running
your computer
for free

**The Flying Doctor's guide
to quality software
at no cost**

Running your computer for free

You've spent a lot of money buying your computer and it still does nothing. That won't do.

Thankfully, there are plenty of people out there writing software for you to use for free!

And we mean free: you don't have to steal it, break copyright or anything. Some publishers do make charges if you are a commercial user.

So what software can we find? Here's a booklet with our recommendations.

You can get hold of the software by typing the product name into a search engine together with the word 'download' to find a page for downloading.

Please bear in mind that these are programs that I have found useful. I haven't tried them out on every version of Windows but have used them on XP and Vista 64: I've mentioned any issues in the text.
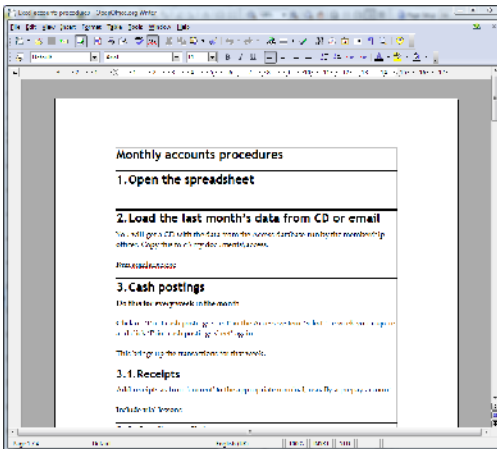
Hey, they are free, so what do you have to lose? A lot of this stuff will work on OS X and Linux - I've indicated the operating systems when I first discuss a package in the text.

Categories

Word processing, spreadsheets, etc

The most successful competitor to Microsoft Office is Open Office (Windows, Linux, OS X) from www.openoffice.org. It reads and writes Word and Excel and reads Powerpoint (I've had some problems saving as Powerpoint). It also generates PDFs, which I use for distributing documents and presentations.

I use Open Office all the time and after a short period of acclimatization find it a great tool. Updates appear frequently and user comments are taken on board willingly.

Open Office will do everything that most people need (and a lot they probably don't). If you are tied into Microsoft suites - all your contacts are in Outlook for example, then you will need to do a bit more work, but nothing too taxing.

If you are looking for a computer-based diary and organiser, try Sunbird (Windows, Linux, OS X) or Lightning (Windows, Linux, OS X) from www.mozilla.org

http://www.freeserifsoftware.com/ has free, but older, versions of Serif programs, such as :

> PagePlus SE (Windows) for desktop publishing
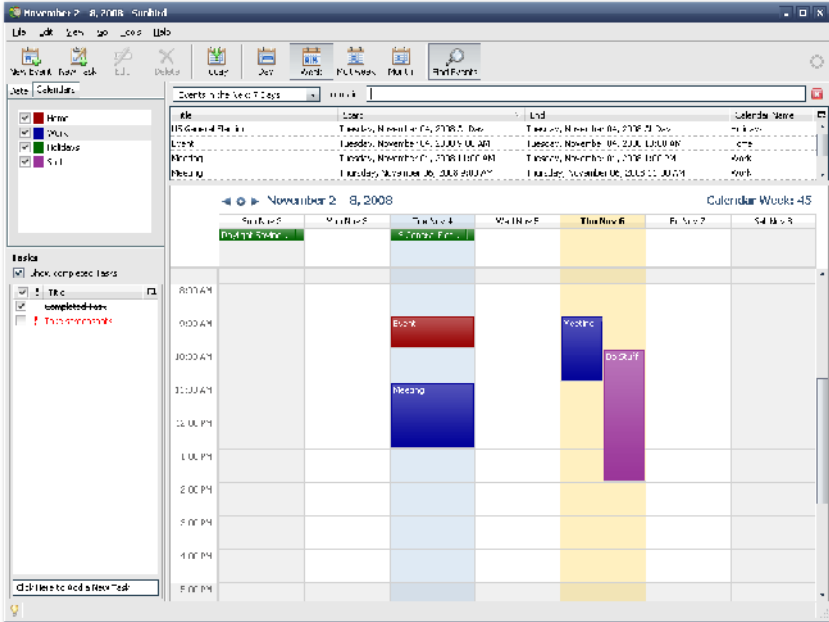> WebPlus SE (Windows) gets you started on websites

If you have to register, I'd suggest that you do it via the Serif web site at www.serif.com. Serif's aim from giving older stuff away is to sell you later versions, so you will be in for a long phone call otherwise. These free ones are great for occasional use and for trying them out. The latest versions are much better. I used PagePlusX3 to produce this guide and write my websites with WebPlusX2, for example.

(Note: I use later, paid-for, versions of Serif software. I'm telling you about Serif because what I use is very good and very good value. I don't get any commission, kick-backs or anything from Serif).
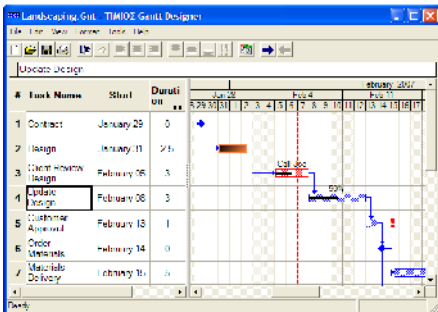
On-line you can find Google Docs (Windows, Linux, OS X) that also offers the usual set of programs. Being on-line can feel a bit slow but the advantages are that you can access your documents from any computer and also share them with others. In addition, they are backed up for you and won't get lost in a disc crash (great for security but not so great if you delete the file yourself or want to go back to an earlier version).

The Mozilla Foundation has a wide range of software discussed later. Two I'll mention here are Sunbird (Windows, Linux, OS X) , a calendar application like Outlook, while Lightning (Windows, Linux, OS X) integrates into Mozilla's email application.
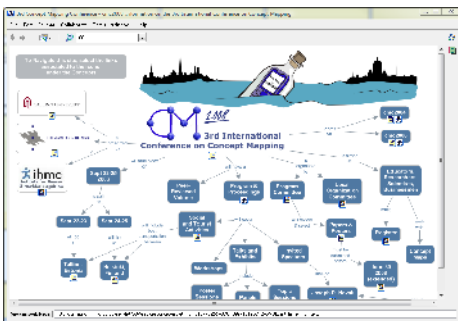
Business utilities

Gantt Designer (Windows) by Timios is under development and currently free. A perfectly good piece of software for small tasks.
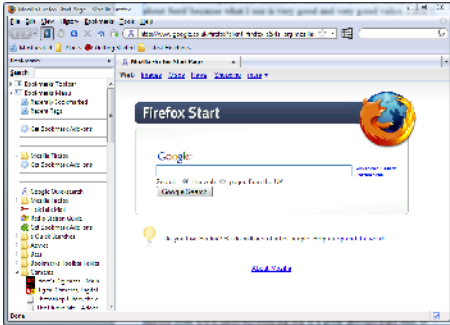

If you like mind mapping, try EDraw Mind Map (Windows). For a slightly different, but I think better, approach of concept mapping, try cmap (Windows, Linux, OS X) from IHMC.
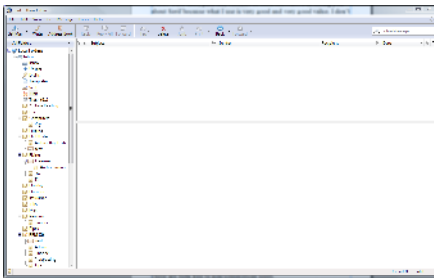
Internet and email

Whilst lots of virus writers target Internet Explorer and Outlook, few have looked at Mozilla, which offers two free products:

Mozilla Firefox (Windows, Linux, OS X), an Internet browser

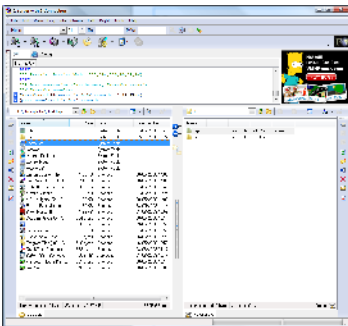and Mozilla Thunderbird (Windows, Linux, OS X), an email client

Both from www.mozilla.com. In my opinion, these products are leading the developments in their areas.

AIRoboform from www.Roboform.com (Windows) is a fantastic add-on to your browser. Just enter your personal and/or business details once, then every time a web site asks you for this information just press the roboform button to have them inserted. The free version is a little limited but still great for most people. You can store data like NI number and

credit card numbers in Roboform. I tend not to for security reasons, but I love Roboform.

Do you need to download a whole website to disc? Maybe you want a copy of your site on your laptop to help you when presenting to clients. WinHTTrack (Windows,) does a pretty good job. WebHttrack is for Linux and Httrack for OS X. Go to www.httrack.com and move to the download page for all versions

If you want to use FTP to upload sites or manage your webspace, then ACEFTP free (Windows) from Visicommedia is a fine tool. Nice graphical interface and file transfer tools.

Security programs

First, we recommend AVG anti virus free (Windows,) to detect viruses out.

Then ZoneAlarm (Windows) as a firewall to keep out intruders.

These are both free to non-commercial users but business users do need to pay.

Type "AVG free" or "zonealarm free" into a search engine to find where to download them. Both will try to persuade you to part with money for improved products, but just stay with the free stuff.

Zonealarm doesn't yet work with Vista64, so I'm looking at Comodo (Windows) - effective but complicated- and Sphinx Software (Windows) - a bit less daunting. The same licence issues apply as above.

If you suffer from pop-up windows and other odd behaviour, then you've probably got malware (spying programs, trojans and so on). Spybot (Windows, Linux) from www.safer-networking.org is a great anti-spyware tool for clearing out those nasty files. It keeps getting better and better.

A great feature hidden in advanced mode is that you can see all the processes that start when you boot your computer. Turning some of these off can help your computer run faster. It does help to know what you are turning off but, in nearly all cases, if you have made a mistake, the computer will start and you can just turn it back on again.
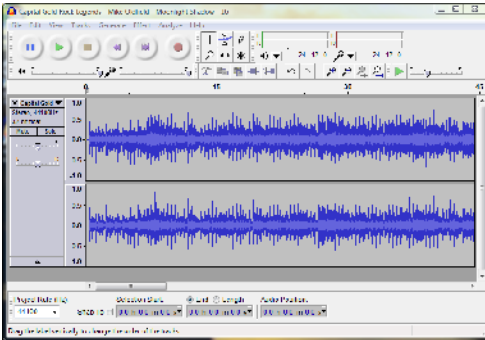
Also useful is adaware (Windows) from Lavasoft. This seems to detect different problems to Spybot.

There are similar free products for OS x but I've not tried these out.

Most importantly, while on the Internet you may find pop-up windows telling you that you are infected and to 'click to get a free scan'. These are practically all designed to get you to pay for software. Ignore them. In fact, close them with the cross in the red box at the top right of the window: These programs will often still install even if you click 'no', 'cancel', etc.!
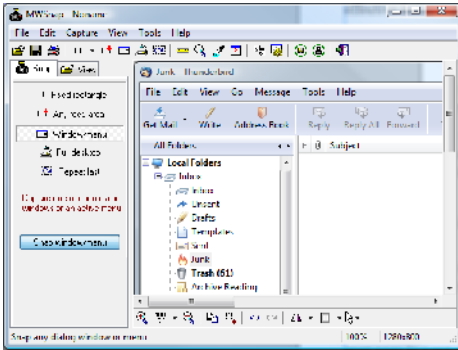
Multimedia

Sound editing is made easy with Audacity (Windows, Linux, OS X), a fully-fledged audio-editing and converting program. It might feel a little complex at first, but stick with it.

If you want to record sound, then try out Silent Bob (Windows). This records whatever goes to your speakers. Really handy. I've used this with XP, but it doesn't seem to like Vista.

ZS4 Video Editor (Windows, Linux, OS X) is a promising video editing tool. If you are aiming to create the fourth Lord of the Rings film, then you might want to buy something. And for serious video-editing you'll need a fast processor, lots of RAM and lots of disc.

MWSnap (Windows) by Mirek Wojtowicz is a fantastic tool for screen capture. You can copy the whole screen, a window or a part of the screen that you select. Excellent. I used it for the screen captures in this book.

http://www.freeserifsoftware.com/ has older versions of Serif programs:

Photoplus 6 (Windows) for photo editing
3Dplus2 (Windows) will get you into 3D graphics for websites, DTP, etc.

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File creation and conversion

If you are using Open Office, then creating PDFs is built right in. For other programs you may need to install a virtual printer that saves the 'printed' file as a PDF. CutePDF (Windows) is a good one.

Utilities

Fancy a secure file area? TrueCrypt (Windows, Linux, OS X) creates a password-protected 'vault' on your disc where you can put confidential files. Just don't forget the password!

Or perhaps you want to get the colours of your monitor more accurate. For this you need a colour profile. Monitor Calibration Wizard (Windows, other OS under development) will help you create one so that you get more accurate colour.

The clipboard is great for copying and pasting, but sometimes we want to cut and paste to a number of locations. There are any number of programs that keep a copy of, say, the last 25 things you cut or copied to allow you to choose which one to paste.

As you can see from this book, I often capture images from the screen. Great for manuals and guides. I use MWSnap (Windows), a very flexible screen grabber.

I run two monitors and it's a pain to have to go back to the main monitor to access the taskbar. Not only that, but the taskbar gets very full. Oscar's multi-monitor taskbar (Windows) puts a taskbar on each monitor and only those programs in that monitor are on that taskbar.

If you are running XP and want to personalise the operating system still further, then try TweakUI from Microsoft. It may also run in Vista. TweakUI is part of the Powertoys range provided free by Microsoft which gives you lots of interesting accessories and adjustments.

Price:

UK £8.42
USA $16.24
EU €11.76

12 Yeftly Drive
Littlemore
OXFORD
OX4 4XS

+44(0)1865 748197

info@theflyingdoctor.biz
www.theflyingdoctor.biz