# E-Mail Explained

We get frequent questions about e-mail so it may be helpful to explain (in a short, simple manner) how it all works.  This may actually be way more than you want to know, but it makes good bedtime reading.

## Sending and receiving mail

You type a message and hit send. Out it goes to the recipient.  Most people think that this is all there is to it.  It's a little more complicated than that.

Without being too technical, it should be understood that mail doesn't just go from your computer to the recipient's computer.  It gets routed over the network and because your messages are competing with other messages, sometimes they take longer to get to the destination.  They may have to go through several mail servers in different parts of the country to finally be delivered.  Your mail may take a minute or an hour or more to get where it is supposed to go.

## Ways of sending and receiving e-mail

## Webmail

Many folks use webmail for their daily correspondence.  This is when you log onto your e-mail account using your web browser.  If you go to Centurylink.net or Comcast.net or AOL or if you use Gmail, you are using webmail. This is quite convenient, as you can send and receive mail no matter where you are—at home or travelling.  Your mail stays on the mail server until you delete it.

There is a downside, though.  If you are on a website where there is a button that allows you to send mail to someone in that company, you may get an error message that says something like "no local email client configured." This makes it impossible to send a message directly from a website.  This is because many sites rely on your computer using its own mail program to do the communication. An example can be found on our site—if you click on the link "Contact Us" your email client, if you have one, will open up so you can write us a message.  If you don't have an e-mail program on your computer, then you'll need to set one up.  If you don't wish to do this, then you can always copy the e-mail address from the website and paste it into your webmail.

## E-mail programs (mail clients)

Examples of these programs are Outlook, Outlook Express, Windows Live Mail, and Thunderbird.  There are a number of others that you may have heard of.  These programs all do

your sending and receiving for you.  All you do is open the program and click on receive mail and you're in business.  After you write your message, you click on send and it's on its way.  These programs allow you to keep your mail on your home computer where you can store the messages in folders.  One thing you cannot do, though, is use these programs when you are away from home.  They don't work away from home.  For travel, you'll need to use webmail.

## Possible mail problems

You may find that when you log onto your mail program, it keeps working and working and working—never really finishing.  This is generally due to a bad (or huge) piece of mail it's trying to download from the server.  A sure symptom is that, if every time you start up your mail program you seem to get copies of the same mail over and over.  This is why:  When your mail program asks the server for the mail, the server responds by starting to send the messages to you.  When the last message is sent to you, your computer tells the server that it has all arrived and the server responds by deleting the mail from its location.  The catch here is that ALL of the mail must be delivered to you or the server treats it like none have been delivered.  So next time you log on, it tries again.

The fix?  Make note of the number of messages that actually downloaded to your computer.  Then log onto webmail.  Count down to the last message that you got and the problem is quite possibly the next message in line.  Delete it.  Then try your mail program again.

Now for some geek trivia—you may have heard of these things when setting up your mail or when working with someone who is giving you tech support.

## Mail servers

**POP** (stands for Post Office Protocol) server—this is the server (the computer) that receives your mail from someone and delivers it to you.  It's like the little mail box in the post office.  You send your authentication (username and password) to the POP server  (you put your key in the mailbox to open it) and the mail is delivered to your computer.

**SMTP** (stands for Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) server—this is the server that takes your mail from you for delivery (like the blue box outside your Post Office).