

Computer Literacy for Seniors

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Many seniors are discovering that the admonition to 'use it or lose it' applies when learning how to use a computer. Learning how to use a computer may seem like a daunting task to, but the process doesn't have to be overwhelming. In fact, learning to use a computer can be quite fun and the rewards are immense.

Computer literacy gives older adults access to a vast network of information and people, and allows them to share their wisdom and experience with the rest of the world. Financial and medical information, travel information, employment and volunteer opportunities, online shopping, bridge, mahjong and chess games are just a mouse click away on the internet. And internet connectivity can allow seniors to transcend physical limitations. A February 2003 report by National Public Radio (NPR) aptly states, "the wired world will extend our eyes and ears and limbs, bringing the world of news and shops and ideas to us, even if our physical movements are constrained."

Many men and women whose initial 'take' on computer use was "I can never learn that" are excited and proud of the new skills they've learned or the old ones they've recalled. Many become proficient enough to offer their services to community organizations doing data input or other basic computer tasks, take part time jobs or volunteer to teach other 'newbies' the wonders of email, the world wide web, graphics programs and online shopping.

Involvement with computers may ease depression and loneliness; or engender satisfaction at knowing 'what's doing' when people talk about computers and the internet. Many people find email an easier way to communicate than the phone, an especially important consideration for people with hearing difficulties.

Email also provides an opportunity to reconnect with old friends and distant family. And it would be impossible to overstate the satisfaction people feel when they are called 'the coolest grandma/grandpa in the world' because they've sent an email or e-greeting to a grandchild.

Why should I learn how to use a computer and the internet?

There are several ways in which learning how to use a computer and the internet might enrich and expand your life. A few of the most convincing reasons include:

- **Information** Using the computer to do research can be rewarding and interesting. You can find out about your favorite hobbies and passions, however unique they might be, and discover that there are other people out there who share your interest. You can also research medical conditions and help yourself become better prepared for visits with your doctor. You can investigate items you want to purchase, find out what other consumers have to say about them, and comparison shop. You can find maps and directions to every conceivable location, movie times and theaters, up-to-the-minute weather information, world news, sports scores and much, much more. Being able to use the computer and navigating the internet can

Did You Know?

22% of Americans 65 and older use the Internet. The percent of seniors who go online has jumped by 47% between 2000 and 2004. In a February 2004 survey, 22% of Americans age 65 or older reported having access to the Internet, up from 15% in 2000. That translates to about 8 million Americans age 65 or older who use the Internet. By contrast, 58% of American age 50-64, 75% of 30-49 year-olds, and 77% of 18-29 year-olds currently go online.

-From Older Americans and the Internet, a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (see [Online resources](#) below)

expand your world of information resources tremendously.

- **Communication, Friendship & Connection** Keeping in touch with friends and family through email will enrich your life. You will be able to hear and see what your children, grandchildren and good friends are up to on a daily basis without the expense of a large phone bill. Additionally, you can communicate with other people via email. You can resolve a billing question with your cable company, find out about services at a local volunteer organization, track down old classmates, or request information from a national organization.
- **Employment** Knowing how to use a computer can help you find a job. There are tremendous resources on the internet to learn about jobs requirements, job openings, and volunteer opportunities. See Helpguide's [Finding the Right Career I: Defining the Job that is Best for You](#) and [Senior Careers: Discovering New Options for Lifetime Employment](#) for more information. Additionally, computer skills will increase the jobs available to you.
- **Entertainment** Your computer can provide entertainment in a variety of ways. Games on and off, can be a fun way to engage your mind when there isn't anyone else around. Online magazines abound, as do newsgroups focused on particular topics. Information about work events, politics, sports and entertainment can provide your daily infusion of current events. Beyond the internet, the computer might become a great tool for a new hobby or interest. If you love photography, new software and a digital camera can give you the ability to spend time working on your art even if you don't have access to a darkroom. Similarly, you may find it easier to create newsletters for your family or community once you learn to use a computer publishing or word processing program. The possibilities are endless.
- **Commerce** Once you learn how, shopping on the internet can prove economical and effective. The internet allows you to compare prices quickly without running from store to store, research particular items, read reviews and commentary before buying, and have purchases delivered right to your door. Of course, it pays to be a careful consumer, which means shopping from reputable sites, getting word of mouth referrals from friends and family and remembering the old adage if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Are there computer training programs designed for seniors?

AARP and SeniorNet have been at the forefront of providing opportunities for seniors to become computer literate. Their accessible websites, SeniorNet's program for training senior volunteers to teach other seniors and the AARP online tutorial are just a few ways to become computer literate.

In addition, most community colleges, senior centers, and libraries can help you find a learning situation that works for you. In some communities, there are computer tutors who work with clients on their home computers or give individual lessons to residents of retirement communities, skilled nursing facilities and assisted living facilities. SeniorNet classes are available in many cities in the country, as well. (See [Online Resources](#) for more information about computer training programs for seniors.)

What deters seniors from becoming computer literate?

More and more seniors are joining the ranks of the computer literate everyday. As stated above (see sidebar), 22% of Americans 65 and older use the internet, an increase of 47% from 2000 to 2004. Once lagging behind, older women have caught up with men and now comprise 50% of all 65+ users. The group slightly younger than the over-65 group is on the internet and using computers in even larger numbers. (Information provided Older Americans and the Internet, a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project see [Online Resources](#) for link.)

Still, there are some seniors who resist computers for various reasons. Some may be put off at first by trying to control the mouse, or by confusing 'error' messages on the screen. Others are deterred by the expense and the sheer bewilderment about the thought of taking on a new medium. Even though there are ways to compensate for most 'disabilities of aging,' some people may just think beyond their capabilities.

These valid concerns can be dispelled by a step-by-step approach to the solutions. Once seniors become aware of the possibilities what the computer can be used for, what types of information y can find on the internet; how email works, what surfing and browsing are there is greater incentiv to learn the technology. When tutoring sessions start with an overview, a 'tour' of what's possible with a visit to a thrilling site, the students become eager to get started.

Can seniors with 'disabilities of aging' become computer literate?

Resoundingly YES! The accessibility options that are standard on most new computers, as well as the available add-on assistive technology software and hardware, make it possible for people wit vision and motor issues to use the computer as well as anyone else. To address vision problems there are programs that will enlarge anything that appears on the screen, and there are programs that will read aloud the text that appears on the screen. It's possible to enhance the letters and numbers on the keyboard with simple stick-on replacements from Lighthouse for the Blind. Most computers will allow you to change the background color on the screen to provide greater contrast between it and the text.

To compensate for motor problems, there are many mouse alternatives and keyboard tricks. The field of adaptive or accessible technology is continually striving to address these concerns. According to a paper by Senior Services and the Center for Accessible Technology, "seniors generally choose technology that is simple and does not have a high learning curve; for example they tend to choose mouse use over keyboard shortcuts. They also tend to be interested in using few specific applications and prefer adaptations that are customized to these applications; e.g., th often prefer a talking browser to a screen reader.

What are some computer training tips and tools?

- TIP 1: URL's (Web addresses) need to be typed in only once! Type URL in 'address' line of your browser. Hit 'enter' and go to the website, then click on 'favorites' and 'add' the page to your personal list of favorites.
- TIP 2: Take frequent breaks. Stand up, move your arms, walk around, drink water, open and close your eyes. Set a timer to remind you once you are 'hooked,' time will fly!!!
- TIP 3: Be sure your computer setup is right for you. Pay attention to how your hands and arms address the keyboard, where your head is in relation to the monitor, and the chair you use.

Would you like to share your passion for email and the internet? Or graphics? Or spreadsheets? you need is a basic understanding of the tools and techniques you already use and a desire to introduce others to this fascinating world. You can become a computer tutor on your own, or with a group of friends.

To start, identify locations where there is not yet a computer learning program, or where there are underused computers. Find out if there are people waiting to be taught. Then, decide how many hours you are willing to donate. Find friends who have similar interests, and use the information in 'Teaching Older Adults to be Computer Literate' (see [Online Resources](#)) to create a volunteer tutoring program. Or simply offer your services where they're needed. You can easily adapt tutoring information from the many online tutorials in the [Online Resources](#) section.

Having fun online

Many computer users just want to have fun and there are lots of ways to do that. Solitaire in any of its many forms is a great way to practice 'mousing' skills. Or, you can send creative, personal e-greeting cards. You can share jokes through email and find even more on sites devoted to humor. See Helpguide's [Free Online Games](#) and [Humor and Laughter](#) for more ideas about having fun

online.

Online resources for computer literacy

General Information on Computer Use

[How to use a computer and protect your body from pain](#) Buying guide for the right computer you. Tips on how to use it without hurting your body.

[Keys to safe computer use from Stanford University](#) Includes information on equipment setup and healthy work habits and practices.

[SeniorNet Discussions: Computer and Internet Q&A & Tips](#) Anyone can browse the SeniorNet Roundtable discussions on computers or any other topic. If you want to contribute, you can register online to become a member at no cost. Scroll down to topics that interest you.

[Older Americans and the Internet](#) (Pew Internet & American Life Project) 2004 report which offers statistics and information about the number of seniors on the internet and what type of activities they do online. Also see Wired Seniors, for Pews 2001 report on the subject.

Online Tutorials

[Getting Cyber Savvy: A New User's Guide to Going Online](#) - Takes some of the mystery out of using the Internet

[AARP: Learn the Internet: Basic and Intermediate Browsing - Online Internet tutorial](#)

[SeniorNet: Eleven Tutorials for Beginning and Intermediate Computer Users](#) - Includes tutorials for getting started, and getting out of trouble.

[Computers for Beginners](#) - Learn about keeping your computer running smoothly.

[Five Minute Tech Tutorials for the PC](#) - Learn internet and PC basics.

[Mac Solutions - Offers tips for using the Mac operating system](#)

[Mouserobics: great practice for beginning mouse users](#) - Self-directed mouse tutorial.

[Multnomah County Library Tutorials - Offers computer basics, Internet basics and Mouse practice](#)

[Email tips - Offers advice about email etiquette, links to free email, and tips on using an email address book.](#)

Accessibility Options/Assistive Technology

[AARP Accessibility Options](#) - PC and Mac built-in accessibility functions. Links to Microsoft and Mac sites that will help you customize your computer to meet your individual needs.

[Alliance for Technology Access: Computer and Web Resources for people with Disabilities](#) comprehensive directory of resources for adults and children with disabilities

[Opera](#) - Opera addresses symptoms of vision impairments (including low vision and blindness) by providing features specifically designed to aid visually impaired users. This software is free if you accept ads; or ad-free if you purchase the software.

[IBM Web Adaptation Technology](#) - Offers tips for transforming web pages to meet your individual needs. For example, it enhances the readability of pages, reduces visual clutter of some pages, makes the mouse and keyboard easier to use, and reads text aloud.

[Microsoft Assistive Technology](#) - Information for technology to address hearing, learning, vision, mobility and language impairments

[Microsoft: Aging and Assistive Technology](#) - Provides information about making adjustments to computers to accommodate age-related changes in vision, hearing, and dexterity.

[Windows 98 Accessibility Features](#) - A special Accessibility menu that includes two new accessibility utilities Accessibility Wizard and Magnifier to help make Microsoft Windows 98 more accessible for people with disabilities

[Lighthouse for the Blind Large Print Keyboard Labels](#) Labels available for purchase for users with vision impairment.

Person-to-Person Computer Tutoring

[SeniorNet Learning Centers](#) Provides information about SeniorNet tutoring and computer learning classes in many cities.

[Teens Teach Technology to Seniors](#) Outlines a model for a teen/senior computer tutoring program.

[Find volunteer tutoring opportunities](#) Nationwide volunteer opportunity database

[Webwise Seniors Mobility](#) Provides information about an alternate tutoring model for seniors who are unable to travel to established classes.

[Ergonomic Guidelines for Arranging a Computer Workstation](#) (Cornell University Ergonomic Web) Provides information about how to set up your computer workstation to maximize comfort and minimize strain.

Fun Online Resources

[Greeting Cards](#) - Send beautiful e-greeting cards to loved ones and friends for free.

[Free daily crossword puzzle from Houston Chronicle](#) - A puzzle to keep your mind active.

[Free help solving crossword puzzles](#) - Get help with words and clues to solve crossword puzzles

Related articles on Helpguide

- [Teaching Older Adults to Become Computer Literate](#)
- [Free Online Games](#)
- [Humor and Laughter: Health Benefits and Online Sources](#)
- [Finding the Right Career I: Defining the Job that is Best for You](#)

- [Finding the Right Career II: Job Networking, Informational Interviewing and Resumes](#)
- [Finding the Right Career III: Preparing for Interviews and Landing the Job](#)
- [Senior Careers: Discovering New Options for Lifetime Employment](#)

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