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You've got webmail

Access your emails from anywhere in the world with our Best Buy webmail services



report by
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In brief

- The best free webmail accounts
- Whether to switch to a different account
- Which features to look for

The past few months have seen a shake up in the world of free webmail (email accounts accessed via the internet). Established services such as Hotmail and Yahoo! have both released improved versions of their existing webmail accounts.

These are currently beta (or trial) versions although they're available to the public. You can upgrade to these beta versions from within an ordinary Hotmail or Yahoo! Mail account. All your contacts and emails will be automatically transferred to the new account.

Google Mail is also ringing the changes with a move away from its invitation-only policy, allowing all-comers to sign up for a free webmail account. With these and many other webmail providers jostling for attention, there's plenty to choose from.

One of the benefits of a webmail account is that it isn't tied to your **internet service provider** (ISP). This means that if you do switch ISP you don't have to worry about losing your webmail account with it. Another benefit is that you can access a webmail account from any PC connected to the internet from anywhere in the world via your **web browser**.

STORAGE SIZE

Emails can soon build up in your webmail inbox and, if your account has a low storage limit, you may have to delete some messages to free up space. Most of the webmail accounts we tested offered **1GB** or more – plenty of space for the average user – with Google Mail offering a massive 2.6GB. An Orange webmail account provides the least amount of storage with just **5MB**, and Tiscali Email isn't far behind with 1OMB (these accounts differ from the versions offered to Orange and Tiscali

customers that are tied to the ISP). We don't recommend you have an account with such a low storage limit if you'll be receiving messages with attachments.

ATTACHING FILES

Webmail accounts limit the size of the attachments you can send in a single message, so it's worth considering the maximum attachment size allowed by your account. AOL Mail was leader of the pack, allowing attachments of 16MB in size. The rest were capable of attaching up to

How we test

EASE OF USE

We opened an email account with each free webmail service and used it as a typical person. We sent and replied, sorted and searched emails and navigated our way around the accounts.

PERFORMANCE

We set up spam filters where available and monitored other security features. We also paid particular attention to the presence of advertising within each account.

VERSATILITY

We made a log of the various features of each webmail account, which included such items as storage capacity and the maximum size of attachments that could be sent.

10MB, apart from Orange Webmail, which came up short again with 3MB – not ideal if you have a host of holiday snaps you want to email all together.

Both Yahoo! Mail Beta and Lycos Email allow you to attach multiple files while continuing to compose an email. This saves time for those who like to multitask.

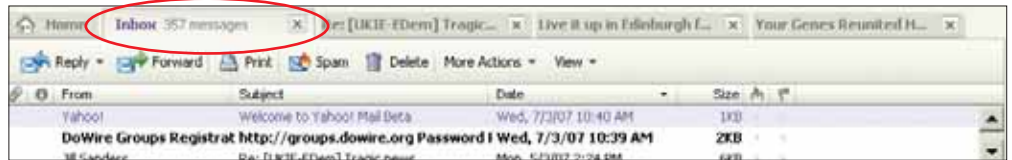
Bear in mind, though that some people may have inbound attachment limits and large attachments may clog up their inbox.

SPAM-A-LOT

Spam (junk email) is the thorn in the side of webmail services. Most of the services we tested incorporate spam filters that intercept such emails, and send them straight to a junk mail folder. Make sure you check your junk mail folder though, as genuine messages can slip through the net. Emails in here will be deleted between 5 and 30 days after they're received.



Spam filters will ensure that junk email is sent to the junk folder



Only Tiscali Email was sorely lacking in this department – it provided no spam protection whatsoever. Of those that did feature spam filters, all performed well, except AOL Email, which allowed a number of spam emails into our inbox.

EASE OF USE

The accounts on test vary dramatically when it comes to how they allow you to organise your emails and move between pages. The Yahoo! Mail Beta allows you to open numerous messages at once. These are organised in tabs across the top of the screen, which you can then flick between. Yahoo! Mail and Windows Live Mail Beta have a 'drag and drop' feature for moving emails between folders.

Google Mail organises emails by grouping together those with the same subject line. This enables you to track the history behind a message you've sent or received.

ACCOUNT EXPIRATION

An email account tied to your ISP will only expire when you change to a different provider. But one downside of webmail is that some providers shut down accounts

Tabbed browsing (shown, here) makes it easier for you to flick between multiple emails and folders

automatically if an account hasn't been used for a certain period of time. For example, a Hotmail account will expire after 120 days if it hasn't been used. Google Mail, AOL Email and Tiscali Email all offer accounts that don't expire.

VERDICT

If you want to try out a free webmail account for the first time then the Yahoo! Mail Beta account is both easy to use and navigate. Google Mail is also intuitive and has useful help pages to get you started. The Windows Live Mail Beta was a good all-rounder, but performed less well when it came to features for a basic user. For example, by right-clicking on your mouse you can reveal some useful functions, but this is easily missed. All three accounts offer plenty of storage and you can add reasonably-sized attachments.

Some of the features offered by webmail accounts – such as instant messaging, which allows you to type conversations in real-time – can only be used between people who use the same webmail provider, so check which email accounts your friends use before you choose one.

PHOTOGRAPHY ALAMY

Good foundations

If you've yet to set up a webmail account, read on to discover some of the benefits that such a service can provide

One of the main benefits of webmail accounts is that you don't have to change your email address if you switch to a different ISP. You can also access a webmail account from any computer in the world that has internet access.

There are numerous free webmail accounts on offer, with some services offering options to upgrade to a paid-for account with

extra storage and features. For example, Hotmail offers an account that has double the size of a free one for £14.99 (per year).

As well as using it to send and receive emails, webmail is also useful for archiving and transporting files. For example, you can send documents to an account, so you can access them if your computer were to crash, although this

is no replacement for a full backup.

Some webmail accounts can be set up to receive email from your ISP or from another webmail account by configuring your **POP3** settings. This means that you can have all your emails directed to the same inbox. If your webmail account has this feature there will be instructions in the help section on how to set this up.

Webmail			Max storage (MB)
1	YAHOO! MAIL Beta ¹	www.yahoo.co.uk/mail	1,024
2	YAHOO! MAIL	www.yahoo.co.uk/mail	1,024
3	WINDOWS LIVE MAIL Beta ^{1/2}	www.ideas.live.com	2,048
4	GOOGLE MAIL	www.google.com/accounts	2,662
5	HOTMAIL	www.hotmail.co.uk	1,024
5	ORANGE WEBMAIL	www.orange.co.uk/communicate	5
7	LYCOS EMAIL	www.lycos.co.uk/email	300
8	AOL EMAIL	www.aol.co.uk/email	2,048
9	TISCALI EMAIL	www.tiscali.co.uk/email	10

USING THE TABLE

POP3 access Indicates whether you can set up an Outlook account to receive emails from the webmail account. See help pages of the provider for details

Consolidation Indicates whether the accounts can receive emails from other email accounts. The provider's help pages will give information on how to do this
Import/export contacts Indicates

Yahoo! Mail Beta free

Intuitive and full of useful features

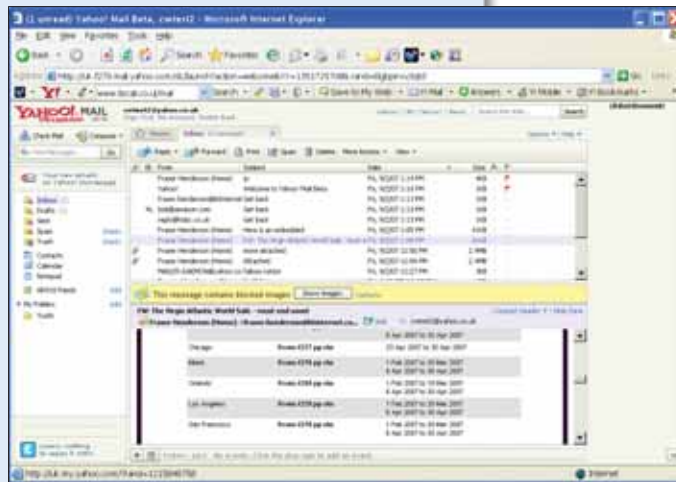
WE LIKE Easy to use with some excellent time-saving features



WE DON'T LIKE It takes longer to sign in compared with the Yahoo! Mail classic version

VERDICT To get the new version of Yahoo! Mail, you first need to sign up to the classic version, then you can upgrade from within this account. Any messages and contacts are seamlessly transferred. Both versions performed well, but the Yahoo! Mail Beta had a few extra features. You can attach emails while continuing to compose an email, as well as drag and drop messages into different folders, for example. Overall, the email account of choice if you're looking for a free service

Website www.yahoo.co.uk
 Ease of use ★★★★★
 Performance ★★★★★
 Versatility ★★★★★
OVERALL SCORE 80%



WORTH CONSIDERING



Windows Live Mail free

Good all-rounder

WE LIKE The useful auto-complete feature when typing email addresses and a slick spell-checker similar to Microsoft Word

WE DON'T LIKE It takes longer to sign in compared with the Hotmail classic version

VERDICT Windows Live Mail offers double the storage of the classic version of Hotmail. It has lots of improved features, but accounts will expire after 120 days of remaining dormant, so be sure to use it regularly
OVERALL SCORE 63%



Google Mail free

Offers lots of storage

WE LIKE Emails with the same subject line are organised into easy-to-read threads

WE DON'T LIKE Targeted advertising while you're reading your emails

VERDICT Google Mail offers the biggest amount of storage on test. It also provides comprehensive help pages that are handy for first-time users. It takes a whole nine months before an inactive account is closed down so there's less chance of losing your emails
OVERALL SCORE 61%

Max attachment size (MB)	Spam filter	Virus scanning	POP3 access	Consolidation	Import/export contacts	Expires after	Ease of use	Performance	Versatility	Overall score
10	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	4 months	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	80%
10	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	4 months	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	72%
10	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	120 days	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	63%
10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9 months	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	61%
10	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗	120 days	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	59%
3 ³	✓	✓	✗	✓	✗	90 days	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	56%
10	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	3 months	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★	53%
16	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	90 days	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	34%
10	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	3 months	★★★	★	★★★★	24%

whether you can import and export your email address book from and to another email account

Expires after How long you can leave the account unused before it's automatically deleted

Overall 40% ease of use, 40% performance, 20% versatility

1 Beta versions only available by upgrading from the classic versions. As these are beta versions, there will

likely have been some changes made to them since our test

2 Windows Live Mail is set to be rebranded as Windows Live Hotmail in the near future
3 2MB max per file/3MB in total