

Understanding RSS feeds

RSS stands for “Really Simple Syndication” or “Real Site Summary”. What is an RSS feed?

Databases and templates

The easiest way to understand how RSS feeds work is to look at something familiar - word processing and databases.

Say you own an ice cream parlour named “My Favourite Flavour” and have a database of customers with information about them that you gleaned from your frequent purchasing discount program called Quickr Lickr that cost \$5 to join.

DATABASE FIELDS are the categories of information in the columns in the example below.

DATABASE RECORDS are the collection of fields that describe one entry, or the rows in the example below.

First Name	Last Name	DOB Day	DOB Month	Cust. No.	Fav Flavour	Fav Topping	Address	Member ship Exp	No. of card uses
Bob	Smith	19	March	00001	Vanilla	Hot Fudge	bob@mail.com	April 28	20
Freida	Jacobs	25	March	00002	Chocolate	Raspberry	fjac43@yes.net	5 July	15
Another	Name	5	June	00003	Strawberry	Peach	aname@email.org	May 2	35

If you wanted to send out a letter to all your customers who have a birthday in a certain month, you could write each of them a separate letter using a word processing program. That could take a very long time – even if you copied and pasted and isn't very efficient.

The better way is to create a birthday letter Template and use fields from the database to customise the letter to each person.

First you create a template in your word processing program, then choose which fields from the database you want to use in the letter.

Birthday letter

Dear <First Name>

We hope you have a happy birthday on <DOB Month> <DOB Day>.

If you come in this month and show us your Quickr Lickr membership card, you'll get a free cup of <Fav Flavour> ice cream topped with <Fav Topping>.

Looking forward to seeing you soon!

My Favourite Flavour

To do the mail merge, you only select the customers with a date of birth (DOB) in the month of March and then merge.

Based on our database of 3 people, you will get two letters out of the one template you created – as follows:

Dear Bob

We hope you have a happy birthday on March 19.

If you come in this month and show us your Quickr Lickr membership card, you'll get a free cup of Vanilla ice cream topped with Hot Fudge.

Looking forward to seeing you soon!

My Favourite Flavour

Dear Freida

We hope you have a happy birthday on March 25.

If you come in this month and show us your Quickr Lickr membership card, you'll get a free cup of Chocolate ice cream topped with Raspberry.

Looking forward to seeing you soon!

My Favourite Flavour

So instead of having to create two emails from scratch, you only had to have information in a database and a template to selectively display the information you want to display.

The database then FEEDS the information out to the template.

If you wanted to create a different letter using the same database of information, you could do so.

Membership Renewal Letter

Dear < First Name >

Don't miss out on all the great discounts that your Quickr Lickr card provides.

From the <No. of card uses> times you've used your card this year, it's clear you find it of value. Your card number <Cust No.> is due to expire <Membership Exp>. Renew now!

<Fav Flavour> wishes and <Fav Topping> dreams to you!

My Favourite Flavour

Okay, so besides making you crave ice cream – you can see the advantage to using a database and templates rather than creating a bunch of flat documents.

Databases allow you to re-use the same information in new ways.

Web sites and databases

In the early days of the web – a web site was a series of pages that were each created individually. To add more pages, you had to create a new page, lay it out, format it, and publish it.

Changing the look of an entire web site meant laying out all those pages all over again. If you wanted to use the information from a web page – you had to copy and paste it into a new page or document.

And if you were a fan of a web site, to find out what the newest information was – you had to go out to that web site.

Fast forward to the present....

Most web sites are based on databases and templates now.

My web site – <http://kerryj.com> has a template for the home page that looks different to the template for the individual stories (called blog posts) which are different to the template for the Archives page and the template for the About page. All access the same database of information.

Home page template for kerryj.com

KerryJ's Neotenous Tech
Playing as I learn and loving it!

FRONT PAGE RSS

Title of story (blog post)

Several stories including the title, images and story content display here

Month, day and year story written displayed here

Really well done conference marketing
June 21st, 2008 - No Comments

Titles of stories display here

SEARCH IT!
Go search, type and hit enter

RECENT ENTRIES

- Really well done conference marketing 6.18
- Want a free mobi site? 6.18
- Testing Wavelog 6.9
- Covering conferences nuts and bolts 6.3
- Mobile production studio 6.1
- Princes of Iddites? 6.1
- Teistra's side of the story on NEN 5.29
- US net neutrality and have your say on future of broadband in Australia 5.24
- Do you wag the tail? 5.24
- Not yet three - and navigating Second Life 5.17

Want a free mobi site?
June 20th, 2008 - No Comments

Every 15 seconds another mobile account is added to the more than 3 billion existing ones according to an [April 2008 press release](#) from the GSM Association. So when I saw a web site promising me the ability to create a mobile compatible web site in minutes just after lunch today - I thought I'd check it out.

MY FLICKR PHOTOS

- Breakfast of champions served at noon
- Opening of bar jokaydia
- Advantages of being child-free
- Dear Adelaide - the 1970s just called

My Story page template

The image shows a screenshot of a Blogger-style 'My Story' page template. The page title is 'KerryJ's Neotenous Tech' with the subtitle 'Playing as I learn and loving it!'. Navigation links include 'FRONT PAGE', 'ARCHIVES', 'ABOUT', and 'RSS'. The main content area features a large image of a child with a yellow and red toy wheel. Below the image is a post titled 'Really well done conference marketing' by 'KerryJ' dated 'June 15th, 2008' with 'No Comments'. The post content discusses a conference and mentions 'Successful and Outstanding Bloggers.com'. A 'RECENT ENTRIES' sidebar lists several posts with dates. A 'MY FLICKR PHOTOS' sidebar lists various photos. A 'RESPONSES SO FAR' section shows no comments. A 'LEAVE A COMMENT' form is present with fields for Name, Email, and Website. Callout boxes highlight: 'Title of story' (pointing to the post title), 'Content of 1 story displays here' (pointing to the post body), 'Month, day and year story written displayed here' (pointing to the date), 'Titles of stories display here' (pointing to the recent entries list), and 'A comment box also displays' (pointing to the comment form).

KerryJ's Neotenous Tech
Playing as I learn and loving it!

FRONT PAGE ARCHIVES ABOUT RSS

Title of story

Content of 1 story displays here

Month, day and year story written displayed here

Titles of stories display here

A comment box also displays

My Archives Page

The screenshot shows a blog titled "KerryJ's Neotenous Tech" with the tagline "Playing as I learn and loving it!". The page has navigation links for "FRONT PAGE", "ARCHIVES", and "ABOUT", and an "RSS" icon. A large banner image shows a child with a yellow ring. Below the banner is a profile picture of a woman and a "Chat with KerryJ Offline" button. The main content area is titled "Browse the Archives..." and lists months from June 2008 to October 2006. A yellow callout box points to this list with the text "Month and year stories were written display here". To the right, there is a "SEARCH IT!" section with a search input field and a "RECENT ENTRIES" section listing various article titles. A second yellow callout box points to the recent entries with the text "Titles of stories display here". At the bottom, there is a "LINK LOVE" section with several links.

The information being displayed on all these pages came from the same database.

The templates have coding built into them that determine what DATABASE FIELDS will be displayed and how the information will be displayed (font, colour, alignment, etc.) I didn't touch these pages to lay them out.

When you click on a page in a database-driven web site like my blog here, the programming calls up a template and the fields in the template determine what information is displayed.

Just like in the letters from the database and templates section of this document.

The Archive page above has programming that tells it to display the month records were created and then links to a template that displays the stories created that month.

The section of the right hand column that has the Recent Entries heading is programmed to display the title of the stories created along with a numerical representation of the month and date they were written. See illustration below:

The image shows a screenshot of a website interface. At the top, there is a search bar with the heading "SEARCH IT!" and a prompt "To search, type and hit enter". Below this is a section titled "RECENT ENTRIES" which contains a list of story titles followed by a date in the format "Month.Day". Two yellow callout boxes are overlaid on the list. The first callout, labeled "Story title", points to the text "Really well done conference marketing" of the first entry. The second callout, labeled "Month and day story published", points to the date "6.12" of the same entry.

SEARCH IT!

To search, type and hit enter

RECENT ENTRIES

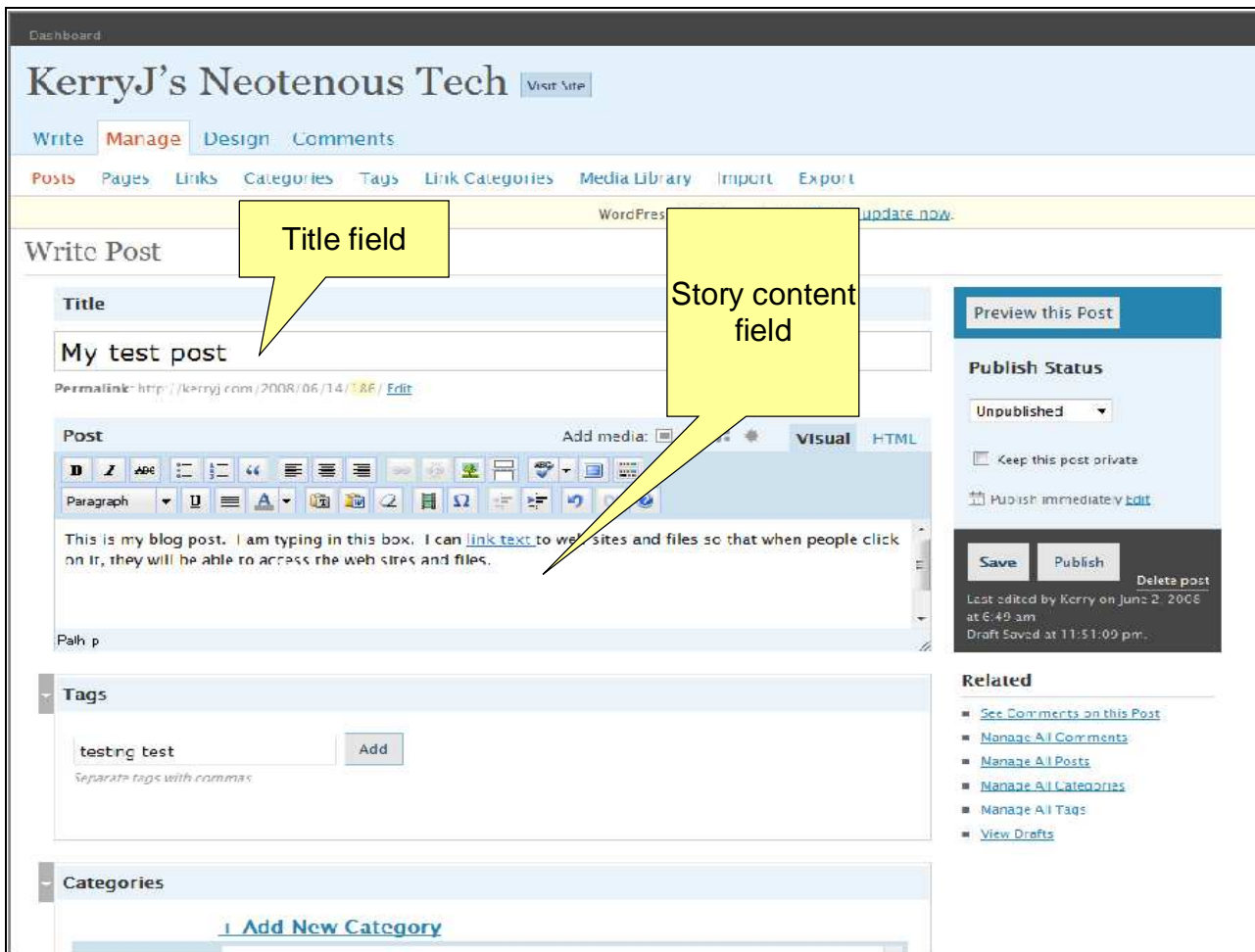
- Really well done conference marketing 6.12
- Want a free mobi site? 6.10
- Testing Wavelog 6.9
- Covering conferences nuts and bolts 6.3
- Mobile production studio 6.1
- Prince of luddites? 6.1
- Telstra's side of the story on NBN 5.29
- US net neutrality and have your say on future of broadband in Australia 5.24
- Do you wag the tail? 5.24
- Not yet three - and navigating Second Life 5.17

Entering information into the database

I enter the information into the database that drives my web site using a web-based form. It allows me to format the text.

It looks like a Word processor, but it's actually a series of fields I'm filling in for a database. It's just prettier than using an Excel spreadsheet.

The month and day the story was created is automatically generated by the database when I create the story.



Portable, flexible information

The programming behind the templates on my web site is not unique. This is REALLY IMPORTANT to understand.

The programming behind my site that takes information from the database and displays it on templates that determine what fields from the database it will show and how to show them is based on a standard way of doing this and is used by thousands of web sites and programs.

Why is that so great? Several reasons.

First up – the information that I enter into the database is NOT tied to the templates. That means the information **portable**.

So I can export the information in that database and take it with me, then set up a new web site with the same or another template ANYWHERE and create a whole new way of looking at the information. That means my information is now **flexible**.

NOW we're getting to RSS!

One method of pulling information out of a database is called RSS – Really Simple Syndication or Real Site Summary.

You'll notice at the top right of my web page there is a link to RSS and an orange square with white waves on it. That means my site makes its database available to be fed out using the RSS standard way of doing it.



You'll notice this symbol on lots of web sites. If you click on it, you'll either get a page full of code -or a page with the title, date and story content on it inviting you to “subscribe”.

What shows up on that page isn't important. What IS important is the address of that page. It will be different from the web site address because it is the address for the FEED, not the web site.

For instance, my web site address is <http://kerryj.com>

My FEED address is <http://feeds.feedburner.com/kerryj>

If you look at my feed using Internet Explorer version 7, you will see this:

The screenshot shows a blog feed titled "KerryJ's Neotenous Tech" with the subtitle "A podcast powered by FeedBurner". A "Subscribe with Google" button is visible. Below the header, there is a section for "Current Feed Content" with several entries. Callouts point to the following elements:

- Title of my blog:** Points to the header "KerryJ's Neotenous Tech".
- Story title:** Points to the first entry title "Really well done conference marketing".
- Date story created:** Points to the timestamp "Posted: Thu, 12 Jun 2008 03:59:54 +0000".
- First few sentences of the story content:** Points to the beginning of the first entry's text: "You'd expect it from the Successful and Outstanding Bloggers conference (cheekily called SOBcon) web site, I suppose. The clever little elements to this site — the fact that it's a Wiki, the badges that people can put on their web site if they are speaking or attending, the prominent RSS buttons, links to the conference blog, [...]"

So what do you do with this?

You use the FEED address <http://feeds.feedburner.com/kerryj> to Subscribe to my FEED and ignore the rest.

How?

You use RSS reading software – either software you download and install to your computer or web-based software to keep track of what I'm up to.

iGoogle RSS Feed Reader/Aggregator

I use iGoogle.

To use iGoogle, you will need to create free account with Google. This will give you web-based email and is really worth doing.

But you can experiment with it before doing all this if you want to.

I'll show you.

First, you go to Google.com and click on the iGoogle link at the top right.



You'll see a page pre-loaded with content and you may be asked to choose some content from a list. Go ahead and pick a few.

I picked Weather, Nasa picture of the day, Book of the day, Date and Time and Google News.

The page now looks like this:

Web [Images](#) [Maps](#) [News](#) [Shopping](#) [Gmail](#) [more](#) [Class.c | Home](#) | [Sign in](#)

iGoogle

[Please sign in to save your page.](#)

Home [Add a tab](#) [Get artist themes](#) | [Select theme](#) | [Add stuff](#)

Nasa Image of the Day



Nasa : 2008-06-14

Weather



Get weather forecasts for your hometown and favorite places around the globe.

Date & Time



Sun
JUN 15

8:56 AM TUE 11:55
12:00 AM 12:00 PM
12:00 PM 12:00 AM
222,242,254 / 28
1936


Google News

[Australia](#) [Business](#) [Sports](#) [Top Stories](#) [+](#)

Rudd unfazed by AIA intervention withdrawal -
ABC On the
Prime Minister Kevin Rudd says he is not concerned
about the future of the Emergen [all 17 news articles](#)

 **Smith defends 'out's whaling strategy -** Sydney
Morning Herald
Foreign Minister Stephen Smith has defended
Australia's strategy for stopping [all 1 064 news articles](#)

 **Police likely to interview Della Boccia -**
The West Australian
NSW Education Minister John Della Boccia and his
federal MP wife Beinda Neal co [all 47 news articles](#)

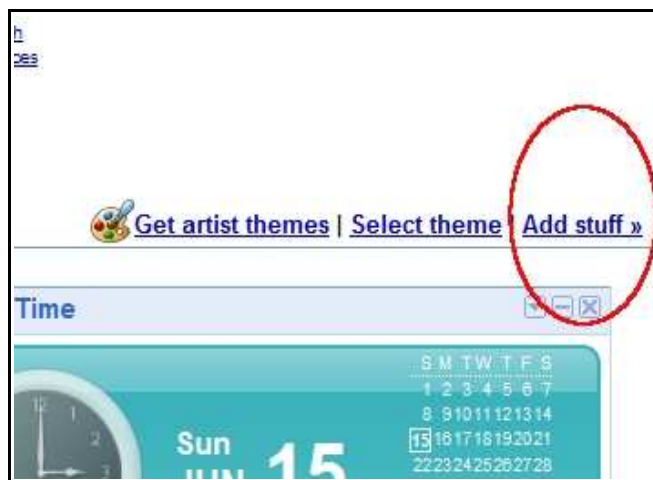
 **John McCain eyes Kevin Rudd's plan for region -**
The Australian
US presidential candidate John McCain is eyeing

I think it looks a bit ugly – so I can hover over the blue bit of the little squares (to the right of the titles) that hold the content and my cursor turns into a four way arrow. This means I can drag the little squares around the page to suit myself.



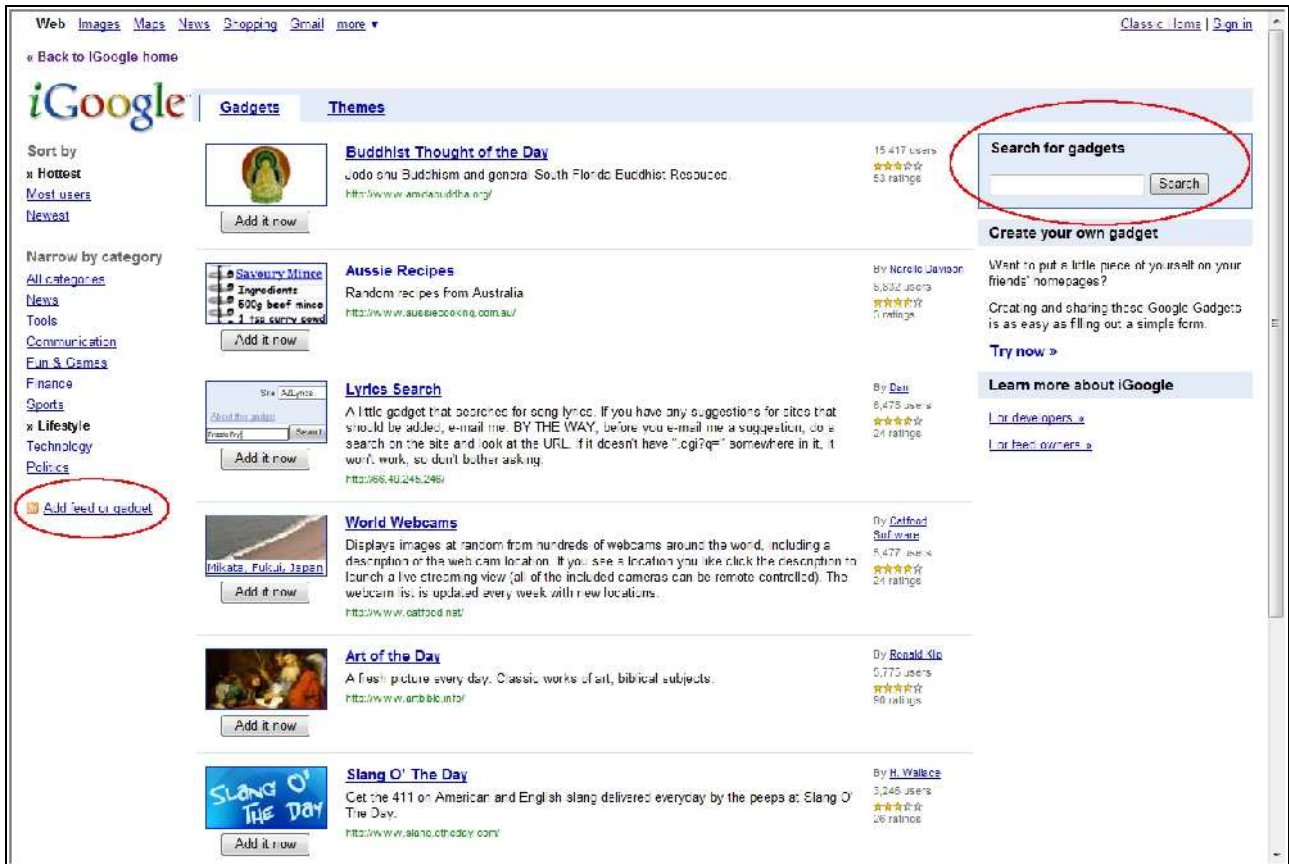
All the information on this screen is being FED in from other web sites.

To display an RSS FEED from a site that interests me, I can click on the elegantly named Add stuff link at the right hand side of the page.



This takes you to a pretty messy page filled with gadgets, games, and suggested web feeds.

You can use the search box in the upper right to search for items of interest or if you know the URL of the feed you want to add, use the Add feed or Gadget link at the middle left.



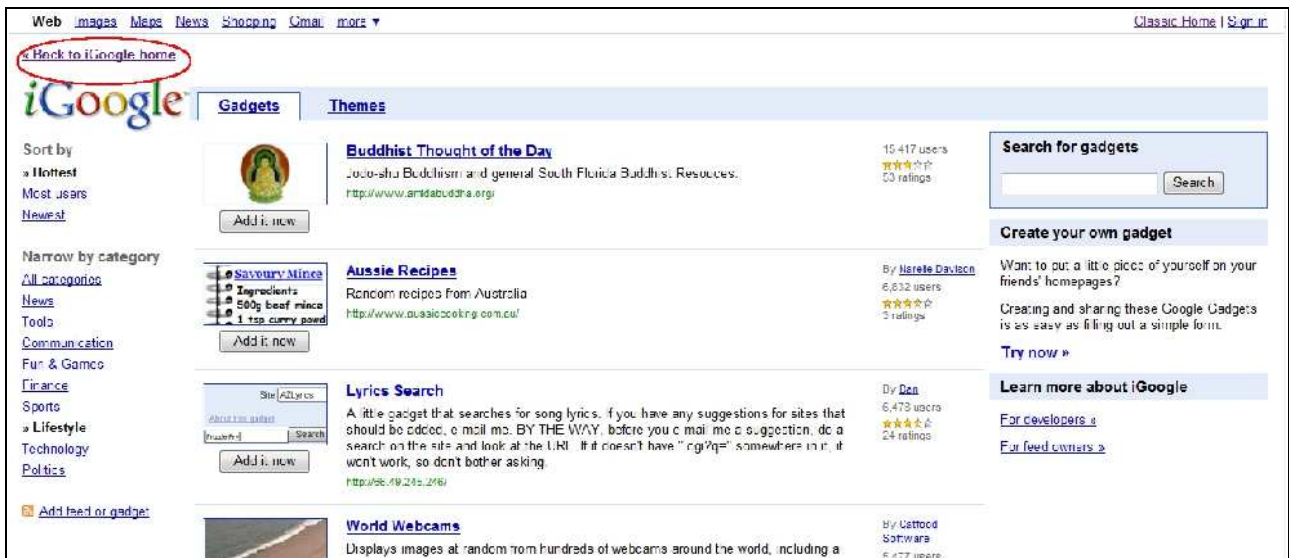
We'll add the RSS feed from kerry.com first.

My FEED address is <http://feeds.feedburner.com/kerryj>

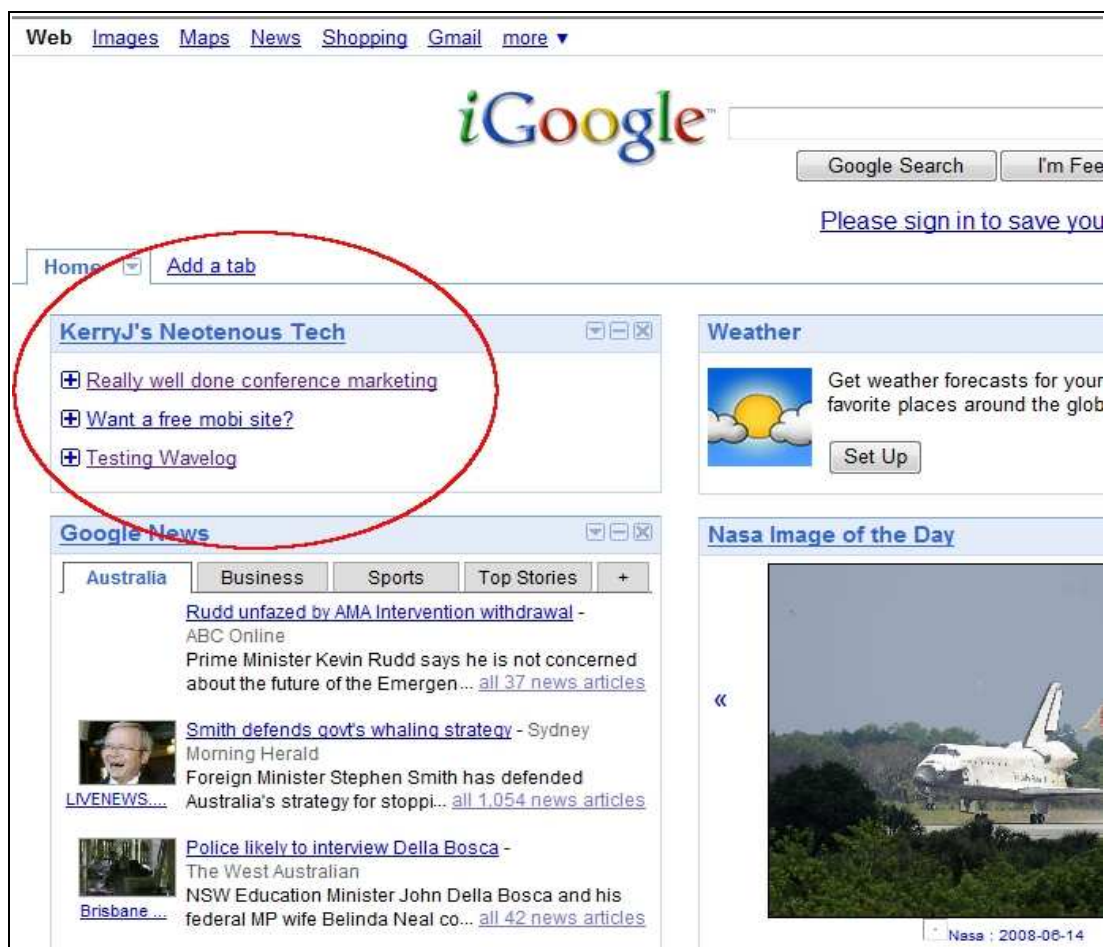
So, we'll click on the Add feed or gadget link and type or paste the URL into the box, making sure not to leave any spaces before or after the address:



Shut the box by clicking on the X and go back to the front page of your iGoogle by clicking on the link at the top left of the page.



You'll see that the little box or widget that displays the RSS feed from the Kerry J site shows the blog title and the title of the articles from my feed.



If you click on the plus sign + next to the title of the articles from my feed, you will see the first few sentences of the contents of the story.



If the story sounds interesting to you, you can click on the title of the story and you'll get to the story page on my web site where you can read the full article.

If not, you can wait for me to write another story. The feed will update and you can decide whether or not to read the full story or not. You can make that decision without having to go to my website.

Please note: if you want to save your iGoogle page at this point, you will need to set up an account with iGoogle. Otherwise, as soon as you navigate away, your changes will be lost.

An iGoogle account is a really great thing. You get a free gmail address and the iGoogle dashboard/RSS reader.

WHY RSS?

An RSS reader like iGoogle allows you to scan any number of web sites that may interest you.

Using a search in the Gadget section of iGoogle – I can find sites that pertain to a particular keyword or phrase and look at user reviews to decide whether or not to add them to my list of feeds.

I can also browse the categories at the left of the page in iGoogle to find content of interest.

Another way of finding out if information of interest to me is available via RSS is to go to the sites that provide information and look for the orange RSS symbol



Not all sites do this well. The PBS web site is terrible. The Oprah Winfrey site doesn't seem to offer them. The AARP site has a community section but no RSS that I could find. The American Library Association sure hides theirs away http://wikis.ala.org/readwriteconnect/index.php/ALA_RSS_feeds if you're interested.

Internet Explorer 7 will clue you in as to whether an RSS feed is available on a particular page.

If you look at the top right of your Explorer toolbar, you will see a list of icons – a little house, an RSS square in gray, a printer, etc. When an RSS feed is available, the RSS square turns orange.



Some sites let you save a search as an RSS feed.

For instance, if you go to Google News and do a search – say on Obama – you will get the latest results from news agencies all over the world.

To keep up to date on Obama, Google lets you subscribe to an RSS feed on your search. Just click on the link at the mid left of your screen:

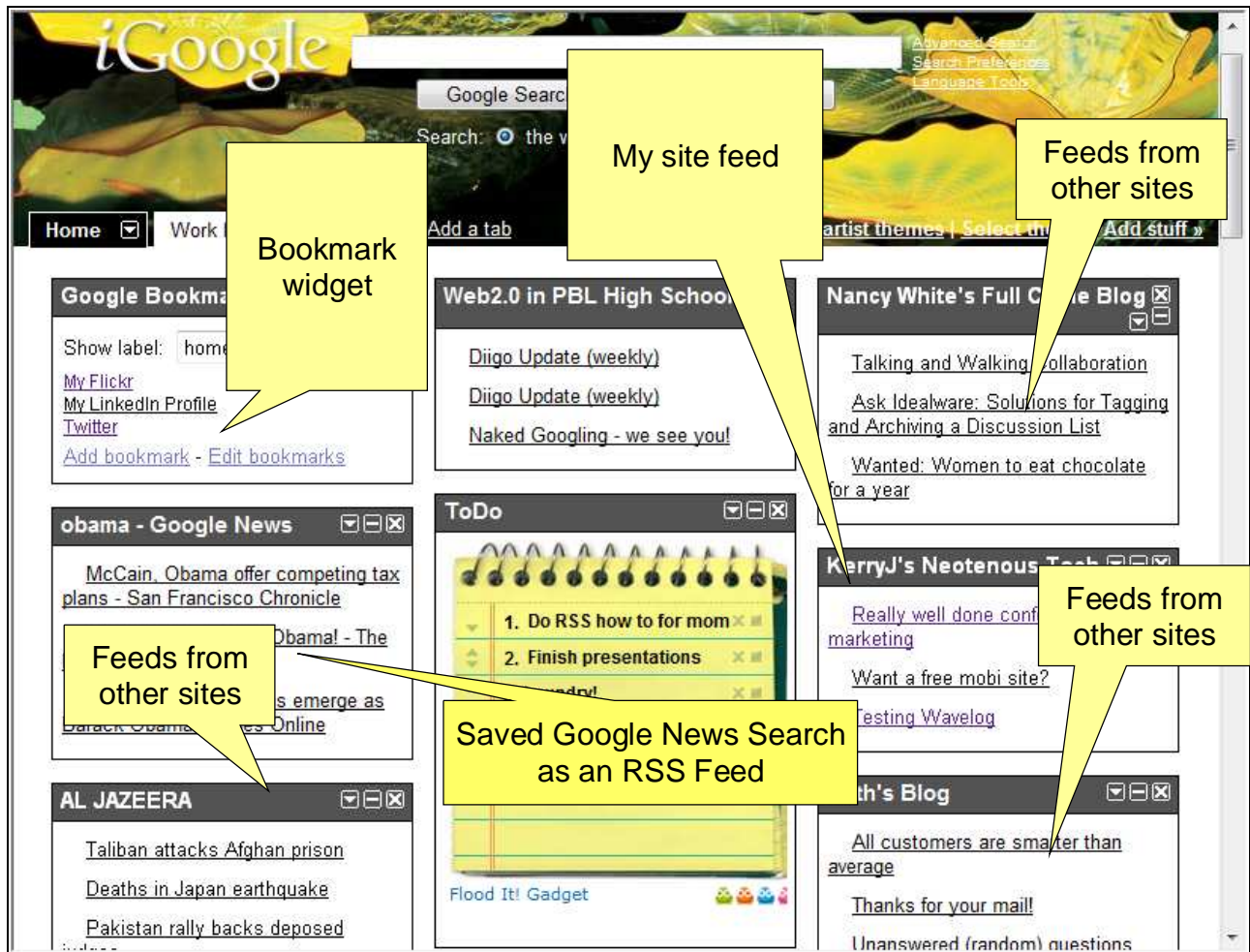
A screenshot of the Google News search results for the query 'obama'. The page shows the Google logo, the search bar with 'obama' entered, and a search button. Below the search bar, there are links for 'Advanced news search' and 'Preferences'. The main content area displays 'News results' for 'Standard Version', 'Text Version', and 'Image Version'. A 'Browse Top Stories' section is visible. On the left side, there are navigation options: 'Recent' (Last hour, Last day, Past week, Past month), 'Archives' (All dates, 2008, 2007, 2000-06, Other dates), 'Quotes', 'Blogs', and 'News Alerts'. At the bottom of the left sidebar, the 'RSS | Atom About Feeds' link is circled in red. The main content area shows a recent news item: '"Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided"' from the Seattle Times, 23 hours ago. Below this, there are two news items: 'McCain, Obama offer competing tax plans' from the San Francisco Chronicle and 'Private Line – Bravo, Obama!' from The Nation Newspaper.

Click on the link and copy address in the address bar by clicking in the address bar and using the key combination Control A to select all the information in the address bar. It will

turn blue.

Then use the key combination Control C to copy the address. Go back to your iGoogle page and go to Add stuff. Paste it in. Done.

Here is what my personal iGoogle RSS reader looks like:



I can also look at the headers from my gmail account (free email account and viewer you get when you sign up to iGoogle).

The great thing about this page is that instead of having to go out to all these sites to see what is new, I can just log on to ONE site – my iGoogle console – and see information from dozens of sites.

That's the power of RSS and that's the advantage of using it.

Other types of feeds include podcasts and vodcasts.

These are created by linking to an audio or video file in a blog post or story, then feeding that out. I use a special site called Feedburner.com that adds extra information. You can then read the text and decide whether or not to download the audio file.

There are some great videos available on the web for visual learners like you. I'd suggest you access the web at your library and check out some great videos from <http://commoncraft.com/>

I hope this got you off to a good start with RSS.