

# Mailing Lists for Courses

Meta-TAs

Spring, 2007

## 1 Intro: the end of newsgroups

For years, CS courses used newsgroups hosted by CIS for announcements and discussion about course-related material. But after January, 2007, CIS will no longer support newsgroups. So we have decided to replace newsgroups with mailing lists, which are fairly easy to maintain and having nearly the same benefits. You can still have a single web page on which announcements are posted (in the form of the list archives page), but students can also choose to have mail delivered directly to their email boxes. TAs can also moderate the mailing list.

The mailing lists are much more configurable than newsgroups. As HTAs, you will be responsible for the proper configuration of your list. This document outlines some of the more important options. If your course has used a list before, then you probably won't have to change too much, but it's worth thinking about.

## 2 Your course mailing list

At the beginning of the semester, the MTA-tech and user services coordinator will ensure that each course has a mailing list, and that the HTAs for the course are marked owners of the list, giving you full administrative privileges.

You should talk with your professor and decide on various mailing list policies:

- Is this an announcement-only list or a discussion list as well? There's a balance between letting excited students discuss course material while preventing students from posting messages which reveal solutions (accidentally or otherwise).
- Along these lines, are students allowed to post to the list?
- If students are allowed to post, is the list moderated? If so, by whom?

Here are some example use cases (this list is not exhaustive, but just to give you some ideas). For all of these, the HTAs (and professor, if he or she wants

to be involved with it) own the list and the TA staff, professors, and students are the subscribers:

- **A course announce-and-discuss list.** Only members can post, but there is no moderation. TAs and students can post freely.
- **A moderated course announce-and-discuss list.** Moderated by the TA staff to avoid people accidentally posting partial or complete solutions. Note that most students will probably be hesitant to post discussion material if they know the TAs have to approve every message.
- **An announcement list.** As far as the settings go, this is essentially the same as the moderated announce-and-discuss list, but it's understood that TAs will not approve posts by students.

## 3 Beginning of semester: configuring your list

### 3.1 The admin interface

The administrative password for your mailing list should be stored in a file in the `admin` directory in your course directory. Once you find it, make sure you can log in to the mailing list administrative interface at

`http://list.cs.brown.edu/mailman/admin/csXXX1`

From this interface, you can change all of the other settings described below.

### 3.2 Initial setup

Before the semester starts, if it wasn't done by last year's HTAs, you should probably save your archives and clear them so that current students can't see posts made last year. To save the archives, see below. Ask the MTA-tech to clear the archives.

Also, remove all current subscribers to the list, except perhaps the professor and TA alias. You can do this from the

`Membership Management... -> Mass Removal` page of the admin interface.

Once the semester starts, make sure that the TA staff, professor, and students are all subscribed to the list. You can do this from the

`Membership Management... -> Mass Subscription` page of the admin interface.

### 3.3 Delivery options

Members of a list can choose whether to receive each individual messages, periodic (usually daily) digests, or no delivery at all. **We strongly discourage allowing students to use the digest option, as many announcements**

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<sup>1</sup>In this document, csXXX means your actual course number (e.g., cs017).

are very time-sensitive, and it only delays the notification. You can turn off digests from the **Digest Options** page.

While you cannot have students not receive posts by default, students can choose not to receive mail from the list (forcing them to check the web archives regularly for course news).

### 3.4 Membership and roles

Here's how you probably want to assign roles:

Role	Who	Which Admin page to check
Owners	HTAs	General
Moderators (optional)	TAs, prof	General
Subscribers	TAs, prof, students	Membership Management

Note that subscribers = members, in mailman terms.

You probably want to require people to be confirmed before they can become members, at least after the first couple of weeks of the semester. Otherwise, people could sign up for the list just to access the archives, and then have a semester's worth of corrections and solutions before they take the class. You can change this on the **Privacy Options** page, but the default is to require approval.

### 3.5 Archives

Mailman keeps archives by default, and you should probably keep this setting for the sakes of current students and future TAs. The archives page is at:

<http://list.cs.brown.edu/mailman/private/csXXX/>

At the beginning of the semester, you should save the archives for the previous semester (you can easily download gzip'd files from the above URL) and then clear out the "public" archives. Email the MTA-tech to get the archives cleared.

You probably want to keep your archives private so that students not in the class cannot see them. This setting is on the **Archiving Options** page. We recommend you stick to our defaults of yearly, private archives.

## 4 During the semester: tending to pending requests

From time to time, you might get emails from mailman (the mailing list software) saying that a non-member tried to post to the list, or that somebody tried to subscribe. Sometimes this will be spam, and sometimes it will just be a person who is posting from a more convenient email address for them. Either way, your job as admin is pretty self-explanatory (follow the directions on the page to accept, reject, discard, the post, and possibly add the address to a permanent list).

## **5 After the semester: clear the archives**

You should save the archives and then delete the web version at the end of the semester so that it's not accessible over the break. You'll also make life slightly easier for next year's HTAs.