

How Do I Use My Computer?

Resources for getting started and getting help with your computer

by Guy Hermann



Computers, despite outward appearances, are not like TVs — you can't just buy one on sale, plug it in, and expect to use it. You will need to learn a whole new set of skills and lingo, just as if you were starting out as an apprentice carpenter. You may often be tempted to toss the whole rig in the dumpster.

The most common mistake someone with a new computer makes is not asking for help soon enough. Help is available — and you will need it. Below are a few places you can get it.

The Manual and Tutorial

Learning the lingo is often the hardest part of getting started. This is why you should read your manuals, with special attention to the glossaries. If your computer or software comes with an on-disk "tutorial," it too can be helpful. Run it several times.

The People You Paid

The stores, mail-order companies, and software companies from which you bought your computer and software owe you support along with their products.

The store — either the salesperson or someone on the technical staff — is the place to turn to with the first week's questions: "Why doesn't my printer print?" "What does 'subdirectory' mean?"

If you bought by mail-order, you should be able to get the same support. The best computer mail-order companies provide outstanding technical advice by telephone. Call them often. You paid for the help when you bought the computer or software. Some software publishers also have good technical phone support. I won't buy from companies that don't offer it.

Classes and Users Groups

In most areas, local high schools and community colleges offer courses on IBM, Macintosh, and Apple II computers and dozens of software

packages. These classes are cheap, readily available, and often as good as or better than more expensive "computer schools."

There are users groups for every imaginable computer and software package. These groups typically meet monthly to swap experiences and help each other solve problems. They're also good places to pick up free and inexpensive software. Also, big groups have subgroups for specific interest areas. The Boston Computer Society (617/964-2547), for instance, has a construction subgroup that meets monthly and publishes its own (primarily IBM-oriented) newsletter.

Finding a users group can be tricky. Your dealer can sometimes help, as can electronic bulletin board services like CompuServe (more on those later). Some computer and software companies maintain lists of users groups across the country. Apple (800/538-9696), for instance, will tell you the name of the Apple users group nearest you. In addition, *Computer Shopper* (800/274-6384), a huge magazine full of ads for discount computer vendors, has a listing of users groups in every issue. If you can't find the specific type of group you want, contact one for your computer type; its members may be able to lead you to the specific group you're looking for.

If all else fails, start your own users group. Invite several other computerized builders (or CAD users, or whatever your special interest is) to your office to see and discuss how you do things. Next month, go to another office. You may expose your inexperience, but you'll learn much. Apple has a free information packet on starting a users group that would also be helpful.

Electronic Bulletin Boards

One of the best ways to get together with and learn from other computer users is through an electronic bulletin board ser-

vice, also known as an on-line computer information service. The biggest and best is CompuServe (800/848-8990), though there are several other major services with their own faithful followers. You hook up to these with your computer and a modem, usually for around 20¢ a minute.

"Going on-line" gives you access to an incredible range of services: encyclopedias, news wire reports, financial and economic information, and huge informational databases. You can also converse, either through "live" forums or by leaving and picking up messages, with other users in any area of interest, ranging from aviation to war games, and for every computer type and all major software. These forums can be great places to get help with your hardware and software problems.

The National Association of Home Builders has a new service, available through CompuServe, called NAHB Net, which has a database of NAHB updates and information on construction-related governmental and regulatory subjects such as wetlands. (For more information, call NAHB's Robyne Maier at 800/368-5242.) Unfortunately, other than this, I couldn't find a builder's forum in any of the major services. Perhaps someone out there would like to start one?

Publications

Good books can help immensely. Two I like for beginners are *The Little Mac Book*, by Robin Williams, and John Dvorak's *PC Crash Course and Survival Guide*. Both are short but explain the essential terminology and commands you need to use your computer.

To keep up with new products and techniques, you should sub-

scribe to at least one of the major computer magazines. The best are *PC Magazine*, *PC World*, and *PC Resources* for PCs, and *MacUser* and *MacWorld* for the Mac. My favorites are *PC World* and *MacUser*. I find them more specific about features and more critical of shortcomings than their competitors. They are also less technical and easier to read. *PC Resources* is likewise good for beginning PC users.

Newsletters can be much more specific than general purpose magazines, but they cost more. One of the best is *Macintosh Construction Forum* (PO Box 1272, Sandpoint, ID 83864), published by Craig Savage. Check with your software companies for other construction-specific newsletters.

Consultants

A good consultant can save you loads of time choosing hardware and software, doing everything from designing and setting up your system to creating an estimating system tailored to your needs. A consultant may seem expensive at first, but if you are busy, the time and headaches saved will make up for the money spent. The best way to find a good one is to ask around — ask your dealer, other computer users, and any of the other sources mentioned in this article. Then ask the consultant a lot of questions. If the answers make your eyes glaze over, call someone else. Apple has an active consulting program called *Apple Consultant Relations* (800/538-9696). PC consultants can be found in the yellow pages. Be sure to check references before making any commitments. ■

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