WASHINGTON STATE LEGISLATURE

RSS TUTORIAL

HOW TO USE RSS TO BE NOTIFIED WHEN BILLS CHANGE STATUS

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What is RSS?

RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication". RSS programs called newsreaders allow your computer to automatically look at webpages that you have specified and lets you know when those pages have new information. This "look and compare" goes on in the background while you do other work on your computer. If the RSS program sees that a webpage you have specified has changed, it will update a summary page or give a "pop-up" message indicating the change. You can instruct the computer program to look at any number of webpages at time intervals you specify.

This year the Washington State Legislature is formatting all of its bill history pages using RSS formatting. This means you can add the bill history webpage for any bill into an RSS newsreader and be notified with pop-up messages anytime a bill you are tracking changes its status. This means you can be notified when a bill is scheduled for a public hearing, or when it comes out of a standing committee or the rules committee, when it is substituted, engrossed or passed, when it gets a second or third reading, or any of the other changes in status a bill may undergo during its legislative life.

RSS newsreaders can be added to your computer at work or at home, or even to your PDA or cell phone to keep you in touch with bill status changes virtually anywhere.

Why RSS and not e-mail notification?

Combine the large number of people using bill tracking with the average number of bills tracked and all the possible bill status changes and you have the potential for creating and broadcasting a huge number of e-mails over the internet. An internet user broadcasting a large number of e-mails can easily be labeled a spammer and blacklisted so that no e-mails will go through the system. RSS gets around this risk.

The Newsreaders

There are two kinds of newsreaders—on-line and on-computer. Each have advantages and disadvantages.

The newsreader programs that are installed directly on your computer run quietly in the background periodically checking webpages that you have specified. When they find a webpage that has changed, they pop-up a little notification on your screen like Outlook's, and many other, e-mail programs. You can click on the pop-up and open the main program to see more detail and activate more features. The main disadvantage is that the list of webpages that you want to track exists only on the computer the program is installed on. There are ways to update the data and synchronize it to several computers but this is somewhat inconvenient.

With the newsreader programs that operate on-line like Google Reader, the list of your bills actually reside on-line on a server and the program can be accessed from any computer at any time. There is no need to update lists on several computers. The main disadvantage is that the program doesn't run in the background on your computer and provide pop-up messages when things change. You must periodically go to the web, open your on-line newsreader and observe in the program what has changed since the last time you looked. The changes are usually indicated by **BOLDING** the bills that have changed since the last time the program was accessed. Additionally, your datafiles are kept on the Internet Service Provider's computer and this may cause security concerns for some.

Which type of program is best for you depends on how you would normally use them.

Free vs Purchased NewsReaders
The internet has scores of free newsreaders including on-line readers as well as computer-based readers. There are also a multitude of Newsreaders you can purchase. Generally the free newsreaders, have fewer features than the purchased ones, but we recommend using the free newsreaders until you become experienced and may want more features.

The Legislative Information Center has experimented with many of the free readers and we recommend FeedReader3 or Google Reader as starters. With FeedReader3, you must go to their website and download and install the program. With Google Reader, you simply go to Google's website and sign-up for a Google Account. FeedReader3 only works on PC based systems. For McIntosh based systems you would need to install some other purchased system a free RSS reader that is compatible with the MAC.

After you have installed the FeedReader3 program or signed up for Google Reader, you simply populate the Reader with the bills you are interested in and let the program know how often you want the reader to check for updates and how to display the data.

Downloading FeedReader3

1. To download FeedReader3 go to their website at www.feedreader.com and click on the download icon
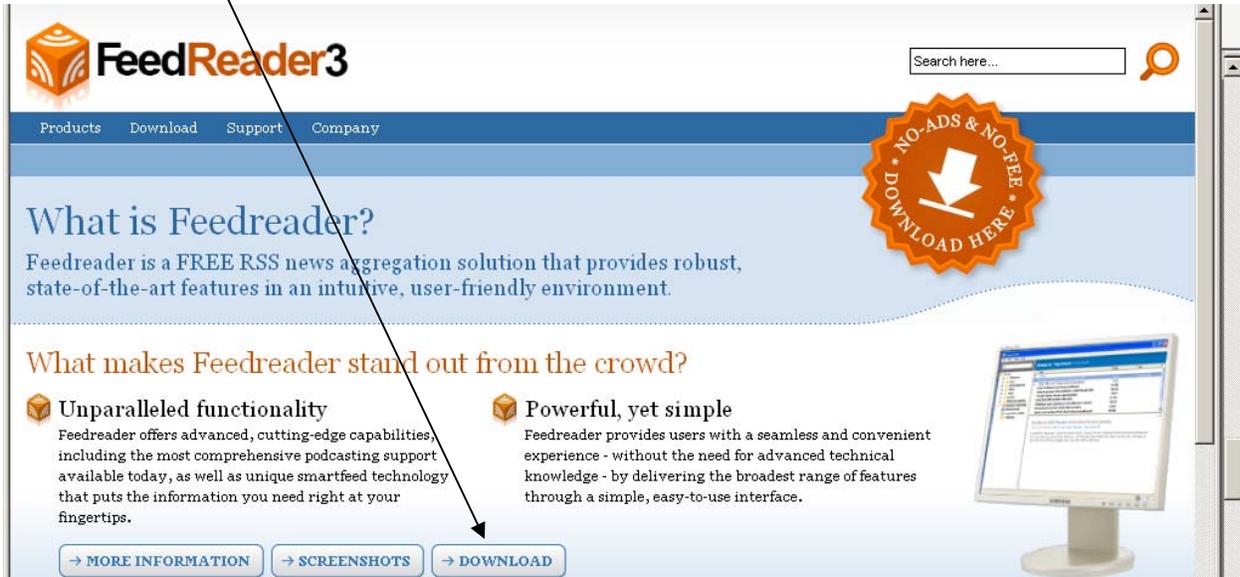
2. The page below will come up. Click on "OLDAPPS.COM"
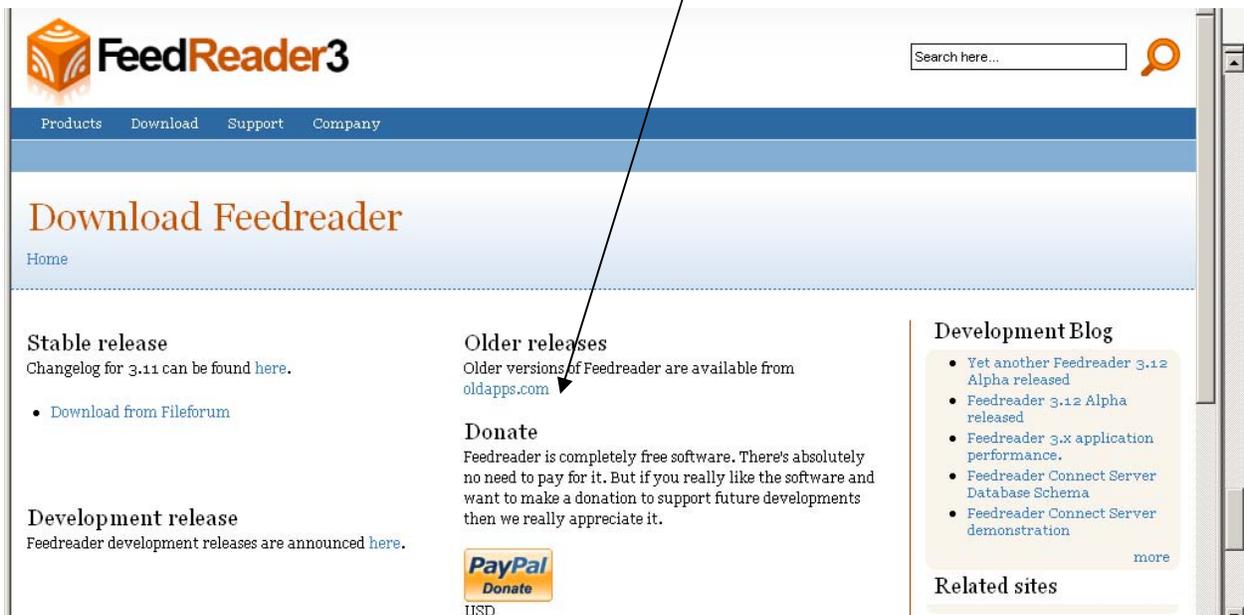
3. Click on FeedReader 3.11 (the most recent free version)
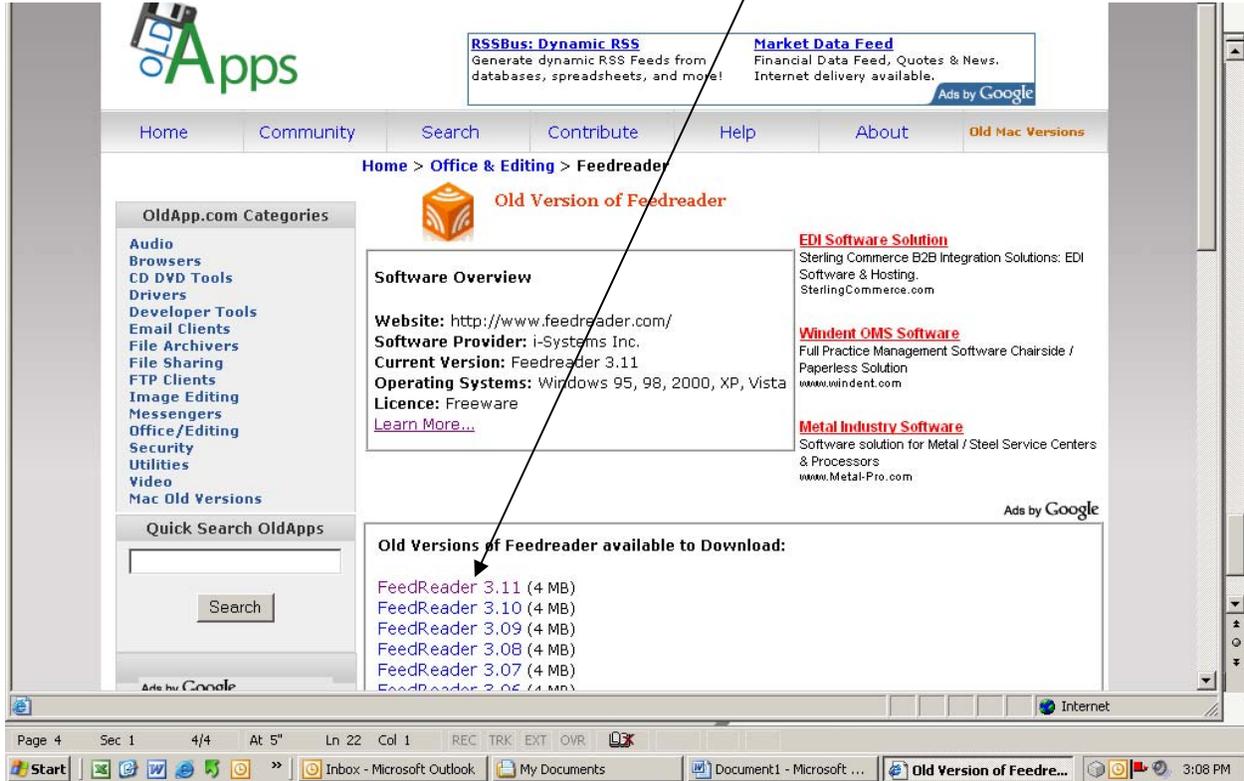
4. The following page will open: Either click here if your protection is set to exclude some downloads and then click download file.

Or click here to start the download.

5. Click on "Save" and when the download is complete click on Run
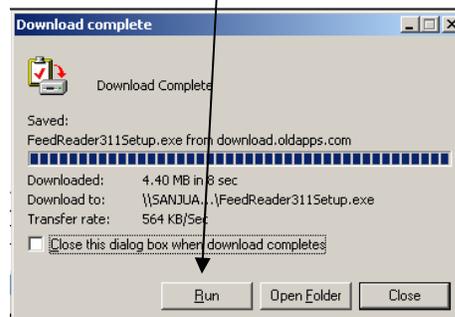
6. (Installing directly from the web) Your computer may ask for further permission. Click "Run", select "English" and click "OK", and then follow the directions in the install wizard.

7. INSTALLING FREEREADER

8. Click on "Next", Click on "browse" to find the folder you to install the program in (or use the one created by the install program) and click next. Click "I accept agreement" and click "Next" again.
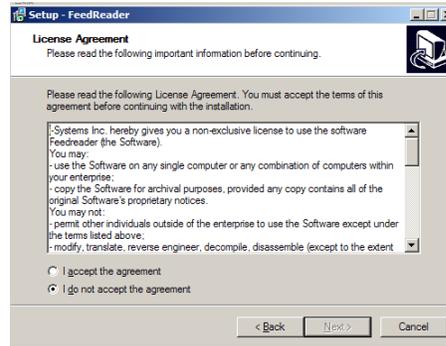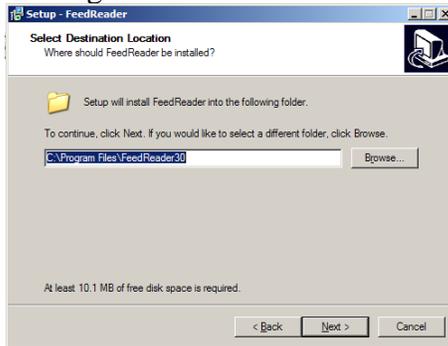
Click on "Next" to create a shortcut in the start menu folder then select additional task and click "next". We usually just click on "create a desktop icon".
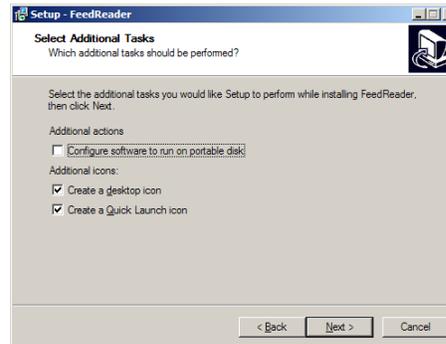
9. Select the feeds you want (we click on "select none since we will add these later), then click "Finish". Then click on "English" and then click on "Next".
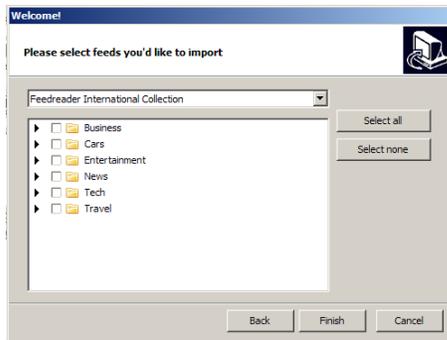
CONFIGURING FEEDREADER

Now you need to set your preferences on how FeedReader works. Click on Tools, then Options, then the General Tab. Select "Run program at startup", "Start minimized to tray", and "Act as default reader.

Under the behavior section-"when I click on the close button in application window", click the dropdown box and pick one of the options (we use "minimize to tray")

- Ask me what to do –when you are done reading the program entries and click the close icon (the little x in the upper right corner) you will be asked if you want to close the program or to minimize the program to the tray (a little cube icon at the bottom) and let the program to continue to operate in the background.
- Close Program
- Minimize program to tray

Under the display notification, click the dropdown box and pick one of the notification options.
- As new items arrive
- Once in an Hour
- Do not Display Notifications

Under "If not set in feed then" pick option (we use "allow feeds to show notifications by default")
- Allow feeds to show notifications by default
- Do not allow feeds to show notifications by default
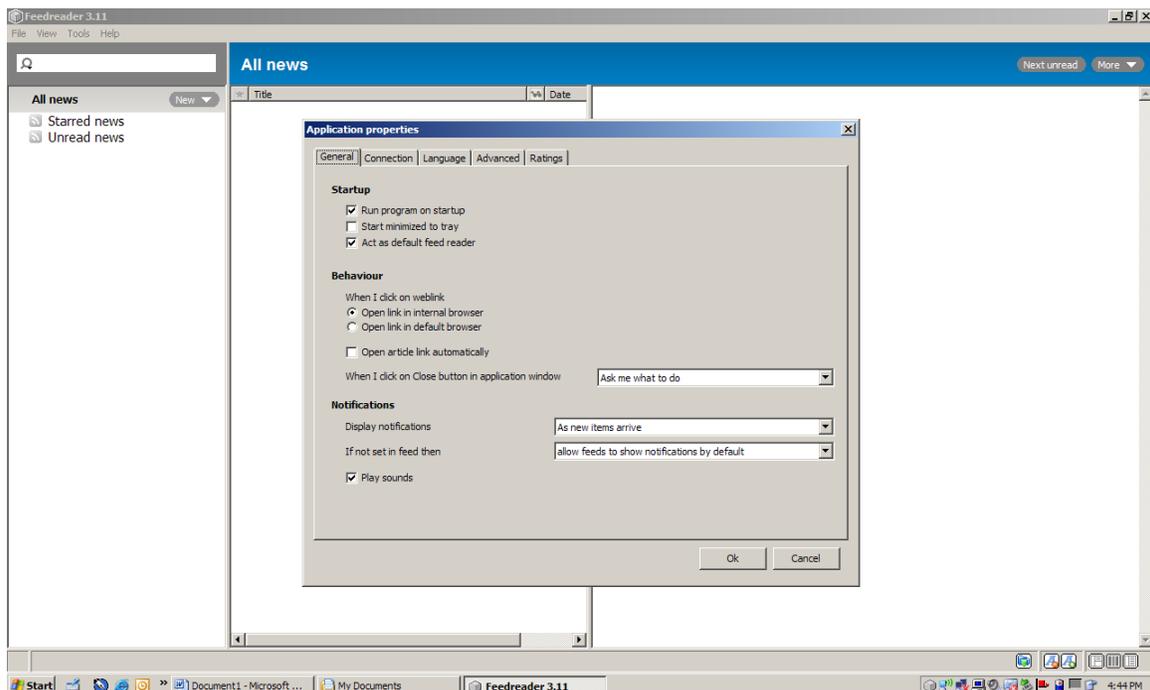
Notifications

By setting the above options, you get a pop-up notification every time FeedReader finds new material on the websites you have specified.
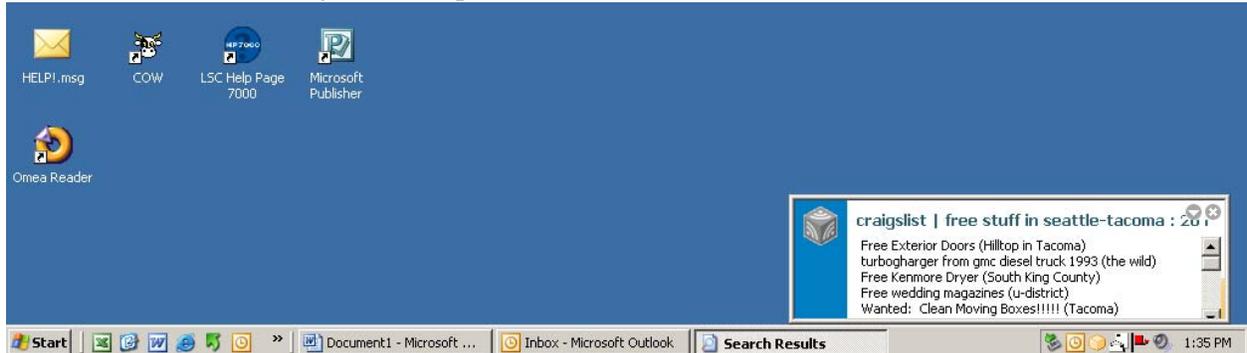
You can control how these notifications work by the options you select. For example, you can turn notifications completely off for all feeds or you can turn them on for all feeds. You can also turn notifications off for some feeds and on for others.

Copying "Feeds" to your Newsreader

Start or open your FeedReader3 newsreader. Open the Legislative Web page and go to Bill Information. Enter a bill number and click on search. When the bill history comes up, click on the orange icon. This will open the following page.

Highlight the URL as shown above, copy it, switch back to your Newsreader
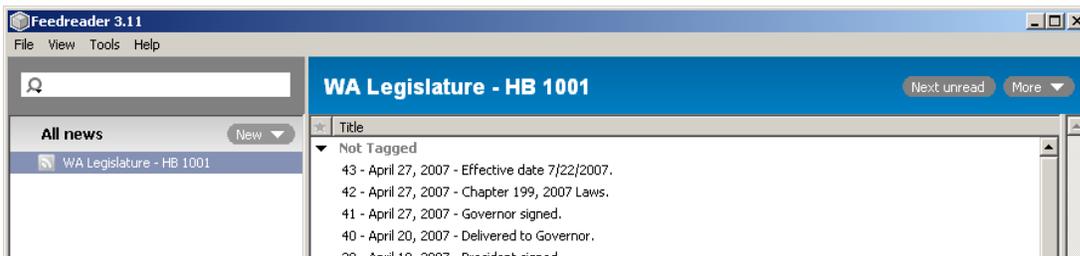
Click on File, then New, Then Feed

Paste the URL you copied from the Legislative web page in the space proved in the newsreader and click on OK.
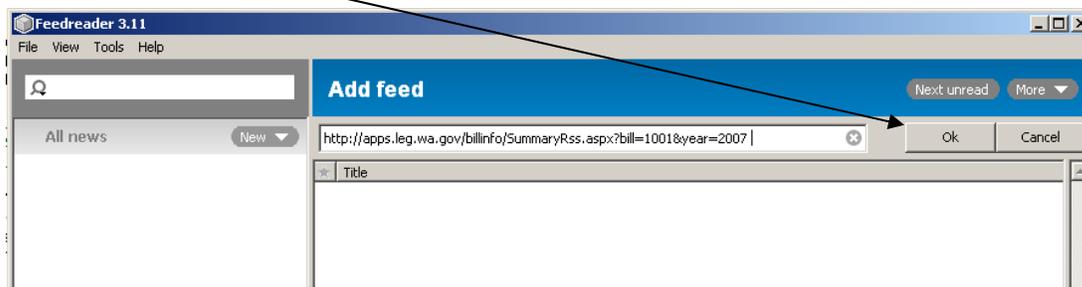
The program will add the "feed" and list all the "articles" associated with the that feed
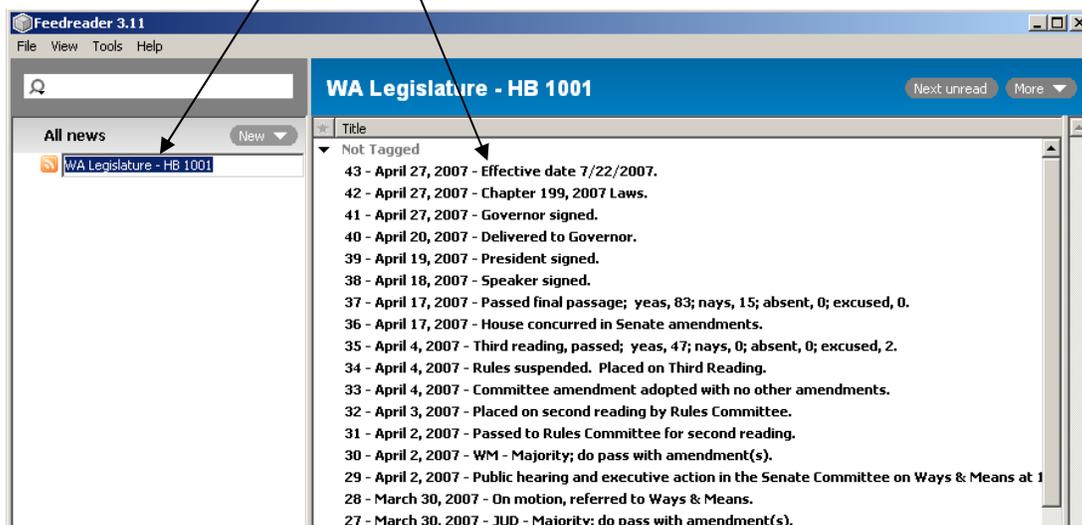
FreeReader and most other NewsReaders use the terms Feeds and Articles. Within the context of using the FeedReader program to track bills, the term "feed" means the web page about a single bill. The information about that bill is "fed" to you when the program asks for it. Within each "feed" there are "articles". "Articles" are the latest information from the web page, in our case, an update to a single bill's status.

Previously read "articles" will not bolded. Unread articles will be bolded as shown above. If you have set up your options to "Display Notifications", you will have a pop-up on your screen every time a new article is added to the feed (a change in bill status for a bill).

Other FeedReader Options

1. Layout
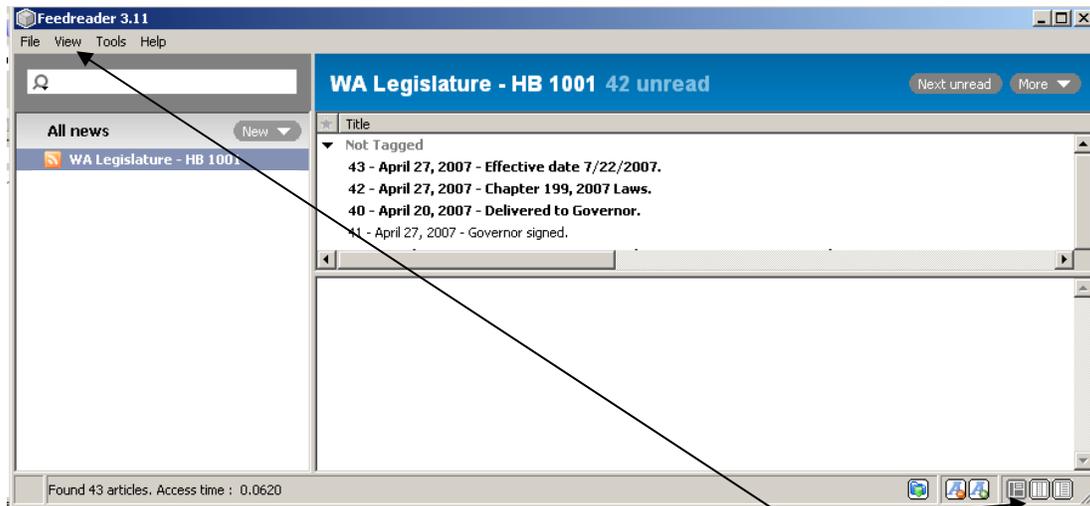
FeedReader3 has three different layouts hat can be accessed from the view menu or from the icons at the bottom of the screen: Classic, Wide and Full.

The classic view splits the screen into three parts as shown above. The left-hand pane shows the feeds. The top right hand pane shows the summary of articles. And when you highlight an article, a more detailed description is shown in the bottom right pane.

The wide view shows just the list of feeds and the summary of the articles.
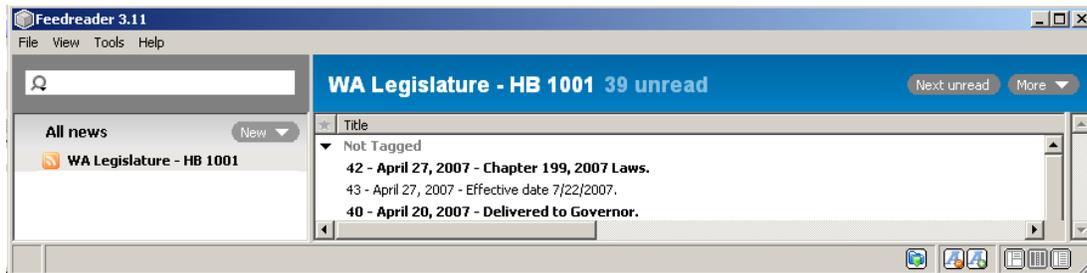
The Full View shows the feeds in the left hand pane and the detailed articles in the right hand pane.

In all three views, you can right click on an article title and select "Open in new window" and a new window of the webpage with the bill history will be opened. In the Classic and full views, you can just click on the title and the web page will be opened in that pane.
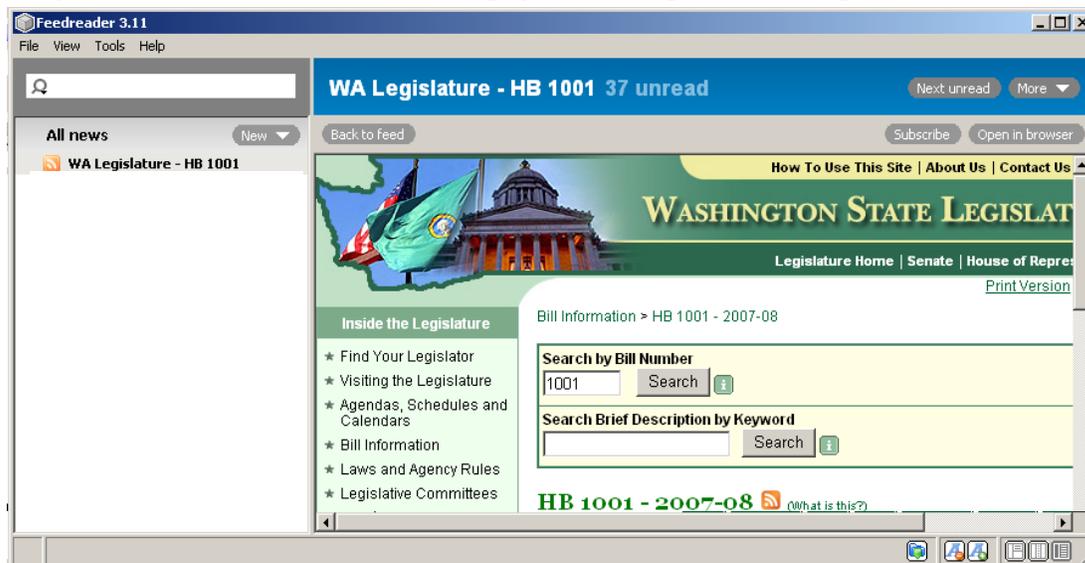

From here you can go back to summary by clicking on "Back to feed" or you can go to the webpage by clicking on "Open in browser"

USING SMART FEED

FeedReader has a feature called SmartFeed that lets you filter your results further and control notifications. The best way to illustrate how this works is to use an example. Let's say that you have a list of bills and you only want to be notified when there is a public hearing on the bills. For all other changes, opening the feedreader program and looking at the bolded changes will be good enough for you to keep track of changes. The process for setting this up is as follows:

- Click on Tools then Options, then the General Tab
- In the Notifications section click on the dropdown box under "If not set in feed then" and select "Do not allow feeds to show notification by default". This will turn off notifications in general.
- Click on "File", Then "New", then "Smart Feed"
- Set title to "Title contains public hearing"
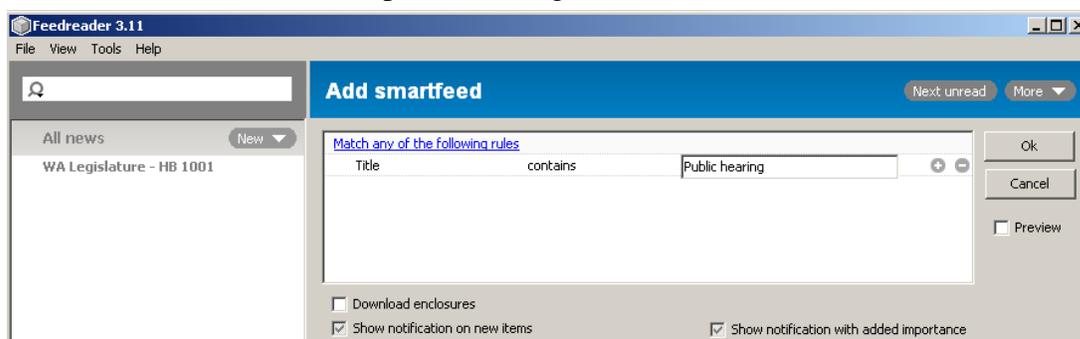
- Click on "show notification for new items" and, if desired, "show notification with added importance".
- Click on OK.
- Rename the name of the Smart feed to whatever you like.

What you have done in this case is to turn off general notification, create a smartfeed that looks through all your other feeds and finds occurrences of the term "public hearing" and specifically provides notification of that occurrence. The detail or summary panes for that smartfeed will tell you what bill the hearing is for.

You can do many other things with the rules in smart feeds as well. Experiment to your hearts content, or see the on-line user guide for more information on smartfeeds.

EXPORTING AND IMPORTING DATA

As noted, FeedReader3 is a computer based program. That means all the databases are stored on your computer and all the processing takes place on your computer. That means if you have your bill notification set up at work, you can't access it on your computer at home or someone else in your office can't access your database at work unless they are working on your computer.

However, it is fairly easy to trade databases by using the import and export features of FeedReader. If you wanted to set up a colleague with a bill tracking database that mirrors yours,

it is a simple matter exporting the data to a disk, flashdrive or e-mail message. The receiver of the data then simply imports that data into their FeedReader program and voila!—they see what you see. Of course, if you add more bills to your database, you would need to export it and make it available for other users to import.

To export data from FeedReader:
- Click on "File", then "Export OPML"
- Give the file a name and click save
- Send the file to another user or for use yourself on another computer or as a backup.

To import a database to FeedReader:
Click on "File" then click on "Import OPML"
Browse and find the file name, then click "Open", and then click "Next"
Check mark the feeds you want to import (duplicate feeds that are already in your database are ignored).
Click "Next" and the new data will be uploaded to your program

USING GOOGLE READER (an on-line reader)

If you prefer, you can use an on-line reader as opposed to computer-dedicated reader. The advantage of the on-line reader is that the program and the database are stored on the internet. This means you can access it from any computer anywhere in the world and it will always be the most current data you've entered. The disadvantage is that there are no pop-up windows or sounds to notify you during the day when new updates arrive. You must sign onto the website and open your account to see what new material there is. You can generally see this because the data is bolded, or you can set the program to only show new, unread items. There are a number of on-line readers, but the one we have experimented with is Google Reader which is free. To use Google Reader you need to set up an account with Google so that they know which database is yours when you get on their site. This is easy to do. Simply get on the internet and go to www.google.com. When the Google page comes up click on "More" and then on "Reader"

After clicking on "Reader" the page below will open and just click on create an account. On subsequent visits you will sign in here instead of creating an account.

15
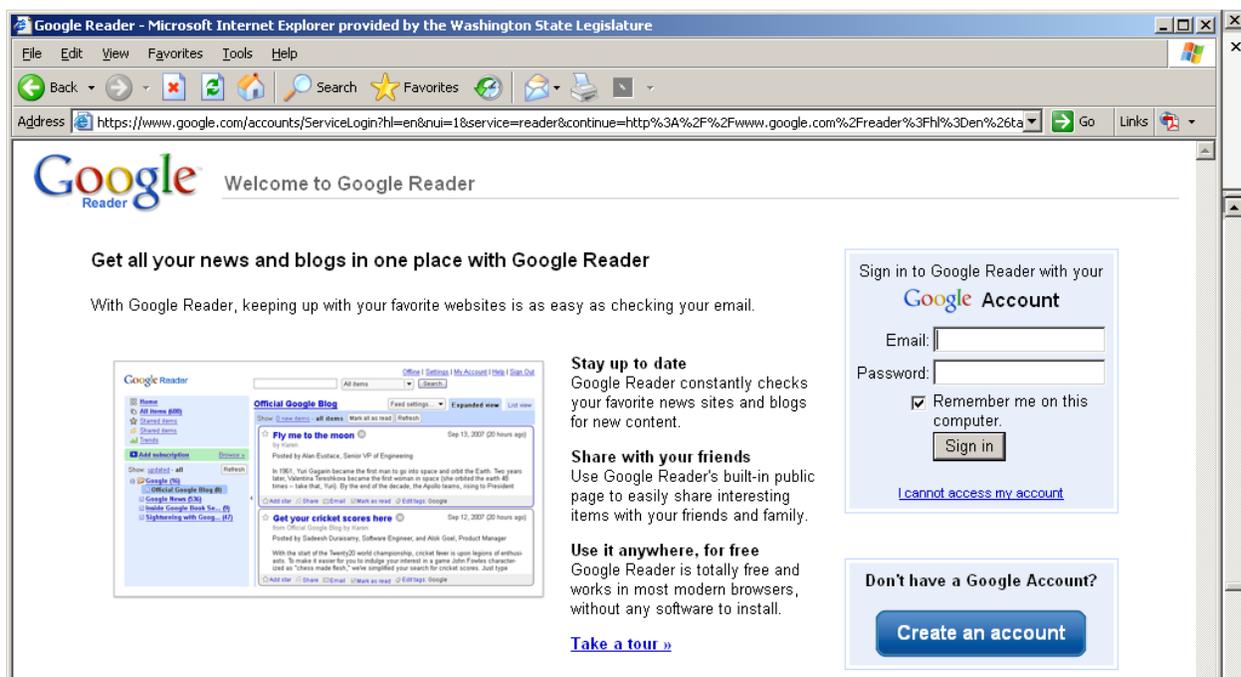
To create an account, just fill out the account information as shown below. We usually turn off the "Remember me" and "enable web history" check boxes. Click on "I accept. Create my Account".

Google will create your account and send a verification message to the e-mail address you specified. Click on the link to finish.
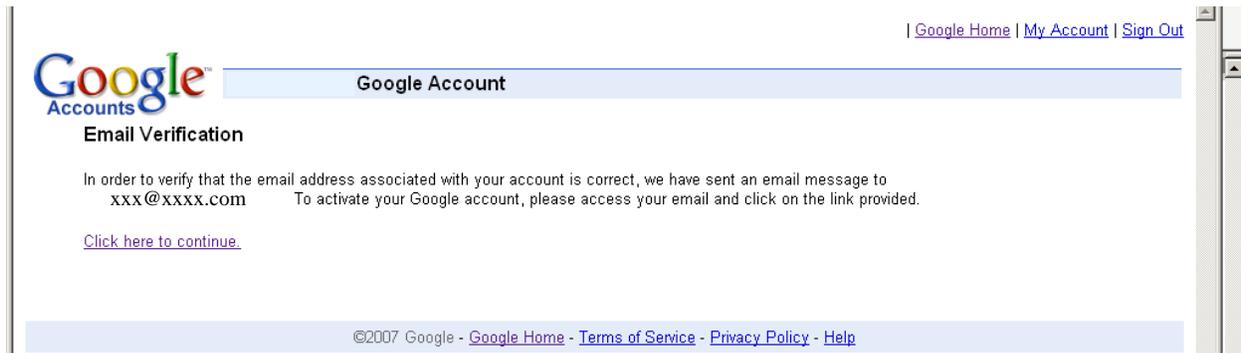
The first time you sign in you will see an introduction page like the one below: You can get started by clicking on "Get Started by Adding Subscriptions" or by clicking on the "Add Subscription" box. Or you can take a tour of Google Reader's features.

ADDING SUBSCRIPTIONS TO GOOGLE READER

To add a subscription (or a "feed" or a web page you want to monitor), open the
Legislative Web page and go to Bill Information. Enter a bill number and click on search.
When the bill history comes up, click on the orange icon [icon]. This will open the following page.

Highlight the URL as shown above, copy it, switch back to Google Reader then paste the address
in the add subscription box
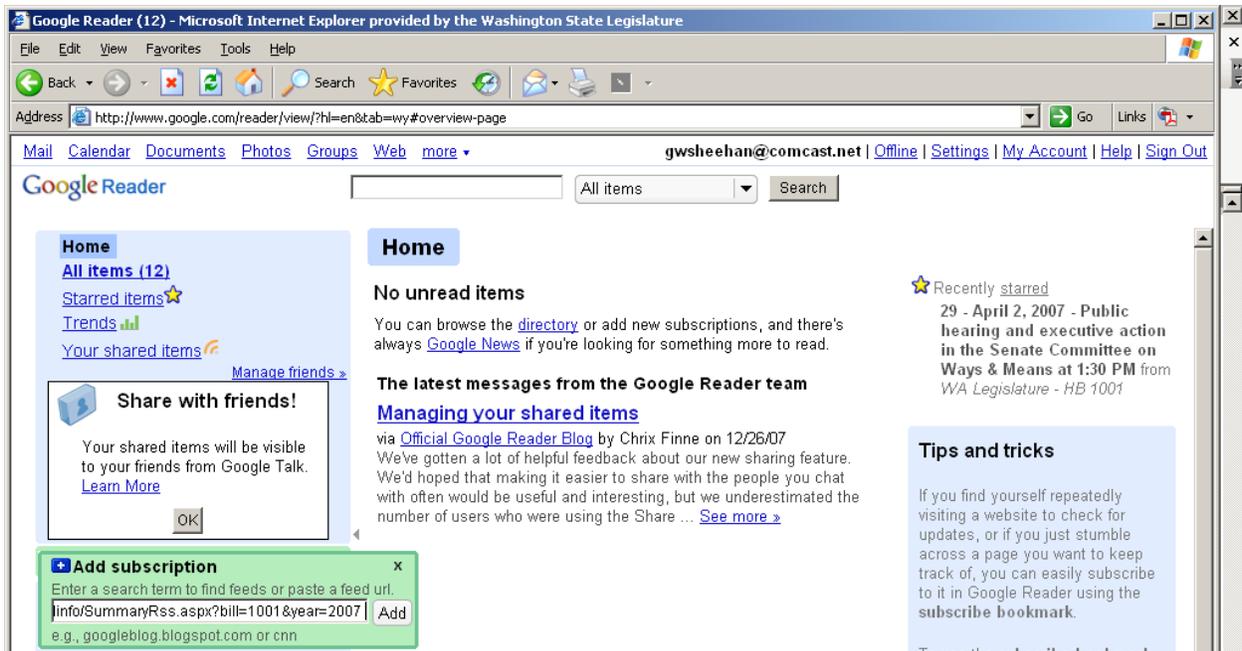
Click on Add and the program will add the webpage to its database and return a page that looks
like the one below.

As you can see the top item in the list for this subscription is bolded indicating that it is new and unread. The other option you have available is the show button. You can elect to have all items shown as is the case here. Or you can click "Show New Items" to display just the latest data.

You also do the same for showing feeds—just show the feeds that have new information or show all the feeds you have subscribed to.

Deleting Subscriptions

To delete a subscription, select the subscription you want to delete, the click "Feed Settings" and click on "Unsubscribe".

You can also click on Feed Settings to sort the items, rename the subscription, or create folders to store similar subscriptions together.

Different Views

With Google Reader you can show a list view or an expanded view by clicking on the appropriate tab. In the list view, if you click on an item it will change to an expanded view. From the expanded view if you click on the title, google will open a new window of the bill history page.

EXPORTING AND IMPORTING DATA

Google Reader, like most news readers allows users to export and import data. If you wanted to set up a colleague with a bill tracking database that mirror's yours, it is a simple matter exporting

the data to a disk or flashdrive or e-mail message, providing it to your colleague, and having them upload the data.

To export data from Google Reader:
- Click on "File", then "Export OPML".
- Give the file a name and click save.
- Send the file to another user or for use yourself on another computer or as a backup.

To import a database to Google Reader:
- Click on "File" then click on "Import OPML"
- Browse and find the file name, then click "Open", and then click "Next"
- Check mark the feeds you want to import (duplicate feeds that are already in your database are ignored).
- Click "Next" and the new data will be uploaded to your program.

Other Features:
With Google Reader you can also e-mail items of interest, share accounts with other users, star items of interest, and create label tags. To explore these features, check the Google Help Facility or call the Legislative Information Center at 360-786-7573.