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5 Easy Steps to Stay Safe (and Private!) on Facebook

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When the President of the United States [warns schoolchildren to watch what they say and do on Facebook](#), you know that we've got a problem...and it's not one limited to the U.S.'s borders, either. People everywhere are mindlessly over-sharing on the [world's largest social network](#), without a second thought as to who's reading their posts or what effect it could have on them further down the road. For example, did you know that [30% of today's employers are using Facebook to vet potential employees](#) prior to hiring? In today's tough economy, the question of whether to post those embarrassing party pics could now cost you a paycheck in addition to a reputation. (Keep that in mind when tagging your friends' photos, too, won't you?)

But what can be done? It's not like you can just quit Facebook, right? No - and you don't have to either. You just need to take a few precautions.

Unbeknownst to most mainstream Facebook users, the social network actually offers a slew of privacy controls and security features which can help you batten down the hatches, so to speak. If used properly, you'll never have to worry about whether you should friend the boss and your mom. You can friend anyone you want while comfortable in the knowledge that not everyone gets to see everything you post.

The problem in implementing these privacy options is that they're just too confusing for most non-tech savvy people to handle. And often, folks don't want to bother to take the time to learn. To simplify the process, we're offering five easy steps you can take today to help make your Facebook experience safer, more secure, and more private.

Step 1: Make Friend Lists

Yes, it will take some time, especially if you're connected to a couple hundred friends already. But this step, while not the quickest, is fairly simple. And it will be **one of the most useful things you can do on Facebook**.

Friend lists, like they sound, are lists for categorizing your friends into various groups. The nice thing about this feature is that once you set these lists up, you won't have to do it again. We suggest that you put your work colleagues and professional acquaintances into a friend list designated "work," personal friends you're not very close with into a list called "Acquaintances," and people you're related to into a list called "Family." Those three main categories will separate out the groups of "friends" who you may want to hide some information from.

To create a friend list, click on "Friends" at the top of the Facebook homepage. In the left-hand column, click "Friends" again under the "Lists" section. Now you'll see a button at the top that says "Create New

List". Click it. In the pop-up that appears, you can name your list and pick members. If you've ever shared an application with your friends, the process of doing this will be very familiar.

When you've finished making lists, you'll be able to use them when selecting who can see what (or who can't!) when configuring the security settings described below.

Step 2: Who Can See What on Your Profile

At the top right of Facebook, there's a menu that many people probably ignore: "Settings." But this menu is now going to become your best friend. To get started, hover your mouse over the Settings menu and click "Privacy Settings" from the list that appears. On the next page, click "Profile." This takes you to a page where you can configure who gets to see certain information on your profile.

Before making changes, think carefully about the sorts of things you want public and the things you want private. Should "everyone" get to see photos you're tagged in? Or would you like to limit this only to those you've specifically chosen as Facebook friends?

Underneath each section on this page (basic info, personal info, status, etc.), you can designate who gets to see that particular bit of information. For anyone not using custom lists (see step 1), **the best thing to enter here is "Only Friends."** Anything else opens up your profile information to people you may or may not know. For example, choosing "Everyone" makes that info public, "Friends of Friends" lets your friends' friends see it, "My Networks and Friends" opens up your info to anyone in your networks - that means anyone in your city, your high school, your college, a professional organization you listed, etc.

You can also block certain groups from seeing these sections, too. On any item that offers an "Edit Custom Settings" option, you can click that link to display a pop-up box where you can choose people or lists to block (see where it says "Except these people"). If you haven't made custom lists as explained in step 1 above, you can enter individual names here instead. (Sorry, mom, dad, boss - this is where you get blocked.)

Step 3: Who Can See Your Address and Phone Number

Did you list your address and phone number on Facebook? While that's a handy feature, you may not want everyone you friended to have this information. To access this configuration page, you follow the same steps as above in step 2 to display the Profile Privacy page. You'll notice that the page has two tabs at the top - click on the one that reads "Contact information."

As previously described above, you can again use the drop-down lists provided to designate who gets to see what and/or block certain people or lists from viewing this information. The sections on this page include "IM Screen Name," "Mobile Phone," "Other Phone," "Current Address," "Website," and your email.

Step 4: Change Who Can Find You on Facebook via Search

Sick of getting friend requests from old high school pals? While for some the beauty of Facebook is that it lets you reconnect with everyone you ever knew throughout your life, others find this intrusive and annoying. You're not friends with any of these people anymore for a reason, right?

As it turns out, you can still enjoy Facebook without some folks ever knowing or finding you thanks to the search privacy settings.

Click on the "Settings" menu on Facebook's homepage and then click "Search" on the following page. You'll be taken to a Search Privacy page where you can specify who gets to find you on Facebook. Want to be wide open? Change the "Search Visibility" drop-down box to "Everyone." Want to keep it a little more limited? Select "My Networks and Friends," "Friends of Friends," or "My Networks and Friends of Friends" instead. **Don't want anyone finding you on Facebook?** Change it to "Only Friends." That means only the people who you've already friended can find you in a Facebook search.

On this page, you can also configure what information displays when your info is returned as a search result (e.g. your profile picture, your friend list, etc.). In addition, you can check and uncheck the boxes for network-based searches too. For example, if you don't want anyone from high school to find you, uncheck the box next to "people in high school networks."

Step 5: Stop Sharing Personal Info with Unknown Applications

Remember when we told you about what [Facebook quizzes know about you](#)? Using Facebook's default settings, you're unknowingly sharing a plethora of personal information (and your friends' info too!) with various Facebook applications and the developers who created them. The problem is so bad that the [ACLU recently created their own Facebook Quiz](#) to demonstrate how much information an app has access to.

It's time to take back control! From the Facebook homepage, hover your mouse over the "Settings" menu and choose "Privacy Settings" from the drop-down list. On the next page, click "Applications" then click the tab that reads "Settings" which is next to the "Overview" tab. (Oh, and if you want to really be freaked out, read that overview!)

On this page, you can check and uncheck boxes next to your personal information (picture, education history, wall, religious views, etc.). This controls what applications your friends are using can see about you. Yes, your friends' apps can see your personal info if you don't make this change! Believe it or not, you don't have the same control over your own apps. The best you can do is head over to the [Applications](#) page and delete the apps you're not using anymore. (Use the "X" to remove them.) You see, once you authorize an application, you're telling it that it's OK to access any information associated with your account that it requires to work. While some developers may only pull what's actually required, many others just pull in everything they can. Scary, isn't it?

Conclusion

While this is by no means a comprehensive guide to Facebook security and privacy, these five steps can help you get started in creating a safer, more secure, and more private environment on the social network.

However, if you choose not to take any precautions, then you'll only have yourself to blame when an errant wall post or naughty photo makes its way online and straight into Grandma's News Feed, or worse, your boss's. These days, it's better be safe than sorry, so go ahead and delve into those settings!

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