



Making An RSS Feed

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What's the Fuss Over RSS?

First off, let's figure out what RSS really means and what it does. Although, there are many people out there that call it whatever the heck they want to call it, RSS means "RDF Site Summary", "Rich Site Summary" or as UserLand called it in 1997, "Really Simple Syndication". The later of the three is the most common though.

RSS is a lightweight XML format designed for sharing Web content and headlines. How does RSS syndication work? Here is the easiest way to understand it. Say for instance you have a fishing report that you would like others to read daily but you don't want to take the time to send 300 e-mails to each person, each and every day. RSS allows you to update your fishing content in one place which then broadcasts it across the web to all of those that have your RSS feed set-up, either on their website or in their aggregator. In other words, RSS is a method of distributing links to content in your website that you would like others to use. Okay, okay, you want a one word definition, don't you? Simple – it's "syndication".

RSS also allows people to easily add links to your content within their own web pages. In other words, if someone that runs a website is trying to explain what RSS is, they can write their own article and then add my XML tag so people that are reading the article, can link to my article and learn more about RSS. (Gasp...almost ran out of air). Bloggers are also a huge core audience that does this as well!

Is RSS Easy to Set-Up?

Hmm, simple is as simple does, or something like that.

RSS is quite simple...in fact, it's very simple! It says so right in the definition, doesn't it? Actually, I have wanted to write an article on RSS since Studio Madfish needs expand our chests every once in a while, you know? The precise reason I wanted to write this article is purely because the articles and how-to's that I read when I was learning RSS were written by geeks for geeks. No offense Mr. and Mrs. Geek as I am one of you...but come on, can't we write one how-to article and truly show how easy something really is? Sit back, relax and learn how to write your own XML tag and get your own RSS feed out there for the world to read!

The RSS File and its Set-Up

Before you open that WYSIWYG editor or raw text editor, you need to know a few things first. So here goes –

At the heart of any RSS file, there are "items". No matter what version of RSS you are using, you must set-up your file to include items, or things you would like other to link to. For example, let's pretend you are a master fisherman and want to show other how to tie the best fisherman's knot. Information about that web page would form an item – check it –

To begin your RSS file, you will need three pieces of information

Title
Description
Link

The Description and Titles tags do not have to match the webpage that you have built showcasing the best fisherman's knot. But, the link has to be exact. The link tag will link your RSS feed directly to your webpage housed on your server.

For our description, we will use this information

Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot

Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?

<http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html>

Once we have the Title, Description and Link built, all we have to do is surround in with the XML tags. These types of tags are similar to HTML tags with one exception. Each XML tag doesn't have a set of definitions as HTML tags do. In other words, you can make up your own XML tags. Okay, back to the task at hand.

Now that we have the three snippets of information needed to build the RSS feed, let's build it!

Open Notepad, Homesite or a simple text editor. Now, watch –

Take your title, "Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot" Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot" and turn it into a XML tag –

<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>

Following?

Now, take your description tag and do the same, except change the <title> tags to <description> tags

Check it –

**<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>
<description>Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?</description>**



Now, all we have to do is add your webpage link like this –

```
<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>  
<description>Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>
```

Almost done...truly!

Now, we need to define all of this information and make it form a particular "item". We do this by adding an <item> tag to the start and end of the information – like this –

```
<item>  
<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>  
<description>Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>  
</item>
```

Easy, isn't it? I told you! And, written like a true NON-GEEK! Okay, we are 100% done, but the hard part is out of the way. Let's make this RSS feed work!

Before we continue, you need to know a few things. RSS feeds can have up to 15 items. So, if you wanted to showcase different knots and how to tie them, you could make a new "item" for each knot, just like we did above. Remember too – new "items" need to go on top to keep your readers seeing new content. Got me?

Let's add one more "item" so when we are done, our RSS feed will show two items, not just one!

```
<item>  
<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>  
<description>Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>  
</item>
```

```
<item>  
<title>Ever Heard of an Arbor Knot?</title>  
<description>Find out how to tie your line to the reel spool...quick and easy!</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>  
</item>
```

Okay, now that we have our “items” set-up, the last thing we need to do is define our site as a “channel”. In other words, we need to use the same three items as above, but make it so the title defines the content of the RSS feed, not just the particular “items”. Check it –

```
<title>Learn Your Knots</title>  
<description>Don't be a flake when you go fishing. Learn your knots so you don't look like a fool!  
There are 2 simple knots that will make your life so much easier, whether you are on the water or  
surfcasting!</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>
```

We are all set...well, almost! Now, if you know a lick about HTML, your next question should be, “How do we define our code above so that an RSS reader knows that the information is for our “channel” and not just simple information?” Easy. As long as we don’t surround our code with an opening and closing <item> tag, it won’t be seen as such. Look at this –

```
<title>Learn Your Knots</title>  
<description>Don't be a flake when you go fishing. Learn your knots so you don't look like a fool!  
There are 2 simple knots that will make your life so much easier, whether you are on the water or  
surfcasting!</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>
```

```
<item>  
<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>  
<description>Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy  
helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you  
think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>  
</item>
```

```
<item>  
<title>Ever Heard of an Arbor Knot?</title>  
<description>Find out how to tie your line to the reel spool...quick and easy!</description>  
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>  
</item>
```

See, the code begins with a <title> tag and ends with an </item> tag so the information is seen as true “channel” information.

We are now ready to finish this thing up!

Finally, we have to add a few things about how this code was written. So, the first thing that needs to be added is that the file was written in accordance to the XML 1.0 specifications. Then, simply add another line underneath the first one stating which version of RSS we are using. It will look like this –



```
<?xml version="1.0" ?>
<rss version="2.0">
```

To define the two lines of code above, the XML version we are using is 1.0, however the code also abides by UserLand's latest RSS 2.0 version. In other words, we satisfy the early version as well as the later, so, if we want, we can add some really cool features later!

Now, all we need to do is add an opening "channel" tag and we are golden.

```
<?xml version="1.0" ?>
<rss version="2.0">
<channel>
```

Now, we need to add a closing <channel> tag and a closing </rss> tag at the bottom of our file so that the RSS readers will see everything we have done perfectly. So, your finished code should look like this –

```
<?xml version="1.0" ?>
<rss version="2.0">
<channel>
```

```
<title>Learn Your Knots</title>
<description>Don't be a flake when you go fishing. Learn your knots so you don't look like a fool!
There are 2 simple knots that will make your life so much easier, whether you are on the water or
surfcasting!</description>
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>
```

```
<item>
<title>Learn How To Tie The Best Fisherman's Knot</title>
<description>Ever been on that charter boat and your line snaps and the deck hand is too busy
helping someone else rig back up? He shouts to you...just tie a fisherman's knot. Hmm...you
think to yourself, how the heck do I do that?</description>
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>
</item>
```

```
<item>
<title>Ever Heard of an Arbor Knot?</title>
<description>Find out how to tie your line to the reel spool...quick and easy!</description>
<link>http://www.studiomadfish.com/knots.html</link>
</item>
```

```
</channel>
```

```
</rss>
```



What Next?

How do we save the file and what extension do we use? Good questions and if we don't know the answer, we just wasted 30 minutes of precious time. So, here goes –

Since we created our file using RSS 2.0, we will save it according to the standards of RSS 2.0. To do this, simply name your file "whateveryouwant.xml". For my example, I am going to name this file "knots.xml".

Now, save the file and place it on your web server wherever you want. I like to be organized so what I would do is create a folder under the root or home directory and call it rss. Then, within the rss folder, I would place my knots.xml file. So, once I am all done, the URL to my new RSS feed is –

<http://www.studiomadfish.com/rss/knots.xml>

Validation

Okay, so now we have to make sure we set-up our RSS feed correctly. And, thanks to the Internet, we can do this pretty quickly. There are tons and tons of validators My favorite is the W3C Feed Validation Service, found here –

<http://validator.w3.org/feed/>

All you have to do is go there, enter the above URL and your computer will tell you if everything is golden. If not, you will need to go back and see what is wrong!

Once you get the thumbs up, it's time for syndication!

Get Read!

So your feed is golden so how do you let the rest of the world know about it? Easy. There are actually a few ways to do this...and you don't have to pay for it at all!

First, add a **<?xml>** tag to your site so people know you have a feed they can subscribe to. This tag is somewhat of the standard so feel free to grab it off here and use it.

Secondly, "ping" to one of the major RSS services. Here is a list of a few.

Weblogs - <http://www.weblogs.com>

Weblogs Ping Site - <http://rpc.weblogs.com/pingSiteForm>

Bl.ogs - <http://www.bl.ogs.com>

Bl.ogs Ping Site - <http://blo.gs/ping.php>



There is also a program you can download free of charge at Hotscripts that will submit your feed to most of the major RSS services. Here is the link –

<http://www.hotscripts.com/Detailed/47212.html>

The download is free and works relatively well.

You Are a Star!

So, over the last 40 minutes of so, we did quite a lot...we learned the basics of RSS, built our very own RSS feed, validated it and then submitted it to a handful of RSS services. And, we didn't spend a cent!

Good luck in your RSS feed future...and, happy surfing!

David W. Craig is the founder and current senior developer of Studio Madfish, a web design and development firm headquartered in Denver, Colorado with a satellite office in Palmerston North, New Zealand. He has worked the Web full time since 1994. He can be reached at dave@studiomadfish.com.