



MORE FOR YOUR MONEY



Free software

Why pay for expensive computer programs when you can get great alternatives for nothing?

Whether you want to edit pictures, do simple word processing or even produce a newsletter, there is computer software that can help. But it often costs hundreds of pounds, and as programs are regularly updated you may have to shell out even more.

The good news is that there are free and safe alternatives. A range of non-profit software has been created with the idea it would be freely available for others to use and pass on.

This is called Open Source software and includes OpenOffice – an alternative to Microsoft Office – and photo-editing software such as Gimp.

You can also get free software to help manage your finances (Microsoft Accounting Express 2008) or manage music and download podcasts (Apple iTunes8). These are distributed by the companies themselves.

A further type of free software called 'freeware' relies on the goodwill of users, and you may be asked to make a donation as a thank you to the authors. Some companies also produce free versions of their professional software, such as the Best Buy AVG Anti-Virus 8 (<http://free.avg.com>) free edition. We've

highlighted useful free programs for home office working, security and digital photography that you can download. Where possible, we've tested them against similar paid-for programs to help deliver our verdict and potential money savings.

PHOTOGRAPHY Gimp

If you want to edit pictures, market-leading software such as Adobe Photoshop costs £570 and even Photoshop Elements, a cutdown version, is £75.

Gimp is free Best Buy photo-editing software that's on a par with paid-for photo-editing packages, in terms of the number of tools and filters available and how well they work. The advanced user will get most out of it, but it's still quite easy for the novice to operate and there is a comprehensive manual available online. The program is advanced, and tools and adjustments are extremely flexible, giving image control to pixel depth. Gimp is good at

manipulating colour, brightness and contrast, correcting our test images well. The red-eye removal tool is effective, too.

Verdict: As good as paid-for Best Buy photo-editing software, but aimed more at experts than novices.

Download: www.gimp.org

Saving: £75, the cost of paid-for alternative Adobe Photoshop Elements.



ONLINE
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PhotoPlus 6
This free flexible photo-editing program is an earlier version of a well-known paid-for program. There are no automatic correction tools, but the manual tools range from average to good. The contrast and brightness tools work well to brighten underexposed

pictures. If there's an unwanted object in your picture, the clone tool gets rid of it. However, there isn't a blur tool and the red-eye removal tool is fiddly to set.

Verdict: A decent application that will appeal particularly to

intermediate users.

Download: www.freerisefsoftware.com

Saving: £75, the cost of paid-for alternative Adobe Photoshop Elements.



Photoshop Album Starter Edition 3.2

This is essentially a photo viewer and organiser with a few basic image-editing tools. It's best suited to those who want to occasionally adjust basic problems such as removing red eye caused by flash



HOME OFFICE



SECURITY

OUR RESEARCH

We downloaded applications to find free software that's easy to use and a good alternative to paid-for choices. Most were tested as part of in-depth lab tests for different types of application. Free security software, for example, formed part of our tests of security suites for next issue's full report. We note where an application hasn't been fully tested. We also show the savings made using the free alternative when compared with a commercial version.

photography, and the tool that does this is good. Image manipulation is largely limited to automatic colour adjustments, brightness and sharpness, although the crop tool works well.



Verdict: Good for storing photos and basic editing.

Download: www.adobe.com/products/photoshopalbum/starter.html

Alternative to: Built-in Windows photo tools, which are also free.

OFFICE APPLICATIONS

OpenOffice 3

You can tackle a wide variety of tasks with this strong product. It's easy to find things and there's an excellent help section. OpenOffice is free and easy to download from the web. It's simple to install, and this is quick if you have broadband internet. It includes Base (database), Calc (spreadsheet), Draw (drawing), Impress (presentation graphics) and Writer (word processor) making it comparable with a quite recent version of Microsoft Office. It doesn't match the latest version, but is still an alternative to Microsoft Office.

Verdict: Easy to use and opens and saves Microsoft Office documents.

Download: www.openoffice.org

Saving: £350, the cost of paid-for alternative Microsoft Office.

Scribus

This free desktop publishing software can create brochures, flyers, newsletters, magazines and even books. It has a range of tools that are more suited to professional users, including good support for fonts and colour output. It was a bit difficult to understand how to download it, but the interface is polished and it can create PDF files to share with others. It wasn't tested fully.

Verdict: Polished page layout software, good for brochures and flyers.

Download: www.scribus.net

Saving: £120, the cost

of paid-for alternative, Microsoft Publisher.



Google Docs

You access this free over the internet and can use it to create word processing documents, spreadsheets and presentations. Your documents are stored online and you can edit them from any PC with an internet connection. You can work with Microsoft Office files and export files to the PDF format. Features are limited – there are just 19 fonts for example. Google Docs wasn't tested fully.

Verdict: Easy access to your documents.

Download: <http://docs.google.com>

Saving: £350, the cost of paid-for alternative Microsoft Office.

Keeping safe online

Security software is vital, but why pay for it?

■ **AVG FREE** The best free antivirus software we tested. It's powerful and easy to use. Menus are clear with strong colours. Once installed, there's nothing else to set up. There's good help (more online) and lots for advanced users.

Verdict: Best free antivirus software tested.

Download: free.avg.com



■ **ZONEALARM FREE FIREWALL** Known on the company's website as Basic Firewall, this is powerful and works well. Unlike those that come with Windows XP and Vista, it checks out- and inbound data. It pops up quite a few alerts, which

can be distracting and it's not always obvious how serious they are. It's best used with other free security software recommended here.

Verdict: Powerful, but gives lots of alerts.

Download:

www.zonealarm.com

■ **WINDOWS DEFENDER**

This comes with Vista, the most recent Windows version. Otherwise, you can download it from Microsoft's website. It's powerful and easy to use, simple to set up and has adequate message alerts. Help files are quite good, but online support is limited. It cleared spyware quickly and effectively.

Verdict: Powerful anti-spyware software, but limited online help.

Download:

www.microsoft.com

Contacts

Adobe www.adobe.com

AVG free.avg.com

Gimp www.gimp.org

Google www.google.com

Serif www.freerisefsoftware.com

Microsoft www.microsoft.com

OpenOffice www.openoffice.org

Scribus www.scribus.net

ZoneAlarm

www.zonealarm.com