

## Getting Started: PCs for the faint-hearted

This little guide is aimed at anyone who is nervous about spending on their first PC, or users who already have a PC but would like to try some different things - or maybe just want to save some money!

### First, get yourself a reasonable PC.

You don't have to splash out on a new one: check out the cards in your local shop windows (no pun intended) there are lots of good used systems on [Freecycle](#), [Snaffleup](#) or [Gumtree](#), and most of them will have some software already installed.

You won't need a lot of computing power but do make sure that you have a decent screen that you can use without straining your eyes.

If you are buying a system that has done quite a bit of work treat it to a new keyboard and mouse – they don't cost much and can make your system a whole lot nicer to use.

It is only my opinion, but I reckon that wireless keyboards and mice are expensive and definitely more trouble than they are worth!

### \* Operating Systems

Windows: If you are buying anything new or less than two years old it will probably come with Windows 7, which is fine. If it is more than five years old it will probably have Windows XP - either Home or Professional version, both of which are OK. In between those two Microsoft put out Vista - in all kinds of variants, but they are all bloated by lots of unnecessary add-ons and features, and are basically inefficient in the way that they use memory and manage tasks. Vista PCs soon become slow and prone to system problems and crashes, so are generally best avoided.

There has been very little publicity about it, but Microsoft do offer a home-user [upgrade](#) from XP or Vista to Windows 7 Premium for up to three PCs for £150, which is a remarkably good deal (by their standards at least).

If you don't want to shell out lots of money to Microsoft (and let's face it, they already have lots!) for your old PC, there are free alternatives. [Ubuntu](#), for example, is one flavour of Linux and uses what they call Open Source code which means it is free to download, install and use. Forever. It isn't from Microsoft and takes a bit of getting used to if you are already used to Windows, but it will do all that you want with no fuss, more reliability and less likelihood of picking-up virus infections.

Similarly, Apple's [Mac OS X](#) is a more affordable and reliable alternative to Windows but again takes some getting used to. It will only run on Apple hardware (unless you are proficient enough to build a [Hackintosh](#)!) but Apple gear, though quite expensive, is almost always good quality and can last for years.

### Web browsers

There's lots more choice than there used to be. Microsoft systems still run Internet Explorer as their default web browser, but Mozilla's [Firefox](#), Google's [Chrome](#), and Apple's [Safari](#) are all free, faster and – according to their users – easier to use. All are available to run on Mac or PC, and Firefox also loves Ubuntu and other Linux distros.

### E-mail systems

All PC operating systems come with their own e-mail clients; Windows 7 goes for Windows Live which is an unusual but effective mix of web-based and traditional (POP) systems.

Most home users nowadays are going for web-based email such as that offered by [Google](#), [Hotmail](#), and [Yahoo](#) – all of which are available for free.

More traditional email clients include Microsoft's Outlook and Outlook Express, but the first is now very expensive and the second is discontinued. Windows Live is quite good and easy to use, whilst Mozilla's [Thunderbird](#) does a great job on any platform – it has very effective SPAM filtering, and is again completely free.

### Office software

Microsoft's [Office](#) (Word, Excel, and PowerPoint etc.) have been the standards for over a decade, but many people think they have become bloated and are tired of buying new versions every three years. You can quite happily run older versions (Office 2003 or 2007) on recent systems, and there is a free download of [File Converters](#) that will let older versions of Office open and work with files created by newer versions of the software.

If you'd like a free alternative to Microsoft then go for [Open Office](#). It offers a very capable word processor, a spreadsheet package, a presentation manager, plus drawing and mathematical tools and a database manager. Again, it works just as well on Linux distros like Ubuntu, Macs and Windows.

You might also try [Google Docs](#) - a free, online-only software package to do much the same things and will accept most popular file formats, which means you can open and amend existing files. It also allows multiple users to collaborate online on the same document, which means no more sending and resending email attachments.

### Anti-virus and security software

There are a swag of free versions of good software out there; [AVG Free](#) and [avast! Free](#) both do a great job. You can of course buy any number of paid/subscription packages – [Norton Anti-Virus](#) and [McAfee Internet Security](#) are the two most popular, but I wouldn't have either

of them on my PC: both of them seem to cause as many problems as they solve, and both seem to want to run my PC for me in stead of sitting quietly in the background and letting me get on with things.

One very good commercial package comes from [Kaspersky Labs](#) , and if you happen to use [Virgin as your ISP](#), or to [bank with Barclays](#) you get it for free!

In fact most ISPs (Internet Service Providers) – and many banks - do offer free software, so check with your ISP what they provide. Once you have logged into your account you will be able to download and run the installation, and the Setup wizards make it pretty clear what you need to do from there on.

[Microsoft Security Essentials](#) is a relatively new and surprisingly effective package, given that it is a free download. As of Jan 2011, I recommend it very strongly BUT BE WARNED there are [fakes](#) around: see the paragraph below.

**WARNING:** some websites will fire uop a pop-up 'warning' you that it has found infections on your PC, inviting you to scan for problems, and ultimately requiring you to purchase – online – the full professional version of the Anti-Vir package.

**DON'T DO IT!** They will scam your credit card details, send you nothing for your money, and leave open a large hole in your PC security through which they can extract pretty much anything on your computer. And as many customers will testify, they can be an absolute nightmare to remove once they have established themselves on a PC. Make sure that everyone in the family knows not to click on these 'Rogue' anti-virus windows!

And HSBC's customers can download a free 12-month subscription to McAfee Security software [here](#). Note: both of these offers are only available to PC users.

## Firewalls

Operating systems come with their own built-in software firewalls: make sure whatever you use is switched on! You can download slightly more powerful alternatives at sites like [Comodo](#) and [Zone Alarm](#). If you have a router for your internet connection it very likely has a built-in firewall of its own, and it is worth taking the time to read the manufacturer's instructions on how to set it up to best effect.

## Anti-spyware

Again, there are lots of good free anti-spyware tools like [a-squared](#) and [Spybot](#) out there. And again, there is a good free Microsoft product in [Windows Defender](#). [Ad Aware](#) is another free package that that detects and removes adware, spyware and other malware on your PC.

## Video and media players

[VLC Player](#) is one of the very few free multimedia packages I know of that includes a DVD decoder – something you will need to play DVDs on your PC as Windows' Media Player doesn't have one! In terms of usability and simple but unobtrusive features, I love the simple [Gom](#) player. Both can run on Windows, Mac, or PC.

## Picture editing software

[IrfanView](#) is simple and great for basic image viewing and editing, [Photoscape](#) is kind of mid-range, and [Gimp](#) offers advanced and powerful options (basically a free version of Photoshop). You can do a lot online these days, too - try [SplashUp](#).

## Web authoring software

[Kompozer](#) and [NVU](#) both offer easy-to-use website creation on Linux, Windows and Mac. Companies like [Yola](#) offer brilliant basic web-site construction tool.

## Sharing files online

[Dropbox](#) provides a very neat way to share files between computers, and back them up online. Again it is free (for up to 2GB of files), and is simple to use.

You install it on your own computer, then define a particular folder as your 'dropbox'. Anything you save there automatically gets backed up online, with a full version history. Plus, if you install Dropbox on another computer you can share that 'dropbox' folder between the two - or more - computers. This makes it easy to share work files - no more carrying USB keys around (and forgetting where you left them).

Google Docs provides shared workspace and websites.

Office Live Workspace will do much the same thing and integrates with other Microsoft products and activities, but is a bit harder to set up and manage.

## File conversion software

You may find that you need to convert a file into another format; the most common example is saving a Word doc as a pdf (Portable Document Format). Both Open Office, and recent MS Office versions, will let you do it using the "Save As" option, but for everything else there is the brilliant little [CutePDF](#). Again, its free.