

The DuckBoat — Beginners’ Pond: Making life easier on Q&A sites

Herr Professor Paulinho van Duck

Abstract

In this installment, Prof. van Duck will suggest some tips and tricks to make it easier to use Q&A sites.

1 Mystic India

Hi, (L)T_EX friends!

Would you ever have thought that our favorite typesetting system is used in an ashram? It is!

You may know the TUG 2025 meeting took place in India. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend in person, but my friend Bär was there and enjoyed very much riding an elephant.

The first talk of the conference [1] was given by a young monk who explained how they use X_qL^AT_EX in their monastery.

Indeed, it is not so strange. It is a very convenient tool to write multilingual books, prayer sheets, and various other documents, especially when the languages do not use the Latin alphabet. It is also free, very suitable for who have taken a vow of poverty. And it is beautiful, quack!

Moreover, for newbies, it is very easy to find documentation resources and help online, in various forums and Q&A sites.



Following the tradition of helpfulness, in this article I will show you some little tips and tricks for better using help sites and their chats.

I will focus on T_EX.SE¹ and TopAnswers T_EX,² because they are the ones I more often attend.



I would like to thank Barbara Beeton, for giving me the idea for this article, and samcarter, because most of what follows is based on her hints.

I also appreciate their careful help editing. Naturally, I am responsible for any remaining errors.

2 Quack Guide n. 11: Suggestions for Q&A sites and chats

In some previous articles [2, 3] I explained how to write effective questions and how to format posts on T_EX.SE.

In this installment, I will show you further, maybe less known, tips.

¹ tex.stackexchange.com

² topanswers.xyz/tex

2.1 Typing and copying code

In [3] I explained how to insert code blocks to T_EX.SE posts. Now I would like to add another way to do it. You could just put three backticks ````` at the beginning and at the end of the code snippet:

```
```
\documentclass{article}
\begin{document}
An example of \LaTeX\ code!
\end{document}
```
```

It works both on T_EX.SE and on TopAnswers T_EX.

On those sites, the default language is T_EX, but you can choose another one if you need it. For example, Python:

```
```python
print('An example of Python code!')
```
```

The code fences do not need to be `````, other symbols work as well, e.g. `~~~`. This can be useful when the code block itself contains code fences, which often happens, for example, with R Markdown.

```
~~~{r}
---
title: "Example"
---

~~~{r, include=FALSE}
library(knitr)
---

R Markdown example
~~~
```



I wish to highlight in particular a new feature on T_EX.SE, which appeared in January 2026: the “Copy” button. You can find it at the top right of every code snippet in both questions and answers:



It is convenient because you can just click on it and copy the block to the clipboard.

Moreover, it also creates the correct attribution at the beginning of the code. The information added is: source link, author, possible changes, date when the code was retrieved, and license under which it was written. Figure 1 shows an example.



On TopAnswers T_EX there is not a specific “copy” button but you can copy a whole code block by clicking into it, selecting everything with `ctrl`+`A` (on

```
% Source - https://tex.stackexchange.com/a/407368
% Posted by CarLaTeX, modified by community. See post 'Timeline' for change history
% Retrieved 2026-01-10, License - CC BY-SA 4.0
```

Figure 1: Code information added by the “Copy” button.

Mac: $\text{⌘} + \text{A}$), and then copying it with $\text{ctrl} + \text{C}$ ($\text{⌘} + \text{C}$). This avoids having to select everything with the mouse.

2.2 Chat features

First of all, some news: all users on Stack Exchange can now participate in chat, there is no more a reputation limit. The change was effective on January 29, 2026.³

If you are a new user, please visit T_EX.SE chat,⁴ you will find very friendly people, quack!



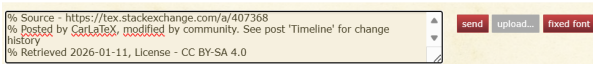
In [3], I said that comments under T_EX.SE posts support a limited subset of Markdown styling. The same is true for chat messages.

The main chat formatting features are:

```
*italic* or _italic_
**bold** or __bold__
***bold italic*** or ___bold italic___
`code phrase` or ```code phrase```
---strikeout---
[link text](https://example.com)]
```

Please note that other symbols, e.g. `~~~`, do not work in chat for formatting code.

For a code snippet which is longer than one line and not only a code phrase, do not use the fences at all, but the button “fixed font” that appears at the right of the message box.



If you would like to play with those features, there is a dedicated chat on the Stack Overflow Network, named Sandbox,⁵ where you can try everything (except flagging) without upsetting anyone.



Typos often happen, when you write quickly in chat. On T_EX.SE, you have two minutes time to “edit” or “delete” your message after sending it. After clicking on the left border of the message, the following shows up:

³ meta.stackexchange.com/q/417109

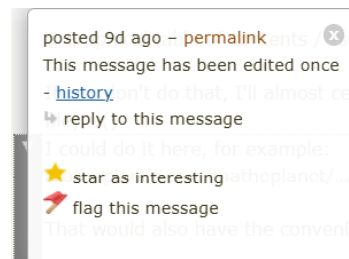
⁴ chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/41/tex-latex-and-friends

⁵ chat.stackexchange.com/rooms/1/sandbox



The “permalink” at the top right gives you the link to the message, in case you would like to cite or save it.

If you click on the left border of another user’s message, you can “star” it as interesting (it will be added to the list at the right of the chat page); or “flag” it for moderators’ attention; both are without time limit.



If the message was edited, you can see its versions with “history”.

For more details, please look at the chat FAQ.⁶



On TopAnswers T_EX chat, you can type code if you add one ```, two ```` or three ````` backticks before and after the snippet. If it has more than one row, the delimiters should go on separate lines, before the first and after the last.

Italics and bold work like T_EX.SE: one `*` or two `**` asterisks, respectively, before and after what you want to emphasize.

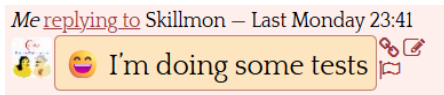
“Strike out” works with two tildes `~~`, whereas with one `~` you can write a subscript.

A nice feature of TopAnswers T_EX chat is emojis. You might try typing `:duck:`, `:bear:`, or `:pizza:` without `:pineapple:` and enjoy the result, quack!



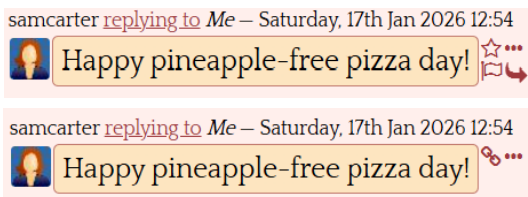
You can edit a message of yours by clicking on the little pen icon button that appears on the right when you hover the mouse over your message.

⁶ chat.stackexchange.com/faq



The time limit for editing is very high (a week) so there is no problem if you make a mistake. For older messages, the edit button is no longer shown.

You can reply to a message by clicking on the curved arrow icon; or flag/star it as interesting by clicking on the flag/star icons, respectively; or save the link to it by clicking on the chain icon. If there are more than three icons, click on the dots to show the others. Here are examples of all of these:



2.3 Notifications

Let us suppose you are interested in a certain topic. For example, you are a package maintainer and you would like to know if new issues arise about your package.

Stack Exchange allows setting email notifications for new questions concerning your selected tags.

From the main site you can click on “Filtered Questions”⁷ and choose which tag to include on which site of the Stack Exchange net, and set instructions about email notifications: address and frequency.

Figure 2 shows the form you should fill in.



Now imagine you asked a question and you would like to have a timely alert if someone comments or answers to your post, without repeatedly

⁷ stackexchange.com/filters

Figure 2: Form for “Filtered Questions” on Stack Exchange.

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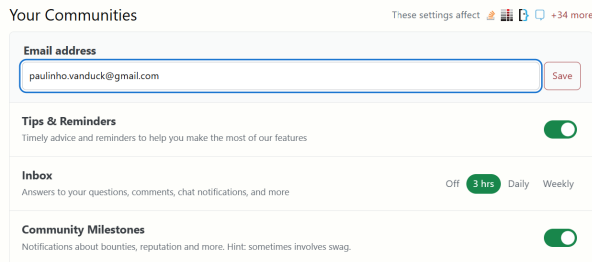
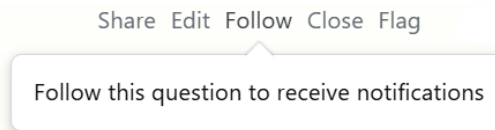


Figure 3: Inbox notification settings on TEx.SE.

checking on TEx.SE. In this case, you can enable email notifications for inbox messages.

Go to your profile, at the tab “Settings”;⁸ scroll down till “Your Communities” and choose the frequency for “Inbox” messages notification. See Figure 3.

If you would like to receive the same alert for someone else’s post, you can follow it clicking on “Follow” at the bottom of the post:



I often use this when I think I can answer a question but I have no time at that moment. If in the meantime someone else answers, I just unfollow it.

In your profile page, at the label “Following” you can see all your followed posts.



Normally, chat mentions that you haven’t replied to are sent to your inbox 15 minutes after you are pinged.

For quicker notifications (few minutes), you can set your chat preferences.

First, go to the main chat site of Stack Exchange;⁹ then click on your username on the top right of the page; choose the “prefs” tab; and check the “Quicker notifications” box. See Figure 4.

⁸ tex.stackexchange.com/users/email/settings/current
⁹ chat.stackexchange.com

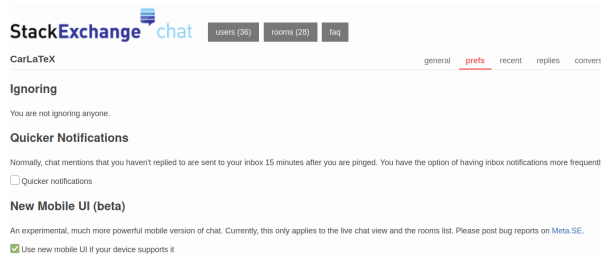


Figure 4: Quicker notifications setting on TEx.SE.

Figure 5: Email notification settings on TopAnswers TeX.

On that same page, you can see the users you marked as “ignored” (to ignore a user’s messages, click on the user’s image and choose “ignore this user (everywhere)”).

There is also a flag to enable an experimental mobile version of chat.



You can also enable email notifications on TopAnswers TeX.

Go to your profile (clicking on your avatar from the main site)¹⁰ and fill in the field “email for notifications”, as shown in Figure 5.

Then you can click on the bell icon at the bottom right of a question to follow, in order to be notified about its new answers and comments.



The other two icons are the usual buttons to flag the post for moderators and to get its link.

2.4 Searching

In [2] I stressed the importance of searching before asking a new question. Now I will give you some further details.

TeX.SE has its own search engine with its own syntax. You can search for an exact phrase by putting it in quotation marks: “*thing-to-search*”, or for a tag by putting it into square brackets: [*tag-to-search*].

You can also exclude something from the results by putting a minus - before what you would like to omit; for example, -[*tag-to-exclude*] or -*word-to-exclude*.

There are some keywords, too. With `user: <user-code>`, you can search by post author. To find the

¹⁰ topanswers.xyz/profile?community=tex

`<user-code>`, click on a user name or icon and it will appear in the search bar. If you would like to find your own posts you can simply type `user:me`.

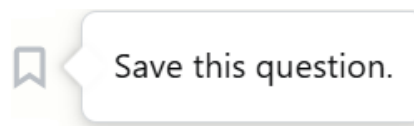
Searching is also useful to find questions to answer. When I have time to spend on TeX.SE, I often use `answers:0` or `hasaccepted:no` to search for questions without answers or questions without accepted answers, respectively.

The search keywords can also be used together, for example I can type `[table] answers:0` to find the unanswered questions tagged “table”.

Finally, you can look for a specific command using: `code: “<code-to-search>”`.



TeX.SE gives you the possibility of saving a question for later, clicking on the “Save this question” symbol. You can find it just below the downvote button:



You will find your saved question in your profile, at the “Saves” label. I often use it, to put aside questions that could be useful in the future.

When you would like to search something among your saved questions, you can use `in:saves`.

I use “Save” for the utilities and “Follow” for the posts I can answer when I have time. I like that they are separated. In the past, I did not make this distinction and it was a mess for me, quack! For more info, please look at the TeX.SE search help pages.¹¹

For a list of posts worth saving, look at the “Often referenced questions” on Meta;¹² and remember to contribute to it adding any new gripping topic you find!



Notwithstanding all the nice features above, the search tool within TeX.SE is not always the best. Sometimes, finding what you are looking for is not straightforward. Maybe it is better to use your favorite search engine (DuckDuckGo, Google, etc.) and search for

`"what-you-want" site:tex.stackexchange.com`. You might also try preceding the search term with a + character.

The same works for TopAnswers TeX or other sites.

¹¹ tex.stackexchange.com/search and tex.stackexchange.com/help/searching

¹² tex.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2419/often-referenced-questions

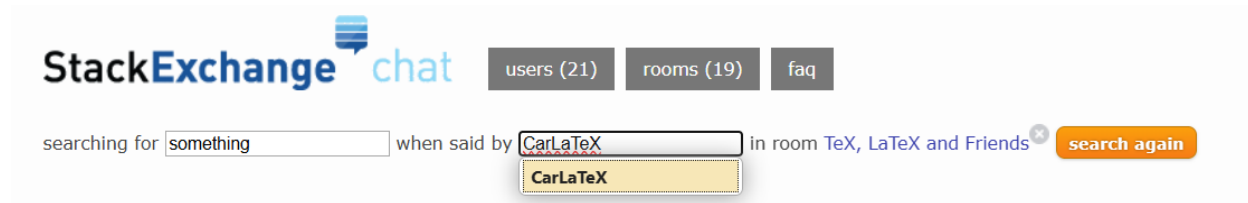
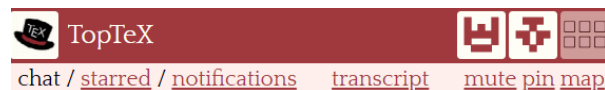


Figure 6: Searching on TeX.SE chat.

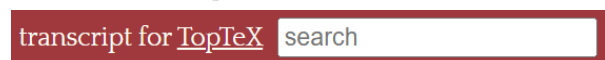
You can also search in the TeX.SE chat, simply putting some words in the search bar which you can find at the top right of the chat page.

When you press enter a new page will come into view, where you can also indicate the user who said what you would like to search. Pay attention because, when you type only part of the user name, the list that appears may be too short to include the user you are searching for. I suggest to copy-paste the complete user name at once. Figure 6 shows an example.

For searching in TopAnswers TeX chat, click on the link “transcript” you find on top of the chat frame:



and then enter a phrase in the search bar:



Other active links you find on top of the chat are: “starred”, to see all the highlighted messages; “notification”, to see the messages where you are pinged; “mute”, to disable chat notification, and, if you are in mute mode, “listen”, to enable them; “pin”, to put the current chat on the chat list on the top of the page, and “unpin” to remove it; “map”, for positioning at a certain date and “people” to return to the default display with the list of connected users.

2.5 Pinging

In [3] I explained how to ping a user who commented before you under a TeX.SE post, by writing `@username`. The same is valid if you would like to ping a user in chat, but only if the user has recently been in chat. This limitation is a choice made by design.

On TopAnswers TeX, if you would like to ping a user in chat, either reply to one of their previous messages or click on their avatar in the bottom right corner of the chat, if they are currently present.

Just entering `@username` will *not* ping users in TopAnswers TeX.

3 Conclusions

I hope you find my suggestions useful, and remember:

Ducks help you get help!

References

- [1] V. Govinda (S. Vinay). How we use X_gL^ATeX at our ashram to publish and print multilingual books and documents. *TUGboat* 46(2):220–227, 2025. doi.org/10.47397/tb/46-2/tb143govinda-ashram
- [2] C. Maggi. The DuckBoat — news from TeX.SE: Asking effective questions. *TUGboat* 38(3):301–305, 2017. tug.org/TUGboat/tb38-3/tb120duck.pdf
- [3] C. Maggi. The DuckBoat — News from TeX.SE: Formatting posts. *TUGboat* 39(3):177–181, 2018. tug.org/TUGboat/tb39-3/tb123duck-format.pdf

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