

## Understanding RSS in Safari

Written by: Scott Haneda,

There have been a few comments on the site asking for us to cover RSS. I have several direct emails from readers asking the same. Today, we will explain what RSS is, how it can help you keep up to date with the rapidly changing web, and in general, what a near mandatory tool it is.

My gut tells me new users have no idea what RSS is, let alone the value it holds. I suspect that since there are links to RSS feeds on nearly every site, people are curious, but just have no idea where to turn to for good advice.

A Google search will show you nice definitions of RSS. You may walk away understanding that it is an acronym for [Really Simple Syndication](#). Even knowing that, to this day, those three words do little to help me in knowing what the heck RSS is good for.

Let's fix that right now.

### **The basics of what RSS is**

RSS is nothing more than a way to deliver information. You currently use a web browser to view web information. That information is on demand, meaning you have to ask for it. RSS removes some of that burden, and has a built in notification system.

Take note, it is a notification system, not a nag system. RSS is very non-intrusive; it will not get in your way, and will only help you once it is front-most and being used.

### **RSS is analogous to bookmarks**

Understanding what RSS is, actually turns out to be pretty easy. Think of RSS as a way to bookmark a site. At its core, that is all a site that offers RSS is going to give you. Since you already know [how to bookmark sites](#), you should be wondering what else RSS brings to the table.

Bookmarks are static and hidden. If you want to come back to OS X Help, you will have to locate the bookmark, and then visit the site. This implies you remember to do so. Making it even worse, you have no idea if there have been any new posts to the site at all.

Wouldn't it be nice if all your bookmarks could in some way tell you if a site has new data on it since the last time you checked? This is the second core of what RSS can do for you. When a site is updated, you are alerted in an unobtrusive way.

If you have ever spent time on a site, hitting the refresh button on your browser to see if there is anything new, RSS will help alleviate that. If you have ever checked in daily on a site to only see nothing has changed, RSS will make it so you know exactly when to visit the site.

In summary, RSS, if supported by the site, it is a notification system to alert you when a site has new content for you to read.

### **Determine what sites support RSS**

Not all websites support RSS. A site like Amazon has little reason to. Since Amazon is more of a shopping system, getting notification every time new content is posted would be overwhelming.

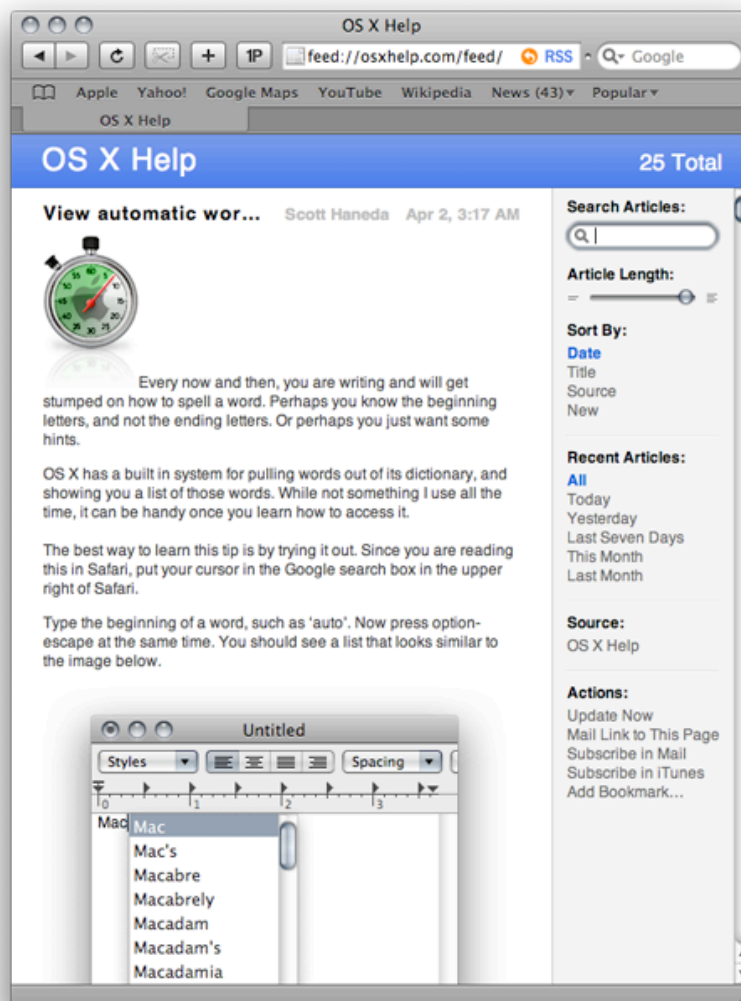
News sites, blogs, job listing sites, and pretty much any website where readable data is posted on a regularly changing basis, should have RSS support.

Safari makes it rather simple to tell. Load any website, and look in the upper right corner of Safari's URL bar. If the site supports RSS, you will see a small blue rectangular icon that has white letters spelling out RSS. This means the site is offering what is called an RSS feed.



### Viewing an RSS feed

If you click on the blue RSS icon, Safari will load the RSS feed. The page you now see, in general, is a slimmed down version of the main website. In most cases, it is sans nearly all graphics, and in plain text. This is just the RSS view mode of Safari. Since we have not saved any RSS feeds, the view has no real benefits other than being a more simple view.



Some RSS feeds contain full posts. Others, like ours, contain only a summary. The length of the data in the RSS feed is determined by the website creator. There are ways to see less data in your feeds, however, if the site owner decides to only show summaries, that is something beyond your control.

Now that you know how to view an RSS feed, let's start to learn how to use it as a notification system. If you follow along to the end, you should get to a point where your top day to day sites are all part of an RSS system; and you know just which ones have been updated. You can then ignore the rest, since nothing has changed.

### Setting Safari to show you unread RSS feeds

There are a few ways to manage RSS feeds in Safari; I am going to show you the way I feel is most accessible to new users.

Step one is to [create a new folder on your bookmarks bar](#). The easiest way to do this is to control-click on the bookmarks bar and select the "New Folder" option. You will be asked to give it a name, I chose RSS. It will be placed at the beginning of your bookmarks bar. I moved mine to the end, but feel free to put yours wherever you want.

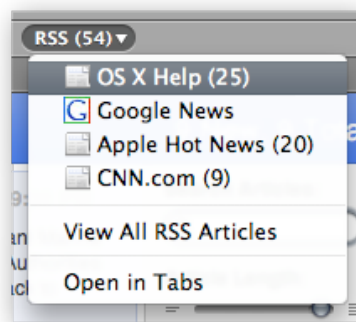
Now that you have an empty bookmarks bar folder called RSS, we need to put some items in it. I suggest you follow along with my examples. At the end, you can delete any sites from your RSS feed folder if you no longer are interested in them.

A good place to start is with this site. Click on the blue RSS icon in the URL bar, and you will see the slimmed down RSS version of our site. You should also see the URL change to "feed://osxhelp.com/feed/". To the left of the URL, right to the left of the "f" in "feed" is an icon. Not all icons on every site will be the same. Drag that icon into the RSS bookmark bar folder. You will be asked to give it a name; in this case, keeping the default of OS X Help should be fine.

Follow through to the below sites, click on the RSS icon, and drag the feed icon into the RSS bookmarks bar folder.

- [Google News](#)
- [CNN](#)
- [Apple](#)

You should now have a total of four items in your RSS bookmarks bar menu.



### Safari's RSS notification system

It is a bit of a stretch to call the way in which Safari tells you new content is available to your RSS subscriptions a notification; nonetheless, Safari does notify you in several ways.

First, right next to your RSS bookmarks bar item, a number will show. (See above image) You may not see it just yet, but as new content makes it's way to your RSS subscriptions, your RSS bookmarks bar icon will change from RSS to RSS (23) where 23 can be any number that reflects how many unread articles there are for you. This is a cumulative summary of *all* the articles for all your subscribed sites.

If you click once on the RSS bookmarks bar item, each site listing will get a number next to it. This represents the total number of articles on each specific site that has not yet been viewed by you. Sites with no new content will have no number listed.

I suspect by now, you are starting to see how great this is. No more stepping through your bookmarks to check on all your daily sites. A quick glance at your RSS button and you know which ones deserve your time.

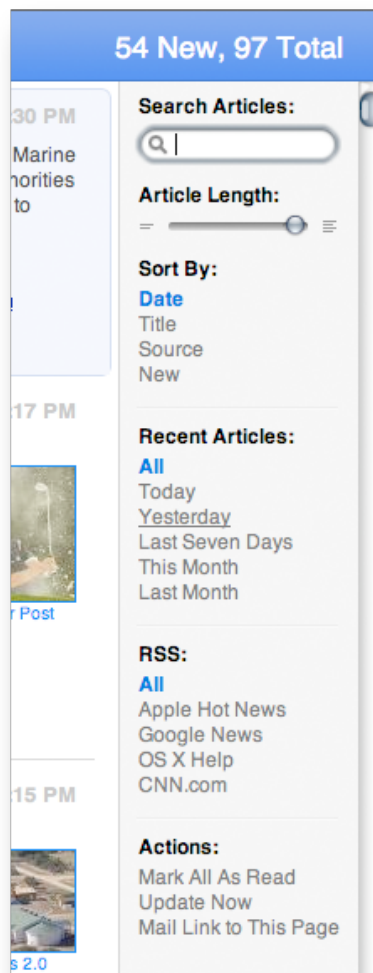
Almost done... Don't give up yet... A few more tips and tricks.

You can pick one RSS item at a time, and read the articles that you have not read in the past. Once you click on one, it will be removed from the running count in your RSS bookmarks bar item. The article listing will still remain, and expire from your view over time. This expiration time can be changed in your RSS preferences.

In the RSS bookmarks bar item you created, you will see one item labeled "View all RSS Articles". Selecting this will show you on one page, every single site you are subscribed to.

I know, a bit daunting isn't it?

As daunting as it appears, this is the item I select most often. The reason I use this most is it gives me full access to Safari's RSS reader's tools.



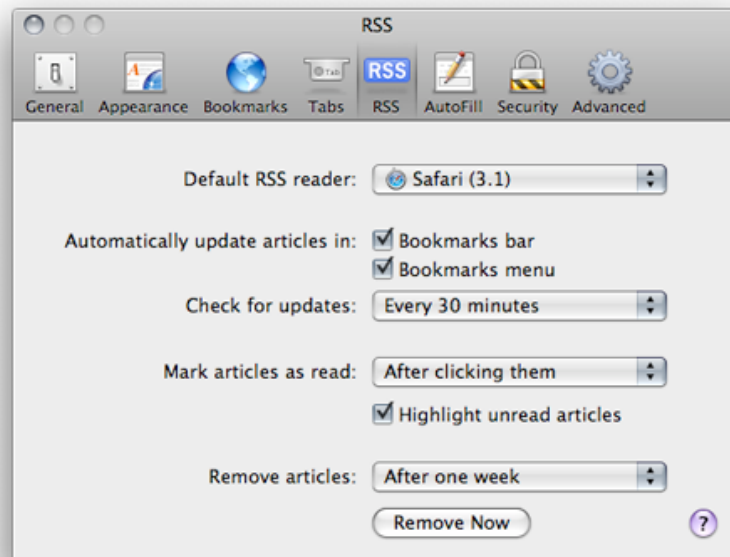
On the right of Safari when in RSS reader mode, are links and a search box. The search box allows you to filter out the listing and distill it down to just what you are interested in.

There are also options to change your sorting order, and even toggle between specific RSS feeds. You can even force a refresh so that if there are any new RSS articles to download, they will come in immediately. By default, RSS feeds are only checked every 30 minutes; this is something you can change in your RSS preferences.

I have not covered all the features in Safari's RSS reader view, none are harmful, so click around and experiment.

### **Safari RSS preferences**

If you navigate your mouse to the Safari menu, and down to Preferences, then click on the RSS tab, you can change a few options about how your RSS feeds are presented.



The Default RSS Reader should be set to Safari, only change this if you know why you need to change this setting.

The next two options define where Safari looks to automatically update your articles. I suggest checking both the bookmarks bar and the bookmarks menu. Even though in my sample case here, we only use the bookmarks bar, at a later time, you may want to put RSS items into a special bookmarks folder.

I am greedy, and tell Safari to check for new article updates every 30 minutes. You can change this to a less frequent interval if you are easily distracted. For me, being on top of what new news is out there is important. To be honest, 30 minutes is not soon enough.

The second to last option defines how articles are marked as read. When you have not read an article, it will have a small blue dot, as well as a blue outline around it. In one case just clicking on the article summary will mark it as read. In the other case, simply viewing the RSS page will mark all those articles as read. For clarity, I would suggest you leave this set to "After clicking on them".

The last setting in the preferences allows you to define how long an item will show up in your RSS feed. I set mine to one week. If you use your computer less frequently, you

may want to up the time. If you are pretty quick to read your RSS articles, set it to a lesser time frame.

### **Third party RSS readers**

I suspect part of the confusion surrounding RSS readers is there are so many out there. Many of you wrote in asking how to get Google reader to work. Others mentioned I might want to cover NetNewsWire.

The point you need to understand is that Safari is not the only way to read RSS feeds. There are dedicated desktop applications like NetNewsWire, there are web-based tools like Google Reader, and there is even a way to use Apple's mail.app email application to read RSS articles. Firefox also has strong tools for RSS reading as well.

In a future post, at the very least, we will talk about NetNewsWire and mail.app as a different way to read RSS articles. At this point, I think Safari is a great RSS reader for the beginner. Safari offers a no frills, yet simple way to get the job done. Gone are the days of remembering to go back and read part two of an article you were really interested in. Now, Safari will remind you in a gentle unobtrusive way.

To me, the greatest thing about RSS is that it allows my web reading to be done on my own terms. At a glance, I know what sites have new articles, and I can deal with it when I have free time. I do not need to worry about a sites article getting buried under other newer articles, as the RSS system keeps track of what I have and have not read.

If this is a bit much to digest all at once, please post a question in the comments. I strongly urge all of you to post your questions, or suggestions in the comments so everyone can learn as much as possible about how to benefit from RSS.