

Computing Basics

I have assumed that your computer has been properly connected – with keyboard, mouse, screen and probably printer cables in their correct sockets. At this stage it is not your responsibility to do this so how is it achieved? Quite simply. It should be a condition that whoever sells you the computer installs it and confirms that it is perfect working order. If a commercial company does not offer this service, walk away. It is more likely that it is a friend or relative who will be advising you at this point and it should be part of your agreement that they set the system up in your own home. Teenage grandchildren are an invaluable resource at this stage but please resist any well-meant offers to teach you at this time. The whole setup should take no longer than an hour and that includes establishing an Internet and email service for you.

With your system properly set up you can proceed at your own pace through the following parts of the book. Later tutorials will take you through the basics of turning the computer on, recognising the elements of the screen, keyboard and mouse, to the concepts of computer memory, files and folders before introducing you to early programs like word processing – typing a letter, email – sending a message and surfing the Net. This may be the most difficult section in that you will have a natural desire to run before you can walk. Your future enjoyment of computer use will depend upon a basic knowledge of the machine.

There will be further tutorials to help you navigate your way through the computer uses you are interested in. Some of them can be left until later or even ignored if they don't appeal. For instance you may be quite happy with the layout of your computer screen and decide that you can skip the tutorial on customising the desktop. That's fine – it's your computer. However you will need a sound knowledge of the basics to avoid frustration in the later tutorials. At the beginning of each lesson there is a list of the skills required to benefit from the advice given in that chapter.

When you first sit down at your new computer it is tempting to rush into those computer functions that attracted you to computer use in the first place. Please try and put that temptation to one side – you may not succeed - but please try. In the knowledge that many of you will fall from grace I have included a lesson entitled Help that will winch you to safety from most uncharted territory.

One of the most compelling reasons I had to write these tutorials was to eliminate, or at least reduce, the fear that many people suffer when faced by a computer for the first time. This fear can be divided into three parts - the fear of 'breaking' it, the fear of 'looking stupid' and the fear of losing all your hard work when something goes wrong.

Fear of breaking it:

Computers are really very robust these days. Laptops are dropped every day and continue to work and it can be difficult to lift an office machine never mind drop it. Flooding to a depth of 12 inches - 30cms if you are decimal literate – will ruin a computer but then your furniture will not appreciate it either. Televisions are just as vulnerable to a spilt cup of coffee and certainly cause more fires than computers. Yes, keyboards are susceptible to

damage occasionally but they can be replaced for less than £20 – the cost of an off-peak train journey to London from the Home Counties.

This does not mean that computers don't go wrong. They do – in the same way that cars suddenly decide not to start – and it can be equally frustrating. In both cases it is unlikely that it is your fault. There is an exercise in the Keyboard tutorial that will help you overcome this understandable fear.

Fear of looking stupid:

It is part of the human condition to worry about the opinions of one's peer group. You are in very good company when the fear of looking foolish strikes. These tutorials can help you with this in that you can lock yourself away with the computer in front of you and the printed tutorial to one side. Beware well-meaning friends who insist on "showing" you how to use your computer. If they do not have the ability to 'tell' you where you are going wrong they do not have the aptitude to teach and should stick to the daytime job. You did not learn to play the piano by watching someone else play.

I never sit at the keyboard when I am teaching. I sit beside the pupil who has strict instructions to smack my hand away if it begins to creep towards the keyboard. When things do go wrong – and they will – have a gentle laugh with yourself.

Fear of losing all your hard work:

This is a much more reasonable worry. You have spent the best part of an hour typing with two fingers a detailed email message to your daughter in Australia when the power supply fails and the screen goes blank taking all your hard work with it. We will discuss the mechanics of computer memory in the tutorial on word processing but, at this stage, just remember to **save your work** to the computer on a regular basis then all that you are likely to lose is the last 5 or 10 minutes of your labours.

Allied to this fear is that of wiping everything from your computer. Apart from your memory disc suffering a catastrophic failure – about as likely as your car engine seizing up on the motorway – you need a degree in computing science to destroy everything on your computer.

Repetition and Reinforcement:

You will find that I have repeated instructions and images throughout the tutorials. This has two main aims. First, I wanted to reduce the need to look back through the previous lessons to refresh your mind and secondly, to reinforce the teaching messages. On the other hand, while there are often several methods of issuing the same computer command, I have tried to reduce the alternatives to one or two in each instance in order to prevent confusion. As an example of this policy there are more than ten ways of creating a new folder on the computer but when this subject first arises I only quote two methods although in later chapters I have added a few more procedures. In this way you will be able to choose the technique that works best for you.