Wireless Home Networking Simplified

- The full-color, fully illustrated, simple guide to wireless home networking
- Step-by-step instructions: Plan, install, secure, optimize, and troubleshoot your wireless network
- Discover all the fun things you can do with your wireless network

Jim Doherty
Neil Anderson
Wireless Home Networking Simplified

Jim Doherty and Neil Anderson

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Dedications

From Jim Doherty:

I would like to dedicate this to my good friend and coauthor Neil Anderson. Working together across ten years, two companies, and six books has been both fun and rewarding, and I’m better off for having been a part of it.

From Neil Anderson:

I would like to dedicate this book to my great and talented coauthor Jim Doherty. I could not ask for a more creative and humorous friend and coauthor. It’s been a kick to work with you Jim on our common passion.
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Contents at a Glance

Part I  How Does It Work
Chapter 1  How Wireless LANs Work  3
Chapter 2  Wireless Standards: What the Letters Mean  15
Chapter 3  Selecting the Right Wireless Standard for Your Network  23

Part II  What You Should Know
Chapter 4  Planning Your Wireless Network  35
Chapter 5  Wireless Security: What You Need to Know  47
Chapter 6  What to Buy  57

Part III  How Do I Set It Up?
Chapter 7  Wireless Router Setup  73
Chapter 8  Wireless NIC Setup  99
Chapter 9  Wireless Security Setup  123

Part IV  “Honey, This Stupid Wireless Thing Is Not Working”
Chapter 10  Troubleshooting: I Can’t Connect at All  173
Chapter 11  Troubleshooting: I Can Connect Sometimes  219
Chapter 12  Troubleshooting: I Can Connect, but It’s Slow  239

Part V  Bells and Whistles
Chapter 13  Wireless Video and Entertainment  259
Chapter 14  Wireless to Go  295
Chapter 15  The Future of Wireless Networking  317

Appendixes
Appendix A  MAC Address Filtering  325
Appendix B  802.11n Wireless Channels  331
Appendix C  802.11 Additional Revisions  333
Glossary  335
Index  345
Contents

Part I How Does It Work

Chapter 1 How Wireless LANs Work 3
Why Wireless? 4
Before We Get to the Wireless Bit, What the Heck Is a LAN? 5
Okay, Now the Wireless Part 9
Challenges for Wireless Communication 9
The Solution 10
Putting It All Together 11
Summary 12
Where to Go for More Information 13

Chapter 2 Wireless Standards: What the Letters Mean 15
The Standard 802.11 and the IEEE 16
802.11a 17
802.11b 18
802.11g 19
802.11n 20
Combinations 21
What Happened to the Other Letters? 21
Summary 22
Where to Go for More Information 22

Chapter 3 Selecting the Right Wireless Standard for Your Network 23
What to Consider When Choosing Your Wireless Standard 24
Compatibility 24
Relationships Among Wireless Standards 25
Dual-Band Products 26
Proprietary Extensions 27
Speed 27
Range 28
Security 28
Cost 29
Additional Considerations 29
Comparing the IEEE WLAN Standards 30
Recommendations 31
Summary 32
Where to Go for More Information 32
Part II What You Should Know

Chapter 4 Planning Your Wireless Network 35
Wireless Network Topologies 35
Sketching a Network Layout 37
Thinking Your Network Plan Through 39
Determining the Networking Capabilities of Your Computers 40
Looking for a Wired NIC 40
Looking for a Wireless NIC 40
Determining Your Immediate Needs to Create a Wireless Network 43
Completing Your Plan 44

Summary 45

Chapter 5 Wireless Security: What You Need to Know 47
Why Should I Worry About Wireless Network Security? 47
What Do I Do to Secure My Wireless Network? 50
Don’t Advertise Your Wireless Network 51
Scramble Your Signal 52
What Is Encryption? 52
Choosing an Encryption Key 53
Disable Ad Hoc Networking 54
Other Tips to Consider 55

Summary 55
Where to Go for More Information 55

Chapter 6 What to Buy 57
Determining Network Readiness 57
Making Your List, Checking It Twice 61
Wireless Router Options 62
Wireless NIC Options 63
Gear for Travel Bugs and Road Warriors 65
Extra Stuff 66
Where to Buy Your Gear 67

Summary 69
Where to Go for More Information 69

Part III How Do I Set It Up?

Chapter 7 Wireless Router Setup 73
Connecting the Wireless Router 74
Configuring the Wireless Router 75
Using the Linksys Setup Wizard 77
Using an Internet Browser 84
Using Linksys EasyLink Advisor 91
### Chapter 8 Wireless NIC Setup 99

- Installing the Wireless NIC 99
  - Installing a PCI Wireless Card in a Desktop Computer 101
  - Installing a PCMCIA Wireless Card in a Laptop Computer 102
  - Installing a USB Wireless NIC in a Computer 103
- Associating the Wireless NIC to the Wireless Router 105
  - Wireless Profiles 106
  - Wireless Connection Managers 108
    - Using the Windows Wireless Network Connection Utility 109
    - Using Linksys WLAN Monitor 111
    - Using Linksys EasyLink Advisor 113

### Chapter 9 Wireless Security Setup 123

- Setting Up Wireless Encryption 123
  - Tips Before We Start 125
  - If Only It Were That Easy 126
  - Manually Setting Up Wireless Encryption 127
    - Enabling WEP Encryption on the Wireless Router 128
    - Enabling WEP Encryption on the Wireless NIC 130
    - WPA Encryption Example 137
  - Setting Up Wireless Encryption with Linksys SecureEasySetup 142
    - Linksys SecureEasySetup on the Wireless Router 144
    - Linksys SecureEasySetup on the Wireless NIC 148
  - Setting Up Wireless Encryption with Linksys EasyLink Advisor 150
    - Linksys EasyLink Advisor on the Wireless Router 151
    - Using EasyLink Advisor to Add Encryption to Wireless NICs 156

### More Wireless Security Steps 162
- Stop Advertising Your Wireless Network 163
- Turn On the Firewall 164
  - Prevent Unintentional Roaming 164
- MAC Address Locking 166
- Top Troubleshooting Tips for Wireless Encryption 167
Part IV “Honey, This Stupid Wireless Thing Is Not Working”

Chapter 10 Troubleshooting: I Can’t Connect at All  173

Steps to Connecting  174
  Scanning  176
  Matching  176
  Associating  176
  Securing the Connection  176
  Obtaining an IP Address  177
  Sending and Receiving  177

What Can Go Wrong  177
  Problems During Scanning  178
  Problems During Matching  179
  Problems During Association  180
  Problems Securing the Connection  180
  Problems Obtaining an IP Address  180
  Problems Sending and Receiving  180

Five Things to Look At First  181

How to Tell if You Do Not Have a Connection  181

Figuring Out Why It Will Not Connect  183
  Scanning-Related Issues  184
    Incompatible Wireless Standards  184
    Wireless Turned Off  185
    Poor Signal Strength  187
  Matching-Related Issues  189
    SSID Mismatch  189
    SSID Broadcast  192
  Association-Related Issues  193
  Security- and Encryption-Related Issues  196
    Encryption Type Mismatch  196
    Encryption Key Mismatch  197
    Windows XP Authentication Setting Mismatch  209

IP Address Assignment–Related Issues  210
  Determining if an IP Address Is Assigned  211
  Determining if IP Address Assignment Is Failing  212
  Trying the Windows XP Repair Function  214
  Checking the Router’s DHCP Client Pool  215

Wireless Connection Made  216
### Chapter 11 Troubleshooting: I Can Connect Sometimes 219

- How Wireless Coverage Works 219
- Tuning Your Wireless Coverage 221
  - Performing a Wireless Survey 221
    - Wireless Survey Using Windows XP 223
    - Wireless Survey Using Linksys WLAN Monitor 224
    - What to Conclude from Your Wireless Survey 226
- What You Can Do to Improve Coverage 227
  - Improving the Location of the Wireless Router 227
  - Trying Different Channels 229
  - Trying Different Antenna Positions 234
  - Upgrading the Antenna 236
  - Using Wireless Range Extenders and Additional Access Points 236
  - Upgrading the Wireless Router 237
- Summary 237
- Where to Go for More Information 237

### Chapter 12 Troubleshooting: I Can Connect, but It’s Slow 239

- Is the Broadband Internet Connection the Bottleneck? 239
  - Checking the Broadband Connection 241
  - Testing Your Broadband Speed 243
- Is the Wireless Network Too Slow? 244
  - Understanding Wireless Standards and Speeds 244
  - Verifying Wireless Network Speed 245
- Is the Wireless Network Signal Getting Degraded? 248
  - Interference from Other Wireless Routers 248
    - Checking for Conflicting Wireless Routers 248
    - Determining Whether the Conflicting Wireless Router Is Causing an Issue 250
    - Correcting a Conflicting Wireless Router Situation 251
  - Interference from Cordless Phones and Other Devices 252
    - Determining Whether the Conflicting Cordless Phone Is Causing an Issue 252
    - Correcting a Conflicting Cordless Phone Issue 254
- Summary 255
- Where to Go for More Information 255
Part V  Bells and Whistles

Chapter 13  Wireless Video and Entertainment  259

Wireless Video Cameras  259
  Finding Uses for Wireless Video Cameras  261
  Connecting the Video Camera to Your Wireless Network  263
  Determining Who Can Access the Video Camera  268
  Viewing Video from Within Your House  271
  Viewing Video over the Internet  273
    Setting Up the Wireless Router for Internet Camera Viewing  274
    How to View the Camera over the Internet  276
  Problems with Viewing Video over the Internet  277
  Using the Video Camera as a Motion Detector  277

Wireless Online Gaming  279
  Gaming Servers  280
  Options for Online Gaming  280

How to Connect Video Game Consoles to Your Wireless Network  281
  Setting Up the Wireless Game Adapter  282
  Connecting a Video Game Console  284
  Connecting to an Online Game Provider  285

Networking Your DVR  288
  Typical DVR Setups Today  289
  Reasons to Network Your DVR  289
  Networking Your DVR  290
  Using TiVoToGo  291

Summary  293

Where to Go for More Information  293

Chapter 14  Wireless to Go  295

What Is a Wireless Hotspot?  295
How to Find Wireless Hotspots  297

Wireless Hotspot Options and Costs  298

Discovering and Connecting to Wireless Hotspots  299
  Connecting to Hotspots Using Linksys WLAN Monitor  300
  Connecting to Hotspots Using Windows XP  302
  Connecting to Hotspots Using Boingo  305

Passing the Membership Test  305

Example: Connecting to a Free Service at Bear Rock Cafe  306
Example: Connecting to T-Mobile Service at Borders Book Stores  307
What Not to Do When Using a Wireless Hotspot 308
Setting Up Your Own Portable Hotspot 310
  How Wireless Travel Routers Work 310
  Setting Up a Wireless Travel Router 311
  Setting Up Your Laptop to See the Travel Router 314
  How to Use a Wireless Travel Router 315
Summary 316
Where to Go for More Information 316

Chapter 15  The Future of Wireless Networking 317
  Wireless Networks Will Be Faster 317
  Wireless Networks Will Go Farther 319
  Wireless Networks Will Be in More Places 319
  Wireless Networks Will Move with You 320
  More Devices Will Connect to Wireless Networks 321
Summary 321
Where to Go for More Information 321

Appendixes

Appendix A  MAC Address Filtering 325
Appendix B  802.11n Wireless Channels 331
Appendix C  802.11 Additional Revisions 333
Glossary 335
Index 345
Introduction
We assume that if you read the front cover you know what this book is about, but there’s a bit more to it than that. With the explosion of popularity in wireless networking, there is a proportional number of people who do not understand the technology, and a similar number of people who think they understand it (but don’t) and are all too willing to dispense advice. Usually it ends poorly, and you get stuck with a network that does not work.

This book is written for all of you out there who want to get the benefits of wireless networking but don’t feel like you have the technical background to set it up yourselves. We are confident that if you read this book and follow the steps we lay out, you will have a much better understanding of the technology and, most importantly, a working wireless network. We will try to do this without you having to get a technical degree just to deploy your home network.

What to Expect
We’ve divided this book into five parts, each of which describes a major part of the process of building and using a wireless network. These sections describe

- How wireless works
- What you need to know
- How to set it all up
- What to do if it doesn’t work
- What other cool things you can do with it

Each section is described in greater detail in the following sections.

Part I, “How Does It Work?”
Part I starts by explaining the basics in Chapter 1, “How Wireless LANs Work.” We think it’s worth mentioning that a basic working knowledge of wireless networking should be of interest to you if you are about to set up your own wireless network, and at a minimum it will help you make some better-informed decisions. In Chapter 2, “Wireless Standards: What the Letters Mean,” we cover the main wireless standards. There are a number of choices with regard to the frequency, speed, range, and costs of each of the main standards, and we cover all of them here. We finish this section with Chapter 3, “Selecting the Right Wireless Standard for Your Network.” There are a lot of choices out there. This chapter will help you cut through the confusion.
Part II, “What You Should Know”

In Part II we focus on what you should know before setting up your wireless network. This is where we put all the information in Part I to good use.

Chapter 4, “Planning Your Wireless Network,” covers how to plan your network to meet the needs of today and bridge the gap to tomorrow. Chapter 5, “Wireless Security: What You Need to Know,” covers the very important topic of wireless security. Don’t skip this chapter.

Finally, in Chapter 6, “What to Buy,” we explain how to figure out what equipment you need to buy. It’s important to wait until this point in the book to actually buy gear, especially if you are starting from scratch. Trust us, this will save you money in the long run.

Part III, “How Do I Set It Up?”

In Part III we get to work and build your network. Chapter 7, “Wireless Router Setup,” covers setting up your wireless router. This is the heart and soul of your network. In Chapter 8, “Wireless NIC Setup,” we help you set up your wireless network interface card (called a NIC). This is the piece that allows your computer to be “wireless.” Once everything is up and running, Chapter 9, “Wireless Security Setup,” covers the implementation of wireless security in a step-by-step manner, because we need to keep the bad guys off our network.

Part IV, “Honey, This Stupid Wireless Thing Is Not Working”

Into every life a little rain must fall. Part IV covers how to troubleshoot a network that does not want to work the way it ought to. Chapter 10, “Troubleshooting: I Can’t Connect at All,” focuses on what to do when you can’t get a computer to connect to the wireless network. Sometimes you can connect but the coverage is lousy. Chapter 11, “Troubleshooting: I Can Connect Sometimes,” covers what to do in these cases. Chapter 12, “Troubleshooting: I Can Connect, but It’s Slow,” wraps up the section with steps to take when your connection seems slower than it ought to be.

Part V, “Bells and Whistles”

For those of you who want to take a step beyond a basic wireless network, Part V covers some bells and whistles you can add. Chapter 13, “Wireless Video and Entertainment,” provides information on how to set up wireless-based entertainment options on your network. Chapter 14, “Wireless to Go,” shows you how to take your wireless on the road and connect to hotspots. We close the section and the book with a summary in Chapter 15, “The Future of Wireless Networking,” on what we think the future holds for wireless networking.
Housekeeping Stuff

This book focuses on the Windows operating systems and all screenshots were taken from computers running Windows XP. If you are not running Windows XP, you can still follow the recommendations and tips for the chapters where changes or setups are made, or where directory paths are followed. The general steps still hold true, but the directory paths and filenames may change. Your user manual or help files should help get you where you need to go for operating systems other than Windows XP.

We also had to make some decisions regarding what type of gear and programs to install as examples. Most of the gear we recommend here is from Linksys. In the spirit of full disclosure, our current (Neil) and former (Jim) employer is the parent company of Linksys. That said, we believe that Linksys has the most complete and easy-to-use wireless portfolio.

We hope you find this book useful, usable, and entertaining. Good luck, and happy networking.
Selecting the Right Wireless Standard for Your Network

If you have looked around at your local technology store for wireless networking equipment, you probably noticed the array of wireless designations. With several broad-based standards available and even more vendor extensions, it’s no wonder people leave the store confused and probably empty handed.

This chapter helps you choose which wireless standard is right for you. The decision does not have to be difficult at all. We try to boil the facts down and make it easy.

...cordless phone, old computer that works only with B... but, I've gotta have maximum speed at hotspots. I'll get G.
What to Consider When Choosing Your Wireless Standard

So how do you sort through the many wireless options that are available to you and decide what’s best for your home network? First, you must keep in mind that there are two sides to this decision process:

- What to choose for the wireless access point/router that will “host” your wireless network
- What to choose for wireless network interface cards (NICs) that will allow the computers on your home network to “join” the network wirelessly

The previous chapters covered the various wireless standards that exist and the advantages and disadvantages of each. Knowing the frequencies and other facts about the various standards is all well and good, but you still need to make a decision that will work well for you not only now, but also for at least a couple of years so that you can recoup the investment you made. In our opinion, you need to weigh the following six primary factors:

- **Compatibility**—How well will all your wirelessly connected stuff work together?
- **Speed**—How fast is fast enough?
- **Range**—How far from the router can I get a wireless signal?
- **Security**—What level of security is supported?
- **Cost**—How much?
- **Future proofing**—Will the technology be obsolete the day after I buy it?

As it turns out, compatibility and speed are intimately related. The following sections explore all six factors, followed by our bottom-line recommendations.

Compatibility

Whatever wireless standard you choose, it’s very important that the wireless router and wireless NICs are compatible. Otherwise, your wireless network will not work at all or, at best, will work rather poorly.

There are three primary factors to consider for compatibility:

- What are the relationships between the standards, and which standards are compatible with each other?
- How does multi-standard, or dual-band, equipment fit into the picture?
- Are the proprietary extensions offered by manufacturers, like SRX, something you should consider?

We examine these questions in the following sections.
Relationships Among Wireless Standards

The first really important point to understand is the relationships among the wireless A, B, G, and N standards, introduced in Chapter 2, “Wireless Standards: What the Letters Mean.” As previously mentioned, NICs need to be compatible with the wireless router you purchase or your router won’t be of much use to anyone. Fortunately, the relationships are pretty straightforward:

- A NICs are compatible *only* with A routers.
- B NICs are compatible with B, G, and N routers.
- G NICs are compatible with B, G, and N routers.
- N NICs are compatible with B, G, and N routers.

Likewise, the relationships work in both directions such that a G router is compatible with B, G, and N NICs.

The key point to remember is that the lowest standard (in terms of speed) shared by the router and the NIC dictates the performance of the interaction between the two devices. This means that N and B devices work together, but only at the B level of performance. Figure 3-1 and Figure 3-2 illustrate this concept.

**Figure 3-1  B NIC on Different Routers**

A computer with a B NIC works with N, G, and B routers, but will only get B performance.
Table 3-1 summarizes the compatibility between standards and the performance you will have when combining NICs and wireless routers.

Table 3-1  Wireless Standards Compatibility Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A Router</th>
<th>B Router</th>
<th>G Router</th>
<th>N Router</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A NIC</td>
<td>A performance</td>
<td>Not compatible</td>
<td>Not compatible</td>
<td>Not compatible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B NIC</td>
<td>Not compatible</td>
<td>B performance</td>
<td>B performance</td>
<td>B performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G NIC</td>
<td>Not compatible</td>
<td>B performance</td>
<td>G performance</td>
<td>G performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N NIC</td>
<td>Not compatible</td>
<td>B performance</td>
<td>G performance</td>
<td>N performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Dual-Band Products

Another point to consider is that some manufacturers provide *dual-band* (also known as *dual-standard*) wireless NICs and routers, meaning that the product supports two bands. As discussed in Chapter 2, 802.11a operates in the 5-GHz band, while 802.11b, 802.11g, and 802.11n all operate in the 2.4-GHz band. The designation of a router or NIC as *dual-band* means that it supports at least one wireless standard in each band, meaning 2.4 GHz and 5 GHz.

By definition, G routers and NICs are dual-standard, because they are backward compatible with the B standard. So, *dual-band* almost always refers to the wireless A standard, plus another standard like B, G, or N. Thus, you will see products labeled A+B and A+G. You will likely see some A+N routers as well. The same holds true for wireless NICs. You can have NICs that are single-band only, such as B or G, or dual-band, such as A+G.
Proprietary Extensions

The next complication is that some vendors provide proprietary extensions to their products to make them run even faster. For example, we mentioned in Chapter 2 that Linksys provides a Speed Booster version of its wireless G products that improves the transmission speed beyond the standard 54 Mbps. Linksys also provides an SRX series of wireless G products that doubles the speed to 108 Mbps. Other vendors have similar product extensions. You need to understand three things about such extensions:

- They are (or should be) backward compatible with the base standard.
- The extended speeds typically work only when you are using both that vendor’s NICs and its routers with that particular extension. So, to get the benefits of SRX, you need to have both an SRX router and an SRX NIC.
- If you already own or intend to purchase a laptop with a built-in NIC, it most likely is not going to support such proprietary extensions.

Remember this when you are thinking of buying products with such extensions. Make sure they are compatible with the base standard, at a minimum. You should also make sure that you have the correct NIC for any manufacturer-based extensions. It would be a waste to pay the extra money for the Linksys SRX router, for example, if your NIC supports only the base G standard.

Speed

The second consideration when choosing your wireless standard is resulting speed. Later in the chapter, in the section “Comparing the IEEE WLAN Standards,” Table 3-2 gives an indication of the performance you will receive when you use a type of wireless NIC with a type of wireless access point/router. In general, the maximum performance the different wireless standards offer follows:

- **802.11a**—54 Mbps
- **802.11b**—11 Mbps
- **802.11g**—54 Mbps (up to 108 Mbps with extensions)
- **802.11n**—100 Mbps+

However, these speeds are the “stated” numbers, which are often only achieved in a lab setting. Once you have a router in your house, any number of factors can come into play that impact the speed you actually get. These factors include the distance between the router and the computer, the building materials in your home, interference from cordless phones and other devices, and, in some cases, even sunspots. Okay, that last one is pretty rare, but it can happen, and the basic point is that many factors—most of which are out of your control—affect the actual speed of the router.

Also, at the risk of being redundant, remember that the lower of the NIC and router speeds dictates the speed. For example, a NIC for the 802.11b standard will certainly function with a wireless router for the 802.11g standard, but it will only operate at the 11-Mbps rate, not the higher 54-Mbps rate of the G standard. Similarly, a NIC for the 802.11g standard will work just fine with a wireless router for the 802.11b standard. It will just operate at the slower 11-Mbps rate of the B standard.
Note: It is important to realize that even the slowest of the wireless standards often provides greater bandwidth than even the fastest residential high-speed Internet connection at the time this book was written. Average broadband provides download speeds (from the Internet) between 1 and 2 Mbps, and upload speeds (to the Internet) between 256 kbps and 1 Mbps. Even very high-speed broadband provides download speeds up to 6 Mbps and maximum upload speeds of around 2 Mbps (and at a price premium).

Even the lowest-speed wireless standard, 802.11b, operates at 11 Mbps and, factoring in the wireless overhead, delivers about 6 Mbps. This can pretty easily keep up with most broadband connections.

The point is, before you go and spend a lot of money on the very fastest wireless router, be sure that you really need the speed you are paying for.

Range

In general, the range of most current wireless routers on the market is adequate for the average house or apartment, so it’s not really something to be very concerned about.

If you do have a large house or area you want to cover with your wireless router (maybe you want to lie by the pool or mount your laptop to your John Deere riding mower), then you may want to consider range as a factor.

Wireless B and G offer about the same range. Wireless A operates in the 5-GHz range and therefore signals last a shorter distance. Wireless N is specifically designed to provide up to four times the range of wireless B and G, and therefore offers the longest range on the market today. Keep in mind, though, that the closer you get to the maximum range, the lower the speed will be and, in some cases (such as with B), the speed at the edge of the range will be quite slow.

Security

Most new wireless routers on the market support the full range (or nearly so) of wireless security options available. There are two primary security-related factors to look for:

- What types of encryption are supported?
- Does the wireless router also provide a firewall?

Encryption comes in a number of “flavors” including (from least to most secure) WEP-64, WEP-128, WPA, and WPA2. Similar to wireless standard and speed, encryption that can be used is determined by the lower of the encryption supported between the router and NIC. You want WEP-128 at a minimum, but WPA or WPA2 is preferred. See Chapter 5, “Wireless Security: What You Need to Know,” and Chapter 9, “Wireless Security Setup,” for a more thorough discussion on wireless security types and recommendations.

Note: Unlike the wireless standard performance, with encryption the lowest available standard determines the type of encryption for all devices on the network. In other words, if you have a NIC that is limited to WEP-64 on your network, all the devices on the network must be set to encrypt at the WEP-64 standard regardless of any higher encryption standard that they are capable of.
The other factor to consider is whether the wireless router you buy contains a built-in stateful packet inspection (SPI) firewall. *Stateful* means that the firewall looks inside the packet to make sure it is part of a valid communication session. Basically it keeps hackers from “tricking” your computers into talking with their computer. This provides a good level of security between your home network and the Internet, and we highly recommend it.

By the way, the type of encryption and whether or not a firewall is included are completely independent of the wireless standard supported by the router. In other words, all types of encryption are possible with all the wireless standards. It’s just a matter of determining what types of encryption are supported by the wireless router and NIC you have or are considering buying.

**Cost**

Costs have come way down for wireless networking, to the point that it is almost the same cost to put up a wireless network as a wired one. Wireless NICs can be more expensive than wired NICs, but costs are falling rapidly. The latest (and fastest) wireless standard (at this time N) tends to be the most expensive option, followed by the next fastest speed (A and G at this time), and finally the slowest wireless standard (at this time B). The gap is rapidly closing as prices come down across the board; however, you pay a price premium for faster speed.

It is getting pretty difficult to find wireless B equipment still for sale because it has been replaced for the most part by wireless G equipment.

**Additional Considerations**

When making your decision, you need to consider a couple of other points, including

- What types of wireless NICs do you already own versus what you must go out and purchase? Many new laptops (and even some desktops) are sold with built-in wireless NICs.

- Do you want to be able to use wireless network access outside your home in a publicly provided wireless network (hotspot)?

The last thing you want to do is purchase a wireless router only to find out that you need to replace a wireless NIC that came with your laptop because it is not compatible. Similarly, you will be quite frustrated if you buy a wireless NIC for your laptop, intending to use it at hotspots, only to find out you bought the wrong standard.

---

**Note:** Wireless NICs come in various form factors, including PCI for installing in desktop computers, PCMCIA and Express Cards (plug-in cards) for installing in laptop computers, and USB for connecting to any computer or device with a USB port. Choose whichever makes sense for your network, computers, and budget.
Comparing the IEEE WLAN Standards

With the preceding considerations in mind, it’s time to make a choice between wireless standards. Table 3-2 provides an easy-to-read, side-by-side comparison of the four standards. This table should help you figure out which standard is right for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3-2</th>
<th>IEEE WLAN Standards Comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>Up to 54 Mbps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>$$$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Uncrowded 5-GHz band. Can coexist with 2.4-GHz networks without interference.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>Shorter range than 802.11b and 802.11g. Typically, 25 to 75 feet indoors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotspots</td>
<td>Very few hotspots support the A standard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3-2  IEEE WLAN Standards Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Benefits</td>
<td>Good alternative if the 2.4-GHz band has too much interference.</td>
<td>Widely supported.</td>
<td>Good mix of speed and broad support.</td>
<td>Blazing-fast speed for high-end networking applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Internet Connection</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiplayer Gaming over Internet</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiplayer Wireless LAN Games</td>
<td>✓ (with speed extensions)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VoIP</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ (Performance can be an issue in some cases.)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ (over Wireless)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streaming Audio</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streaming Video</td>
<td>✓ (with speed extensions)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large Homes</td>
<td>✓ (Keep in mind that speed greatly suffers at the edge of the usable range.)</td>
<td>✓ (with speed extensions)</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recommendations**

Based on the information in Table 3-2, here are our bottom-line recommendations:

- If you just want Internet access, are on a tight budget, or do not anticipate a large amount of internal traffic (from a wireless juke box, for example), either the B or G standard is a good choice. Choose B only if you already have B-only NICs for most of your computers.

- B equipment may be hard to find for sale in retail locations because it has been mainly replaced by G equipment in the market, so if you can’t find B, go with G.

- If you plan on using hotspots or getting on other people’s networks, G offers the best bet for compatibility and speed.

- If you anticipate a large amount of internal traffic, plan on setting up a wireless gaming system, or want a little bit of future-proofing, N is the best choice. Purchasing G with an extension such as SRX will give you similar performance, but as N begins to gain popularity (and it will), a proprietary G extension will limit your flexibility.
We do *not* recommend the A standard unless you happen to have a specific reason to avoid using B, G, or N. For example, if you are getting known interference from 2.4-GHz cordless phones, or if you live in an apartment and you are surrounded by G routers, A might be an option. Keep in mind, though, that cordless phones are now also being offered in the 5-GHz range, which can potentially interfere with wireless A networks.

For the purposes of helping the broadest group of readers, we will hedge our bet just a bit and show the setup and configurations for both an N and a G router throughout the remainder of this book.

**Summary**

There are several important factors to consider when choosing your wireless standard, including compatibility, security levels supported, and the performance you expect.

B, G, and N devices are compatible with each other and offer the most opportunity for compatibility outside your network as well, at wireless hotspots.

Standard A equipment works only with other A equipment. Unless you have an explicit need for wireless A, avoid building out an A network.

If you have typical requirements for speed and range, a G network usually is sufficient. If you need extra speed inside your home for streaming video, heavy gaming, or other wireless applications, or you need significant extra range, then an N network is probably a better bet.

**Where to Go for More Information**

To learn more about wireless A, B, and G standards, check out Bradley Mitchell’s article on About.com titled “802.11 Standards—802.11b 802.11a 802.11g”: http://compnetworking.about.com/cs/wireless80211/a/aa80211standard.htm.

Space.com has an interesting article about interference from sun spots: www.space.com/scienceastronomy/solarsystem/sunspot_detail_021113.html.
access
free Internet, 49
hotspots
Boingo, 305
configuring, 310-316
connecting, 299-300
Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
membership tests, 305-308
searching, 297-298
services, 298-299
troubleshooting, 308-310
Windows XP, 302-304
networks, 328
security, 47-50
encryption, 52-55
SSID, 51
wireless access points, 11
wireless video cameras, 268-275
WPA, 53
ad hoc networks, 35, 54-55
adapters, wireless games, 282-283
adding
computers, 114-120
encryption, 123-135, 137
Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
Linksys SES, 142-150
troubleshooting, 167
WPA, 137, 140-141
addresses
IP
assigning, 177, 180, 210-216
dynamic, 277
MAC
enabling filtering, 327
locking, 166
troubleshooting filtering, 329
administration, passwords, 55. See also passwords
Advanced Encryption Standard. See also AES
advertising, stopping, 163
AES (Advanced Encryption Standard), 53
applications
Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 91-98
Viewer Client, 271-275
assigning
IP addresses, 177, 180, 210-216
IP ports, 275
associating
NICs with routers, 105-111, 113-120
routers, 176, 180, 193-195
attenuation, 187
authentication, 176, 209
automatic speed negotiation, 245-247
availability, future of, 319-320
avoiding proprietary extensions, 58
bad signals, verifying Windows XP, 246
base stations, 11
Boingo monitor, 252
Boingo utility, 305
bottlenecks, 239-242
broadband connections
speed, 243
testing, 239-242
upgrading from dial-up, 75
broadcasts
SSID settings, 51
troubleshooting, 192-193
browsers. See also interfaces
connections, 181-183
routers, 84-90
cables. See also connections
Ethernet, 263
overview of, 4
routers, 78
cameras, 259
accessing, 268-275
configuring as motion detectors, 277-279
connecting, 263-268
troubleshooting, 277
uses of, 261-262
viewing, 271, 276
cards, laptops, 59
INDEX
channels
IEEE 802.11n standard, 331-332
interference
cordless phones, 252-254
troubleshooting, 248-251
characters, WEP passphrases, 125
clients, troubleshooting, 215-216
CNET.com, 67
combinations of standards, 21
comparing ExpressCards/PCMCIA, 59
compatibility
cordless phones, 252-254
standards, 24-26
computers
adding, 114-120
capabilities, 40-41
USB wireless NICs, 103-104
configuring
DVRs, 289
Encryption, 123-137
  Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
  Linksys SES, 142-150
  Troubleshooting, 167
  WPA137, 140-141
hotspots, 310-316
NICs, 99
  associating with routers, 105-111, 113-120
  installing, 99-104
routers, 75-77
  connecting, 74-75
  Internet browsers, 84-90
  Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 91-98
  Linksys Setup Wizard, 77-84
  viewing wireless camera images, 274-275
topologies, 6
wireless online gaming, 282-283
wireless video cameras, 277-279
connections, 11-12
DVRs, 288-292
  configuring, 289
  uses of, 289
future of, 317
  availability, 319-320
devices, 321
portability, 320
range, 319
speed, 317
hotspots, 299-300
  Boingo, 305
  configuring, 310-316
Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
  membership tests, 305-308
troubleshooting, 239-245
Windows XP, 302-304
Linksys Setup Wizard, 80
managing, 108-120
NICs
  wired, 40
  wireless, 40-41
overview of, 4
profiles, 106-108
routers, 74-75
security, 52-55
slow
degraded signals, 248-254
speed tests, 243
testing broadband connections, 239-242
troubleshooting, 239-245
verifying speed, 245-247
SSID, 51
Troubleshooting, 174-181, 218
  assigning IP addresses, 177, 180, 210-216
  associating, 176, 180, 193-195
detecting, 181-183
  matching, 176-179, 189, 192-193
  scanning, 176-178, 184-188
  securing, 176, 180, 196-204, 206-209
  testing, 216-217
Wi-Fi, 10-11
wireless online gaming, 281-288
wireless video cameras, 263-268
consoles, wireless online gaming, 284-285
cordless phones, interference, 252-254
costs
  hotspots, 298-299
  standards, 29
customizing routers, 76
D
data rates, 10
decoding keys, 52
default channels
cordless phones, 252-254
troubleshooting, 248-251
degraded signals, 248-254
desktops. See also computers
  NICs, 101-102
  PCI wireless cards, 101-102
  USB wireless NICs, 103-104
detecting connections, 181-183
devices
- future of, 321
- interference, 252-254
- purchases, 57
  - determining readiness, 57-61
  - selecting NICs, 63-65
  - selecting routers, 62-63
  - travel routers, 65-66
  - where to, 67-69
- standards
  - IEEE 802.11, 16, 333-334
  - IEEE 802.11a, 17
  - IEEE 802.11b, 18
  - IEEE 802.11g, 19-20
  - IEEE 802.11n, 20-21, 331-332
- wireless online gaming, 279
  - connecting, 281-288
  - options, 280-281
  - servers, 280
- wireless video cameras, 259
  - accessing, 268-275
  - configuring as motion detectors, 277-279
  - connecting, 263-268
  - troubleshooting, 277
  - uses of, 261-262
  - viewing, 271, 276
- Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol, 210, 215-216
- dial-up connections, upgrading to broadband, 75
- digital video recorders. See also DVRs
- disabling ad hoc networks, 54-55
- drivers, war-drivers, 49. See also devices
- dual-band products, 26
- DVRs (digital video recorders), 288
  - configuring, 289
  - connecting, 290-292
  - uses of, 289
- Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol. See also DHCP
- dynamic IP addresses, 277

E
- e-mail, overview of, 7
- EasyLink Advisor, 76, 91-98
  - connections, 113-120
  - encryption, 150-162
  - enabling
    - encryption, 126-127
      - Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
      - Linksys SES, 142-143, 150
- NICs, 130-137
- Routers, 128-129
- WPA, 137-141
- firewalls, 164
- MAC address filtering, 327-329
- NICs, 185-186
- encoding keys, 52
- encryption, 52-55. See also security
  - configuring, 123-137
  - connections, 196-197, 199-209
  - Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
  - Linksys SES, 142-150
  - standards, 28-29
  - troubleshooting, 167
  - WPA137, 140-141
- entering SSIDs, 82
- episodes (TV), recording, 291. See also DVRs
- Ethernets, 17, 263. See also connections
- ExpressCards, 59
- extending VoIP, 60
- extensions, proprietary, 27, 58

F-G
- filters (MAC addresses)
  - enabling, 327
  - troubleshooting, 329
- firewalls. See also security
  - enabling, 164
  - encryption, 28-29
- forwarding ports, 274
- free Internet access, 49
- frequency, unregulated ranges, 17
- future of wireless networking, 317
  - availability, 319-320
  - devices, 321
  - portability, 320
  - range, 319
  - speed, 317
- games, 279
  - connecting, 281-288
  - options, 280-281
  - servers, 280
- good signals, verifying Windows XP, 246
H

hackers, war-drivers, 49. See also security

hotspots, 295-297
Boingo, 305
configuring, 310-316
connecting, 299-300
Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
membership tests, 305-308
searching, 297-298
services, 298-299
troubleshooting, 308-310
Windows XP, 302-304

I-K

IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers) standards
combinations of, 21
comparing to WLAN, 30-31
compatibility, 24-26
cost, 29
IEEE 802.11, 16, 333-334
IEEE 802.11a, 17
IEEE 802.11b, 18
IEEE 802.11g, 19-20
IEEE 802.11n, 20-21, 331-332
range, 28
security, 28-29
selection of, 23-24
speed, 27-28
images (wireless video cameras)
troubleshooting, 277
viewing, 271, 276
incoming messages, 7
incompatible standards, 184-185
infrastructure, 35
installing
NICs, 99-104
wireless video cameras, 263-268
Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers. See also IEEE standards
interfaces
connections, 181-183
NICs, 99
routers, 84-90
USB, 58
interference, 10, 17
cordless phones, 252-254
planning, 38
routers, 248-251

Internet
broadband connections
speed tests, 243
testing, 239-242
browsers, 84-90
connections, 80
images
troubleshooting, 277
viewing, 271-276
Wi-Fi, 305. See also Wi-Fi
wireless online gaming, 279
connecting, 281-288
options, 280-281
servers, 280

Internet Explorer, detecting connections, 181-183

Internet Protocol. See also IP

Internet service provider. See also ISP

Interoperability, 10

IP (Internet Protocol)
addresses
assigning, 177, 180, 210-216
dynamic, 277
ports, 275

ISP (Internet service provider), 7

keys
encryption, 52
mismatch, 197-208
selecting, 53-54
PSKs, 125
renewal periods, 137
WEP, 125

L

LANs (local area networks)
connections, 11-12
overview of, 4-11

laptops
cards, 59
hotspots, 302
NICs, 99
PCMCIA cards, 102-103
travel routers, 314
TV episodes, 291

layouts, planning networks, 37-39

leeching onto networks, 49

limitations of IEEE 802.11g, 19
Linksys. See also routers
   EasyLink Advisor, 91-98
   configuring encryption, 150-162
   managing connections, 113-120
   SES, 142-150
   Setup Wizard, 76-84
   wireless game adapters, 282-283
   Wireless-N Broadband Router (WRT300N), 331
   WLAN Monitor, 111-113, 300-301
   WLAN utility, 131-132
local area networks. See also LANs
locking
   MAC addresses, 166
   Networks, 328
M
MAC (Media Access Control) addresses
   enabling filtering, 327
   locking, 166
   troubleshooting filtering, 329
management
   connections, 108-118, 120
   profiles, 106-108
manually configuring encryption, 127
maps, channels, 332
matching SSIDs, 176, 179, 189-193
Mbps (megabits per second), 16
megabits per second. See also Mbps
memories, SIDs, 176, 179, 189-193
messages, 7. See also e-mail
methods, encryption, 53
Microsoft Xbox, 280. See also wireless online gaming
MIMO (multiple inputs, multiple outputs), 20
mismatch (encryption)
   keys, 197-208
   type, 196-206
modes, IEEE 802.11n standard, 331-332
monitoring
   Boingo monitor, 252
   Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
motion detectors, configuring video cameras as, 277-279
multiple inputs, multiple outputs. See also MIMO
locking, 328
purchases, 57
determining readiness, 57-61
selecting NICs, 63-65
selecting routers, 62-63
travel routers, 65-66
where to, 67-69
readiness, 44
security, 47-50
enabling firewalls, 164
encryption, 52-55
optimizing, 162
preventing roaming, 164-165
SSID, 51
stopping advertising, 163
topologies, 35-37
wireless online gaming, 279
connecting, 281-288
options, 280-281
servers, 280
wireless video cameras
accessing, 268-275
configuring as motion detectors, 277-279
connecting, 263-268
troubleshooting, 277
viewing, 271, 276
worksheets, 43-44
NICs (network interface cards)
compatibility, 25
configuring, 99
associating with routers, 105-114, 117-120
installing, 99-104
connecting
assigning IP addresses, 177, 180, 210-216
associating, 176, 180, 193-195
detecting, 181-183
matching, 176-193
scanning, 176-188
securing, 176, 180, 196-209
testing, 216-217
troubleshooting, 174-181, 218
encryption
configuring, 123-137
Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
Linksys SES, 142-150
troubleshooting, 167
WPA, 137-141
hotspots
Boingo, 305
configuring, 310-316
connecting, 299-300
Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
membership tests, 305-308
troubleshooting, 308-310
Windows XP, 302-304
locking, 328
proprietary extensions, 27
readiness, 57-61
selecting, 63-65
standards
costs, 29
ranges, 28
security, 28-29
speed, 27-28
topologies, 36
upgrading, 244
wired, 40
wireless, 40-41

omnidirectional signals, 47
optimizing
connections
degraded signals, 248-254
slow, 239, 244
speed tests, 243
testing broadband, 239-242
upgrading routers, 244-245
verifying speed, 245-247
security, 162
enabling firewalls, 164
preventing roaming, 164-165
stopping advertising, 163
options
hotspots, 298-299
routers, 76
wireless online gaming, 280-281

packets
firewalls, 164
SPI, 29

passphrases
generators, 53
selecting, 128
WEP, 125

passwords
routers, 80
wireless video cameras, 269

PCI wireless cards, installing on desktops, 101-102
PCMCIA (Personal Computer Memory Card International Association), 59-60, 102-103
peer-to-access point networks, 35
peer-to-peer networks, 35
performance, compatibility, 26
Personal Computer Memory Card International Association. See also PCMCIA
ping utility, 241. See also testing
planning
  networks
    computer capabilities, 40
    layouts, 37-39
    readiness, 44
    topologies, 35-37
    wired NICs, 40
    wireless NICs, 40-41
    worksheets, 43-44
  purchases, 57
    determining readiness, 57-61
    NICs, 63-65
    selecting routers, 62-63
    travel routers, 65-66
    where to, 67-69
pools, troubleshooting, 215-216
portability, 320
ports. See also connections
  forwarding, 274
  IP, 275
power of transmissions, 10
preshared keys. See also PSKs
preventing roaming, 164-165
primary channels, 332
privacy, WEP, 52
profiles, 106-108, 110-120
proprietary extensions, 27, 58
protocols
  DHCP, 210, 215-216
  Ethernet, 7
  IP. See also IP
  TKIP, 53
providers, connecting to online games, 285-288
PSKs (preshared keys), 125
purchases (planning), 57
  determining readiness, 57-61
  selecting NICs, 63-65
  selecting routers, 62-63
  travel routers, 65-69
R
radio frequency. See also RF
ranges
  future of, 319
  standards, 28
  transmissions, 10
  unregulated frequency, 17
readiness
  determining, 57-61
  planning networks, 44
recording, DVRs, 291. See also DVRs
relationships, wireless standards, 25
renewal periods, keys, 137
Repair function (Windows XP), 214
revisions, IEEE 802.11 standards, 333-334
RF (radio frequency), 9-10
ring topology, 6
roaming, preventing, 164-165
routers, 6
  associating, 176, 180, 193-195
  broadband connections
    speed, 243
    testing, 239-242
  compatibility, 26
  configuring, 74-77
  connections, 4, 11-12
  encryption
    configuring, 123-137
    Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
    Linksys SES, 142-150
    troubleshooting, 167
    WPA, 137, 140-141
  extensions, 27
  interference, 248-251
  Internet browsers, 84-90
  Linksys EasyLink Advisor, 91-98
  Linksys Setup Wizard, 77-84
  NICs, 105-114, 117-120
  passwords, 80
  purchases, 57
  selecting, 62-63
  travel, 65-66, 310-316
  upgrading, 244-245
S
saving router configuration settings, 83
scanning signals, 176, 178-188
scrambling signals, 52-55
searching for hotspots, 297-298
secondary channels, 332
SecureEasySetup. See also SES
Security, 47-50
connections, 176, 180, 196-209
decryption, 52-55
configuring, 123-137
Linkssys EasyLink Advisor, 150-162
Linkssys SES, 142-150
troubleshooting, 167
WPA, 137-141
hotspots
Boingo, 305
configuring, 310-316
connecting, 299-300
Linkssys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
membership tests, 305-308
troubleshooting, 308-310
Windows XP, 302-304
optimizing, 162
enabling firewalls, 164
preventing roaming, 164-165
stopping advertising, 163
SSID, 51
standards, 28-29
wireless video cameras
accessing, 268-275
cabling, 277-279
troubleshooting, 277
viewing, 276
selection
encryption keys, 53-54
IEEE 802.11n wireless channels, 331-332
NICs, 63-65
routers, 62-63
standards, 23-24
compatibility, 24-26
cost, 29
range, 28
security, 28-29
speed, 27-28
travel routers, 65-66
WEP passphrases, 128
servers, wireless online gaming, 280
Service Set Identification. See also SSID
services, hotspots, 298-299
SES (SecureEasySetup), 142-150
Setup Wizard, 263
setup. See also configuring
signals
Boingo monitor, 252
degradation, 248-254
omnidirectional, 47
RF, 9-10
scrambling, 52-55
scanning, 176, 178-188
troubleshooting, 187-188
Windows XP, 246
slow connections, 239, 244
degraded signals, 248-254
speed tests, 243
testing broadband connections, 239-242
upgrading routers, 244-245
verifying speed, 245-247
snooping, 8
SoloLink, 277
speed
broadband connections, 243
degradation, 248-254
overview of, 244-245
standards, 27-28
verifying, 245-247
Speed Booster, 19, 58
SPI (stateful packet inspection), 29, 164
SSID (Service Set Identification), 11, 51
entering, 82
hotspots, 299-300
matching, 176, 179, 189-193
standard channel, 331-332
standards, 16
AES, 53
combinations of, 21
IEEE 802.11, 16, 333-334
IEEE 802.11a, 17
IEEE 802.11b, 18
IEEE 802.11g, 19-20
IEEE 802.11n, 20-21, 331-332
incompatible, 184-185
overview of, 244-245
selection of, 23-24
compatibility, 24-26
cost, 29
range, 28
security, 28-29
speed, 27-28
travel routers, 65-66
WEP passphrases, 128
servers, wireless online gaming, 280
Service Set Identification. See also SSID
services, hotspots, 298-299
SES (SecureEasySetup), 142-150
Setup Wizard, 263
setup. See also configuring
static IP addressing, 211
stopping advertising, 163
strength, troubleshooting signals, 187-188
surveillance, 261, 277-279
switches, 6

T
T-Mobile, connecting, 307. See also hotspots
telephones, troubleshooting interference, 252-254
Temporal Key Integrity Protocol. See also TKIP
testing
  broadband connections, 239-243
  connections, 216-217
  hotspots, 305-308
TiVo, 288
  configuring, 289
  connecting, 290-292
  TiVoToGo, 291
  uses of, 289
TKIP (Temporal Key Integrity Protocol), 53
tools
  Boingo, 252, 305
  Linksys WLAN Monitor, 111-113, 300-301
  Linksys WLAN utility, 131-132
  ping, 241. See also testing
  Windows Wireless network Connection utility, 109
  Windows XP, 135-137
topologies
  overview of, 6
  types of, 35-37
transferring TV episodes (DVRs), 291
transmissions, power of, 10
travel routers, 65-66, 310-316
troubleshooting
collections, 174-181, 218
  assigning IP addresses, 177, 180, 210-216
  associating, 176, 180, 193-195
degraded signals, 248-254
detecting, 181-183
  matching, 176, 179, 189-193
  scanning, 176-178, 184-188
  securing, 176, 180, 196-209
  slow, 239, 244
  speed tests, 243
testing, 216-217, 239-242
  upgrading routers, 244-245
  verifying speed, 245-247
cordless phones, 252-254
  encryption, 167
hotspots, 308-310
  MAC address filtering, 329
  router interference, 248-251
  wireless video cameras, 277
types
  of encryption mismatch, 196-206
  of NICs, 99
  of topologies, 35-37
  of wireless connection managers, 108
unregulated frequency ranges, 17
upgrading
dial-up connections to broadband, 75
  NICs, 244
  overview of, 244-245
  routers, 244-245
USB (universal serial bus). See also connections
  interfaces, 58
  NICs, 103-104
verifying speed, 245-247
video
  DVRs, 288
    configuring, 289
    connecting, 290-292
    uses of, 289
  wireless cameras, 259
    accessing, 268-275
    configuring as motion detectors, 277-279
    connecting, 263-268
    troubleshooting, 277
    uses of, 261-262
    viewing, 271, 276
Viewer Client, 271-275
viewing wireless video cameras, 271, 276
VoIP (Voice over IP), 17, 60
vulnerabilities, 50. See also security
W
W-Fi hotspots, 295-297
  Boingo, 305
  configuring, 310-316
  connecting, 299-300
  Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
  membership tests, 305-308
  searching, 297-298
  services, 298-299
  troubleshooting, 302-310
war-drivers, 49
web sites, CNET.com, 67
WEP (Wired Equivalent Privacy), 52
  keys, 125, 197-203
  NICs, 130-137
  passphrases, 125, 128
  routers, 128-129
Wi-Fi Protected Access. See also WPA
wide channel, 331-332
Windows XP
  authentication, 209
  hotspots, 302-304
  Repair function, 214
  speed, 246
  WEP encryption, 135-137
Wired Equivalent Privacy. See also WEP
wired NICs, 40
wireless access points, 11
wireless devices
  standards
    IEEE 802.11, 16, 333-334
    IEEE 802.11a, 17
    IEEE 802.11b, 18
    IEEE 802.11g, 19-20
    IEEE 802.11n, 20-21, 331-332
wireless hotspots, 295-297
  Boingo, 305
  configuring, 310-316
  connecting, 299-300
  Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
  membership tests, 305-308
  searching, 297-298
  services, 298-299
  troubleshooting, 308-310
  Windows XP, 302-304
wireless LAN. See also WLAN
wireless networks, 317
  availability, 319-320
  devices, 321
  portability, 320
  range, 319
  speed, 317
wireless NICs, 40-41
wireless online gaming, 279
  connecting, 281-288
  options, 280-281
  servers, 280
wireless profiles, 106-108, 110-120
  Wireless Security Wizard, 152
  wireless travel routers, 310-316
wizards
  Setup, 263
  Wireless Security Wizard, 152
WLAN (wireless LAN)
  connections, 11-12
  Linksys Monitor, 111-113
  Linksys WLAN Monitor, 300-301
  overview of, 4-11
  standards, 30-31
worksheets, planning networks, 43-44
WPA (Wi-Fi Protected Access), 53
  enabling, 137, 140-141
  preshared key mismatch, 207-208
  PSKs, 125
  type mismatch, 203-206
Xbox, 280. See also wireless online gaming