

Android Tips

More Android Tips

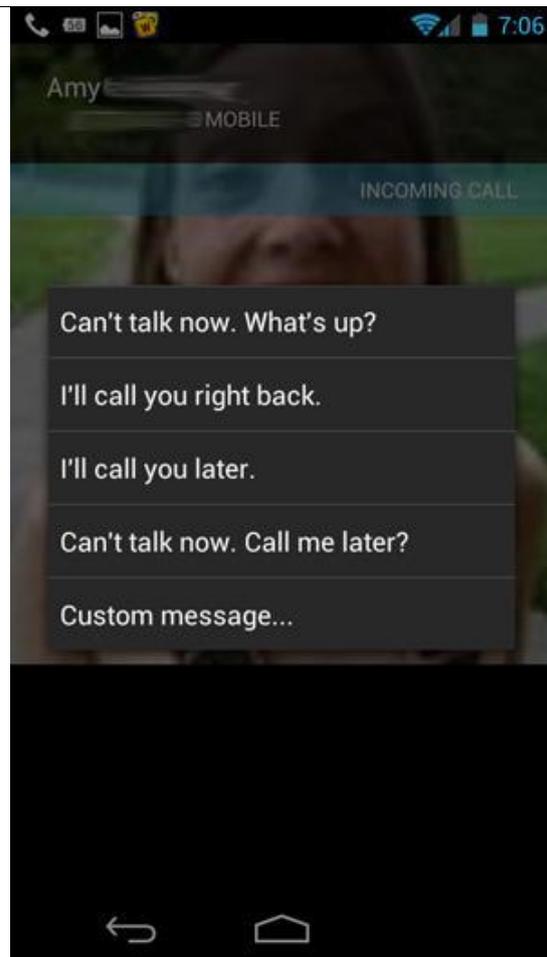


1. Respond to a call with a text message

Sometimes, important calls come at inopportune times, like when you're in a meeting or deep in face-to-face conversation. What do you do when you can't pick up, but don't want to blow the caller off? Android has you covered.

If you have a device running Gingerbread or Ice Cream Sandwich, the "incoming call" screen will give you three response options: pick up, ignore, or "ignore with text." The way to select that option varies from phone to phone (on most [Samsung](#) phones, you slide the call icon up rather than left or right), but the result is a list of canned text messages like "Can't talk now. Call me back in five minutes?" You can even include custom messages on this list to send to your caller, presumably averting uncomfortable "Why didn't you pick up your phone?" discussions later on.

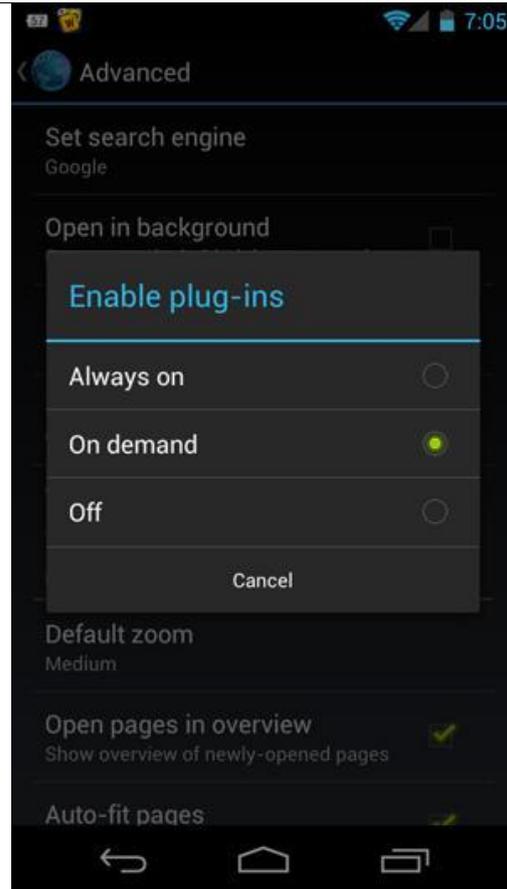
If you're running Froyo, check out the free "Incoming Call Plus (beta)" app. It'll give you the same feature, although you'll have to put up with a different-looking "Incoming Call" screen.



If an incoming call is important but you can't pick up right away, you can respond with a text instead of ignoring it outright.

2. Load Flash content on demand

One of the great things about having an Android phone is that you can view Flash content, including videos, that the [iPhone](#) can't render (at least, not right in the browser). But if all that rich web content is slowing down your browsing – or you're bumping against the limit on a metered data plan – you might not want to load all the Flash content on a page automatically. No problem. On the Settings page of the stock Android browser, tap “Advanced.” On the next page, change “Enable plug-ins” from “Always” to “On demand” and restart the browser. Now when you get to a Flash video on a page, you'll see an arrow icon where the content would be. Tap it to load that bit of Flash. Simple as that.

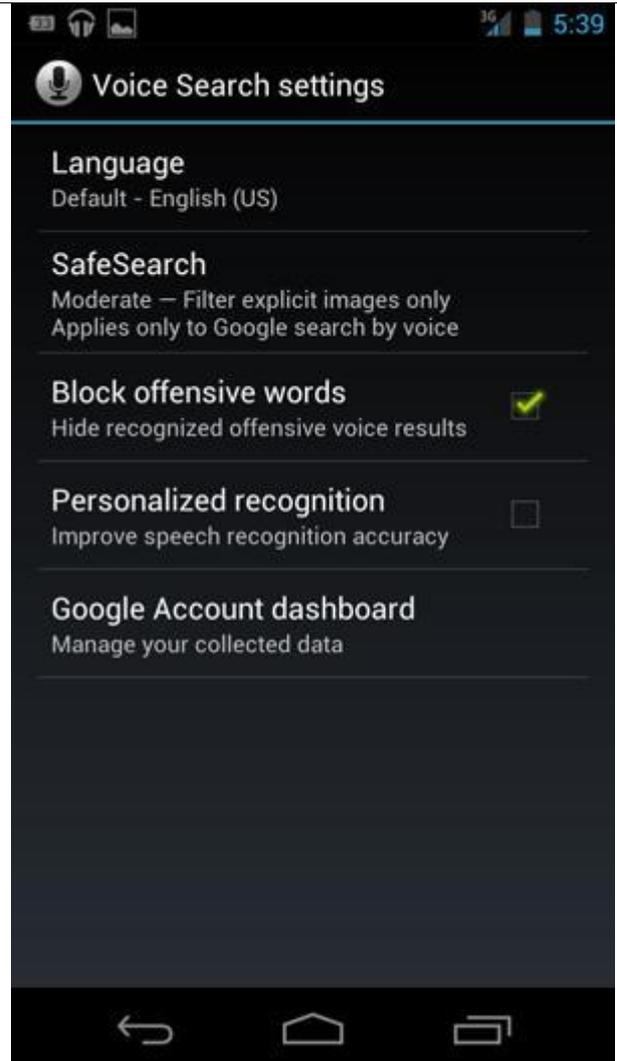


Loading plug-ins on demand keeps your phone from automatically downloading Flash content.

3. Personalized voice recognition

It's not quite as robust as Siri on [iOS](#), but [Android](#)'s built-in voice recognition software is surprisingly capable. Try it out: from a text input field, click the microphone button to the left of the space bar. You'll be able to dictate text messages, fill a field, or even search the Web without having to tap anything out with your thumbs. (To get that last function, Froyo and Gingerbread users might have to download [Google's free Voice Search](#) app.)

Of course, the text recognition engine sometimes delivers less-than-accurate, or downright comedic, results. If that's happening more often than you'd like, try turning on personalized voice recognition in your device's Settings. Tap "Language and Input," then look for the "Text-to-speech output" option under the Speech section. Turning on Personalized Recognition on the following page will help give you more accurate speech synthesis over time. This tip requires a little patience – you might not notice much improvement in transcription accuracy at first, but over time your device will adjust to your personal inflections.

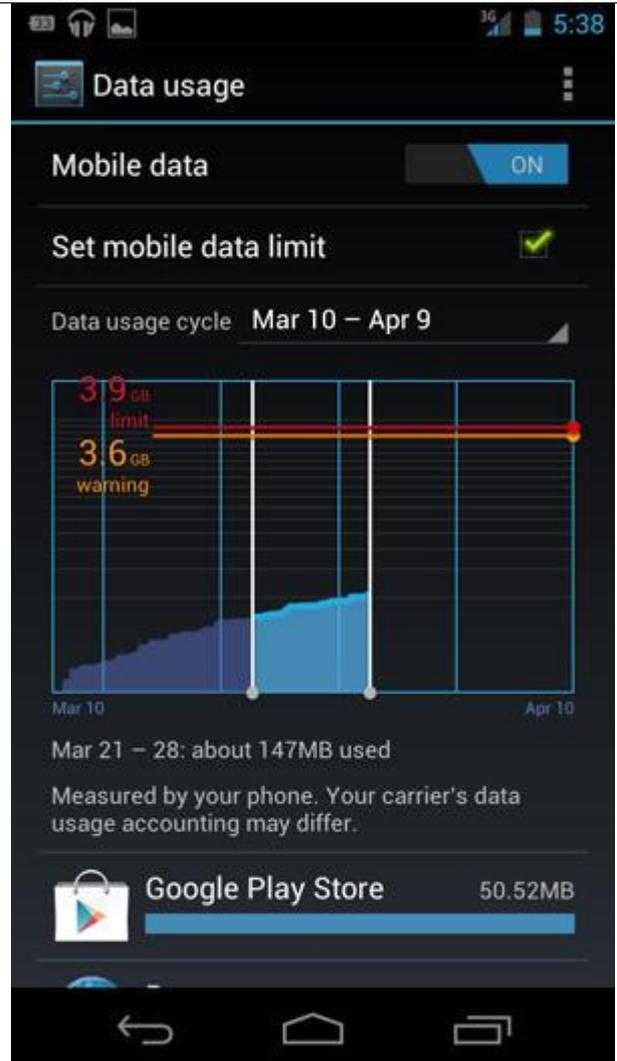


Turning on personalized voice recognition can give you better speech-to-text results over time.

4. Keep tabs on your data

Lots of Android users are on unmetered data plans – for example, the [Sprint](#) and [Verizon](#) networks in the [US](#) have unlimited plans (though the latter, only if you've been grandfathered in). But the rest of us has to live with only a certain amount of data each month, and the overage charges can be pretty punitive. Fortunately, it's fairly easy to make sure you're living within your means, data-wise. Ice Cream Sandwich gives you a built-in way to keep tabs on your data. Just head over to the "Data usage" section of settings. In addition to showing you how much mobile data each app has used, it'll also let you set a warning when your data usage approaches a certain limit and a hard stop when it reaches a particular threshold. Let's say you're on a standard 2GB/month plan. You could set a warning when you reach 1.5GB, and a limit on data when you get to 1.9GB.

For Froyo, Gingerbread, and Honeycomb, try the free [Onavo](#) app. It actually has a few more features than Ice Cream Sandwich's data monitor, including the ability to set limits for individual apps and/or restrict them to Wi-Fi only.



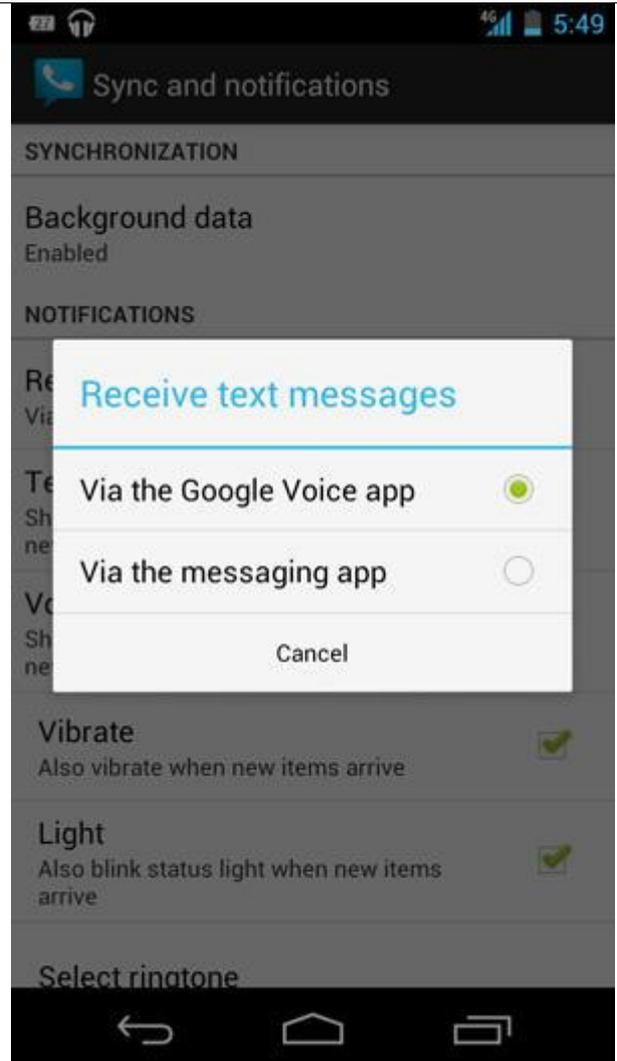
Setting a data limit can keep you from incurring overage charges from your cell phone company. Here, the data limit screen on a Samsung Galaxy Nexus running Android 4.0 "Ice Cream Sandwich."

5. Google Voice integration

One of the best things about [Android](#) is its tight integration with the [Google Apps](#) suite. The [Gmail](#) client, for example, is leaps and bounds ahead of its [iOS](#) counterpart, giving you the ability to tag, filter, switch accounts, and do just about everything you can do on the desktop version. Maybe the most versatile member of the Google Apps squad, though, is [Google Voice](#).

Voice gives you a new phone number (or you can carry over your existing mobile number) that is tied to your [Google](#) account. You can do all sorts of nifty things with this number, like setting different voicemail greetings for different callers, forwarding the number to a separate line (or two), and having voicemails automatically transcribed to text so you can read them like regular messages. If you're moving to a new city, you might also consider signing up for a Google Voice number with a local area code – that way you can hang on to your original number, but also get the benefits of local calling rates.

With the proper setup, you can also use Google Voice to get free texts – even if your phone plan doesn't include texting. Your Google Voice number can both send and receive texts for free, and your Android phone will give you the option to use that Voice number as the default. Alternatively, you can tell it to forward texts as emails (you'll be able to respond to incoming texts by email, as well). As long as you keep the data portion of your phone plan, you can pretty safely drop the messaging part.



With careful setup, Google Voice can replace regular texting on your phone. Here's the dialog box that allows Voice to capture incoming text messages.

6. Google Sky Map

This is undoubtedly one of the coolest free apps you can download. Just launch Sky Map, and point your phone to the heavens (or any direction at all, really). For the most mind-blowing results, you'll want to be outside at night, but it'll work during the day, too. You'll see a map of the constellations, planets, and Messier objects that currently occupy the portion of space at which your phone is currently pointing. The app will even point out meteor showers while they're happening. (Did we mention it's Android-only? iPhone has a few less interesting and more expensive versions.)

Oh, and it does time-travel, too. Star Maps can show you what the sky will look like in the future, or what it looked like in the past, as far back as 1900. Ever wonder what the sky looked like the night of the Apollo 11 moon landing? Now you can find out, in more detail than you probably wanted to know.



Google Sky Map can help you identify the stars and planets above you. Or, you can point it toward the ground to see constellations only visible in the opposite hemisphere!

7. Widgets on the homescreen

Android does a pretty good job of letting you use your homescreen real estate in whatever way is most useful to you. You can opt for the straight-up grid of applications, of course, but you can also get all sorts of information at a glance from that space. By default, Android lets you put up a big analog or digital clock, weather info (updated based on your location), a Googlesearch bar, a quick overview of your calendar, and all kinds of other information. And a lot of the apps that you download (like Dropbox, which we'll dive into in just a moment) will give you other widget options. Just select the "widgets" tab from the list of applications and drag whatever you like onto your home screens. If you're running Ice Cream Sandwich, you can even resize these widgets at will.



Android lets you put all sorts of useful widgets on your homescreens. Here, a Samsung Galaxy Nexus running Ice Cream Sandwich sports a Google search bar, analog clock, calendar preview, two Dropbox folders, and live traffic link