Google Docs:

If you need to get data from various people on the internet, you could pay for a polling service, or use Google Docs for free. **Andy Channelle** explains…

❯ **Create multiple-choice questionnaires and provide a number of answers for your respondents to choose from.**

Our expert

Andy Channelle
Andy seems to have been taking his first steps in free software forever, and has been interested in technology since the advent of the Dragon 32.

Google Docs has become more useful with each update, and while the spreadsheet program isn't the most glamorous in the world, it's great for capturing data from web users. We'll show you how to build a form and share the link to encourage users to respond.

There are many potential uses for this, from enabling people to sign up for an email newsletter to polling your club's members. You could even use it as a front-end for your own data gathering needs, such as if you were cataloguing a collection of some kind. You'll need an internet connection and a Google account. If you don't have one, set up the latter at **http://docs.google.com**. Click Create Account.

When you sign in to the service for the first time, you'll be presented with the file manager, which will eventually list the documents you've created or have been invited to share. At the top-left is a Create New button. Click this and select Form.

We're going to make a feedback form that will request a user's name and email address, ask a number of multiple choice questions, before giving them a larger comment space. The process, though, is the same if you want to create something simpler, or more complex.

Begin by giving your form a title and a description. The latter is a great way to introduce the form to your audience and encourage them to fill it out. The whole form is built around a series of questions, which can have different answer types. Building the form simply involves typing in the

question, selecting and defining the appropriate answer type and then saving the whole thing.

For instance, our first question, 'What is your name?' needs a simple text box to type the answer in, so we choose Text from the Question Type drop-down. There's also a space for some advice to the user, which is great for more complex forms and, at the base of the question section, a button to make the question a required one. If you select this, your user won't be able to submit the form without that section filled in.

Choose your question

Question types range from the simple to the complex. Here's a quick rundown of what each one does.
Text Used for simple text strings such as names, email addresses and short textual answers.
Paragraph text Can be used to add longer elements such as Addresses or longer comments.
Multiple choice Gives your users the opportunity to choose from predefined options. When you select this, you'll be shown two spaces for options. As you fill in the first space, a new option box will appear. Fill this in and another will appear below it. At the bottom is a link that says Or Add 'Other'. This adds a text box to the choices, where the person filling the form in can type their own answer. You can delete options in the list by clicking the small cross to the right of the label.
Checkboxes In contrast to Multiple choice, checkboxes enable users to select more than one option from the list and so is useful for questions that can have multiple responses. Adding information is the same as above.
Choose from a list In usual interface design terms, this option would be called a Combo box. The user is presented

Easy forms

with a drop-down list, from which they select a single option. As before, you define the choices they see using text boxes.
Scale This gives users a chance to define how much they agree or disagree with a statement or express their strength of feeling. Use the two drop-downs to set the scale itself and then use the labels to give the start and end text for the scale.
Grid This enables you to include a range of options and a scale in a single question. So your question might be: 'How much did you enjoy the following parts of the festival?' You could then have row labels such as Music, Comedy and Toilets and column headings Great, Good and Appalling'

Form structure

If you're adding a lot of questions to a form, break things up into sections using Add Item > Section Header. This enables you to label a section and add some introductory text. Longer productions, such as customer satisfaction surveys might also benefit from being ranged across different pages and it's possible to do this by selecting Add Item > Page Break. You still construct the form as a single document, but the user will see a series of pages with a Go To option at the bottom.

Once you've added questions and section headers, you can reorder them by dragging and dropping up and down the list. You can also alter questions by clicking the Edit (pencil) icon next to the appropriate question.

We've created a new page (Add Item > Page Break) labelled Festival Experience, which is only relevant to those who've previously been to a festival. Those who haven't need to be directed to our third page. To do this, we add a new multiple choice question on the first page: Have you been to a festival before? Since we now have a series of pages, you'll see a new option next to the Question Type, which is a checkbox labelled Go To Page Based On Answer. Select this and add your options to the bottom of the screen. Each time you add an option, you'll see a new drop-down list appear

❯ **The Section Header option is useful for dividing up your questionnaire into smaller, more manageable chunks.**

❯ **Make your project more interactive by using the Go To Page options.**

next to the option, where you can select one of your pages. When the user gives their answer, the choice will be registered and they'll be taken to the appropriate page.

Sharing the form

Every form you create has a unique URL, which you'll find at the bottom of the editing window. This is a link to the live form. It's a great way to test your edits, but note that any text you enter during testing will find its way into your dataset.

The simplest way to share a form is to copy this address and add it as a link on your website, email or Facebook status. Others can then access the form and add their thoughts.

At the top of the window you'll see an Email This Form option. Under More Actions, you'll find the Embed option, which gives you the code to embed your form into another site as an iFrame. Finally, you'll also see Edit Confirmation, where you can type a message that users will see once they hit Submit. Publish Response Summary gives the respondent an opportunity to see a headline view of the results so far.

With the form created, refined and running live on the internet, sit back and wait for the information to come flooding in. Next month, we'll look at some of the methods available for sorting and analysing the results of the data. **LXF**

Change the look

At the top of the form designer is a button labelled Theme: Plain. Click this to see some themes you can use to add a dash of style to your form. Simply select a design from the gallery to see a preview and then click Apply. You can always get back to a Plain form later.

Themes range from business-like to light, fluffy designs. Choose wisely, because the look of your form may affect your users' engagement with it.

❯ **There's a range of form styles to change the feel of your production.**

❯ **If you missed last issue** Call 0870 837 4773 or +44 1858 438795.

Thunderbird:

Access your webmail and calendars without the need for a web browser.

» **Thunderbird 3.1.1**

There's a trend in computing at the moment to integrate various desktop and mobile services to provide a seamless experience when it comes to handling your data. We're going to show you how to make the most of what's on offer. In this first part of a two-part tutorial, we'll set up Mozilla's *Thunderbird* email client to deal with our web-based email account and calendar. Next month, we'll synchronise these with a mobile phone. In the course of our exploration, we'll look at the ways in which we can use *Thunderbird*'s tabbed interface to provide lots of information in a small amount of space.

We'll begin by setting up a simple webmail account, and then use this to send and receive email without going near a web browser. Fortunately, the software is pretty intuitive, especially when it comes to setting things up. The first thing you'll need to do is set up a webmail account. We've used Gmail, which you can sign up for at **http://mail.google.com**.

Then install *Thunderbird* if it's not already available. You could either look through your package manager for *Thunderbird 3.x*, or go to **www.mozillamessaging.com** and download the latest version. The latter option will give you the most up-to-date software and so is recommended. Once you've downloaded *Thunderbird*, extract the file into your **home** folder and double-click the *Thunderbird* icon. You'll be asked what you'd like to to with the file. Just choose Run.

The first time you do this, you'll be presented with the Account Setup wizard. Fill in the appropriate details and hit the Continue button. *Thunderbird* should find the right settings. We're using Gmail, so we want to select IMAP as the access protocol in the second part of the wizard to manage the mail on the server as though it were locally stored. This

» *Thunderbird* **does a good job of working out your email server settings.**

❯ **Downloading 36,000 messages dating back to 2004 can take a little time, even if you have a fast web connection.**

will mean that if you read a message in *Thunderbird*, next time you log into Gmail, it will be marked as read. This level of automation is available for many mainstream webmail systems. If you're working with a more esoteric provider, hit Manual Setup and input the incoming and outgoing server details you were given when you signed up for the account.

You've got mail

Once you're ready, click the Create Account button. You should see the name of your account on the left above the Local Folders heading. Select Read Email from the main window and the mail headers (the details of sender, date and subject) will be downloaded. Clicking one from the list will show you the actual message in the main window pane.

It's worth noting that the software will download headers for all of your messages, and if you don't tend to delete stuff, the first time you fetch all of them may take a while.

By default, *Thunderbird* will check whether new mail has arrived. You can change this, but there's little advantage in doing so. If you need an immediate check, you can always hit the Get Mail button in the toolbar and download the latest mail that's arrived in your account.

To write a new email, click the Write button, add the appropriate details and message and click Send. To the recipient, the message will appear to come from your standard address (such as **yourname@gmail.com**) and if you're using IMAP, it will also appear in the Sent Mail folder on your webmail's online interface.

Now we're going to use one of the new features in *Thunderbird* to integrate a Google calendar into the actual interface. Note, you could use *Lightning*, which is the official Mozilla calendar application, but our way is useful if you have lots of data already added to Google Calendar and would like easy access to it alongside your emails.

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Mail and more

Step by step: Google Calendar in Thunderbird

As well as accessing your Gmail account in Thunderbird, you can view and edit your Google Calendar, right from the comfort of your mail program.


1 Install the extension
Like *Firefox*, there are plenty of extensions available for *Thunderbird*. You can browse them by selecting Tools > Addons. Use the Search bar to look for Calendar, and select the option labelled Google Calendar Tab. Click the Add To Thunderbird button, then you'll need to restart the program. Either do so manually or select the Restart button beneath the toolbar.

2 Launch a calendar tab
As the title of the extension suggests, we're going to put a Google Calendar into a new tab. To begin, select Tools > Google Calendar Tab. After a short pause, a new tab will appear and you'll be asked to input your account details in the usual manner. Depending on your approach to security, you can click the Stay Signed In button to make the calendar more persistent.
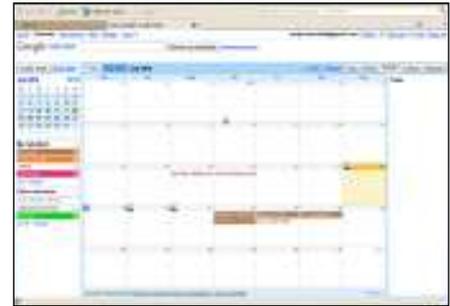
3 Add events
From here on in, *Thunderbird* behaves like *Firefox*. To add an event, click one of the boxes representing a day and type your event details. You also have access to the Tasks pane (if you're running it on your Gmail account) and links at the top of the page, including Documents and Photos, will open up new tabs in *Thunderbird*.


4 Alarms and alerts
Next time you open up *Thunderbird*, the Google Calendar tab will be loaded automatically unless you specifically closed it earlier. This means that alerts you've set up for events will pop up over your mail client as you read. To set an alert, select an event in the calendar, click Edit... and use the section on the right to add a pop-up alert a few minutes (or hours) before the event date and time.
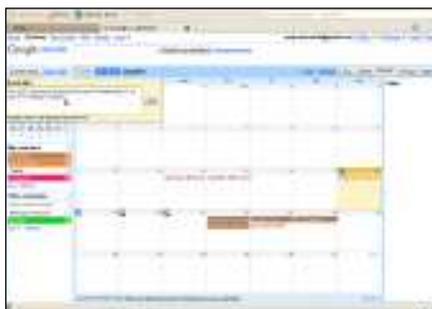
5 Middle button magic
While it's not yet possible to add email events to the calendar automatically, a function of the middle mouse button makes things easier. If you had an email saying 'John and Helen's house warming at 7.30pm. 21 July, 2010,' you highlight the information, open the Calendar tab, click Quick Add and then click with the middle mouse button (or scroll wheel) to add the event to your diary.
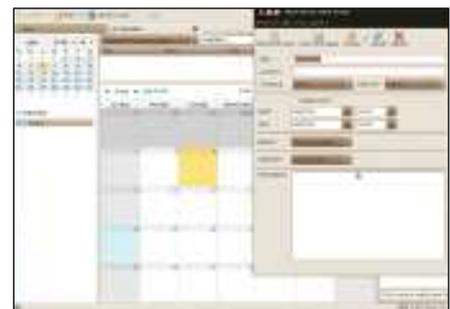
6 More calendar options
For a more integrated solution, *Thunderbird* has a component called *Lightning* that can be installed through the usual Addons window. The advantage of *Lightning* is that it stores data locally and can also take event or task information from an email and turn it into a calendar event. Next issue, we'll look at these features and also at the potential for syncing local calendars with remote ones. **LXF**

» **Next month** We'll analyse form data and sync local and remote calendars.