

FEED MY RSS: USING RSS FEEDS IN WRITING CLASSES

by **Stan Bogdanov**

Department of Foreign Languages, New Bulgarian University

Sofia, Bulgaria

stanbogdanov @ yahoo.com

Publishing on the Web is getting easier every day. [XML](#) has the clearest syntax so far and [RSS feeds – \(*Really Simple Syndication*\)](#) - has made it even easier to deliver and publish content allowing educators to use more technology in a friendly and amusing way.

We have all seen the small orange **RSS** button. More and more students are subscribing to RSS feeds and use aggregators to read and publish to their own and their friends' blogs. Teachers can use this interest to develop their students' writing skills and teach writing conventions. However, few have looked into how to create their feeds by coding by hand.

Technicalities for the teacher

RSS XML files have a very clear structure and thus provide a clear framework for writing. Below is a typical RSS outline ready for a teacher to use as a template. (Note: preventing the content to display as xml in this online journal version, angle brackets have been replaced with square brackets: (also here <http://ictlt.teachereducation.org.uk/tutorials/rss.xml>)

Click to see the [RSS outline](#)

The [item]s number will vary as per the number of students - each student's contribution is a separate [item] in the feed.

Sample procedure

The teacher can open a few xml rss feeds in a browser to display the xml tags and should inform the students that this structure is a must. Otherwise the news aggregators/readers will not display the news stories properly. This can also serve as a 'bookmark' to mention writing conventions (in the offline world) without going too deep into them, and also a starting point for further work on writing conventions.

The teacher hands out worksheets ([worksheet1.pdf](#) – for young learners and low-level students; [worksheet2.pdf](#) – for higher-level students; or a worksheet with the xml tags) with description of what to fill between each tag; and asks students to compose their stories. Sample layouts of the worksheets can be as follows:

Worksheet1 - Young Learners and low-level students
--

Title:
Author:
Date:
Story:

Worksheet2 – higher-level students	
Title:	
Author:	
Date:	
Summary/Abstract:	
Full story:	

When ready, the students turn to the computers and open the xml feed template in Notepad (prepared by the teacher beforehand). They type in their stories and save the files. These are collected by the teacher, checked and published. The students will subscribe to their own feeds, read each others stories and discuss whatever the teacher has instructed them to.

Variation

You may wish to download some software for writing and publishing feeds. This will make it even easier for students to get used to the format, additionally reducing paper work. Besides, it will save the teacher’s time compiling the feeds. A possibility is the Firefox browser plugin/extension *RSS Editor* (<http://rsseditor.mozdev.org/>) with which feeds are easily written, organised and published.

Timing, students’ level and variations

Such a writing class can take a period or two with low level students who may only write a news title and a news shot of about three to five sentences, while higher level students can develop summarising skills by writing summaries/abstracts. With more proficient students, the feeds may be full length stories; and classes can be extended to homework assignments over a few days.

The RSS feeds publishing is easy enough to implement in classes with young learners through to university students; group or whole class feeds; from beginner language students to non-language university or other courses.

Teachers have the freedom to choose one or a few tenses only for students to practise, for example, only will/going to; or only present perfect, or only past simple or all tenses studied, only passive voice, etc. The stories can all be on a single topic or students may write on a different topic for each RSS feed publication. The RSS feeds can be published to a class blog or the class/school website.

Follow-ups

Follow-up classes and lessons spring up naturally since RSS feeds, by definition, are supposed to be updated frequently and regularly. Publishing RSS feeds can grow into a long-term commitment of the class; and the feeds can be published to the class blog or the school website every couple of days or every week.

Conclusion

RSS feeds with the clear XML structure provide a “nice and clean” framework for practising and teaching writing and writing conventions. It is amusing and students will love seeing a direct and quick result of their work. Subscribing to their own class’ RSS feeds and reading each others’ work is both stimulating and motivating to keep writing for a real audience; it allows for and can boost creativity and competition. The opportunities are open to both the teacher’s and students’ imagination and ingenuity.