
Which way to the forum?

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The \TeX and \LaTeX community is formed, in part, through forums, online places where we get together.

Old-timers often hang out where they always have been and beginners may not know where they could go, so both groups might benefit from a brief summary of the current options.

I will focus on places where you can get a \TeX question answered, sticking to those sites with a good number of posts,¹ and not including specialized lists such as \TeX Live's or package-specific ones. I will also focus on English-language options, simply because that is what I know.

1 `texhax`

This was the first real mailing list for \TeX and friends—the earliest post is from 1986. Many of those early posts are about acquiring \TeX so they remind us how far we have come.

There are now about a dozen posts a day. Many of the list contributors are long-time and knowledgeable members of the community. This list's atmosphere is polite, pleasant, and helpful. Almost never does a post go without an answer.

You do not have to subscribe to the list in order to post or to read the archives. The list is not moderated, that is, there is no one who approves every post in order to, for instance, keep out spam. But posts from an address that the list has never seen before must be approved, whether from a subscriber or not; the resulting delay is usually less than a day.

This list is now hosted by TUG. Subscribing or reading the archives is easy; see the signup page.²

2 `comp.text.tex`

This is a Usenet group so it has a feel rather like `texhax`'s. It also has been around a long time, since at least February 1990.

This forum is well enough known to have a common abbreviation, `ctt`. It seems to me to be the place that is most often recommended when a person new to \TeX asks where to get questions answered. As with `texhax`, many of the names that you will see here are well-known \TeX experts and there is an overlap of members between the two.

This list has two to three dozen postings a day (many are announcements from CTAN). Almost all posts get answered but in my experience posting late on a Friday afternoon is not your best strategy.

¹ For example, I have omitted Google's \LaTeX Users Group and Yahoo's \TeX and \LaTeX group.

² <http://lists.tug.org/texhax>

It is not moderated. The atmosphere is polite and helpful, although once in a great while an exchange can get sharp.

Few people today have Usenet access so the most popular way to read the list is through Google's interface.³ This interface makes the forum easily searchable and with the length of time it has been around you can expect that the great majority of questions have already been answered. So if you have a question then you may not even have to ask.

However, this interface has the disadvantage that some spam messages appear. Another thing about this interface that some people may consider an issue is that as a commercial site, Google puts advertisements on this page (called "Sponsored links").

3 `tex.stackexchange.com`

This is a new forum and it is built with a web browser in mind rather than an email reader. It is part of a family of such sites, Stack Exchange,⁴ and inherits its features from the common code base.

As with the traditional forums above, someone asks a question and other people send answers. Here, though, other readers vote on the answers and the ones with the most votes move to the top of the page. Thus a person reading a list of responses gets some guidance about which posts others find most valuable. You don't have to register but if you do (it is free) and your answers are consistently rated highly then you get reputation points—web cred.

High reputation users become 'trusted' and the forum is moderated by its trusted users (other users can flag something for a moderator to examine). One unusual aspect here is that trusted users may edit the questions and answers of other users, so you can find that what you wrote has been altered.

The area for \TeX and friends is called $\{\text{\TeX}\}$.⁵ The larger family of sites is commercial and has advertisements, although at the moment ads do not seem to appear on this \TeX area.

The interface is attractive, with the amenities that a modern surfer expects. For instance, you can search for questions that have already been answered. However, this community is new so there is not the decades-long background as with `texhax` or `ctt`. But it is growing fast; the number of postings seems to me to be at least comparable to that of the older forums. There are people hanging out on this site who are quite knowledgeable and most questions get answered quickly and reliably. I find the tone here professional as well as helpful.

³ <http://groups.google.com/group/comp.text.tex>

⁴ <http://stackexchange.com>

⁵ <http://tex.stackexchange.com/>

4 latex-community.org

Like the prior one, this new resource is directed to a web browser. Here the forum is a part of a larger site for L^AT_EX users⁶ that offers articles, RSS feeds, and a number of other features.

This forum⁷ is grouped into subtopics. A grouping has advantages and disadvantages; for myself, I find that while lurking on an all-purpose list I often pick up bits and pieces that I find useful later, whereas if I only read what I am interested in today then I miss those. But you may feel that the grouping helps you zero in on exactly what you want.

It seems to my visitor's eyes that the great majority of questions get answered but that the total number of daily posts is not as large as for the Stack Exchange site.

The L^AT_EX Community has advertisements. Discussions are moderated.

I find the conversation here to be both helpful and knowledgeable.

5 latex.reddit.com

The popular social news site Reddit⁸ has a forum for L^AT_EX.⁹ (*Full disclosure:* I moderate the Reddit T_EX forum, although it gets so little traffic that I won't discuss it.)

As with other modern sites, readers can vote the posted links up or down and the winners float to the top of the page. In addition, visitors can comment on the links and reply to other commentators.

If you regularly visit Reddit then you can add the L^AT_EX sub-reddit to your stream so that items from it appear on your front page. This makes this forum part of your daily routine.

⁶ <http://www.latex-community.org>

⁷ <http://www.latex-community.org/forum>

⁸ <http://www.reddit.com>

⁹ <http://latex.reddit.com>

Reddit is a commercial operation and there are advertisements. Material is moderated (users can flag something for a moderator to examine).

This forum does not get many topics posted, two or three a day, and the number of responses to topics is also small, perhaps six or eight a day. Some of the posts are links to articles about L^AT_EX but the majority are questions. Most of the questions get answered, but in my experience for some it may take a couple of days or they may not get answered at all.

The tone is gentle and compared to the forums above there is more a feel here of beginner-to-beginner, or perhaps of intermediate-to-beginner. One thing that is great about this forum is that many of the posts are from obviously enthusiastic members of a new generation of T_EX and L^AT_EX users.

6 Summary

The historical forums, `texhax` and `comp.text.tex` are still going strong. They have a good number of daily posts and support active communities.

The newer options, Stack Exchange and L^AT_EX Community, offer modern conveniences such as a system for voting on posts and answers. Both have built a regular group of contributors and are exciting additions to the online T_EX landscape.

The Reddit L^AT_EX subsite is like the prior two, although with fewer posts and contributors. If a person is already a frequent visitor to the main site then becoming a member of this subsite is convenient.

Thus, in total, even with the limitations I put on which forums I'd consider here, T_EX users have many options. To me, this says something very good about the strength and adaptability of the community of users of T_EX and friends.

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