

How to choose a... WEBMAIL ACCOUNT

Send and receive email from any computer using a webmail account



Webmail was the fifth most visited category of website in 2009. Of the 35 million internet-connected PC users in the UK, 27.3 million (78%), access their accounts online; confirming webmail's status as the preferred method of email communication over traditional **email clients** such as Microsoft's Outlook Express.

WHY USE WEBMAIL?

These web-based accounts are better-suited to busy, mobile lives as they allow you to send and receive messages from any internet-connected computer or, increasingly, phone – 4.6 million users accessed email via their mobile phone in 2008.

Better still, as webmail is free, you can sign up for an unlimited number of accounts. You could, for instance, keep one account for family and friends, another for work colleagues and a third for online shopping (an activity that can attract unsolicited junk emails).

There are four major players when it comes to webmail: AOL Mail, Gmail, Windows Live Hotmail and Yahoo! Mail. Of these, Yahoo! Mail is the most popular with 106 million unique monthly visitors, followed by Hotmail (47 million), Gmail (37 million) and AOL (36.4 million), according to ComScore.

Here, we guide you through the common features of webmail and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each type of webmail account.

COMMON FEATURES

All four of these webmail accounts support **POP3**. This allows you to download your messages to your computer's hard disk. The IMAP protocol is newer than POP3 and delivers your email to your inbox faster and more regularly. Both technologies synchronise with your computer so when you mark an email as read in Outlook, it is marked as read in your webmail. All four of these services support IMAP, too.

Email storage limits

The amount of emails you can store varies. Yahoo! offers unlimited storage. Windows Live Hotmail starts you off with **5GB** of storage but says that will 'increase as

Accounts may be deleted if you don't use them

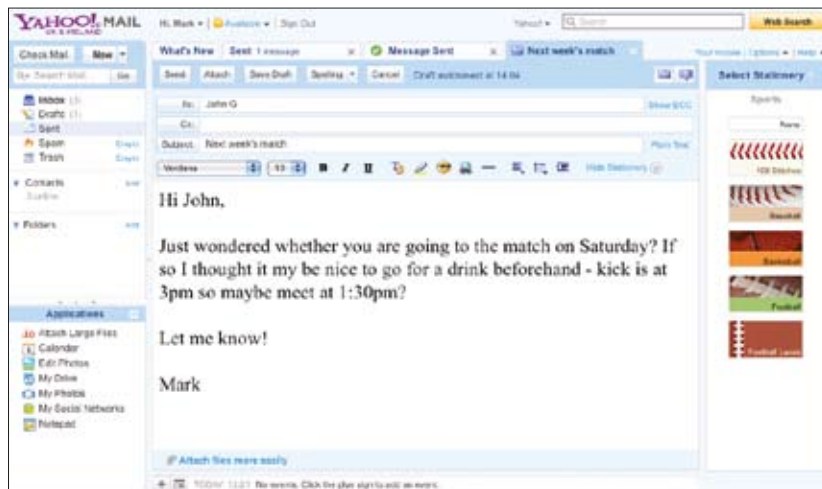
The amount of emails that you can store varies

needed'. Gmail offers 7GB with an additional 1GB of storage with its Picasa photo application. AOL Mail states that it provides users with unlimited storage on the first screen of the registration page. To deter spammers, this is provided in chunks of 2GB; as you reach your limit, you'll be given another 2GB of storage.

You also need to be aware that if you don't use your webmail for a long period of time the service provider will switch off or deactivate the account. Windows Live Hotmail accounts are deactivated if you don't sign in for more than 270 days (just over nine months). Google says it may delete an account left unused for nine months. AOL Mail deactivates any account left idle for 90 days or more. Yahoo's terms of service cryptically say that the company 'reserves the right to terminate accounts after a prolonged bout of inactivity'.

CHOOSING A WEBMAIL ACCOUNT

AOL Mail works the most like a Desktop email client. It has a similar layout, and you can drag and drop email messages into folders. Like Gmail, it has a huge array of **plug-ins** available, which will display in either the main window, or the side panel. These include **apps** for internet radio, social networking and Yahoo! Mail.



Yahoo! Mail integrates well with social networking websites



All contain spam and virus/phishing filters. All four services are POP3 and IMAP compatible.

AOL Mail

www.aol.co.uk

Large number of plug-ins, drag and drop interface, unlimited storage but only 16MB file attachment limit.

USEFUL FEATURES Yahoo!, AIM (AOL Instant Messaging), calendar and contacts. There are also plug-ins available such as internet radio, Twitter and FaceBook. File attachment limit is 16GB.

Gmail

<http://mail.google.com>

20MB file attachment limit but only a 7GB storage limit and less support for social networking websites.

USEFUL FEATURES Mobile phone access; to-do list; labels; previews of photos, videos, and reviews; offline access; text messages; threading/conversation view; 20MB file attachment limit.

Windows Live Hotmail

www.hotmail.co.uk

Receive email from POP3 accounts. IMAP support. Offers 10MB file attachment.

USEFUL FEATURES Receive emails from POP3 accounts; mobile phone access; add contacts from Facebook, MySpace, AOL Mail and LinkedIn.

Yahoo! Mail

www.yahoo.co.uk

Unlimited storage, 25MB file attachment limit, Sobees Social Networking app but it's unclear how long an inactive account lasts.

USEFUL FEATURES Yahoo! Mobile, Sobees Social Networks (Twitter, FaceBook, MySpace); Calendar; Edit Photos; Notepad; send 25MB file attachment limit.

Google's Gmail

Gmail integrates well with other Google apps. Links to all apps, such as documents or maps, are available from within Gmail. Also, it is possible to email files from Google Docs (Google's office application). Select the file, click **Share**, and then **Email as attachment**. Getting Gmail to work with social networking sites is rather clunky. It does have a 'threading' feature, called Conversation View, which links grouped messages together and has proven popular with users.

Yahoo! Mail

Yahoo! Mail integrates well with social networking websites using a tool called Sobees. This feeds in updates from Twitter, FaceBook and MySpace. It also offers a built-in calendar, photo tools, and a generous 25MB file attachment limit. An account will also give you access to Yahoo! Groups where you can connect with people with shared interests.

Windows Live Hotmail

Windows Live Hotmail lets you link to other webmail accounts. It has an easy-to-use calendar application. Messages from other email accounts, as long as they support POP3, can be downloaded into folders in your Hotmail inbox. Your Windows Live Hotmail identity

106 million
unique monthly visitors to Yahoo! Mail

78%
of UK email users access accounts online

4.6 million
users access email via mobile phone

and password also give you access to other Windows Live services such as SkyDrive, which allows you to store up to 25GB of files, such as documents and photographs.

A NOTE OF CAUTION
Spammers can quickly set up, abuse, and then shut down webmail accounts. For this reason you may find that some companies won't accept messages sent from webmail.

Equally frustrating is that if your webmail provider has a problem with its service you'll be locked out of your email until they sort it out; in September 2009, for example, Gmail suffered a worldwide service collapse.

Webmail's popularity means it's a prime target for would-be hackers, too. US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin had her Yahoo! Mail account hacked during the 2008 campaign. In October 2009, a hacker accessed 10,000 accounts from **Hotmail.com**, **MSN.com** and **Live.com** and posted the stolen passwords online.

But, incidents like these are rare and, overall, webmail is an easy and safe way to stay in touch. ■



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