

The Difference Between WebMail, IMAP Mail, and POP Mail

When setting up a new eMail account there is the question as to type; “WebMail”, “POP”, or “IMAP”.

I will describe each type and list the pros and cons of each type.

WEBMAIL

Webmail is not really on your computer at all. It is on the mail server and works in conjunction with your web browser. It is similar to a web page. One might say the mail lives in the cloud... out there somewhere.

Advantages:

- Is very simple to use.
- No mail program and no set-up is required.
- May be accessed from any computer anywhere.
- The screen looks the same on every computer and acts as if it is installed on your system. You can manage your mail from anywhere.
- It is a very easy system to use and ideal for those with limited, or no technical ability.

Disadvantages:

- The user is limited to features the webmail site offers.
- Cannot be accessed if there is no Internet connection.
- Cannot be used off-line.
- If the mail server fails, you lose any messages or archives that have not been moved and stored to your local computer.
- Speed is limited by the speed of the users Internet connection.

IMAP

Advantages:

- The User uses his or her favorite mail program, of which there are many, the most popular being Thunderbird, Evolution, Outlook, Outlook Express, Claws, and others.
- Your personal mail program works with whatever features you have set up and the program supports. You might have a calendar, appointments and reminders, for example
- The user can access the mail from any computer anywhere and still see the same mail, however the local features will depend on what mail program is being using.

- The mail resides on the server, all files remain on the server (same as WebMail). If the users computer crashes, the mail is safe.
- While you cannot send or receive mail while off-line (no Internet service) you can work off-line to compose mail to be sent when the Internet connection is restored.
- Speed is not limited by your Internet connection speed, except for the actual sending or receiving of mail.

Disadvantages:

- If the Internet connection is unavailable, one cannot even see or read any mail at all.
- Since all mail stays on the server, if something happens to the server, you lose all of your archives and saved mail unless you have backed them up on your local computer.
- If you use filters to identify SPAM and other unwanted mail, this can lead to conflicts and problems if you use more than one computer. If one program says, for example, “this is SPAM, put it in the **Junk** folder” and another computer/mail program identifies the same message as SPAM and says to move the file to a **SPAM** folder, these conflicts (different folder names) can have unintended consequences and cause problems.

IMAP is almost identical to WebMail but the difference is you run your own local mail program instead of the web-browser.

POP

Pop mail is a system where all mail is managed on your local computer. When you get your mail, it is transferred (downloaded) to your computer. The server is just where you get your mail, and how outgoing mail is sent. Your mail does not stay, or reside, on the server.

Advantages:

- Your local mail program and all features are customized by the user. The user has full control.
- Since the mail is on your local computer, if the server fails, you do not lose any mail.
- Since everything is on the local computer the user is able to work off-line and do everything except send and receive the actual mail, until the Internet connection is restored.

Disadvantages:

- The user must supply his or her own mail program.
- Mail is not shared between different computers so what is read on one computer, is not available on a different computer.
- If the users computer dies, or becomes inoperable, the user will lose everything.

Conclusions:

Which is best?

Keep in mind that one has to have a mail account in the first place, and that is not covered here.

There is no right or wrong answer, the decision is based on what works best for you. I would guess that the WebMail method is the most widely used.

WebMail requires nothing of the users, it just works when one goes to the web log on screen.

IMAP is the next most used method for email but it does require some set-up and requires a local mail program on the users computer. IMAP allows one to use their favorite mail program but leaves the mail and files on the server so they are available using WebMail from other computers.

POP is least popular is method. It is best if used on only one computer and all mail is stored on that computer. While POP does allow total control, in other ways it is limited to a one computer. POP mail is rather old-fashion and not used much in this day where almost everybody access mail from several different computer (work computer, 2nd computer, laptop computer, tablet...)

Also understand that one does not need to have all eggs in one basket... for example, if I do not leave my POP mail program running when away, I can use WebMail from any computer anywhere and the mail will remain until such time as I return home and start using POP mail from my master computer again, then mail downloads to my local computer.

IMAP and WebMail differ only in the sense IMAP uses your mail program while WebMail does not. With WebMail the user does not even need a local mail program at all.

In summation, if the user is going to be accessing mail from several computers (like work and home) then the WebMail is best suited.

If the user wants full control, use his or her own mail program, but is happy to leave the actual mail on the server, and operates from several computers, and also uses WebMail on some computers, than IMAP is best suited for this user.

If the user is a power user and wants full control of everything including storage of the mail files, use custom filters, and works from one primary computer for mail, then POP is best suited.

One final note: Mail servers are generally very safe and stable, there is a much greater chance of failure of the users computer than the Internet Server. Mail stored on-line is generally safer. On-line servers are regularly backed up while few home computers are backed up.

One final note: Mail stored on-line **may** be hacked more easily than if the mail file is on your computer and out of reach to the hackers, however that being said, on-line systems are normally very safe and the mail may be encrypted. Just remember that in theory, anything stored on the Internet can be gotten to by someone, anywhere in the world, anyone who can get past the security. Your home computer can be disconnected from the Internet (Air-Gap), or turned off, and nobody on the Internet can reach it.

Mail Programs

There are many mail programs but I will mention only one. I mention Thunderbird from Mozilla, the same people who give us the Firefox Web Browser. Thunderbird may be downloaded from <https://www.thunderbird.net/en-US/>. As a side note. Firefox (similar to MS-Explorer, Chrome, Chromium, and others) are available for almost all operating systems and works and looks the same on all. I also highly recommend Firefox as your browser. Firefox is FREE.

I recommend Thunderbird for several reasons; first and foremost, it is FREE. No catches, it is free and is available for almost any operating system, including Linux and Raspberry Pi computers, as well as Microsoft Windows. Thunderbird is very similar to the Microsoft Outlook program and supports mail, normal address book function, plus a Calendar with a To-Do list, Appointments and reminders. If you, like me, use several different computers and different operating systems, like me, you can run Thunderbird Mail on all of them

Thunderbird is quite easy to install and configure. You tell it what mode you wish (POP or IMAP), give it your email address and password, and it will configure itself for that system. If you are installing on several computers, I recommend IMAP for all of the reasons mentioned on earlier pages. Do know that if you use the Calendar for reminders and such, it is only active on the computer where you created the calendar event.

Terms:

Server – the computer where the actual mail account is located. This is on the Internet and operated by a company or organization. It ‘serves’ your mail and sends and receives the mail on the Internet. The server communicates with other servers to transfer mail.

Local Computer – This is your computer, tablet or any device you use to access the Internet. The local computer is used to send and receive mail via the server. Your local mail program works ONLY with the server. If the server is down, you have no mail access at all.