

Understanding Your Computer: E-mail Clients

The main difference between e-mail clients is the user interface. Regardless of which software you decide to use, follow good security practices when reading or sending e-mail.

How do e-mail clients work? Every e-mail address has two basic parts: the user name and the domain name. When you are sending mail to someone else, your domain's server has to communicate with your recipient's domain server. For example, let's assume that your e-mail address is *johndoe@example.com*, and the person you are contacting is at *janesmith@anotherexample.org*. In very basic terms, after you hit **send**, the server hosting your domain (*example.com*) looks at the e-mail address and then contacts the server hosting the recipient's domain (*anotherexample.org*) to let it know that it has a message for someone at that domain. Once the connection has been established, the server hosting the recipient's domain (*anotherexample.org*) then looks at the user name of the e-mail address and routes the message to that account.

How many e-mail clients are there? There are many different e-mail clients and services, each with its own interface. Some are web-based, some are stand-alone graphics-based, and some are text-based. The following are some well-known e-mail programs:

Web-based

- Live Mail
- Yahoo! Mail
- Gmail

Stand-alone graphics-based

- Outlook and Outlook Express
- Thunderbird
- Pegasus

How do you choose an e-mail client? There is usually an e-mail client included with the installation of your operating system, but many other alternatives are available. Be wary of "home-brewed" software, because it may not be as secure or reliable as software that is tested and actively maintained. Some of the factors to consider when deciding which e-mail client best suits your needs include

- **security** - Do you feel that your e-mail program offers you the level of security you want for sending, receiving, and reading e-mail messages? How does it handle attachments? If you are dealing with sensitive information, do you have the option of sending and receiving signed and/or encrypted messages?
- **privacy** - If you are using a web-based service, have you read its privacy policy? Do you know what information is being collected and who has access to it? Are there options for filtering spam?
- **functionality** - Does the software send, receive, and interpret e-mail messages appropriately?
- **reliability** - For web-based services, is the server reliable, or is your e-mail frequently unavailable due to maintenance, security problems, a high volume of users, or other reasons?
- **availability** - Do you need to be able to access your account from any computer?
- **ease of use** - Are the menus and options easy to understand and use?
- **visual appeal** - Do you find the interface appealing?

Each e-mail client may have a different way of organizing drafted, sent, saved, and deleted mail. Familiarize yourself with the software so that you can find and store messages easily, and so that you don't unintentionally lose messages. Once you have chosen the software you want to use for your e-mail, protect yourself and your contacts by following good security practices.

Can you have use more than one e-mail client? You can have more than one e-mail client, although you may have issues with compatibility. Some e-mail accounts, such as those issued through your internet

service provider (ISP) or place of employment, are only accessible from a computer that has appropriate privileges and settings for you to access that account. You can use any stand-alone e-mail client to read those messages, but if you have more than one client installed on your machine, you should choose one as your default. When you click an e-mail link in a browser or e-mail message, your computer will open that default e-mail client that you chose. Most vendors give you the option to download their e-mail software directly from their web sites. Make sure to verify the authenticity of the site before downloading any files, and follow other good security practices, like using a firewall and keeping anti-virus software up to date, to further minimize risk.

You can also maintain free e-mail accounts through browser-based e-mail clients (e.g., Yahoo!, Hotmail, Gmail) that you can access from any computer. Because these accounts are maintained directly on the vendors' servers, they don't interfere with other e-mail accounts.