Customizing Google and the Google Home Page

The main Google search page is an exercise in simplicity, pretty much just a search box and a search button—none of the clutter you see at other search sites. That doesn't mean that you can't customize the way the page looks, however slightly. And it also doesn't mean that Google doesn't offer a portal-like page filled with custom content. (This latter page is simply at a different address than the main search page.)

Read on to learn more about applying your own personal preferences to the way Google looks and acts.

Setting Google Search Preferences

Most users aren't aware that they can personlize the way in which Google displays search results—and, to a small degree, the way the main search page looks. Well, you can, thanks to Google's Preferences page.

You get to the Preferences page by clicking the Preferences link on Google's home page. As you can see in Figure 11.1, there are a handful of items you can configure here; we'll discuss each separately in the following sections.

FIGURE 11.1

Customize the way Google looks and acts on the Preferences page.

When you're done configuring your preferences, clicking the Save Preferences button applies your choices to your current and all future Google searches across all Google services. That's all there is to it.

caution Google tracks and applies your preferences via the use of browser cookies. If you have cookies disabled in your browser, your preferences won't be retained.

Display Google in a Different Language

By default, the Google interface displays with all the text in English. Google can, however, display its main page in dozens

of local languages, from Afrikaans to Zulu. To select the interface language, just pull down the Interface Language list and make a selection.

> **note** Learn more about Google's interface language and search language features in Chapter 13, "Using Google in Other Languages."

Search in a Different Language

When you search Google, your query automatically searches for web pages created in any language. You may, however, want to restrict your searches to pages created in a specific language—especially if you only speak that one language.

To that end, you can instruct Google to restrict all your searches to pages created in a specific language. To do this, check the Search for Pages Written in These Languages option, and then click the language(s) you want your results restricted to. The choices range from Arabic to Turkish; English is somewhere in the middle there.

Search Safely

When your children are searching the Web, you probably don't want them exposed to adult content in Google's search results. Fortunately, Google offers a SafeSearch content filtering option that identifies and filters out any potentially offensive content from any Google search. You activate the SafeSearch filtering option from the Preferences page; you can choose from strict filtering (filters both words and images), moderate filtering (filters images only), and no filtering (Google's default configuration). Just check the option you want.

Display More Results Per Page

By default, Google displays 10 results per page for each search you make. This allows for a fairly fast display of results. If you want to see more results on your page, go to the Number of Results section of the Preferences page and change the setting to 20, 30, 50, or 100. As you might expect, choosing a larger number of results per page will slow down the display of results—and make it a little harder to chug through the results.

Open a New Results Window

By default, Google displays your search results in the same browser window you used to initiate your search. If you prefer to

> **note** Learn more about Google's SafeSearch content filtering in Chapter 12, "Making Google Safe for Kids."

have Google open a new browser window containing your search results, go to the Results Window section of the Preferences page and select the Open Search Results in a New Browser Window option. With this option selected, any time you click the Search Google button, a new browser window will open with the search results listed.

Creating Your Own Personalized Homepage

By now you're undoubtedly familiar and comfortable with the Spartan Google home page. But that's not the only way into the Google search engine; Google also offers a separate start page that you can use as a portal not just to Google, but to the entire World Wide Web.

This Google start page, called (rather unimaginatively, in my opinion) the Personalized Homepage, can be found at www.google.com/ig/. (Don't ask me what the "ig" in the address stands for; I have no idea.) You have to have a Google Account to create your Personalized Homepage; you can then log into your account from any computer to see your home page wherever you might happen to be.

When you first see your Personalized Homepage, it looks like the one in Figure 11.2. There's not a whole lot there yet, just the standard Google search box and options, a Top Stories section, sections for Quote of the Day and Word of the Day, and the weather forecast for someplace called Happy, Texas. (It's in Swisher County, near Highway 87, in case you're wondering.) But this is just a start; the whole point of creating a personal start page is to personalize the content—which we'll learn how to do next.
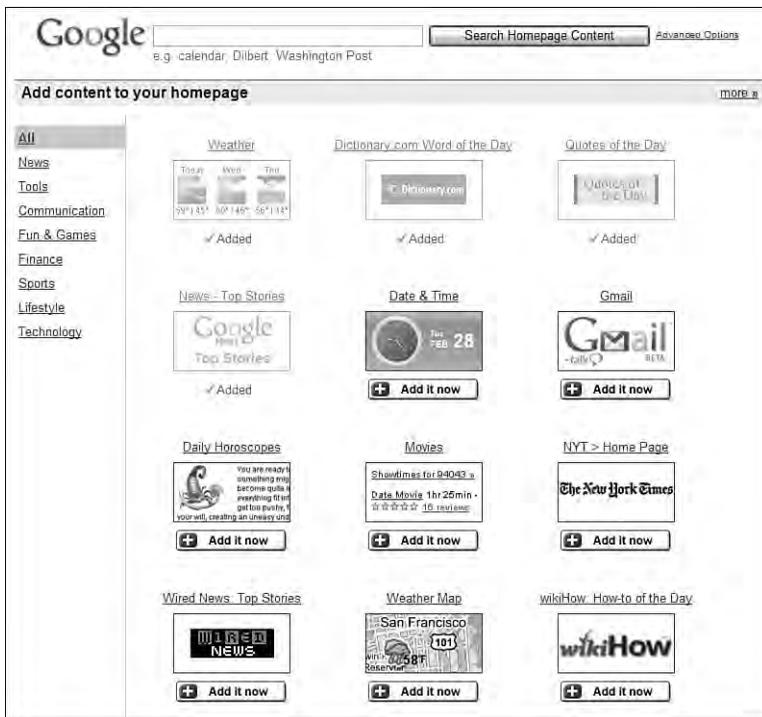

FIGURE 11.2

The default Personalized Homepage—not much content yet.

Personalizing Start Page Content

Personalizing Google's Personalized Homepage involves choosing which content you want to display, as well as how you want to display it. We'll start with the content-picking part, first.

To create your own personalized page, you start at the default Google Personalized Homepage and click the Personalize Your Google Homepage link. (Alternatively, after you've created your Personalized Homepage, you can click the Add Content link at the top-left corner of the page.) Google now displays a page full of content modules, as shown in Figure 11.3.
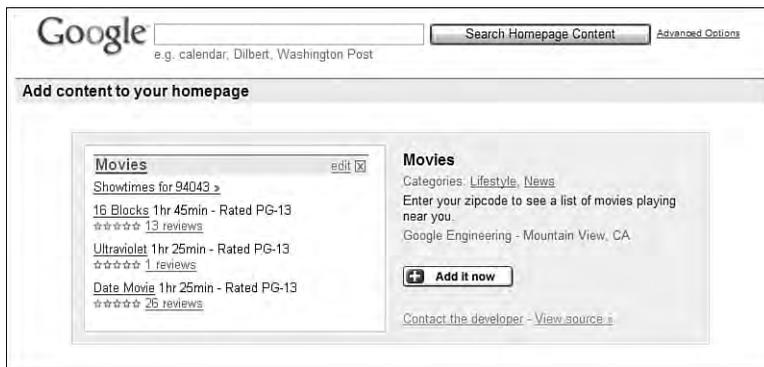

FIGURE 11.3

Available content modules for Google's Personalized Homepage.

The content modules you see are just a few of the many that are available. The content is organized by type (News, Tools, Communication, and so on); just click a content link at the left side of the page to see those modules of that particular type. And make sure you scroll down to the bottom of the page and click the More link to see all the modules that didn't fit on this first page.

Not surprisingly, Google also lets you search for content to include on the Personalized Homepage. Just enter your query into the search box at the top of this page, and then click the Search Homepage Content button; content that matches your query will now be displayed.

To view what a full content module looks like (and see more details about the content), click the module title; this displays a content information page, like the one in Figure 11.4. To add a content module to your home page, click the Add It Now button, either on the main module listing or on the detailed content information page.

FIGURE 11.4
Viewing detailed information about a particular content module.

Adding RSS Feeds

You're not limited to adding the prepackaged content that Google offers to your Personalized Homepage. You can also use the Personalized Homepage to display RSS feeds from blogs and other feed-enabled websites. All you need to know is the URL of the RSS feed, and then follow these steps:

1. From the Google Personalized Homepage, click the Add Content link.

2. When the Add Content to Your Homepage page appears, click the Add by URL link.

note Some modules require additional information, such as your ZIP Code, to work properly. You can add this information from the Personalized Homepage itself by editing the module in question, as we'll discuss later in this chapter.

3. The page now expands to include an Add by URL box, as shown in Figure 11.5. Enter the URL for the RSS feed into this box, and then click the Add button.

FIGURE 11.5
Use the Advanced Options box to add RSS feeds to your Personalized Homepage.

Customizing Individual Content Modules

Once you've added some content modules to your Personalized Homepage, you may want to customize the way they're displayed. Some modules let you specify the number of headlines that are displayed; others let you display information for a particular location.

You customize a module by clicking the Edit link next to the module title.

If a module lets you change the number of headlines displayed, you'll see a pull-down number list, like the one in Figure 11.6. Select the number of stories from the list, and then click the Save button.

FIGURE 11.6
Select how many headlines to display from the pull-down list.

If particular content requires localization, clicking the Edit link displays the necessary options for your selection. For example, Figure 11.7 shows the editing options for the Weather module; you can choose to display the temperature in Fahrenheit or Celsius, which country or region to display, and add

cities that you want to view. Click the Add button and the selected cities will be added to the Weather module's display. (In this instance, you'll need to click the Close link when you're done adding cities to the module.)

FIGURE 11.7

Adding cities to the Weather module.

Similarly, the Stock Market module lets you add any security to the list. As you can see in Figure 11.8, when you click the Edit link you enter a ticker symbol into the box, and then click the Add button. Again, you need to click the Close Edit link to end the editing session.

FIGURE 11.8

Adding stocks to the Stock Market module.

Rearranging Content Modules

With some personalized start pages, you have to access a separate "design" page to rearrange content on the page. Not so with Google's Personalized Homepage. Google's page has a set three-column design, and any content module can appear anywhere in any column.

To rearrange modules on the Personalized Homepage, all you have to do is use your mouse to drag a module to a different location. The layout of the page is "live" all the time; just position your cursor in the title bar for a module, click and hold the left mouse button, and then drag the module to where you want it to appear. It's that easy.

Deleting Content Modules

It's also easy to delete any content module you no longer want to appear on the Personalized Homepage. Just click the "X" in the modules title bar, and the module is deleted from the page. Simple.

Adding Even More Content

The question remains—just what content can you add to your Personalized Homepage? All of Google's official modules are displayed when you click the Add Content link; you can also view the modules at www.google.com/ig/ directory. There are several hundred available modules, with more being added daily.

You're not limited to Google's official modules, however. Google has published the API for its Personalized Homepage, which opens up the development of new modules to anyone with programming skills.

Google's directory of Personalized Homepage modules includes a lot of these homegrown content modules, but there's even more available elsewhere on the Web. One good source for "unofficial" content modules is Google Modules (www.googlemodules.com).

As you can see in Figure 11.9, Google Modules includes a ton of specialty modules from a variety of developers— everything from a PacMan module to a Travelocity flight search hack to a constantly updated list of President Bush's language-garbling "Bushisms." Adding one of these modules to your Personalized

tip If you're interested in developing your own Google Personalized Homepage modules, you'll need to use the Google Homepage API. Find out more at www.google.com/apis/ homepage/.

11

Homepage is as easy as clicking the Add Module link next to each module description; when Google displays the confirmation page, click the Add to Google page to confirm the addition.
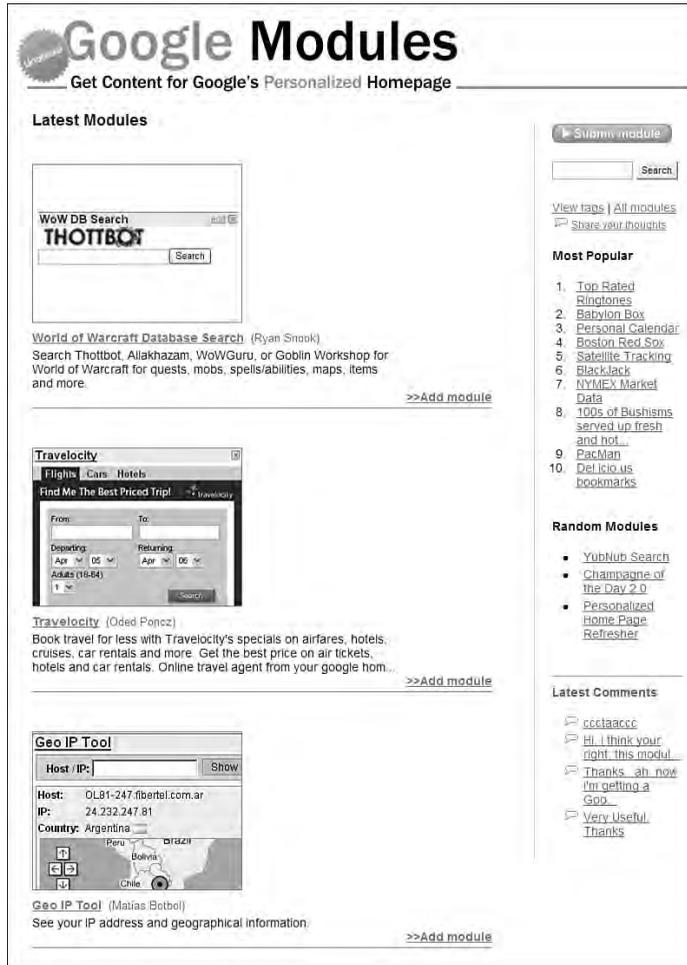
FIGURE 11.9

Find unofficial Google modules at the Google Modules website.

Other good sources of unofficial modules are GoogleWidgets.net (www. googlewidgets.net), Hot Modules (www.hotmodules.com), and widQ.com (www.widq.com).

Your Final Personalized Homepage

When you're done adding, editing, and deleting, you have a start page that's as personalized as you like. It's great to have all the content you're interested in assembled on a single page—and still have the handy Google search box at the top. Figure 11.10 shows what my Personalized Homepage looks like— what about yours?

FIGURE 11.10

A fully customized Personalized Homepage.

PERSONALIZED PORTAL VERSUS PURE SEARCH

For a half-dozen years, one of the most attractive things about Google was its bare-bones, totally uncluttered home page. Unlike other former search-only sites, such as Yahoo!, Google resisted the urge to turn its search engine into a web portal. Google's search-only page was clean and to the point, where Yahoo! and similar sites were crammed full of all manner of content.

To be honest, I hate the portalization of sites like Yahoo! and Excite. When I want to search, I want to search—and I don't want to be distracted by unwanted and mostly irrelevant content. That's one of the reasons why Google long ago became my search site of choice.

On one level, the adoption of a portal-like approach for Google's Personalized Homepage disturbs me. On another level, I really like it. Oh, to be conflicted!

I'm disturbed because Google is all about purity of search, and throwing all this other stuff into the mix dilutes that purity. On the other hand, Google does the personalized start page thing quite well; the results are at least as appealing as what you get with My Yahoo! (my.yahoo.com) or My Way (www.myway.com). And, to Google's credit, they've kept the personalized portal separate from the standard search page. When you want search and nothing but search, you still go to www.google.com. When you want the portal interface, you go to www.google.com/ig/.

As long as Google continues to keep pure search separate from the personalized portal, they'll please both types of users—searchers and browsers. Let's hope that the folks in Mountain View never abandon their core search audience, and that the Personalized Homepage is merely a supplement to what Google does best.

Making Google Your Home Page

Whether you use the standard Google home page or Google's Personalized Homepage, you can easily set this page as the home page for your web browser. This way Google will be the first thing you see when you start web browsing every day.

Instructions for all major web browsers are listed in Table 11.1:

Table 11.1	**Instructions for Setting Google As Your Browser's Home Page**
Web Browser	**Instructions**
Internet Explorer	1. Select Tools, Internet Options. 2. Select the General tab. 3. Enter either **www.google.com** or **www.google.com/ig/** into the Address box. 4. Click OK.
Mozilla Firefox	1. Select Tools, Options. 2. Select the General preferences. 3. Enter either **www.google.com** or **www.google.com/ig/** into the text box. 4. Click OK.
Opera	1. Select Tools, Preferences. 2. Select the General tab. 3. Pull down the Startup menu and select Start with Home Page. 4. Enter either **www.google.com** or **www.google.com/ig/** into the Home Page field. 5. Click OK.
Netscape	1. Select Edit, Preferences. 2. Select the Navigator category. 3. Enter either **www.google.com** or **www.google.com/ig/** into the Home Page text box. 4. Click OK.
Safari	1. Select the Preferences menu. 2. Select General preferences. 3. Enter either **www.google.com** or **www.google.com/ig/** into the Home Page field. 4. Close the Preferences window.

11

The Bottom Line

While there is a little bit of customization you can do to the "classic" Google home page, if you want a true personalized portal, you can turn to Google's Personalized Homepage. You retain the standard Google search box at the top of the page, but what goes below that is entirely up to you. Between Google's in-house developers and a small army of independent programmers, there are hundreds of content modules you can add to your own Personalized Homepage. The potential exists to create a start page that contains all the content you're interested in, a true gateway to those parts of the web that most interest you, if that's your thing. If not, the traditional Google home page is still there, ready for your next search—and nothing but the search.