

# **Do I need a computer?**

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## **The Home Computer:**

The computer does not have to be connected to the outside world for it to become a valuable tool for making life easier and more interesting.

Home accounting programs have become very user-friendly over the past few years; secretaries of local organisations can keep accurate records of activities and membership and mail letters at the stroke of a key; instant photography in the form of digital cameras costing less than £100 has blossomed and so much more genealogy can be done at home. Diaries do not have to be replaced every year and personal telephone directories no longer contain four different numbers in various writing materials leaving you wondering which one is current.

Photos, CDs and other music, stamp collections and other memories can be catalogued in hundreds of different ways allowing instant retrieval. Computers can play music or you can tune in to thousands of radio stations across the world or watch the latest Test match while the rest of the family insist on watching EastEnders.

As we get older our memory begins to fail – just a little – and computers can remind us of birthdays, anniversaries and appointments in time for us to go and buy that card or take the cat to the vet. Photocopies no longer require a car trip to the town library. Christmas card lists can be kept up to date and flyers announcing the Church Jumble Sale can be printed all with the help of a computer.

**The home computer is a servant – not a master.**

## **The Internet:**

Connect the home computer to the telephone line and the information world is your oyster. Even compulsive Internet surfers barely scratch the surface of this resource goldmine and that is what it is - a resource. Knowledge, information and tuition are just part of this resource while communication, banking and shopping form further veins throughout the system. The Internet, the Web or Cyberspace is explained in the [Internet tutorial](#)

## **Communication:**

Research shows that the most popular use of the home computer lies in the field of communication. Messages can be sent across the world in a matter of seconds, family members separated by thousands of miles can exchange photographs while tickets for concerts, flights and sporting events are only a few finger movements away and advice on every subject under the sun is available in your own home. E-mail is covered in the [Email tutorial](#)

**Information:**

The fact that you are browsing this book suggests that you have an enquiring mind. The sort of mind that is stimulated or puzzled several times a week to know more. A home computer linked to the Internet will satisfy this quest for knowledge even if it is of a bizarre nature.

- **How** old was Napoleon when he died?
- **What** are the words of the song “Windmills of Your Mind”?
- **When** did the Sumerian dynasty reign?
- **Who** was the first Pope to hold his court at Avignon?
- **Why** do we need wind farms?
- **How** do I learn origami?

Answers to all these questions and millions more are available on the Internet. Details of how to search for such answers are found in the [Internet tutorial](#)

**Shopping:**

Mail order shopping is the second most popular use of the home computer. Books, CDs and video tapes are among the most popular purchases but there are many bargains to be found in items as varied as garden plants and equipment, bed linen, kitchen appliances and children’s toys.

Even supermarket shopping on the Web can help with the logistics of heavy loads such as the big weekly shop and heavy items like huge boxes of washing powder or bargain packs of beer. Working parents may have difficulty with the delivery times of such items but the retired can organise their lives more freely.

In addition to the normal mail order form of shopping there are the auction sites. These are like huge car boot sales selling everything from precious stones to early editions of the Beano. Shopping and Auctions are covered in the [Shopping tutorial](#)

**Hobbies:**

Hobbies from antiques to woodworking are scattered across the Web in the form of newsgroups, discussion seminars and tutorial pages – there are harmonica lessons and instructions on the best methods of restoring a church organ. No matter what your interest you will find enthusiasm and information to fill 36 hours in a day.

The information stored on the Internet is almost always free – for the time being anyway. Such information can be as simple as finding the best route from Chipping Camden to Elmstead Market or the correct definition of puddingstone or as detailed as the agricultural practices of the Mayan civilisation. It is like having a library of reference books immediately at hand. There are a few sites offering cutting edge information such as real-time Stock Market prices or detailed analysis of market research that charge for their services but they form a very small minority.

**Sport:**

Almost every sport devised by man is covered by the Internet from American football to Zen archery. Cricketing sites will provide enthusiasts with analysis of thousands of matches while football sites range from the massive Manchester United to the minnows of the Boxted Lodgers.

**Holidays:**

Fancy a break? What about a small bed and breakfast overlooking Loch Lomond or a lecture tour of the Egyptian pyramids? Not only can you book it all from the comfort of your own home but you can read unbiased opinions of your proposed destination.

**Prices are almost always cheaper on the Internet.**

That might be all very well but what about the security of my credit card details? Let us say you are driving to Scotland and decide to stop for a lunch break at an unknown restaurant. At the end of the meal you hand over your card to be swiped, enter your pin number, collect the receipt and return to your car. You have left significant details of your card transaction with people you have never met and whose honesty you had never questioned. Yet they only have to turn the card over to see your security code and they can use the information to charge items to your account. It requires a far greater amount of technical knowledge to intercept those details over a secure Internet connection.

**What do you need?**

A computer, obviously, but that answer is of no help at all. What kind of computer? Should I buy new or second-hand? Laptop or Desktop? How much RAM do I need even if I knew what RAM meant? What about modems, routers and disk space? If you have any idea what I am talking about then you should not really be reading this book.

You could go to one of the High Street stores. Unfortunately many of the sales people within these places seem to communicate in a language that is only distantly related to ordinary English and, however helpful they are trying to be, you will soon feel the overwhelming urge to run out of the shop while screaming silently.

The answer is, as usual, a friend. Someone who understands your needs and anxieties and can translate them into 'computerspeak'. People over the age of 25 or 30 tend to be better 'translators' whereas grandchildren tend to get overexcited by the prospect of the latest power and speed of a new computer.

However before you approach your advisor there are a few matters to consider.

- Where do you expect to use the computer? A permanent position is better than the kitchen table.
  - How much space can you allocate to computing? If you are limited by size then a laptop machine about the size of a small attaché case may be more suitable than a desktop computer. You will still need to find space for a printer.
  - Are there sufficient power sockets within easy reach? You will need a minimum of four sockets but these could be provided by an extension cable.
  - Where is the nearest telephone point? Trailing extension leads through the house can lead to nasty accidents.

- Finally, do you have adequate lighting? Staring at a screen in dark corners is very tiring.
- Have you any ideas about your possible use of the computer?
  - Email and the Internet will require an accessible telephone point.
  - Digital photography will need a good printer and more computer 'memory'.
  - Accounts and records will only require a basic machine.
  - Your screen should measure at least 17" and flat screens take up far less room; they are easier to view but they are more expensive.
  - Laptops jump in price when you move above a 15.4" screen.
- How confident are you that your enthusiasm will last?
  - Perfectly suitable second-hand or reconditioned machines are a fraction of the price of new equipment.
  - Mention the fact that you are thinking of getting a computer. It may turn out that someone is thinking of upgrading their machine which would suit your purposes perfectly.
- How much money do you want to spend?
  - A new desktop computer with a 17" flat screen monitor should cost you less than £500.
  - A new laptop with a 15.4" screen will cost between £600 to £800 with a 19" screen model costing over £900
  - A new colour printer should cost less than £60
  - A second-hand desktop with 17" flat screen should cost less than £300.
  - A second-hand laptop with 17" screen should cost less than £500.

Laptops have an obvious space-saving advantage but, without a power connection, their battery life will only last about 2-3 hours before needing to be recharged. Connection to the Internet will necessitate a telephone connection and the printer will need another cable so the idea of reclining on the sofa in front of a fire while sending emails may be a little optimistic. You will still need a table surface, a good sized screen, access to power and telephone points as well as space to store your printer.

Desktops are larger and offer larger screens at lower prices. A study, workroom or spare bedroom are ideal but not always available and you may have to look for an unused corner of a living room.

Having established where you are going to place the computer, I would suggest the following minimum specification for the machine –

- 17" screen – preferably flat.
- A CPU speed of at least 1.7 GHertz
- 512Kb of RAM
- 80Mb of hard disk space
- Windows XP operating system
- DVD drive

- Internal modem
- Basic keyboard and mouse

**Please do not try to understand these specifications.** They have been listed simply to guide your advisor to the kind of computer that will be perfectly adequate for every lesson in this book – and beyond.

## How to use these tutorials

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. The basic 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 information in these early tutorials.

Some lessons 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 lesson 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 more advanced lessons. At the beginning of each tutorial there is a list of the skills required to benefit from the advice given in that lesson.

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. This book can help you with this in that you can lock yourself away with the computer in front of you and the book 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 [word processing tutorial](#) 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 tutorials I have added a few more procedures. In this way you will be able to choose the technique that works best for you.