



The Open University



Using a Computer to Support your Study

This booklet accompanies the Skills for OU Study website: www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy

Skills for OU Study

Using a Computer to
Support your Study

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Skills for OU Study

Using a Computer to Support your Study

This booklet is for prospective students of The Open University (the OU). If you have not used computers before, this booklet will help you understand how to gain access to a computer in order to study with the OU and how to get online. This booklet accompanies the Skills for OU Study website
<http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/>.



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1 Introduction

This booklet is for anyone considering studying with The Open University (the OU) and who would like to know more about using a computer for study.

You will find out about:

- what you can do with a computer
- the type of computer you will need
- how you can gain access to one.

Gaining access to a computer might mean using one at your local library or internet café, using a work computer or buying one yourself.

This booklet describes the skills you will need to study with a computer. You will also find these skills useful in work situations. Many employers require computing skills and they are useful for leisure activities too, especially for keeping in touch with friends and family.

You can shop, pay bills and do your banking online. The internet can also be great fun. You can use your computer to watch movies and television programmes, listen to music, look at photographs and find out about any subject in the world that interests you.



Visit <http://www.open.ac.uk/pc4study/> to find out more about how OU students use computers to study.

2 Using a computer to study

Many of the tasks you need to perform as a student can be done online (see Figure 1). For example, you can send in your assignment over the internet, which is often quicker and more convenient than taking it to the post office.

Once they have registered for a course and been sent their logon details, OU students use the StudentHome website as their route to important information. They can find out about their assignment scores and how to contact a tutor or other students studying the same course. From StudentHome they can also get to their course website, which contains the course materials.

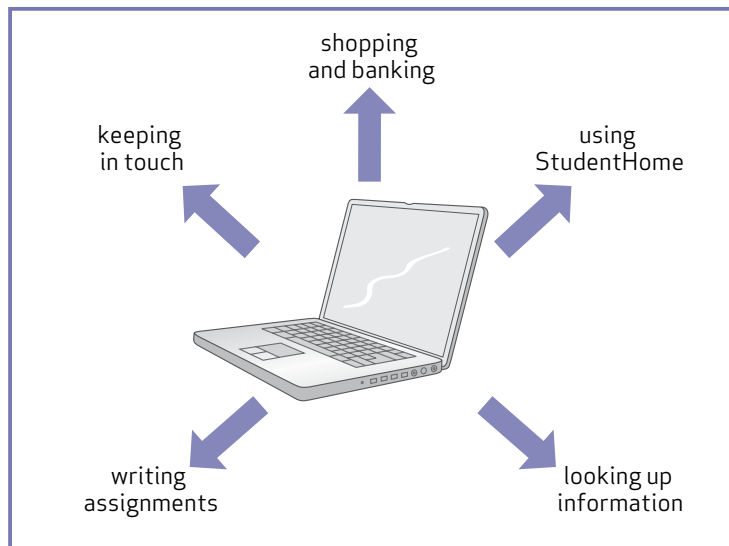


Figure 1 The many ways in which you can use a computer

Accessing your course materials

Most OU courses now have a website, which helps the OU to get news about your course to you quickly. Although many courses, for example the 'Openings' range of courses, send printed course materials to students, other courses are studied entirely online. OU courses may include elements such as video, animations and news, as well as the course materials.

Writing assignments and storing documents

Some OU courses require you to use a word processor for your assignments. You may find that word processing other documents, such as letters and notes, is more convenient than handwriting them. Being able to save these documents safely on your computer is very valuable in case you need to print a further copy, go back to your essay later in your course or when you want to base a new document on something you have already stored.

Doing research

The Open University library is a modern, state of the art building on the Milton Keynes campus. It also provides a comprehensive online library through which students can access a huge array of useful materials and services. As an OU student you will be able to make full use of the facilities, both in person if you are in Milton Keynes and online. The library subscribes to a wide range of online resources and the library website is a gateway to them.

Keeping in touch

As an OU student you can use a computer and the internet to keep in touch with your tutor and fellow students, as well as friends and family. Emails, for example, are like sending electronic letters. You can send a message at any time and the recipient can reply at a time that suits them.

Online forums work in a similar way, and OU forums are an integral part of keeping in touch with other students. You can use your computer to post messages to a course forum and engage in dialogue with other students.

The OU sends students emails about administrative issues and also puts updates on the main student website, StudentHome. Some courses have a course website, where you would look for news and resources related to your course.

3 Access to a computer

Depending on the course, you might not have to buy your own computer, although it would be more convenient to have your own. Some OU courses require you to use a computer regularly, however, other courses might require only occasional access.

Check the OU computer specification

Visit the 'Study at the OU' website (<http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/>) and look at the details for the course you want to study. Alternatively, if you know the course code, go to <http://www3.open.ac.uk/personal-computing/> and type in the course code.

To decide whether or not you feel you should get your own computer, check the computer specification of the course you're interested in. You can do this by visiting the 'Study at the OU' website (<http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/>) and looking at the details for the course you want to study.

Your options for getting access to a computer are:

- buying one (either new or second-hand)
- using one at work
- using one at your local library or internet café
- using a friend's computer.

For most OU courses, any computer first purchased in the last six years should be satisfactory. However, a few courses need more powerful machines than this so check the details in the Personal Computing website (<http://www3.open.ac.uk/personal-computing/>).

You will need your employer's permission if you want to use a work computer, particularly if your course requires you to load any software onto the machine. You should also check whether your company's security system will block access to the websites you need to visit. The IT department at your place of work can usually advise on this.

Using a public computer, say at a library, can be an option if your course only requires limited computer use (e.g. browsing the internet to access some information). Getting enough time on a public machine can sometimes be a problem and there may be a booking

system. You will probably not be allowed to load software onto a library computer. You can store your work on a removable storage device such as a USB flash drive (see glossary), which you can carry with you and also use on other machines. The librarian will give you some guidance.



Alternatively, if you only need occasional access, you may be able to use a computer belonging to a friend or relative.



Visit <http://www.open.ac.uk/pc4study/> to find out more about how OU students use computers to study.

Financial support

If you will be studying on a low income you can apply to the University's financial support scheme for help. Your first point of contact for this is the OU's Financial Support Office at Milton Keynes (phone 0190 8653 411) who will send you the required forms. Students in Scotland should instead contact the Edinburgh office on 0131 226 3851.

3.1 Buying your own computer

Whether you are buying new or second-hand, make sure that the computer you choose at least fits the minimum specification for your course. The OU doesn't demand a particularly high specification for computers and many new computers have a higher specification than you'll need.

It can be a great help to take a knowledgeable friend with you when you go shopping for a computer, someone who understands the specification and can advise you on the best buy for your needs.

A few tips

- Decide how much money you want to spend - you can get an idea by looking at prices advertised in shops and magazines
- Shop around - don't buy the first computer you come across
- Try using a computer in the shop before you decide to buy
- If possible, ask a knowledgeable friend to accompany you to the shop
- Ask a shop assistant for advice and opinions, but don't be persuaded to buy a more expensive computer than you need
- Look for a 'Genuine Windows' or 'Windows Vista' sticker on the case, manual or discs
- Find out whether the computer comes with any other software
- Check the warranty offered and whether it is 'on site' or 'return to base' (meaning you have to get the machine back to the supplier)
- Find out what else is included in the price (printer, cables, delivery to your home)
- Ask about after-sales support and how much it costs
- Find out if they will help you to set up the computer and access the internet

Buying second-hand

If you decide to buy a second-hand machine make sure you go to a reputable company as there are a lot of stolen machines on the market. The value of computers depreciates quickly, so check the price of a new machine for comparison.

Second-hand machines might come with limited warranty or no warranty at all, and might be less reliable than a new computer.

Double-check the computer against the specification for your course and don't assume that a lower specification will be sufficient. However if your computer doesn't meet the specification you might be able to upgrade it by taking it to a computer shop.

4 Choosing a computer

You need to make sure that your computer has the right specification for your course. This is for a number of reasons: your course might use activities that specifically require Microsoft Windows operating system in order to work (see later for a discussion of operating systems); your course might involve working with software that needs a lot of memory and processing power; some courses (for example language courses) might require a microphone.

4.1 The computer specification

The computer requirements of the course you want to study are given in the 'Study at the OU' website (<http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/>). Simply search for the course you are interested in and then look for details on computing requirements. It is also worthwhile to look at courses you may study later. If you don't have internet access, ask a friend or colleague to help you look up the specification you need on the internet. Alternatively, phone the Student Registration and Enquiry Service on 0845 300 6090.

Check the OU computer specification

Visit the 'Study at the OU' website (<http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/>) and look at the details for the course you want to study. Alternatively, if you know the course code, go to <http://www3.open.ac.uk/personal-computing/> and type in the course code.

As a rough guide, we suggest buying a machine with at least:

- 3.0 GHz processor
- 1 GB of RAM (memory)
- a DVD-ROM or combi drive
- 100+ GB hard disk drive
- 17" LCD screen.

A slower processor (at least 2.0 GHz) and less memory (512 megabytes) would be a reasonable compromise, except for some computing courses. Nowadays the power of processors is rarely specified by their speed. You will get just a code, like E8000 or QX9000. Any computer with a processor coded like this is satisfactory.

The amount of memory you need is more dependent on the operating system version than on the requirements of your OU course software. You may need more than indicated above.

Laptops have a different range of standard sizes for screen and processor. We would recommend at least a 15.4" screen for a laptop, with at least a 1.6 GHz processor, if it is one of the older, speed-rated types.

Knowing the minimum specification you need isn't much help if you don't know how that translates to the way computers are described. There are other options to consider too, such as whether you want a PC computer or an Apple Mac computer, a laptop or desktop machine. Do you need a printer? Speakers? A microphone? Read on for more advice.

4.2 PC or Mac?

Nearly everything said above assumes you'll be using a PC with a Microsoft Windows operating system (as opposed to an Apple Macintosh computer). PC computers are so common that people often use the name PC to refer to any computer. The Apple Macintosh ('Mac') is a popular alternative but the OU can offer only limited technical support for them. Much of the OU course software delivered on CD or DVD only works on Microsoft Windows, although that is changing, so do check the course description.

4.3 Desktop or laptop?

Whether you choose a Mac or PC you will also have to decide on the style of your computer. Desktops are designed to sit on a desk and consist of a base unit with a separate screen and keyboard (see Figure 2). Laptops perform the same functions as desktops but are smaller and more compact.

Desktops are generally cheaper, more reliable and more robust than laptops. They are also easier to update. Laptops are more portable but, consequently, easy to drop and more expensive to repair, and it is not so easy to replace a faulty screen or keyboard. However if you are highly mobile or have little room at home, perhaps a laptop is for you.

In addition, you can even buy smaller computers, sometimes called ultra-portables, netbooks or palmtops. These are sometimes cheaper and quite good for web browsing and taking notes. However,

because they often don't have a hard drive or a DVD drive, you usually can't run other OU course software on them (OU courses might occasionally require you to run bespoke software from CDs or DVDs on your computer).

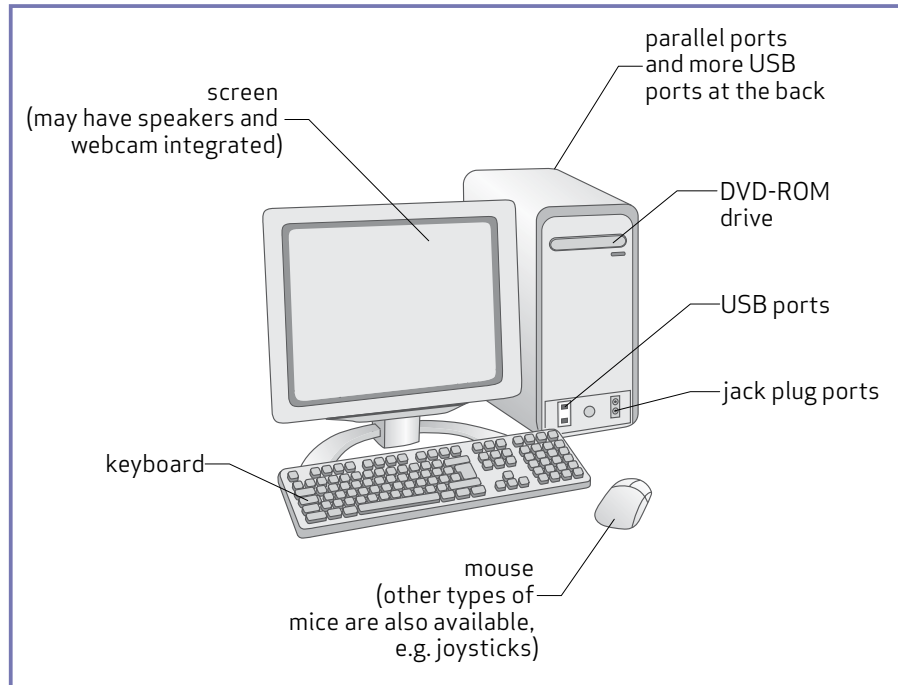


Figure 2 The various components of a desktop computer set up

All the elements of a computer can be divided up into hardware and software. Hardware includes all the physical components of the computer. Software can be thought of as the programs and instructions that direct the hardware to perform tasks.

4.4 Hardware

System unit – all desktop computers have a main box into which other components are plugged and this is usually called the system unit (or the 'base unit'). The sockets on the systems unit have particular shapes or are colour coded to avoid making a mistake when connecting equipment.

Screen – the screen (or monitor) may have to be obtained separately from the systems unit if you buy a desktop computer. In a laptop the screen is usually built into the lid.

Keyboard – the keyboard is just like a typewriter keyboard and

works in the same way although it usually has a few more keys. It is not essential to be a touch typist to use a computer - many computer users are skilled two-finger typists!

Mouse – the mouse is used to control the position of the cursor on the screen by moving it around on the work surface. You click the buttons on top of the mouse to make selections. Using a mouse can take a bit of practice. Laptops often have an integrated device called a touch pad instead of a mouse which, again, takes some practice to use. A mouse can usually be plugged in to the laptop if you find this easier.

Printer – most people buy a printer to print out their work. You can choose between inkjet or laser printers, and those that print the most common UK paper size, A4, are now fairly cheap. An inkjet printer may even be included in the price of a new computer. However, the cost of replacement ink cartridges might make ink jet printers more expensive to run. Laser printers are more expensive to purchase but may be cheaper to run in the longer term. When you are comparing costs, don't forget to ask if all necessary printer cables are supplied with the printer, and check out the life and cost of refill cartridges.

Speakers and a microphone – you may need speakers or headphones to hear sounds from the computer and, occasionally, courses may require other hardware, such as a microphone. For example, language courses require a microphone. So make sure you check the course details. Speakers are often built into laptops.

4.5 Software: the operating system

All computers have an operating system (OS) that controls the overall operation of the computer. If you buy a new computer, the OS is usually supplied as part of the purchase.

On a PC, Microsoft Windows is the most frequently used and the most readily available OS. There are several versions of Windows currently available: Windows XP is still widely used; Windows Vista was launched in late 2006 and in late 2009 Windows 7 is expected.

Apple Macintosh computers have their own operating system, called OS X, with the individual versions being named after big cats – Tiger or Leopard.

Linux is a free, open source system that works on both PCs and Macs. The Linux operating system is free to download from the internet.

These operating systems work in slightly different ways but perform the same functions. So, for example, you can make a copy of a file in all operating systems but you would have to press different keys to do so.

The companies update their operating systems regularly. However older systems (for example, Microsoft Windows XP) still work and may be preferred because they have been around long enough to have problems ironed out.

OU students have access to the technical help offered by the OU Computing Helpdesk. However, this is limited for a Mac. If you choose to buy a Mac, you should make sure that you have some other form of support in case you run into difficulties.

4.6 Software: application programs

In addition to the operating system, there are a number of other computer applications programs you will use during your studies (for example, a word processing program or Adobe Reader, a free program that allows you to look at PDF documents, which are a type of document you will encounter often on a computer). If you purchase a machine from a shop these might be included with your purchase, but you should ask the shop assistant. If you have to buy them separately, the main commercial applications can add quite a lot to the cost of a new computer.

OU students have access to several major software applications such as word processing packages and software that allows you to read PDF documents (a file format that you will regularly encounter). These are available free of charge.

Any specialist software applications that might be required for a course will also be supplied with your course materials.

Web browsers

A web browser is a program that allows you to look at web pages on the internet. There is usually one supplied with the computer, or they can be obtained free from the internet.

Some of the more popular web browsers are Internet Explorer (which comes with Windows), Firefox and Safari (which comes with the Apple Mac).

5 The internet – going online

There are several ways of gaining access to the internet and many companies that offer internet connections. To decide how you want to connect to the internet you will need to think about:

- whether you want a fast connection (broadband) or are content with a slower, dial-up connection
- whether you will always connect in one place (for example from home) or if you want to move around to different locations (using a laptop)
- who will supply your connection, that is, who will be your Internet Service Provider (ISP)
- how you want to pay: by pay-as-you-go or monthly contract.

To connect your home computer to the internet, you will usually need a telephone connection (unless you have a television cable network connection). You will also need an account with an internet service provider.

If you don't have a conventional telephone landline or if you want to connect your laptop to the internet in different locations (on the train, for example) you can buy a mobile broadband stick (a small USB plug in device) from many mobile phone suppliers.

In summary, these are the ways in which you can connect to the internet:

- broadband via your landline telephone connection (restricted to your home computer network)
- broadband via a cable connection (restricted to your home computer network)
- broadband via a mobile internet USB stick (which you can use with a laptop in many locations)
- dial-up access via your landline telephone connection (restricted to your home computer).

5.1 Dial-up or broadband?

This is one of the first things you need to decide. Broadband is increasingly popular as it is much faster than dial-up, so you can move around the internet more quickly and watch video and

download large files more easily. However, you will need to make sure that broadband is available in your area by checking with an ISP.

Dial-up access

Dial-up access uses your original telephone system without any adaptation. You need a modem (which is usually built into computers, but do check that any machine you buy has one), a cable to connect your computer to the telephone line in your house and an ISP.

Every time you want to go online you use your computer to call your ISP. Dial-up access is cheaper but slower than broadband, and while you are online you won't be able to use your telephone.



Visit <http://www.open.ac.uk/pc4study/> to find out more about how OU students use computers to study.

Most OU websites do load reasonably promptly over a standard 56kbps dial-up connection, but some course websites have animations or interactive elements that may be slow to launch. In addition, some course websites provide documents online, and if they are more than a few megabytes in size they may take half an hour or more to download. (On average it takes about four minutes per megabyte when downloading over a 56kbps connection.)

If you choose a dial-up connection, you can pay by:

- monthly contract, where you pay a monthly fee and the ISP gives you a 0800 (i.e. free call) number to use for connections, or



- pay-as-you-go contract, where you only pay for the calls you use – this is suitable for infrequent access to the internet. You can change your contract to a monthly contract later.

Broadband access

A broadband connection gives you an automatic high-speed connection to the internet whenever you start up your computer. You will also be able to make telephone calls and stay connected to the internet at the same time. Although many people now have broadband, it is not essential for OU study.

You can obtain broadband at home either by fitting an extra box with a broadband modem to the telephone line in your house, or by using your cable television connection. Alternatively, you might choose to buy a mobile internet USB stick if you want to use your laptop online outside of your home.

Broadband is nearly always paid via a monthly contract rather than on a pay-as-you-go basis. The adverts you see for 'free' or 'pay-as-you-go' broadband are usually tied in to other contracts, such as mobile phone or satellite TV.

If you choose to have your telephone line adapted, typically your ISP will tie you in to a contract for a year in return for the modification and supplying a free router.

The router allows you to connect several computers to the internet at once, and make a mini-network at home. Increasingly, ISPs also provide a wireless link, so if your computer is wireless enabled (and most modern laptops are) you don't even need cables to connect to the internet.

5.2 Selecting an ISP

There are many ISPs in the market place, and ordinary telephone companies also offer an internet service, so check whether your existing telephone company can offer you a good deal. A computing magazine is a good source for finding out about a range of ISPs (see Figure 3).

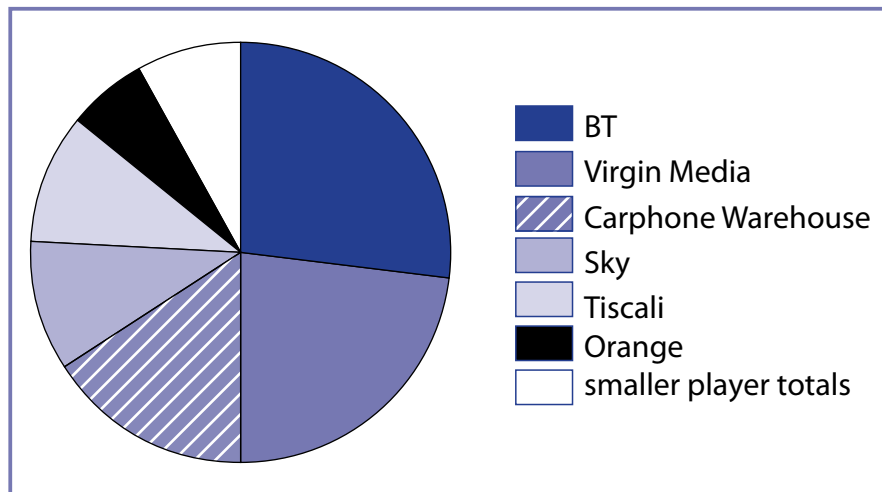


Figure 3 The market shares of the biggest ISP providers in the UK during the third quarter of 2008

Source: *Point Topic for the Broadband Stakeholder Group*
(BSG <http://www.broadbanduk.org/>)

Things to check with your ISP include:

- the monthly contract cost (which sometimes rises after the first few months)
- the contract duration, and any penalties for ending it early
- the cost of telephone support and whether 24-hour support is provided
- any limit to how much you can download
- whether there is a connection charge
- the bandwidth size - the bigger it is, the faster
- whether any adaptation required to your telephone line or cable is supplied free
- whether you can keep your old telephone number if you choose to adapt your telephone line.

The market is changing rapidly so do shop around and look for the combination of price and features that suits your needs.

5.3 Online security

Once you have your internet connection sorted out you will need to ensure that your computer is secure. It is important to protect your

computer against malicious software such as viruses, spyware, adware, bots and hackers.

Anti-virus software

Computer viruses are hidden or secretive programs that you can acquire while online. They may have been programmed to copy information from your machine, damage its contents or, increasingly, to turn your computer into a 'bot', which allows hackers to use your computer to send unwanted ('spam') email to other people. Your computer can acquire a virus if you click on an attachment in a malicious email or if you click on a link to a suspect website.

New computers are frequently supplied with a free three-month trial of anti-virus software for which you can pay to continue using after this period. There are also a number of free anti-virus packages.

It's also important to keep the software up to date so new threats are detected. Anti-virus software will often automatically prompt you to update it, which involves connecting to the internet and downloading specific files.

Firewalls

A firewall is a program on your computer that prevents other users of the internet accessing your machine. Both Windows XP and Vista have firewalls but it's important to check that they are turned on.

Firewalls and other types of security feature are usually integrated into modern security software suites.

A firewall can occasionally prevent some essential activity, such as downloading a legitimate file. However, you can turn it off temporarily or adjust the level of security to a lower setting for a while.

Phishing

Phishing is malicious activity designed either to damage your computer or copy information from it. Phishing emails work by posing as legitimate emails that either ask you to click on a link, or reply to the email sending private information, usually regarding your bank account. An email received from someone you do not recognise or that asks for private information should always be treated with caution and the safest option is not to answer it and to delete it.

6 Getting ready

If you have never used a computer before, take some time to get familiar with using one before your course starts.

You will need to be able to:

- install software from a CD or DVD
- use the mouse or keyboard to open a document or program
- move around a standard screen and windows on a computer
- save and open documents and other files that you use or create
- connect your computer to the internet
- use a web browser and move around a website.

It will also help if you can:

- use a word processor at a basic level to create and save documents
- use email
- create and organise files and folders on your computer
- change settings so your computer works the way you want it to.

6.1 Learning computing skills

You can get help and training to develop your skills. Your local library is a good place to start if you want to find courses in your area, or they might run courses themselves.

A library should also be able to give you advice on courses run by your local authority (as adult learning or leisure courses) and local colleges.

If you have access to an online computer then there are some sites that can help you to get started, even if you are a total beginner. Probably one of the best of these is the BBC's 'Absolute beginner's guide to using a computer', which you can find at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/abbeg/abbegsound.shtml>. The BBC's Webwise site will provide you with a good general introduction to computing: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/>.

Learndirect (www.learndirect.co.uk) offers online courses and gives information about courses at over 2000 centres across the UK. You can telephone them on 0800 101 901.

The BBC Computer Tutor, at www.bbc.co.uk/computertutor, is an online guide for people who do not know how to use a keyboard, mouse or computer screen.

Think about what you will use the computer for most and check that you have the skills or knowledge you need. For example, although some students use spreadsheets and databases, the key skills for most students are

- using StudentHome and the course website to find out information about their course
- word processing their study notes and assignments
- searching for information on the internet
- using forums and email to communicate with their tutor and other students
- sending and receiving assignments online.



Visit <http://www.open.ac.uk/webguide/> to find out more about how to get the best out of the web.



Students with additional requirements

If you experience problems with reading printed materials, perhaps because of a visual impairment or dyslexia, it is possible that using a computer can help. For example, it is very easy to adjust the size of the text on a computer screen to make it comfortable for you to read, or to change the colour of the text or the background.

If you have a disability, mental health condition or specific learning difficulty (such as dyslexia) you may be entitled to a Disabled Students Allowance (DSA). A DSA can help pay for the additional services and equipment required as a result of a disability. DSAs are not based on financial circumstances and there is no age limit for eligibility.

You can apply for a DSA once you are registered on a course. We encourage you to apply at the earliest opportunity as it can take up to three months from application to confirmation of a DSA award.

You can apply on line at <https://css2.open.ac.uk/online-financial-support/gatekeeper/gatekeeper.aspx> or you can contact the DSA office on 01908 654136 to obtain an application form.

Students who live in Scotland should contact the Edinburgh office on 0131 226 3851.

Glossary

ADSL: (Asymmetric digital subscriber line): telephone technology that allows fast information transmission over a standard telephone line. This is the most common form of broadband.

Application: A program running on your computer which does a particular job, e.g. a word processor or web browser.

Attachment: A file included within an email message, which could be a picture, a document etc.

Broadband: A fast telephone connection designed mainly for computer use.

Browser: A program that lets you look at web pages, e.g. Firefox, Internet Explorer.

CD (Compact disc): A disc with information stored on it.

Dial-up: The original telephone connection system used before the invention of broadband, still used in some areas that don't have broadband.

Download: The process of moving a file from a remote computer onto your computer.

DVD (Digital video - or versatile - disc): Originally a disc (read by a laser) which contained video information like a film; now also used to hold other information.

File: A single collection of information stored under one name, e.g. a document, spreadsheet, or picture.

Firewall: A security system on your computer which controls incoming and outgoing information, and may be hardware or software.

Folder: A group of files held together, much as in a filing cabinet. Folders can contain other folders within them.

Forum: An online 'meeting place' which works rather like a public notice board. Members of the forum can post and reply to messages.

GB (gigabyte): A measurement of data size or storage capacity, about a billion bytes.

Hard disc: A magnetic disc which can hold large quantities of information and is usually (but not always) fitted inside a computer.

Hardware: The physical parts of a computer, e.g. the screen,

keyboard, mouse.

HD/DVD: A high capacity DVD format now redundant and superseded by Blu-ray. Don't buy discs or drives that use this format.

Internet: The vast collection of interconnected computers throughout the world that can exchange information with each other and allows people to communicate with each other online.

Internet Explorer (IE): A web browser program

ISP: (Internet service provider): A company that provides (and often charges) for access to the Internet.

kbps: A kilobit per second (kb/s or kbit/s or kbps) is a unit of data transfer rate equal to 1000 bits per second.

Malware: (Malicious software): Software intended to cause harm or damage to your computer.

Megabyte (MB): A measurement of data size or storage capacity, around a million bytes.

Mbps: A megabit per second (abbreviated as Mb/s or Mbit/s or Mbps) is a unit of data transfer rate equal to 1,000,000 bits per second.

Memory (RAM): the fast-working memory used by the computer – the more it has the better.

Modem: The device that links to the internet via your telephone line.

Operating system: The master program that controls your computer, e.g. Windows, Linux. It is what you use to give your computer instructions.

PDF (portable document format): A common file format defined by Adobe Systems Inc. To read a PDF file you need a PDF reader – software that is freely available on the internet.

Processor: The device in a computer that performs all the work. The minimum processor speed required is given in the specification. Many processors are now defined by a code number rather than specifying a speed.

Program: The instructions that tell a computer what to do, also called software or application. Programs can be installed from a disc or by downloading from the internet.

Software: The common term for a computer program or application.

Spam: Unwanted and unsolicited email.

Spyware: A program which may have been installed on your computer by an online source without your knowledge, and that reports your computer use to others.

URL: An address that identifies the location of a website, e.g. <http://www.open.ac.uk>, also known as an internet address.

USB (universal serial bus): A socket into which you can plug equipment like a printer, web-camera, USB flash drive, etc.

USB flash drive: A small, portable memory device that can be plugged into a USB socket. Also called a memory stick or pen drive.

Virus: A program designed to replicate itself and which may damage part of your computer.

Web browser: A program that allows you to look at web pages, e.g. Firefox, Internet Explorer, Safari.

WiFi (wireless fidelity): A wireless technology that allows computers to communicate without the need for any physical connection between them. Commonly found on laptops.

Window: A rectangular outline on your screen showing one activity or program. You can have a number of windows open at a time.

Windows: A computer operating system, the most common one on PCs.

For a good glossary of computer terms, visit the BBC's jargonbuster webpage: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/webwise/course/jargon/a.shtml>

OU contact numbers

Use the Student Registration and Enquiry Service telephone helpline for your first port of call at the Open University.

- The Student Registration and Enquiry Service: 0845 300 6090

For advice on financial support contact:

- Financial Support Office: 0190 865 3411

(NB Financial support differs according to which area of the UK you live in. It is best to contact the Student Registration and Enquiry Service first. They will then refer you on to the correct service.)

Further reading

Aldridge, E. (2008) How to be a Silver Surfer: A Beginner's Guide to the Internet (2nd edn) Age Concern Books, London.

Gatenby, J. (2003) Computing for the Older Generation, Bernard Babani Publishing, London.

Miller, M. (2003) Absolute Beginner's Guide to Computer Basics, Que Publishing, USA.

Manning, L. (2006) Computing For Beginners: The Basics Explained in Plain English, AuthorHouse, UK.

Vandome, N. (2008) Laptops for Seniors – for the Over 50s, In Easy Steps Ltd, Southam.

Don't forget to check your local library for useful introductory books on computing. They might also stock copies of Computing Which? magazine.