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What's the greatest sin a computer journalist can commit? To editors, who live in constant fear of having to print blank pages in their magazines, it's failing to meet deadlines. To PR companies, it's grabbing all the promotional T-shirts at their product launches and ripping them apart to use as car polishing rags. To readers it's reviewing a new piece of software without trying it out – this also raises a number of ethical questions, but the chances are you won't get found out unless you're stupid enough to praise the exciting gameplay in the latest word processor.

But far worse than all these is the wanton use of car metaphors. You must have read them: 'Lifting the bonnet reveals the massive hard disk' and 'Graphics performance moves up a gear.' We hear of 'middle-of-the-road computers' and read news items telling us that AMD is 'revving up its processors.' Even sub-editors, who should know better, come up with headlines like 'Life in the fast lane.'

Mind you, it's easy to understand how journalists, who are easily led at the best of times, can be seduced by the jargon of manufacturers. Intel makes OverDrive processors, with which we cruise down the information superhighway. PCs come with turbo buttons; Starfish Software wants us to buy a program called Dashboard and there are hundreds of utility programs sold as toolkits. Even Windows 95 has a start button and relies on drivers.

The one unforgivable sin, however, is not the use of car metaphors: it's the full-blown car analogy, pieces that run along the lines of, 'Next to a house and a car, buying a PC is the biggest single purchase...' The articles compare a computer's processor to a car's engine, and its speed in MHz to the engine's horsepower. Learning to use a computer is 'the same as learning to drive' and the mouse becomes 'a steering wheel, for telling the PC where to go'.

I'm sorry, but the car analogy doesn't work. Computers don't have wheels; cars don't have hard disks, or anything like them; and a monitor isn't a windscreen to see where you're going. The analogy breaks down completely when you look at obsolescence. Have you heard of a car being scrapped after two years because it can't keep up with this year's models?

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Teach Yourself Office 97 Visually

IDG Books. 351pp. Fully illustrated. £28.99.
ISBN 0-7645-6018-2.



This is a colourful guide to getting the most out of Microsoft's latest and greatest office suite. Designed for the beginner, it relies on clear illustrations and captions rather than endless pages of text to get the message across.

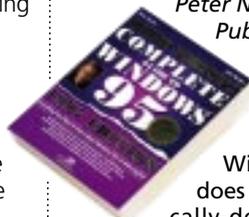
Most of the book concentrates on the three main office applications – Word, Excel and PowerPoint. Office 97 also comes with Microsoft's new personal information manager, Outlook, and so there's a bit on that too. Here you can learn how to use the e-mail Inbox and Outbox functions, enter tasks and contacts, and make full use of the calendar and journal facilities.

This Office 97 guide doesn't go into every feature, but all of the basics are covered in an easy-to-follow step-by-step format. Each page is well laid out with no more than two or three screenshots, plus superb full-colour illustrations.

A great guide for any newcomer to Office 97.

Complete Guide To Windows 95

Peter Norton (& John Mueller). Sams Publishing. 1,160pp. £31.95.
ISBN: 0-672-31040-6.

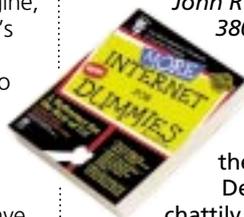


This guide comes courtesy of PC guru Peter Norton, who used to boast with gay abandon: 'I don't do Windows'. Well, quite obviously now he does because with well over 1,000 technically-detailed pages, *Complete Guide to Windows 95* lives up to its title. He starts off with an interesting history of the Windows operating system and goes on to cover everything from installation of Window 95 to complicated methods of tweaking the Registry. Along the way he drops in plenty of explanatory notes and examples, but illustrations are few and far between.

Norton does have a tendency to assume his readers are primed to some aspects of the industry that most people have probably never come across ('...and we all know how well the honor system works' – what's the 'honor system', exactly?), but on the whole this is a very readable and highly informative book.

More Internet for Dummies, 3rd edition

John R Levine and Margaret Levine Young.
380pp. IDG Books. £21.99.
ISBN: 0-7645-0135-6.



This is a companion to *The Internet for Dummies*, by the same authors, and goes into quite a lot of detail about the technology behind the Internet.

Despite this level of detail, it's written as chattily as the other Dummies books and is easy to understand – it even manages to be quite funny. If you want to skip these details, they're separate from the lucid chapters on getting and setting up an Internet connection. Even the Web site recommendations seemed well-chosen, and as nearly all of them are from major companies like Yahoo or The Economist, they shouldn't become out of date too quickly. It's a book for dipping into rather than reading from cover to cover, but if you want to delve into the workings of the Internet as well as getting on line, then it's certainly worth a look.

next month

New, improved *What PC?*

Next month look out for the all-new *What PC?* – redesigned to be bigger, brighter and easier to use than ever before. Packed with reviews and features, it's your best guide to buying PCs, software and peripherals.

What PC? reliability report

Just how reliable is your PC? Are some brands better than others? Which components are prone to break down the most? Next month we answer these and other important questions in the *What PC?* reliability report. The answers may surprise you.

The business – all you need for £1,500

Superstore or dealer? High street or direct? With so many different ways of buying a PC, it's difficult to know how to get the best deal – especially when you're on a budget. Next month the *What PC?* team go in search of complete business systems, including printer and software, for £1,500.

Colour inkjets

With prices falling and quality improving in leaps and bounds, there's never been a better time to buy a colour printer. We put the latest models to the test to find the best.



Tax software

Shrouded in confusing forms and terminology, tax self-assessment can be a terrifying affair. We look at PC software designed to make the process easier.

On sale 14th August
(contents subject to change)