

## What is the Difference Between Email, IM, Discussion Forums, and Chat?

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**Question:** What is the Difference Between Email, IM, Discussion Forums, and Chat?

**Answer:** I have received many letters asking for clarification of differences between email, instant messenger, chat, discussion forum, and mailing list. Most of these letters have come from brave grandmoms and granddads who regularly use their computers to talk to their grandkids. It is wonderful to hear that these folks are embracing the technology and putting it to great use. Let's see if we can support them with some clear explanations:

### Question 1) What is Email?

**Answer: "Email" is short for "electronic mail"** (yes, email is an official English word that requires no hyphen). Email is like an old fashioned letter but in electronic format sent from one computer to another. There is no going to the metal mailbox down the road, no envelopes to address and stamps to lick, yet email very much resembles the classic post office mail process. Most importantly: the email recipient does not have to be at their computer for an email to successfully send. Recipients retrieve their email on their own time. **Because of this lag between sending and receiving, email is called "non-real time" or "asynchronous time" messaging.**

### Question 2) What is Instant Messaging ("IM")

**Answer: Unlike email, instant messaging is a real-time messaging format.** IM is really a specialized form of 'chat' between people who know each other. Both IM users must be online at the same time for IM to fully work. IM is not as popular as email, but it is popular amongst teenagers and people in office places that allow instant messaging.

### Question 3) What is Chat?

**Answer: A chat is a real time online conversation between many computer users.** All participants must be in front of their computer at the same time. The chat takes place in a "chat room", a virtual online room also called a channel. Users type their messages, and their messages appear on the monitor as text entries that scroll many screens deep. Anywhere from 2 to 200 people can be in a chat room. They can freely send, receive and reply to messages from many chat users simultaneously. It is like instant messaging, but with more than two people, fast typing, fast scrolling screens, and most of the people are strangers to each other. Chat used to be very popular in the late 1990's, but has fallen out of vogue lately. Fewer and fewer people use chat; instead, instant messaging and discussion forums are far more popular in 2007.

### Question 4) What is a Discussion Forum?

**Answer: discussion forums are really a slow-motion form of chat.** Forums are designed to build online communities of people with similar interests. Also known as a "discussion group", "board" or "newsgroup", a forum is an asynchronous service where you can trade non-instant messages with other members. The other members reply on their own schedule, and do not need to be present while you are sending. Every forum is also dedicated to some specific community or subject, such as travel, gardening, motorcycles, vintage cars, cooking, social issues, music artists, and more. Forums are very popular, and are renowned for being quite addictive because they put you in touch with many similar-minded people.

### Question 5) What is an Email List?

**Answer: a "mailing list" is a list of email subscribers who choose to receive regular broadcast email on specific topics.** It is primarily used to distribute current news, newsletters, hurricane alerts, weather forecasts, product update notifications, and other information. While some mailing lists have daily broadcasts, many days or even weeks could go by between broadcasts. Examples of mailing lists would be: when a store releases new products or has new sales, when a music artists is going to tour in your city, or when a chronic pain research group has medical news to release.

### Conclusion:

All of these synchronous and asynchronous messaging techniques have their pros and cons. Email is the most popular, followed by forums and IM, then by email lists, then by chat. They each offer a different flavor of online communications. It is best that you try them all and decide for yourself which messaging technique works for you.

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