

# Getting help - using mailing lists

By Dianne Reuby

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What is a mailing list? It's a discussion group that converses by e-mail. Mailing lists cover a wide variety of topics, at all levels. Many lists have a moderator, who will check posts for suitability before they go out to the list members.

How do I find and join a list? Many lists are operated through the Topica, Yahoo and SmartGroups list services. They all have searchable directories. You can join a list at the list web page, or by e-mail. To join at the web site, you'll need to take out free membership of the service provider. If you join by sending an email, you don't have to worry about this step. You can find them here:

<http://www.topica.com>

<http://www.groups.yahoo.com>

<http://www.smartgroups.com>

How do I know if the list will interest me? If the list you're interested in has public archives, you can take a look before joining. If not, you'll have to join first. If it doesn't interest you, you can unsubscribe, either at the site or by e-mail.

How does the discussion work? Lists have three options - individual, digest, or web-only. If you choose individual, you'll get an e-mail for every post that is made. Digest will send you one email a day with all the posts for that day. Web-only doesn't send any mail - you'll have to log onto the web site to read. This option is handy if you're going to be away from your PC, and don't want email piling up. You can switch between options whenever you want to.

How do I post? Send an email to the posting address - this isn't the same address that you use to subscribe and unsubscribe. Check the rules for what you can have in your posts. Some lists don't allow HTML code, ads in your

signature, or off-topic posts. I hope I don't need to say that they don't allow bad language, abuse of other members, or sp\*m!

What should I include in my post? Most posts are part of a thread - just as in a face-to-face conversation. So you may want to include a quote from a previous post when you reply, so that people know what you're talking about. This is helpful to new list members, or for people who've missed posts while away from their PC.

If you get a digest version, don't just click reply when you submit a post. This will include a copy of the entire digest in your post. People who are getting the digest version find it almost impossible to disentangle the new posts from the copies of old posts and digests. I've sometimes given up trying to read some digests, when everyone has copied a whole thread, and added their post!

Always include a subject - list members won't always be interested in every post. Digest versions include a contents list which show the subject. If you're replying to a previous post, start with RE (for REply), and then the subject.

Some lists allow off-topic posts. In this case, start your subject line with the letters OT, and suggest that list members contact you "off list" - by emailing you direct rather than posting. This is a courtesy - some lists are happy to have off topic threads, especially if they will interest other members. Some lists have a completely separate mailing list for off topic stuff.

You may find it helpful to "lurk" for a while - just reading what other people have to say before making your first post. This will give you a feel for the list and its' rules. You may like to use your first post to introduce yourself - that way, people know that you're new, and will make allowances for any posting errors you may make.

I've found mailing lists invaluable in getting help with new software and hardware, exchanging information about my business interests and hobbies, for getting advice before making a purchase or choosing goods, and meeting people from around the world with similar interests.

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Dianne Reuby is co-author of the e-book "First Website Builder". Dianne created and runs the First Web Builder site, dedicated to providing ebooks and tips for new webmasters.

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