

What is a web browser?

If you want to view web pages on different websites, you will need to use a program called a 'browser'. This acts as your door to the internet. Browsers are all slightly different, but they all allow you to 'surf' the internet and access different websites.

Types of browser

If you have a Windows device, you'll have a browser program called Internet Explorer. If you have an Apple product, then you'll use a browser called Safari. There are also other browsers available, such as Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox.

To access the internet, you'll firstly need to click or tap on your browser program's icon. A browser window will open. There are several different functions within this window that allow you to do different things.

Web address (or URL)

To load a web page you want to view, just type in its web address - also known as its 'URL' - into the address bar (the space at the top of the window) and then press the 'Enter' button. As a shortcut, you can copy and paste a URL into the address bar.

The BBC's website can be found at the address www.bbc.co.uk - this address takes you to the BBC's 'homepage'. A homepage - which is a bit like the front page of a newspaper - is an entry point for a website and has links to lots of other web pages on the same site.

Make sure you get all of the words, numbers and punctuation in a web address exactly correct, otherwise it won't load. If you don't know the exact address, you can use a search engine (such as Google or Yahoo!) to help you look for it.

Links (or hyperlinks)

On any page of a website, you will see text links which may be underlined. An image on a web page may also contain a link.

By clicking or tapping on a link, you might be taken to a different place on the same web page, a different page on the same website, or another website altogether.

You can tell if a piece of text or an image is an active link as your cursor arrow will change in appearance as you hover over the link – for example, the cursor arrow might turn into the shape of a pointing hand.

What is a web browser? (continued)

Backwards, forwards and reloading

There are two arrow symbols at the top of your browser window – one pointing left (which is the back icon) and the other pointing right (which is the forward icon). If you want to go back to a previous page, you can click or tap on the back icon. Similarly, you can use the forward icon to go forwards.

You may also want to reload the same page - for example, if it's a breaking news story that is being regularly updated. Some browsers refer to this function as 'refreshing' a page. Depending on your browser, the symbol for 'reload' or 'refresh' may appear as a circular arrow or arrows.

Storing favourite pages

As you browse various web pages, you'll probably find ones you like and want to visit again. You can use your web browser to save and store links to these pages. Firefox, Chrome and Safari refer to these stored pages as 'Bookmarks', while Internet Explorer calls them 'Favorites' (spelt the American way).

Find the Bookmark or Favorites symbol or tab at the top of the browser window and click on it. A link to your chosen page will either be saved automatically or you'll be offered the option of saving it. This function varies from browser to browser (and from device to device), but is usually pretty straightforward.

Other features

You can also set a 'homepage' which loads every time you open your browser program. Your chosen homepage could be the main page of a search engine, the BBC's homepage, or anything you want.

You can change your homepage by going to your browser preferences and changing the address in the relevant box.

Your browser stores the address of every page you visit in its 'History'. This is useful if you visited a page a few days ago and want to view it again, but can't remember its address or find the website. You can easily delete your History if you want to.

Parental controls and cookies

You can use security settings to filter out inappropriate material such as violent or adult content. This can be useful if, for example, you have children and want them to browse safely.

What is a web browser? (continued)

Many internet service providers (ISPs) have free parental control software which you can activate at any time. See the UK Safer Internet Centre link at the end of this guide for more details.

When you go to a new website you may see a notice about 'cookies' on the first page. Cookies are small pieces of data stored on your computer by the website, so the site can remember you the next time you return to it. The notice will tell you how the site uses the data.

Finally, if the text on a page is too small for you to easily read, you can 'zoom in' to make it bigger. This useful function can be found in the 'View' menu.

BBC Links

BBC WebWise: What is a search engine?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/0/22562918>

BBC Webwise: Basic online skills – list of guides

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/0/20595791>

BBC My Web, My Way: How to make the web easier to use

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/>

BBC: Privacy & Cookies – What is a cookie? <http://www.bbc.co.uk/privacy/cookies/>

Related Links

Digital Unite: What is a web browser?

<http://digitalunite.com/guides/using-internet-0/searching-browsing/what-web-browser>

Digital Unite: How to store your favourite web pages

<http://digitalunite.com/guides/using-internet-0/storing-favourite-pages>

AbilityNet: Making the web more accessible

<http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/factsheets>

Learn My Way: Internet Basics online course ('Getting Around Online')

<http://www.learnmyway.com/get-started/internet>

UK Safer Internet Centre: How to set up parental controls

<http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/advice-and-resources/parents-and-carers/parental-controls>