

Chapter 1

Befriending Google Sites

In This Chapter

- ▶ Introducing Google Sites
 - ▶ Comparing Google Sites to other team apps
 - ▶ Improving your life with Google Sites
 - ▶ Deconstructing Google Sites
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Google Sites (<http://sites.google.com>) is a great online information buddy. After all, buddies watch out for their friends — and Sites will help take care of you. With a little thought and a few clicks, Google Sites can help you, your friends, and your co-workers stay on top of projects, meetings, classes, events, clubs, teams, causes, fundraisers, schedules, vacations, or anything else you can think of. Google Sites fills three related functions:

- ✔ Creates dynamic Web pages with a few clicks
- ✔ Constructs wikis for your users on any topic you may need
- ✔ Generates dynamic file sharing tools on the fly

In this chapter (and this book), we show how Google Sites can be very helpful to you, what that word *wiki* means, and how Google's many online apps and gadgets can make your life much simpler. You see how Sites compares to all the other team collaboration tools out there so you can understand why picking Google Sites is as easy as making a mouse click.

Now for the best part: Google Sites is a free component of Google Apps, along with Gmail, Calendar, and Docs. As with these other services, you don't need programming skills, and you don't need any complicated Web design software beyond a Web browser, such as Chrome, Internet Explorer, or Firefox.

What You Should Know Before You Start

Before you can use Google Sites, you must first have a Google Account or Google Apps account. A Google Account gives you access to a whole bunch of other free Google online services, such as Google Calendar (<http://>

calendar.google.com), where you can track your appointments and events, Blogger (www.blogger.com), which lets you create your own blog, Picasa Web Albums (www.picasa.com), where you can share your photos online, and Google Docs (http://docs.google.com). If you don't have an account, Chapter 3 shows you how to sign up.



Like many other services offered by Google, Sites is a *perpetual beta*. This means that the clever Google engineers are always improving the way Sites works by adding new features and changing ones that aren't as helpful. If the screen looks somewhat different from the figures that you see in this book, it's okay. The same basic idea should still apply.

To help you understand all that Google Sites has to offer, let us introduce you to three key definitions: *Web pages*, *wikis*, and *file sharing*.

Web pages

A *Web page* is a file that can be viewed by others in a Web browser. A page can include written text, images, links to other pages, videos, and so on. One way you can use Google Sites is to create a Web page with information you want to share with the world. An example of this type of site is shown in Figure 1-1.

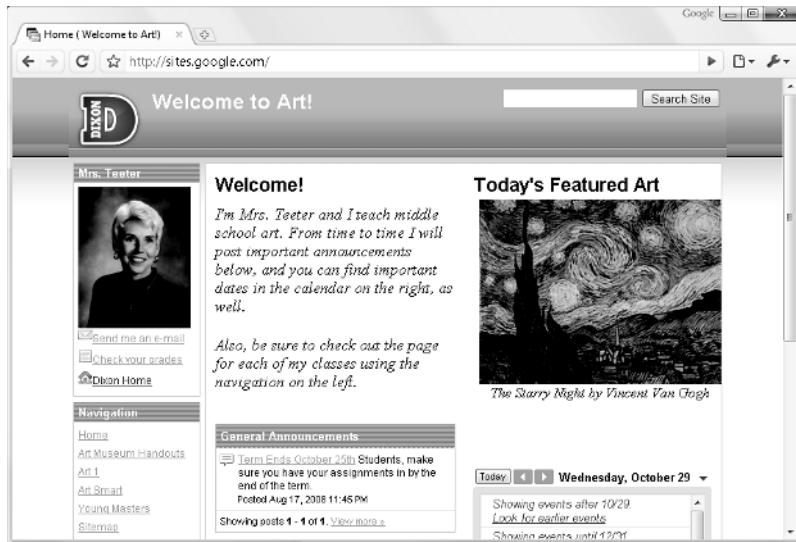


Figure 1-1:
Use Google Sites to create a Web page.

In addition to helping you include your text and images, Google Sites gives you access to hundreds of gadgets that you can add to your page. *Gadgets* are like mini Web pages that show specific information, such as weather, news headlines, calendar events, videos, communication tools, and more. We talk about gadgets in depth in Chapter 6.

Wikis

A *wiki* is a Web page that anyone can add to or edit. Wiki is a Hawaiian word that means quick, and wiki sites are unique because they can be created, edited, and saved very quickly from within your Web browser. They're also very helpful because every member of your group or team needs to go to only one place to find the latest information.

Wikis are becoming more and more popular as companies, organizations, teams, and families work to share information and learn the unique things that people know. In any workplace, employees generally have more collective knowledge about how a company operates than the human resources director or company president. By using a wiki, all employees can share their knowledge with everyone else. The human resources team can then edit and organize it all.

How does a wiki work in Google Sites? Everyone who has the ability to edit a site will see the Create New Page and Edit Page buttons at the top of the page. When anyone in your group clicks the Edit Page button, they can begin making changes to the page by adding a graphic or paragraph. When they are done, all they have to do is click the Save button at the top and the page updates instantly.

If you already have a site and you want to start editing your wiki, head over to Chapter 4. We've also put together a few ideas for creating a wiki for your work, family, class, or group in Part IV.

File sharing

A very important feature that goes hand in hand with wikis is the ability to keep your team's files in a central location. *File sharing* lets members of your team upload any type of file, such as a presentation or video, so everyone else can find it later. When you *upload* a file, you send it from your computer to a Web site. Then other people can *download* the file by saving it from the Web site to their computer.

Define: Wikipedia

The new Internet (also known as *Web 2.0*) is all about sharing information. Instead of simply connecting computers and services, the new Internet connects people and ideas. Look at the most famous wiki: Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). When this book was published, there were 2,472,151 articles in English, contributed by more than 7.5 million different users, covering everything from

important historical events to pop culture, calculus proofs, and book summaries. Compare that to the meager 120,000 articles found in the Encyclopedia Britannica, which is one of the most comprehensive traditional sources. There's no doubt that connecting people with wikis gives everyone access to more information and helps people feel that they are making a contribution to the world's knowledge.

Google Sites makes it easy to share files using the File Sharing page template, as shown in Figure 1-2. Similar to editing a wiki page, you add and delete files by clicking the buttons that appear on a File Cabinet page. Additionally, Google Sites keeps track of multiple versions of your files, so if someone makes a change to a file and uploads the new one, you see both the new version and the old one.

To find more about how to use the File Cabinet in Google Sites, check out Chapter 5.

Figure 1-2:
File sharing puts all of your important documents in one place.

The screenshot shows a Google Sites interface for a page titled "Welcome to Art!". At the top, there are navigation links: "My sites", "Help", and "Sign out". Below this is a toolbar with "Create new page", "Edit page", "More actions", and "Site settings". The main content area is titled "Art Museum Handouts" and includes a sub-header: "Use this page to look up instructions or print a copy of a museum assignment". There are buttons for "Add file", "Move to", "Delete", and "Subscribe to changes". A list of files is displayed:

	2D Label Creator.pdf	Directions for creating 2-D labels for the Museum	41k	v. 1	Mar 6, 2008 11:41 AM
	2D Label Creator.pdf	Directions for completing the labels for the 3-D clay projects displayed in the Museum	39k	v. 1	Mar 6, 2008 11:42 AM
	Artist Brief Worksheet.pdf	Use this worksheet to organize the information you have about your artist	34k	v. 1	Mar 6, 2008 11:38 AM

On the left side, there is a navigation menu with "Home", "Art Museum Handouts", and "Art 1". Above the menu is a profile picture of Mrs. Taster and links for "Send me an e-mail", "Check your grades", and "Dixon Home".

Comparing Google Sites to Other Team Sites

We're assuming that because you're reading this book, you're leaning toward using Google Sites. In case you're curious, however, here's how the others compare.

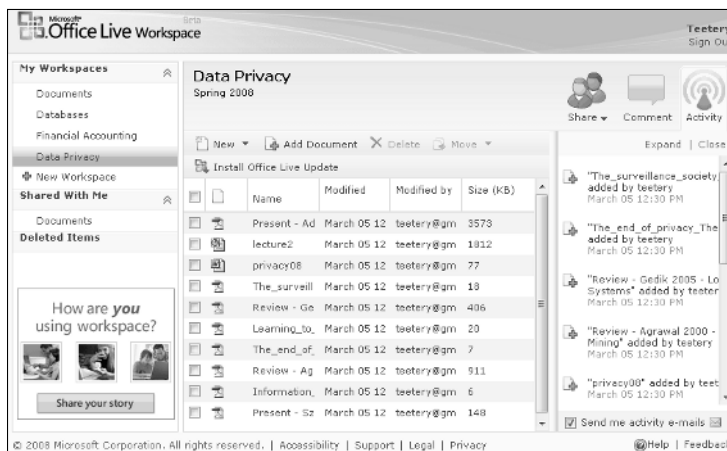
Microsoft Office Live Workspace

Microsoft Office Live Workspace (<http://workspace.officelive.com>) — a free service that's probably the most similar to Sites — offers users the ability to share files easily and to comment on projects, as shown in Figure 1-3. Unlike Sites, however, there's no Web page tool, so creating a wiki site isn't part of the package.

The main advantage to using Office Live Workspace is that if you use Microsoft Office, you can download a plug-in that gives you easy access to save your Office documents directly to the site. Office Live's big brothers, Groove and SharePoint, offer additional features for larger companies but also require expensive servers and software.

To use Office Live Workspace, you need a Windows Live ID and password, which you can get free at <http://home.live.com>.

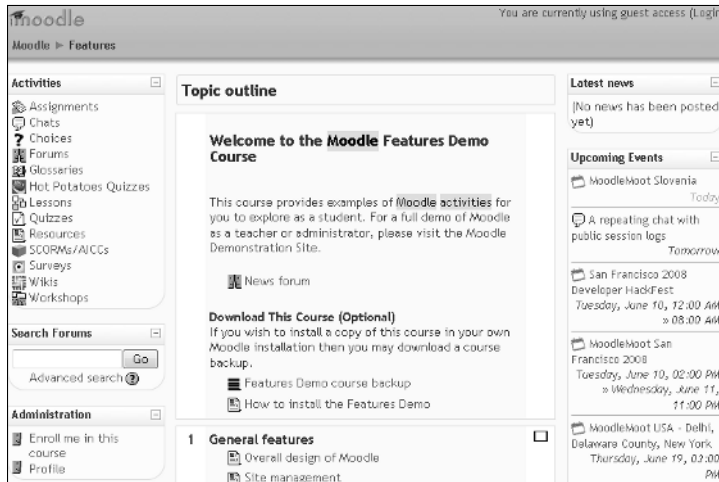
Figure 1-3: Microsoft Office Live Workspace makes it easy to share files.



Blackboard and Moodle

Blackboard (www.blackboard.com) and Moodle (www.moodle.org) are both great tools for teachers to keep track of classes, handouts, quizzes, and grades. (Moodle is shown in Figure 1-4.) They provide tools for pretty much any aspect of your class needs. But they're also very complex and require extensive training every time a new semester rolls around.

Figure 1-4: Moodle has more classroom features, such as quizzes and gradebooks.



Blackboard and Moodle both require servers to run on, and someone to maintain them. You also have to pay a license fee for Blackboard. If your school already uses either one, they have gone ahead and taken care of the cost.

In cases where you don't need all the bells and whistles or if you use other publisher-provided tools, Google Sites gives you the basics to share all of your classroom information with the students in your class. For an example of using Google Sites for a classroom, see Chapter 12.

Acrobat

Adobe takes a slightly different approach to sharing files. They offer five services through their Web site, www.acrobat.com, which allow you to create and share individual files with others:

- ✔ **Buzzword** is an online word processor similar to Google Docs (see Chapter 15).
- ✔ **ConnectNow** lets you host online conferences and share your screen over the Internet.
- ✔ **Create PDF** is a tool to transform your documents into portable document format.
- ✔ **Share** lets you upload and invite others to see your documents.
- ✔ **My Files** gives you a place to keep your files and access them from anywhere.

Instead of using a wiki-like interface, Acrobat gives you the option to enter the e-mail addresses of your team members so they can keep track of your files. Although this is useful for individual documents, it makes running a whole team project a little difficult because every time you want to share a file, you have to remember the addresses of everyone on your team. Still, the black interface is very easy to use and is just plain cool.

Why Google Sites Is the Right Way to Do Things

We mention in the previous section that Google Sites incorporates the best aspects of Web page, wiki, and file sharing technology into an easy-to-use online tool. But choosing Google Sites is about more than playing with a shiny new service — it's also about saving you time and money. In this section, we share with you our two cents, just in case you're not already convinced that Sites is the way to go.

Simplifying your life

The first thing you notice with Google Sites is Google's trademark simplicity. Although other services may have more bells and whistles, Google Sites keeps it simple and gives you the features you need to get your work done without making you master a whole new complicated set of tools and features.

With Google Sites, you can focus more on coordinating group activities to accomplish your tasks and less on figuring out all the extra stuff. Plus, you get all the training you need from this book. Now that's simple!

Saving money

Google Sites is free. Talk about saving money. You don't have to invest in expensive servers and software. All you need is an Internet connection and a Web browser, either of which you could get free at your public library, if you wanted.

All of your pages, wikis, and files are hosted for free, along with your other Google services. The exception, of course, is if you use Google Apps Premier Edition (www.google.com/apps), but in that case, your organization is really paying for the support. (Google Apps Premier Edition, along with all other editions of Google Apps, is discussed in the next section.)



Google can provide these services free because of the money they make on Internet search advertising. Next time you use Google Search, look for the sponsored links to the right of your results. That's what pays the engineers to create these high-quality tools.

How Google Sites Fits with the Other Google Apps

Google Apps (www.google.com/apps) is made up of five fully-functioning online applications: Gmail, Calendar, Docs, Talk, and Sites. Communicating with other people on the Internet is a snap with Gmail and Talk, and collaboration is simple with Calendar, Docs, and Sites. Each of these apps are fully functioning programs that allow you to do your work, such as e-mail and word processing, from any Web browser, instead of relying on your computer's other installed software. Additionally, you can quickly access information you store online by using mini versions of the apps called *gadgets*. There are different editions of the whole Google Apps package, depending on your organization and needs. These include:

- ✓ **Team Edition:** If you already have a school or work e-mail address, this edition adds Calendar, Docs, Talk, and Sites to the mix. Plus, you can instantly start connecting with other users in your organization that have already signed up. (Click the link for Coworkers or Classmates.)
- ✓ **Standard Edition:** If your group or business is just starting out or is switching from another service, such as Outlook, this free edition of Google Apps lets you use all five services with your existing domain name with minimal e-mail advertisements. (Click the Business IT Managers link, click the See Details and Sign Up button, and then click Compare to Standard Edition)

- ✓ **Premier Edition:** This edition costs \$50 per user per year, but adds more functionality and security than Standard Edition, more storage space, provides 24/7 support, and gets rid of the ads. (Click the Business IT Managers link.)
- ✓ **Education Edition.** This is just like Premier Edition, but free for universities, schools, and other nonprofit organizations. (Click the School IT Managers link.)

These apps just so happen to play nice with each other, too, by allowing you to easily share information from one app with another. Some of the features we talk about in this book include alerts, which are sent to your e-mail account, and embedded calendars, which help your team members know what's coming up.

In the next few sections, we give you a taste of what each of the other apps does and provide examples of how you can include them in your sites by using gadgets. You can find more about how to use these apps individually in Part V.

Calendar

Google Calendar (<http://calendar.google.com>) keeps track of your events. You can easily add new calendar items and access them from anywhere, including your BlackBerry or iPhone. In Calendar, you can create separate calendars for your personal and team-related events and share them with other members of your team.

Displaying your team calendar is easy in Google Sites, thanks to the Calendar gadget. From your site, everyone can quickly find upcoming events or follow up on meetings that happened. Figure 1-5 shows an agenda for a class, using the Calendar gadget.

Skip to Chapter 14 to begin coordinating schedules.

Docs

Create, edit, and store documents, spreadsheets, and presentations online with Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>). Google Docs features a surprisingly powerful word processor, spreadsheet editor, and presentations app that provide most of the tools you need. One of the cool things about Docs is that you can share your documents with other team members and work on them at the same time. This way, any changes you make are automatically updated and everyone else can see them right away.

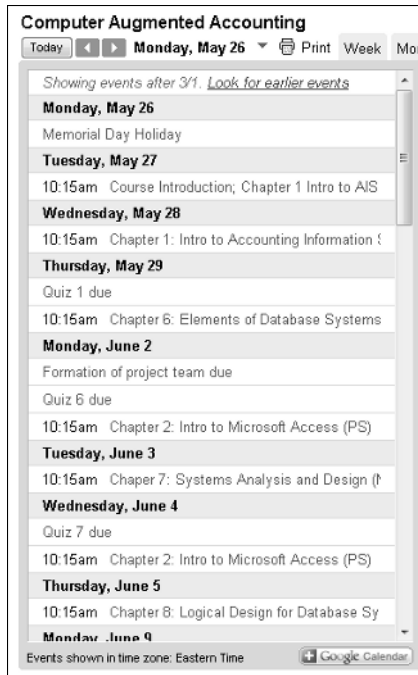


Figure 1-5:
Place your
team
calendar on
your site.

It should be no surprise, then, that you can include your docs on Google Sites, too. Beyond simply creating links to your individual docs, Google Sites uses gadgets to place the content of your docs directly on your pages, as shown in Figure 1-6. For example, use the Spreadsheet gadget to include a list you have stored in a spreadsheet or the Presentation gadget to play an animated slideshow of a quarterly report.

To find out more about Google Docs, flip to Chapter 15 and begin exploring the Google Docs Home. Chapters 16, 17, and 18 cover the basics for word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations, respectively.

Gmail

Gmail (www.gmail.com) is Google's solution to e-mail. It features a simple interface and a lot of cool innovations, such as conversations and labels. You can also use Gmail with your favorite e-mail program, such as Outlook or Thunderbird. Unlike other free e-mail services, which feature annoying graphical ads, Gmail uses text ads that are less bothersome.

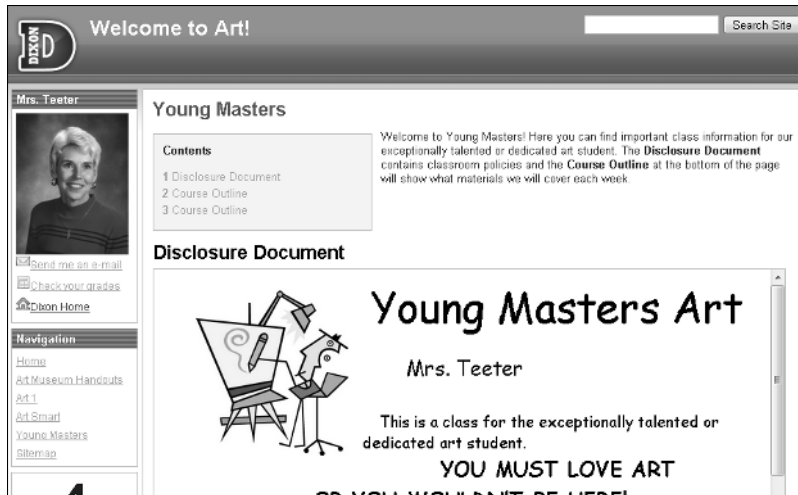


Figure 1-6:
View the
contents of
a document
without
having to
open it.

With Google Apps, Gmail works with your group's domain name. This means that your e-mail can still be *you@yourcompany.com*, but you can use Gmail's intuitive interface and have your e-mail hosted by Google.

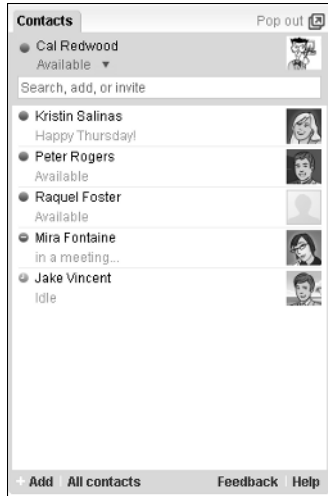
Google Sites uses e-mail notifications to let your group or team members know when something changes on your site. When a change is made to a page, Google Sites sends subscribers an e-mail showing exactly what changes were made and gives you a link to open that page directly.

See Chapter 19 to find out more about Gmail.

Talk

When e-mail simply isn't fast enough, use Google Talk (<http://talk.google.com>). Talk is a really cool instant messaging app that you can either download to your computer or run directly from your site. If you're using Google Apps Team Edition, your co-workers or fellow students are automatically added to your contact list, similar to Figure 1-7. When one of your contacts is online (they'll have a green dot next to their name), simply click their name and start telling them why they're the best member of your team. When you chat with more than one person, each conversation shows as a tab along the top of the Talk gadget.

Figure 1-7:
See
whether
your team
members
are online
and chat
with them
directly.



Add the Talk gadget to any page on your site, and you and your team members are signed in automatically each time you visit.

The second half of Chapter 19 gets you talking with your team and friends. Go there when you want to start talking.