

INTRODUCTION

Because this is the *Absolute Beginner's Guide to Computer Basics*, let's start at the absolute beginning, which is this: Computers aren't supposed to be scary. Intimidating, sometimes. Difficult to use, perhaps. Inherently unreliable, most definitely. (Although they're better than they used to be.)

But scary? Definitely not.

Computers aren't scary because there's nothing they can do to hurt you. (Unless you drop your notebook PC on your foot, that is.) And there's not much you can do to hurt them, either. It's kind of a wary coexistence between man and machine, but the relationship has the potential to be beneficial. To you, anyway.

Many people think that they're scared of computers because they think they're unfamiliar with them. But that isn't really true.

You see, even if you've never actually used a computer before, you've been exposed to computers and all they can do for at least the last 20 years or so. Whenever you make a deposit at your bank, you're working with computers. Whenever you make a purchase at a retail store, you're working with computers. Whenever you watch a television show or read a newspaper article or look at a picture in a magazine, you're working with computers.

That's because computers are used in all those applications. Somebody, somewhere, is working behind the scenes with a computer to manage your bank account and monitor your credit card purchases.

In fact, it's difficult to imagine, here in the twenty-first century, how we ever got by without all those keyboards, mice, and monitors. (Or, for that matter, the Internet.)

However, just because computers have been around for awhile doesn't mean that everyone knows how to use them. It's not unusual to feel a little trepidation the first time you sit down in front of that intimidating monitor and keyboard. Which keys should you press? What do they mean by double-clicking the mouse? And what are all those little pictures onscreen?

As foreign as all this might seem at first, computers really aren't that hard to understand—or to use. You have to learn a few basic concepts, of course (all the pressing and clicking and whatnot), and it helps to understand exactly what part of the system does what. But once you get the hang of things, computers really are easy to use.

Which, of course, is where this book comes in.

Absolute Beginner's Guide to Computer Basics, Fourth Edition, will help you figure out how to use your new computer system. You'll learn how computers work, how to connect all the pieces and parts, and how to start using them. You'll learn about computer hardware and software, about the Windows Vista and Windows XP operating systems, and about the Internet. And after you're comfortable with the basic concepts (which won't take too long, trust me), you'll learn how to actually do stuff. You'll learn how to do useful stuff, such as writing letters and balancing your checkbook and creating presentations; fun stuff, such as listening to music and watching movies and editing your digital photos; online stuff, such as searching for information and sending email and chatting with friends via instant messages; and essential stuff, such as copying files and troubleshooting problems and protecting against thieves and hackers.

All you have to do is sit yourself down in front of your computer, try not to be scared (there's nothing to be scared of, really), and work your way through the chapters and activities in this book. And remember that computers aren't difficult to use, they don't break easily, and they let you do all sorts of fun and useful things once you get the hang of them. Really!

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized into six main parts, as follows:

- **Part I, “Getting Started,”** describes all the pieces and parts of both desktop and notebook PCs, and how to connect everything to get your new system up and running.
- **Part II, “Using Windows,”** introduces the backbone of your entire system, the Microsoft Windows operating system. This section covers both the newer Windows Vista and the older Windows XP operating systems; you'll learn how Windows works, and how to use Windows to perform basic tasks, such as copying and deleting files and folders. (You'll also learn fun stuff, such as how to change the picture on your computer desktop.)
- **Part III, “Upgrading and Maintaining Your System,”** contains all the boring (but necessary) information you need to know to keep your new PC in tip-top shape. You'll learn how to add new pieces of hardware to your system, how to set up either a wired or wireless home network, how to perform routine maintenance, how to track down and fix common PC problems, and how to protect your system against viruses, spyware, and other forms of computer attack.
- **Part IV, “Using Computer Software,”** tells you everything you need to know about running the most popular computer programs. You'll learn how to use Microsoft Works, Microsoft Office, Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Money, and Quicken.

- **Part V, “Using the Internet,”** is all about going online. You’ll discover how to surf the Web with Internet Explorer, send and receive email, and chat online via instant messaging. You’ll also learn how to shop online, buy and sell in eBay auctions, browse the blogosphere, network socially on MySpace, view and download videos online, and create your own personal web page. This is the fun part of the book.
- **Part VI, “Exploring the Digital Lifestyle,”** is even more fun. You’ll learn how to use your PC with your digital camera to edit and manage your digital photos, how to listen to CDs and download music to your iPod or MP3 player, how to watch DVDs on your computer screen, and how to create your own digital home movies on DVD. It’s amazing all the things you can do with your PC!

Taken together, the 38 chapters in this book will help you progress from absolute beginner to experienced computer user. Just read what you need, and before long you’ll be using your computer like a pro!

Which Version of Windows?

If you read through the table of contents, you’ll notice that there are chapters in this book for both Windows Vista and Windows XP. That’s because we’re currently in a period of transition. Most new PCs sold today come with the newer Windows Vista pre-installed, but most older PCs are still using the previous Windows XP operating system. The good news is that both versions of Windows work in pretty much the same fashion, so both versions can be covered in this book. That said, most of the specific examples and screenshots in this book are of Windows Vista; if you’re still using Windows XP, things may look a little different on your PC screen than they do in these pages.

In addition, Windows Vista includes some new applications that simply aren’t present in Windows XP. I cover these new Vista applications in this book, of course, but I also try to present alternative applications for Windows XP users.

So, although this fourth edition of *Absolute Beginner’s Guide to Computer Basics* focuses on and is updated for Windows Vista, it should still be usable by Windows XP users. After all, everybody wants to do the same things, no matter which version of Windows you’re using!

Conventions Used in This Book

I hope that this book is easy enough to figure out on its own, without requiring its own instruction manual. As you read through the pages, however, it helps to know precisely how I’ve presented specific types of information.

Menu Commands

Most computer programs operate via a series of pull-down menus. You use your mouse to pull down a menu and then select an option from that menu. This sort of operation is indicated like this throughout the book:

Select File, Save

or

Click the Start button and select All Programs, Accessories, Notepad.

All you have to do is follow the instructions in order, using your mouse to click each item in turn. When submenus are tacked onto the main menu (as in the All Programs, Accessories, Notepad example), just keep clicking the selections until you come to the last one—which should open the program or activate the command you want!

Shortcut Key Combinations

When you're using your computer keyboard, sometimes you have to press two keys at the same time. These two-key combinations are called *shortcut keys* and are shown as the key names joined with a plus sign (+).

For example, Ctrl+W indicates that you should press the W key while holding down the Ctrl key. It's no more complex than that.

Web Page Addresses

This book contains a lot of web page addresses. (That's because you'll probably be spending a lot of time on the Internet.)

Technically, a web page address is supposed to start with `http://` (as in `http://www.molehillgroup.com`). Because Internet Explorer and other web browsers automatically insert this piece of the address, however, you don't have to type it—and I haven't included it in any of the addresses in this book.

Special Elements

This book also includes a few special elements that provide additional information not included in the basic text. These elements are designed to supplement the text to make your learning faster, easier, and more efficient.



tip

A *tip* is a piece of advice—a little trick, actually—that helps you use your computer more effectively or maneuver around problems or limitations.



note

A *note* is designed to provide information that is generally useful but not specifically necessary for what you're doing at the moment. Some are like extended tips—interesting, but not essential.



caution

A *caution* tells you to beware of a potentially dangerous act or situation. In some cases, ignoring a caution could cause you significant problems—so pay attention to them!



Let Me Know What You Think

I always love to hear from readers. If you want to contact me, feel free to email me at abg@molehillgroup.com. I can't promise that I'll answer every message, but I do promise that I'll read each one!

If you want to learn more about me and any new books I have cooking, check out my Molehill Group website at www.molehillgroup.com. Who knows—you might find some other books there that you would like to read.