web when you are away from your computer, so that you can continue to check your mail when you are away from home (e.g., on vacation).



compatibility

People often ask: "If my friend has email through one service provider, and I get email through a different provider, can I send email to my friend?"

The short answer is, "Yes."

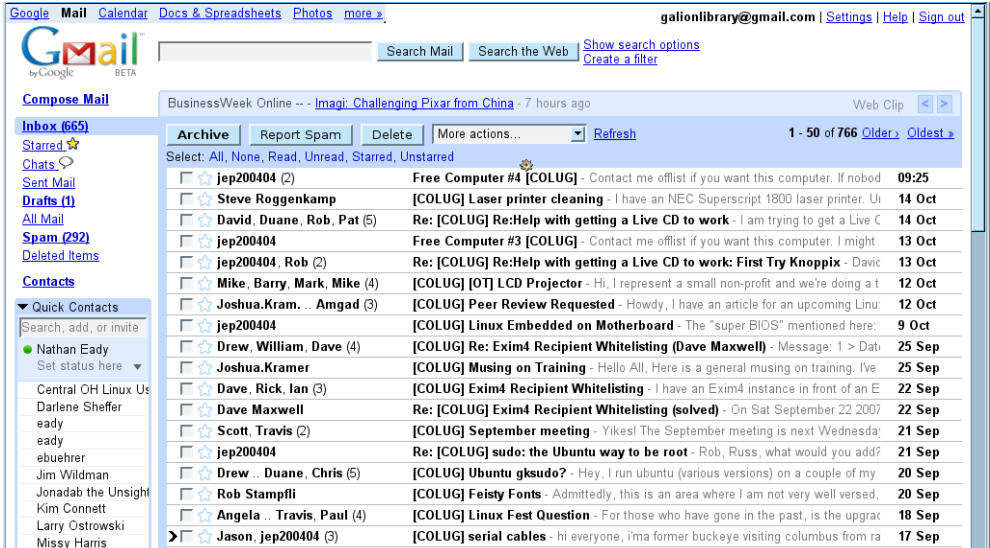
The longer answer is that there are technical standards that govern the underlying details of how the parts of the message are represented as they are transmitted from place to place. These technical details don't matter, except that the existence of standards allows different email software from different vendors to *interoperate*, so that all the world's internet email systems can talk to each other.

So yes, you can exchange mail with anyone who has email, no matter which software they or their service provider choose to use.

gmail: introduction

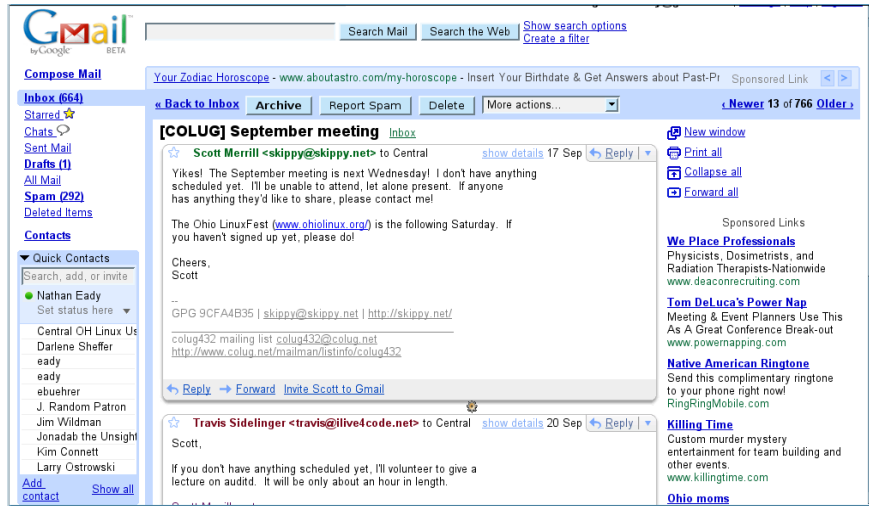
Google offers a webmail service called Gmail. This screenshot shows a Gmail inbox. (The "inbox" is where new mail is stored when it arrives.)

Each message in the list has a checkbox, and the buttons across the top perform actions (Archive, Report Spam, Delete) which, if you do them, apply to whatever messages have their checkboxes checked. So if you wanted to archive several messages from the list, you would check their boxes and then click the Archive button.



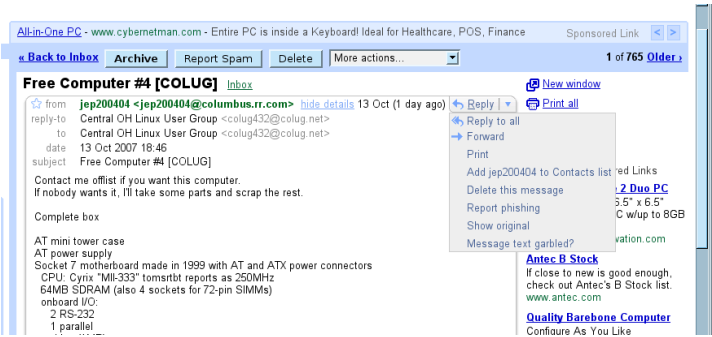
Clicking on one of the messages in the list causes the message (or, if there are replies, the entire conversation thread) to be displayed, as shown in the screenshot at left. Notice that Gmail is showing very minimal information from the headers, condensed into a single line. Clicking on "show details" shows a handful of the most important headers, each on its own line.

The main action buttons are still present at the top, but now would apply to the conversation thread that is currently being viewed.



There are also, however, some new actions available when viewing a message, that were not accessible from the list. The Reply option is visible right away, but next to it there is a little downward-pointing triangle: this is the pull-down button for a menu of additional actions that can be taken. The screenshot at right shows this menu pulled down, to reveal the available choices.

The "Reply to all" action is very similar to Reply, but tries to collect more addresses from the original message than just the sender, and address the response to all of them. The Forward action is a way of sending the message along to a new recipient. Print is for producing a paper copy. The "Show original" action lets you see the message as it looked when it was sent, without Gmail's interpretation. (Among other things, this lets you see all the headers, not just the ones visible through "show details".)



gmail: message composition

When you click the Compose Mail link, Gmail takes you to a message composition screen, like the one shown at right. There are three main things you need to fill in:

- In the To: field, you put the email address of the person you want to contact.
- In the Subject: field, you put a brief description of the subject matter of the message.
- In the main body text area, you type in the actual message itself.

There are some other, optional fields, but those three are the only required ones.

The text area for the To: field has an auto-complete feature. If you start typing in an address that you've used before, a little list will pop up containing previously-used addresses that match what you've typed. If one of them is the address you want, you can click on it, and the rest will be filled in automatically.

When you are satisfied with all three required fields, you can click the Send button to send the message. When it has finished sending, Gmail will notify you that the message has been sent, as shown at right.

Composing a reply is even easier. When you hit the Reply button (or Reply to All), Gmail will automatically fill in the To: and Subject: fields, so all you have to do is edit your actual response and then click Send. Gmail shows you the original message (at the top of the screen) so that you can refer to it while writing your response.

Again, you can edit other fields (e.g., the Subject) if you like, but in the case of a reply it is generally unnecessary.

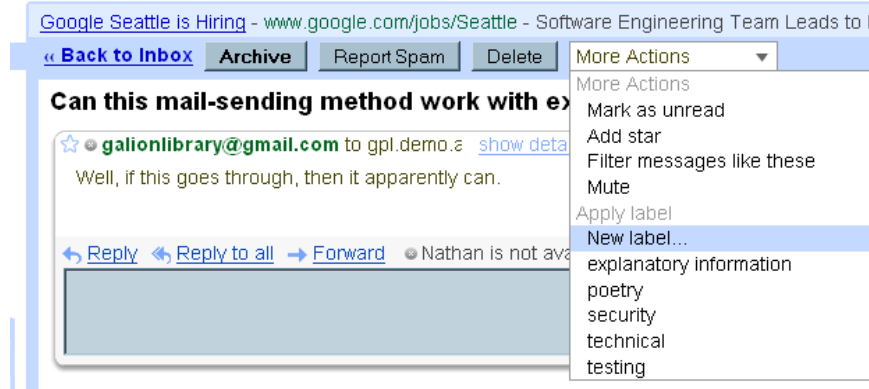
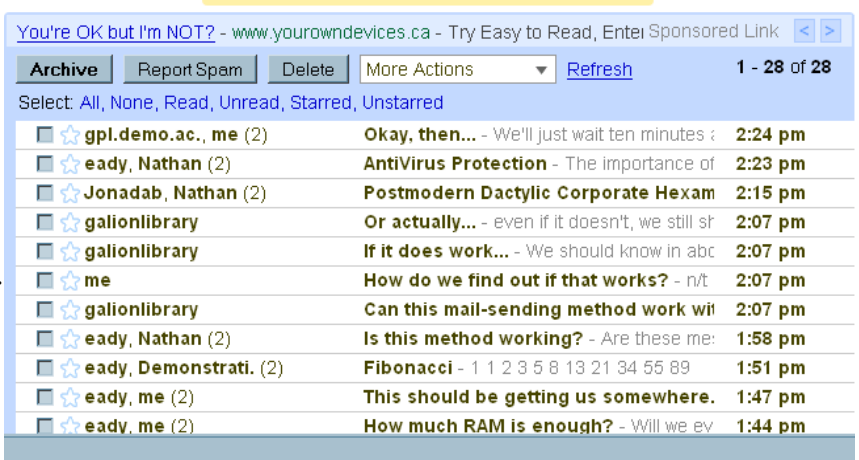
In the example at left, the user has included relevant excerpts of the previous message, marked with > marks along the left edge, and then has inserted his own comments after each excerpt. This practice is called "quoting", and is very common with email, especially when a conversation stretches out over hours or days. It supplies context so that the reader knows what you are talking about.

Gmail can automatically include the previous message and the quote marks in the composition box, but it does not supply the special editing features some of the more advanced mailreaders have for breaking the quoted message into excerpts while preserving the quoting. With Gmail, you have to do that part yourself.

gmail: message management

After you've had email for a while, your inbox can begin to accumulate messages. They may all be things you'd like to keep, but the clutter can make it hard to find what you want.

Most mailreaders provide a feature called *folders* whereby you sort your messages into categories. Instead of traditional folders, Gmail provides *labels*. It's still a way of sorting your messages into categories, but with labels a message can be labeled with more than one category.



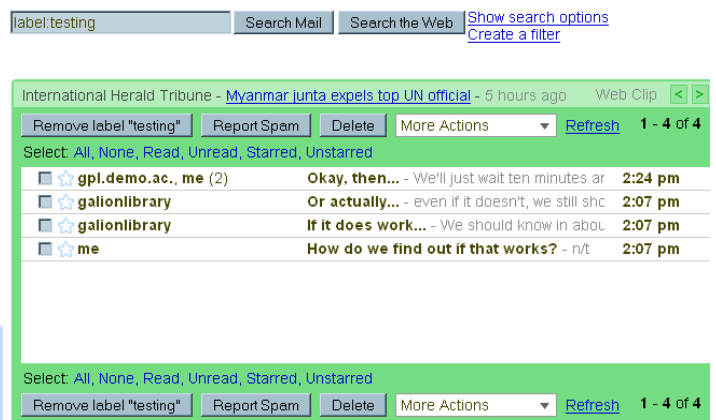
You can apply labels either from the list of messages (and the label will apply to any messages that have their checkbox marked) or when viewing a specific message.

To apply a label, pull down the More Actions dropdown list. If you haven't already created the label you want to apply, click New label. A dialog box will pop up, prompting you for the label

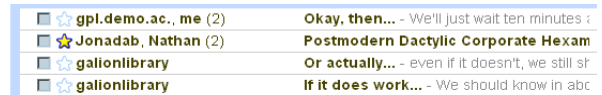
to apply. Fill in a word that describes the category to which you want to assign the message, and click OK. You only have to do this once for each label (category) you want to create. Once you've created a label, it becomes available directly on the More Actions list and can be applied to any message, by picking it from the list.



Once you have applied any labels you want to a message, you may want to archive it, by clicking the Archive button. This removes it from your inbox, reducing clutter, but you can still find it later, either by searching for it directly, or by looking under any of the labels you applied to it. In the sidebar (on the left side of the page) Gmail shows a list of the different labels you have used, and how many messages there are with each label. By clicking on one of the labels in this list, you can view a list of the messages with that label.



Another message management feature Gmail provides is starring. By clicking on the star outline next to a message, you can give it a gold star, so it will stand out in the list.



anatomy of an email message

An email message consists of two or three parts. All email messages should have *headers* and a *body*, and some messages may also have *attachments*.

The *headers* specify certain standard information about the message, such as the Subject (what the message is about), the Date that the message was composed, and what address(es) the message is being sent To. Some of the headers contain technical information, such as what *character set* the message is in (Latin, Greek, Japanese, Unicode, ...), how the attachments are encoded, or how and when the mail servers passed it along to its destination. Your mailreader may not show you all of the headers, but it should show certain important ones.

The *body* is the text of the message itself.

The *attachments*, if there are any, are additional computer files that are being sent along with the message. These can be anything – pictures, word processing documents, computer software, or anything else that can be stored in a computer file. However, the recipient will only be able to usefully open the attachments if he has software installed for opening that kind of file. Some file types, such as PNG images, are standard enough that almost everyone can open them. Others are more obscure.

terminology

here are some email-related terms you may encounter and wonder about...

account – if you have an email account, then you have a mailbox on a mail server and an address that points to it

address – a unique identifier that refers to one specific mailbox on one specific mailservier – and thus to one recipient

biff – a program that alerts you whenever you have new mail in your mailbox on the mailservier

bounce – if a mail server accepts a message and then later decides it cannot be delivered, it may send a *bounce message* to the Sender

domain – the part of the address after the @ symbol, which identifies the mailservier

IMAP – a protocol sometimes used (instead of the much more common POP3); designed to handle mail that is permanently stored on the mail server

mailbox – a location on the mail server where one user's mail is kept until his mailreader gets it

mailreader – a program that you use to send and receive email

mail server – a special computer that hosts email accounts (mailboxes)

MTA – *mail transfer agent* – software that a mail server uses to do its job

MUA – *mail user agent* – same thing as a mailreader

MX – *mail exchanger* – the mail server for a specific domain

password – how you prove to the mail server that you have the right to get your mail – only someone with your password can get your mail

POP3 – the protocol normally used by a mailreader to get new mail from a mail server

queue – if a message cannot be delivered right away, it may be placed in a queue for another try at delivery later

reply – a message that is an answer to another message

SMTP – the protocol used by mailreaders and mail servers to send mail to someone else

spam – email sent automatically or in bulk to many recipients, who did not ask to receive it; junk mail

signature – either a short bit of text automatically appended to

email conventions

In addition to the technical standards, there are a number of cultural conventions (sometimes called *netiquette*) surrounding email – things people who use email expect to see in any message. Here are some of the most important ones:

- Every message is expected to have a relevant Subject header. This may seem unimportant at first, but people who have been using email for a while can collect quite a lot of it, and messages that don't have a good Subject are much harder to keep track of. Give people a break: give your message a good Subject. Additionally, a good Subject will help the recipient recognize that the message is not spam.
- The letters "Re: " at the beginning of the Subject indicate that the message is a *reply* to a previous message with that Subject. (Replies to replies still only have one "Re: ", not two or three or more.)
- In replies it is common to *quote* relevant excerpts of the previous message, prefixing them with a *quoting symbol* (usually >) to indicate that this is an excerpt of the previous message. Sometimes someone will quote an excerpt that already included a quoted excerpt, in which case you may see multiple quoting symbols side-by-side. This is called *nested quoting*.

available mailreaders

You probably already have some kind of mailreader software installed on your computer. Most operating systems include at least one mailreader. (For example, Mac OS X includes Mail.app, and Microsoft Windows comes with Outlook Express.) Additionally, many internet service providers include a mailreader with the software package or connection kit that they send out to new customers. So if you want, you can probably just use whatever mailreader your computer already has.

However, your options are actually wide open: dozens of mailreaders are available, and most of them are free to download. If you are looking for a good mailreader, or are dissatisfied with your current one, there are plenty of options out there that you can try. Here are some of the most popular mailreaders:

- Pegasus Mail is very easy to learn to use, yet also has very good features and capabilities. <http://www.pmail.com/>
- Mozilla Thunderbird is a relative newcomer, made by the same people who create the Firefox web browser. It's simple and easy to use and includes usenet support as well as email. <http://www.mozilla.org/>
- Webmail is a mailreader built into a website, so that you can read mail in your web browser. Webmail is usually very poor in features compared to a regular mailreader, but one advantage is that the computer you use only needs to have a web browser, so it's good for getting your mail away from home, when you don't have your own computer with you. Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft all offer webmail services, and many internet service providers do as well.
- Mulberry, Opera, Zimbra, Forte Agent, Eureka, Ximian Evolution, The Bat, Turnpike, Mail.app, SquirrelMail, BeMail, Sylpheed, KMail, Balsa, Mail Commander, ... there are many, many, many more.