

Internet Browsers

A comparison by: [Wil C. Fry](#)

For several years, Microsoft's Internet Explorer was about the only choice of program for average computer users who wanted to "surf" the 'net. The few who used Apple computers had their own browser, and Netscape was the only competition to the widespread IE. Many estimate that IE now controls about 90 percent of the worldwide market for internet browsers.

But many IE users have grown increasingly frustrated with the constant "security updates" and "patches" that are supposed to fix vulnerabilities to attacks by hackers, spammers and purveyors of spyware. This has led to the development of literally hundreds of free, alternative browsers, some created by individuals for their own use and then shared with others, some created by "open source" foundations (like Mozilla's browsers), and others created by for-profit corporations. Nearly all of them offer *usable* alternatives to Internet Explorer, but many of them lack the features most in demand by internet users.

Mozilla Firefox may be the most viable alternative, and it's completely free to use. It has all the features of Internet Explorer, plus a few that Microsoft has never thought worthwhile. Opera's browser is also highly useful, and feature-heavy, but features flashing advertisements in the free version (Opera also offers a for-pay version, but who wants to pay, if you can get it for free from Mozilla?)

If you're considering switching browsers, this review may be for you. I'll try to cover the basic features contained (or lacked) by each browser.

Internet Explorer is, as I've said, the most common browser. Anyone familiar with IE can get on another computer and use this program, since it's installed on every PC that's sold with Windows. That's a huge advantage, I'll admit. Also, it does have just about every feature that the average user will need, such as favorites, built-in internet search, the ability to save web pages, and a relatively "clean" interface.

The disadvantages, though, are many. First, there are the above-mentioned constant security updates from Microsoft, which just can't seem to develop a program that doesn't crash or isn't vulnerable to hackers. Secondly, IE has never had a built-in pop-up blocker; it appears it was made specifically for the use of advertisers who want to slow your system and constantly bother you. Various stand-alone pop-up blockers are available, some for free, and some others can be incorporated into IE, like the Google search toolbar, which installs into IE and blocks *most* annoying pop-ups, while allowing pop-ups that you need or want. However, it's extra trouble to install these, and why should you have to? Third, IE doesn't have "skins." True, many people don't have any use for changing the appearance of their browser, and you *can* change the look of IE by toggling your Windows "appearance" settings, which will change the look of everything else on your computer. But why shouldn't you be able to download a new "skin" in just a few seconds and change the interface? You can with other browsers.

And, though IE *seems* free, since it was already on your computer, it really wasn't free. It added to the cost of the computer you bought.

Mozilla's Firefox is completely free, and easy to install. Like IE, it is a full-function browser with favorites, options, and a highly-usable toolbar. After using it for more than a year, I haven't had to install any security updates, and I've never been the victim of a malicious script, worm, virus or Trojan (knock on wood.) Occasionally, Mozilla's developers will formulate an update for the program, to add new features, but you don't *need* them, like with IE, and you're not constantly barraged with messages from them, urging you to download the new version.

There is a built-in pop-up blocker, which has blocked more than 99 percent of pop-up advertisements (the program tells you every time it blocks one). So far, I've only come across two or three sites whose pop-ups can make it through Mozilla's protection. And, unlike the Google blocker that

can be installed in IE, you don't have to press CTRL every time you want to allow a useful pop-up. It just knows.

Other advantages include dozens of skins that can be downloaded and easily installed. If you're willing to learn how, you can design your own skins. A Google search bar is included in Firefox's toolbar, but you can get rid of it if you don't want it. The "favorites" are called "bookmarks," like in Netscape, and once you learn the slightly different interface, they're easier to deal with than IE's favorites.

Firefox also offers "tabbed browsing," which means you can have several web pages open at once, without having several windows open. There are tabs across the top that you can click to choose which page you want to view. When opening a new link, you can choose whether you want it to replace the page you're viewing or open it in a new tab, or even in a new window, if you want.

And, for those users who constantly use the internet to stay updated on current events and news around the world, Firefox comes with the ability to read RSS news feeds. Instead of going to every news site in existence, just to check the headlines, you can use the live news feeds (RSS) that most news sites offer. They fit in small drop-down buttons across the toolbar. Click on the site's news feed button, and the headlines drop down. From there, you can choose to go to the site or not. And the RSS buttons are completely customizable.

Firefox, when installing, will also import "favorites" from Internet Explorer.

However, I have found at least two disadvantages in Firefox, neither of which is too annoying, and one of which won't affect very many users. One, it doesn't come with most of the "plug-ins" that the average user will need on occasion. Some of the plug-ins, like QuickTime movie viewer and Macromedia flash viewer, are already installed for IE, but have to be reinstalled to work with Firefox. And, instead of opening Word documents in the browser, Firefox will open them in a separate Word window. But, once the plug-ins are installed, it's just as easy as IE to use.

Secondly—and this is just for really savvy users—Firefox saves its downloaded web files in a cache (much like IE), but the cache is only accessible by Firefox. Why is this a disadvantage? Well, every now and then, when I've just been to a web page, and later realize that I want one of the files or pictures from that page, I don't want to have to download it again. With IE, I can just open my "temporary internet files" folder, and copy-and-paste the desired file into a folder of my choice. This works for all image files, video files, web pages, and Shockwave Flash Objects (.swf) like the movies used on JibJab's popular website. It's not so easy in Firefox. But most users never use this advantage of IE anyway.

Mozilla also offers the "Mozilla Suite" that includes both an internet browser *and* a fantastic email client, which may be handy for some users. Here, though, we're just talking about the browser.

Opera has most of the features of IE and Firefox, like favorites/bookmarks, search, options, toolbars, etc. And, like Firefox, it has tabbed browsing, downloadable skins, and a built-in pop-up blocker. It's also free to download, but the user has to put up with constant ads urging him/her to download the paid version. These ads aren't invasive—they just sit up there in a box in the upper right-hand corner of the browser, taking up space and occasionally flashing.

Also, the user doesn't have to worry about constant security updates.

One thing I don't like about Opera's browser is the included email client. Sure, it's nice to have your email program built-in to your web browser, because you usually surf the net and check emails at the same times during the day. But Opera's email client is poorly designed, irritating to manage, and extremely weak compare to the email client you already use (Outlook Express, or Mozilla Thunderbird). But I'm not reviewing email clients here. If you choose to install Opera, I recommend not even setting up the email options and getting rid of the email buttons.

Like Firefox, Opera can also read RSS news feeds, but not in an easy way. The news feeds are delivered to the emails "news inbox," which means you have to open each "email" just to read the headline and decide if you want to view the full story at that site's page. It's much easier to use Firefox's drop-down headline menus for RSS.

I also found that Opera's options/preferences interface can be confusing to the average user. Compared to IE's simple options interface and Firefox's attractive preferences box, Opera's is ugly, confusing, and not very powerful.

When installing Opera, I couldn't get it to import favorites from Internet Explorer.

Overall, I would recommend Opera over Internet Explorer, simply because of the tabbed browsing ability, skins, low price (free), pop-up blocker, and lack of constant harrying from Microsoft about "critical updates." And, if most of your emails are plain text (all that Opera offers), then it might be handy to use Opera. But I'm not sure why you would, when Firefox does all of these things (except email), and does them better, smoother, and without advertisements.

Other browsers are out there as well, including one that I liked for a short time—PhaseOut. PhaseOut offers some really amazing skins—better, in my opinion, than Firefox and Opera skins, a built-in pop-up blocker, tabbed browsing, simple toolbars, favorites, etc. PhaseOut also will block advertisement banners on web pages. But, sometimes, PhaseOut confused a web page's pictures with ads. And sometimes, you want to see these pictures on the page, like when viewing a news site or a friend's online photo album. The browser didn't always decide correctly which pictures were ads and which ones were "good" photos. But it's free.

Others, though, all had faults. Some have an address bar that disappears each time you go to a site, and you have to get it back again. Some had no favorites or bookmarks. Others used a constant-sized window that couldn't be adjusted. Still others had too many buttons on the toolbar, or not enough. Some had skins that only worked some of the time. Some blocked all pop-ups (even the good ones), and others didn't block any pop-ups.

Many are simply built on IE's shell, which means they look a lot like Internet Explorer, and use IE's option box instead of their own, and use Windows features to download or save files from the internet. Some, like the browser built for SBC Yahoo! DSL users, are almost exactly like IE, except that they use even more system resources and are difficult to install—why would you want that?

My recommendation for the best browser—easiest to use, most features, lowest cost, best look—is Mozilla Firefox. Otherwise, until something better comes along, I would stick with IE. But, check out the following chart, and decide for yourself.

Chart Comparison of Popular Internet Browsers

A “✓” (check-mark) will indicate that the named browser has a certain feature, while a “✓*” (check-mark and asterisk) will indicate which browser is best in that feature, in my opinion. An “✗” will indicate that the named browser has a negative feature.

	Internet Explorer 6.0	Mozilla Firefox 1.0	Opera	PhaseOut 5.3
Tabbed browsing		✓*	✓	✓
Favorites/bookmarks	✓	✓*	✓	✓
Customizable tools	✓	✓		
Skins		✓	✓	✓*
RSS news feeds		✓*	✓	
Simple interface	✓	✓		
Attractive interface		✓		✓*
Pop-up blocker		✓*	✓	✓
Ad blocker				✓
Customizable favorites/bookmarks	✓	✓*	✓	✓
Internet search	✓	✓	✓	✓
Email client built-in			✓	
Usable options (preferences)	✓	✓*		✓
Supported by ads			✗	
Usable help files	✓	✓		✓
Constant updates for vulnerabilities	✗			
Can import favorites from IE/other	✗	✓*		✓
Open links in new tabs		✓* (user's choice)	✓ (user's choice)	✓ (always)
Access to cache	✓			✓
Java script blocker		✓		
Password manager	✓ (uses Windows cookies)	✓*	✓	✓ (uses Windows cookies)
Price	included in Windows PCs	free	free (ad-supported)	free
Website	Internet Explorer	Firefox	Opera	PhaseOut