

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 139. Freeware

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You have read about a number of different freeware programs here in the past, but never about freeware programs in general. This class of programs deserves a plug.

Some people think that when they pay for a program, it must necessarily be better than some freeware program that will do the same thing. "You get what you pay for", correct? It is not necessarily so! Lots of "paid for" programs are not so good, and lots of freeware programs are just outstanding. Outstanding means they do exactly what they claim, swiftly, efficiently, and without unwanted side effects such as crashes or modifying things they are not supposed to touch.

To understand why freeware can be good, let us first ask why it is written. In some cases an author writes a program and releases it as freeware with the idea that, after it has been fully exercised and tested by the user public, a final version will be released as commercial (pay for) software. If that author is a skillful writer, it may well be very good right at its initial release. On the other hand, the software may be just so-so. Or, it may be not so good.

In other cases, though, the writer has no vision of ever collecting money for the work. Some write the software to do something that they needed to do, and no programs were available that would do it well. So, the author "rolled their own" to meet their own needs, and then decide to simply share it with the rest of the computing world. I myself did something similar a number of years ago when I was on sabbatical leave from my academic medical school job, and working in my field in a hosting foreign country. It was a database program to collect and organize data on women who had been exposed to agents that can cause birth defects (that is my field). I wrote and tested it over a period of several months and left it with my host foreign med school, to be freely used throughout that country, and anywhere else it was requested. The point is, that there are lots of software writers who simply want to share with others what they have authored to meet their own need.

So, how can you tell if freeware is good? Well, you can read this column. I freely admit to being a sort of software junkie. I check majorgeeks.com at least once each day, and download, install and test programs that look interesting. If they are really top notch, they stay on my machine and I use them, and I may even write about them in this column. I would judge that about one out of every four or five that I test wind up with a permanent spot on all my machines. Ergo, if my statistics reflect the software universe and if my judgment is reasonable, up to 25% of all the freeware programs written are very, very good. That is rather amazing! Remember, we are talking about totally free software!

You can do the same thing, if you are so inclined. The important thing is to download from a reliable, safe site such as [majorgeeks](http://majorgeeks.com). They scan all their offerings (freeware, shareware and pay-for categories) for viruses, spyware and other malware, and they test the software to see that it works. They don't check to see how well it works, though. I guess that is my job, and yours.

So, what kinds of software are available? Which ones do you need? Only you can decide which are important for your computing activities, but here is a partial list of freeware to consider.

ANTIVIRUS	At least four free versions out there are as good or better than any pay-for version!
AUDIO/VIDEO PLAYERS/CONVERTERS	View movies, listen to audio files, and convert from one format to another.
BACKUP	Make safety copies of everything from your Registry to the entire hard drive.
BROWSERS	You have lots of choices other than Internet Explorer, with better, safer features!
CD/DVD BURNERS	Several of these free versions are really very, very good.
DEFRAGMENTERS	Lots of good ones to replace the sloooooow version that came with Windows. Some work in the background.
DRIVE and REGISTRY CLEANERS and REGISTRY EDITORS	These keep your machine lean and mean.
DRIVERS	Includes the latest drivers specific for your machine, and also specialized software to backup your drivers.
DUAL BOOT	You can have several operating systems on your machine! Try Vista while keeping XP.
EMAIL/MESSAGING	Much better and safer than Outlook or Outlook Express.
ERGONOMIC UTILITIES	Ease your problems if you have visual, hearing or motor impairments.
FIREWALLS	At least two free ones lead the world in quality.
GAMES	Unlimited in number and style.
GRAPHICS/MULTIMEDIA	Paint, drawing, audio mixing, video mixing programs.
ICON TOOLS	Make new icons, edit old ones, put some where they don't exist now.
MEMORY	Test your memory and pinpoint faulty memory sticks.
NETWORK	Virtually any kind of networking setup, use and monitoring utilities.
OFFICE	Compatible replacements for the MS suite, and more.
PROCESSOR INFO	Is your machine set to utilize the full speed of the installed processor?
SECURITY TOOLS	Look for open ports that should not be open, and more.
SPELL CHECKERS	Stand-alone versions that will work with any writing application.
STARTUP MANAGERS	Will stop programs from loading with Windows that you don't need or want, or add new ones that you do want.
SYSTEM INFO	These tell you every detail about hardware and software in your machine.
UNINSTALLERS	These really remove programs and all their bits and pieces.
WALLPAPER	Nice pictures to enhance your desktop.
ZIP/UNZIP	Utilities to compress and uncompress every kind of file.

That's just a sample. Don't be afraid to explore the possibilities for yourself. Happy Computing!