

FAQ & KNOWLEDGEBASE

FAQ is an acronym for "Frequently Asked Question(s)". The term refers to listed questions and answers, all supposed to be frequently asked in some context, and pertaining to a particular topic. Since the acronym originated in textual media, its pronunciation varies; "fak," "faks," "facts," and "F.A.Q." are commonly heard. Depending on usage, the term may refer specifically to a single frequently asked question, or to an assembled list of many questions and their answers.

Origins

While the name may be recent, the FAQ format itself is quite old. For instance, Matthew Hopkins wrote *The Discovery of Witches* in 1647 in FAQ format. He introduces it as "Certaine Queries answered," ... Many old catechisms are in a question-and-answer (Q&A) format.

The FAQ is an Internet textual tradition originating from a combination of mailing list-laziness plus speculation and a separate technical and political need within NASA in the early 1980s. The first FAQ developed over several pre-Web years starting from 1982 when storage was expensive. On the SPACE mailing list, the presumption was that new users would ftp archived past messages. In practice, this never happened. Instead, the dynamic on mailing lists was for users to speculate rather than use very basic original sources (contacting NASA which was not part of ARPA and had only one site on the ARPANET) to get simple answers. Repeating the "right" answers becomes tedious. A series of different measures from regularly posted messages to netlib-like query mailing daemons were set up by loosely affiliated groups of computer system administrators. The acronym FAQ was developed in 1983 by Eugene Miya of NASA for the SPACE mailing list (Miya notes that Mark Horton's "18 question" periodic post (PP) happened concurrent to the SPACE FAQ, although it was not labelled with the word FAQ). The format was then picked up on other mailing lists. Posting frequency changed to monthly, and finally weekly and daily across a variety of mailing lists and newsgroups. The first person to post a weekly FAQ was Jef Poskanzer to the Usenet net.graphics/comp.graphics newsgroups. Eugene Miya experimented with the first daily FAQ. The first FAQ were initially attacked by some mailing list users for being repetitive.

On Usenet, Mark Horton started a series of "Periodic Posts" (PP) which attempted to answer trivia terminology such as "What is 'foobar'?" with appropriate answer. Periodic summary messages posted to Usenet newsgroups attempted to reduce the continual reposting of the same basic questions and associated wrong answers. On Usenet, posting questions which are covered in a group's FAQ is often considered poor netiquette, as it shows that the poster has not done the expected background reading before asking others to provide answers. Some groups may have multiple FAQ on related topics, or even two or more competing FAQ explaining a topic from different points of view.

Another factor on early ARPANET mailing lists was netiquette, wherein people asking questions typically "promised to 'summarize' received answers." Rarely were these summaries more than mere concatenations of received electronic replies with little to no quality checking.

The initialism FAQ possibly started as a contrived three-letter abbreviation with an auditory similarity to the word "facts," (i.e., a statement "check the FAQs" echoes "check the facts.") Arguably the word was deliberately intended to stand for the secret pronunciation "fah-queue". In this sense FAQ may have some passive-aggressive genesis from computer tech support specialists, frustrated with answering over and over the same, perceived stupid questions from computer users, and thus along the same lines as the infamous ID-Ten-T error.

Modern developments

Originally the term FAQ referred to the Frequently Answered Questions, and listed answers that had previously been posted to the mailing list. The word now is usually considered Frequently Asked Question and the compilation of questions and answers was known as a FAQ list or some similar expression. Today "FAQ" is more frequently used to refer to the list, and a text consisting of questions and their answers is often called a FAQ regardless of whether the questions

FAQ

are actually frequently asked (if asked at all). This is done to capitalize on the fact that the concept of a FAQ has become fairly familiar online - documents of this kind are sometimes called FAAQs (Frequently Asked and Anticipated Questions).

In some cases informative documents not in the traditional FAQ style have also been called FAQs, videogame FAQs in particular. A number of online repositories of videogame FAQs have emerged in recent years (such as CheatCodes.com and GameFAQs), where most so-called "FAQs" have nothing in common with the meaning of the name, but are often instead rather detailed descriptions of gameplay, including tips, secrets, and beginning-to-end guidance. Rarely are videogame FAQs in a question-and-answer format, although they may contain a short section of questions and answers in this format.

Over time, the accumulated FAQ across all USENET news groups sparked the creation of the "*.answers" moderated newsgroups such as comp.answers, misc.answers, sci.answers, etc. for crossposting and collecting FAQ across respective comp.*, misc.*, sci.* newsgroups.

The term "FAQ", and the idea behind it, has spread offline as well, even to areas not related to the Net at all. Even bottles of bicycle chain lubricant have been marketed with accompanying leaflets titled as a "FAQ".

There are thousands of FAQs available on many subjects. Several sites catalog them and provide search capabilities—for example, the Internet FAQ Consortium.

In the World Wide Web, FAQ nowadays tend to be stored in content management systems (CMS), or in simple text files. Since 1998, a high number of specialized software has emerged, mostly written in Perl or PHP. Some of them are integrated in more complex software applications, others, like phpMyFAQ can be both run as a stand-alone-FAQ and integrated into web applications. The purpose of FAQ is to inform the website visitor of questions to inform them of changes or curiosity.

Recently, the term FAQQER has become more popular, but has two possible uses. The original definition was of someone who typically asked a lot of questions. The abbreviation has also been applied to users who have built up a level of knowledge to allow them to frequently answer questions.

Not "really" frequently asked?

The Dilbert comic strip has a recurring theme that reinforces the perception that often FAQs are not truly "frequently" asked questions via parody. Dogbert intentionally writes FAQs to be as obscure and useless as possible. Many corporate websites can be seen as the source for this gag, since some of their FAQs are nearly as obscure and far from a regular user's mind as the Dogbert versions are. Usability experts Jakob Nielsen and Steve Krug (in Don't Make Me Think) have mentioned this in their writings, that too often these FAQs are written from an internal vantage point in place of putting true thought into the user's perspective and what information typical users may want and need.

One example of this is the on-line FAQ for the Douglas Adams computer game "Starship Titanic", which included the question "Where did I leave my keys?"