

Best Free Software (PC Magazine, March 2008)

Adobe Acrobat Reader	This simplest of Adobe's PDF programs lets you do just about anything PDF-related (other than creating new PDFs), including online collaboration. www.adobe.com
AOL Instant Messenger (AIM)	One of the most widely used pieces of free software ever and offers a ton of capabilities. www.aim.com
Audacity	Whether you're recording or editing, Audacity is all about audio in practically any format. audacity.sourceforge.net
Firefox	This PC Magazine Editors' Choice Web browser has been on top of the heap since version 1.5 came out in late 2005. www.mozilla.com
GIMP	The GNU Image Manipulation Program (GIMP) does most of what Photoshop does; the Gimpshop project (plasticbugs.com) even makes it look like Photoshop. www.gimp.org
OpenOffice	You can spend a lot for Microsoft Office or nothing for this suite with full-function word processor, spreadsheet, database, presentations, even an equations editor. www.openoffice.org
Thunderbird	Mozilla's no-cost e-mail alternative is extensible, fast, and easy to master. There are a wealth of free add-ons from calendars to encryption. www.mozilla.com/thunderbird
NanoScan	In less than a minute, NanoScan can analyze all processes running on your computer and identify viruses, Trojan horses, spyware, or other malicious programs. www.nanoscan.com
Comodo Firewall	This protective dragon keeps hackers out of your system, controls which programs can access the Net (its whitelist of about one million means you get fewer pop-ups), and blocks tricky "leak test" techniques. It's both touch and good looking. www.personalfirewall.comodo.com
Hotspot Shield	Create an instant virtual private network (VPN) tunnel between your laptop and the router at any Wi-Fi hot spot to protect your data from snoops on the public airwaves, even if you're using extra encryption. If you're on a network that limits the use of certain apps (such as Skype), the VPN could give you unfettered access. It even works with your wired connection for an extra layer of security. www.anchorfree.com
KompoZer	A full WYSIWYG web-page authoring tool akin to Dreamweaver. KompoZer integrates an FTP site manager for file uploads. www.kompozer.net
Notepad++	Notepad++ handles text—especially source code—in ways the basic Windows Notepad could only dream of, with embellishments like tabs and color coding. notepad-plus.sourceforge.net
EssentialPIM Free	Imagine taking the e-mail out of Microsoft Outlook to get a killer personal information manager (PIM). That's what EssentialPIM is all about. www.essentialpim.com
Power Calculator	This XP-only PowerToy replaces the lame Windows calculator with a mathematical powerhouse. www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/downloads/powertoys/xppowertoys.msp
Allways Sync	Sync files between your PC and an external drive, filtering by folder, file name, or file type. The program displays warnings about questionable files before syncing. www.allwayssync.com
Glary Utilities	Glary offers a ton of utilities for cleaning, optimizing, and securing Windows in one package. www.glaryutilities.com
UTorrent	The tiniest BitTorrent client around (only 214K) comes with all the torrent download features you crave. www.utorrent.com
Battery Status	This application runs in the system tray and takes advantage of smart battery support in XP/Vista to provide loads of info on laptop power usage.

	Users.rcn.com/tmtalpey/BattStat
Vista Drive Icon	Add one of Vista's best features to XP: smart drive icons showing the current capacity of each hard drive. Dvicon.sourceforge.net
Xyplorer	Multiple tabs and improved search enhance and replace the boring old Windows Explorer. www.xyplorer.com
NetStumbler	Use it to detect any Wi-Fi network in your vicinity and see if it's open for use, or just use it to troubleshoot your own. www.netstumbler.com
Blogger	Blogger was one of the first blog-publishing tools. Years after Google bought it, it remains one of the best, especially for newbies. Create a brain-dead simple weblog and let Blogger host it (with a blogspot.com name) using the slew of provided templates, or use it to publish blog on your own domain. www.blogger.com
Levelator	Levelator adjusts the levels of your audio files to give the perfect balance. www.conversationsnetwork.org/levelator
Paint.net	This program is probably the closest thing to Photoshop you can get free, courtesy of a student project. www.getpaint.net
Picasa	Google's photo manager makes it easy to get pictures off a digital camera, organize them, and even edit and share them. www.picasa.com
Zotero	Zotero makes it easy to keep track of all your research on the web, including how to cite it in future reports. www.zotero.com
Google Earth	Fly over familiar terrain or foreign lands with Google Earth, a searchable database of satellite images and geographical data—even images of the heavens. You can go a step further with all sorts of downloadable, gee-whiz applications from scientists, media outlets, and other third-party developers to trick out your Earth-moving experience. www.earth.google.com
Google Maps	This interactive mapping tool goes beyond driving directions. View destinations in Street View, Satellite, or Terrain modes; check traffic updates; or look up info on nearby businesses. www.maps.google.com
AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition	Its control center is awkward, but AVG scans files on demand, upon access, on a schedule, and in e-mail. Its rescue disks will help you recover from disaster. http://free.grisoft.com
SyncToy v2.0	Make sure folders across your networked computers contain the same files, even on drives that change location and name. www.microsoft.com/downloads
Scribus	This open-source page layout tool has features comparable to big names like Pagemaker, plus support for PDFs and scalable vector graphics (SVG) www.scribus.net
Uniblue Process Scanner	You can do the Ctrl-Alt-Delete salute in Windows to see what's bogging down your PC, but can you understand the results? ProcessScanner, coupled with the online Process Library, provides extra information on each process (like whether it autostarts or not, and who makes the software in question), and even lists the security risk to your system for running it. www.processlibrary.com
YouConvertIt	This web application turns just about any file into a different kind of file, even online videos from YouTube. It also converts units of energy, force, length, and more. www.youconvertit.com
ZamZar	File conversion is no longer a complete nightmare. Just go to ZamZar, upload a file, choose from a long list of extensions (including image, doc., music, video, and compression types), and enter your email address. When it's done, ZamZar will send you the converted file. www.zamzar.com
Reaper	The name is short for Rapid Environment for Audio Production Engineering, and Recording. That pretty much says it all. www.cockos.com/reaper
Wavosaur	A low-price and low-profile audio editor. Wavosaur doesn't even need installation. Just click the executable to start processing and recording sounds. It lacks some of the features of full programs like Audacity, but for quick and dirty

	MP3 editing it can't be beat. www.wavosaur.com
VLC Media Player	Forget Windows Media Player. VideoLAN's open-source VLC can replace it, and nearly every other player, too. VLC supports almost every audio format and video codec imaginable and doubles as a server for streaming your music and video to other PCs. Change its skin to make it look like the player you want—even WMP. www.videolan.org
YouTube Uploader	If you've got a lot of YouTube videos ready to go online, upload them to the site all at once with the Uploader. www.youtube.com/multifile_installer
IrfanView	IrfanView previews images (or even audio and video) and then converts or optimizes them without opening a separate editor. www.irfanview.com