

RSS Made Simple: How Blogs Can Enhance Your Website

Tristan Hoffmann

Webmaster, Sanford School (DE)

hoffmannt@sanfordschool.org

Background: Sanford School has a section in blue on the front page used to highlight our current feature story. This past year, we have implemented a system in which the content for the “blue box” is updated by a news blog. This in turn automatically generates an RSS feed for our featured news, allowing readers to sign up to get the news from RSS readers or even an email update service. Several advantages system include getting out the latest school news or even weather or crisis updates, such as when school is closing due to snow.

How It Works: When the blog is updated, the latest entry is automatically converted into an RSS entry. Then, a PHP script (rss2html.php, available free from <http://www.feedforall.com/free-php-script.htm>) changes the RSS entry into html text on the homepage. In addition, the email service is alerted about the new entry in the RSS, and an email is sent out to everyone who has registered for the service. We use Feedblitz (<http://www.feedblitz.com/>) as our email service at Sanford.

Setup Required (This is the techie part for your webmaster.):

1. Set up a blog. You can host it yourself, or you can sign up for one from the free blog hosting companies like WordPress (<http://www.wordpress.com/>), Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com/>) or Livejournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>).
2. If you want to have the RSS entries displayed on your website, download the rss2html PHP script (<http://www.feedforall.com/free-php-script.htm>) to use to parse the php into html. The easiest way to do this is to upload the php script to the same directory as the page you wish to display the entries. In addition, you will need to set up a template file for the entries. The template file is a simple HTML file that tells the script how you want the entries to be displayed on your page. The FeedForAll website has instructions for the template file, and you can see one from Sanford's website at: <http://www.sanfordtest.org/template.html>.
3. Add the PHP call to the page you want the entries displayed on. An example of the line to add is: `<?php`

```
$XMLFILE = "http://bluebox.sanfordtest.org/?feed=rss2";  
$TEMPLATE = "http://www.sanfordschool.org/template.html";  
$MAXITEMS = "1";  
include("rss2html.php"); ?>
```

The \$XMLFILE is the location of the rss feed from the blog, the \$TEMPLATE is the address of your template, and the \$MAXITEMS is the number of entries you want displayed on the page. (**Note:** There is also now a way to do this hosted on <http://www.rss2html.com/> that does not require steps 2 or 3, but I have not personally tried it yet).

4. Set up an account for a service that converts RSS feeds to emails. We use FeedBlitz (<http://www.feedblitz.com/>). Create a new syndication and point it to the address of your blog's RSS feed (as used in Step 3). The service will then give you HTML code to copy and paste into your site to allow readers to sign up to receive the alerts. Now your updates should automatically be emailed out to your readers! (**Note:** This step does not require steps 2 and 3 if you do not want to post the entries on your website.)