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I'd always been one of the many who thought it was only a matter of a short time before PCs would become so simple that everyone and his aunt would be cheerfully using them every day. Now I'm not so sure.

Are we really about to reach the stage that just about any able-bodied person will be as comfortable with a PC as with, say, a telephone or TV, or driving a car? A time when PCs will be so intelligent and robust that even a complete novice will be able to install and use one, straight from the box, and add applications with no problem?

Rather than being just a matter of a few years away, maybe we're talking about decades. Progress seems to have been glacially slow during the past few years. How many users – even experienced ones – can honestly say they find PCs 'easy'? Many of the promises made nearly two years ago about Windows 95 didn't materialise, such as Plug 'n Play and the virtual 'uncrashabilty' of the new version. Then there was the much-hyped ease of installing and uninstalling software. My PC, for one, is dense with files that are no longer needed but which Windows 95 doesn't seem capable of deleting when the software's removed. As for the Net and the Web, it's still often a slog for the newcomer to establish a reliable on-line connection that works smoothly with a variety of software.

Going further, at times I even wonder whether this PC mass market will remain elusive indefinitely. Sure, eventually PCs will undoubtedly become so intelligent and so cheap that everyone will have a couple. But there will always be some people on the fringe of the market who don't know quite enough, who will struggle with whatever is available, no matter how user-friendly it purports to be. Although the next PC generation will obviously be simpler to use, it will attract those who wouldn't even have tackled earlier PCs – so you'll still have many at the tail of the distribution curve who'll be in trouble.

But, on balance, I'm optimistic. For most people I think the key issue is motivation. Is learning how to install and use PCs worth the effort for the potential advantages? You put a lot of effort into learning to drive because of the benefits. If you can drive a car, you should certainly be able to run Windows. On a good day, anyway.
Terry Pinnell

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Upgrade & Repair Your PC on a Shoestring
Wayne N Kawamoto. 386pp plus CD-ROM. Ventana. £22.50. ISBN: 1-56604-529-0.

This technical book is written for the non-techie. Starting from what you may want to do with your PC, the author explains the minimum requirements for each of your computer's components. For instance, if you want basic Internet access or if you want multimedia capabilities, the requirements of your PC will be different. He goes on to look at each of the chief components. CPUs, video cards, monitors, modems, sound cards and CD-ROMs are explained in a no-fuss way, and there are hints on how to spot whether your current model needs upgrading.

The upgrading process itself is also nicely explained, with plenty of photos to help out – these would be even more useful if they were in colour, as it can be difficult at times to see the fine detail. On the whole, however, this book takes the panic out of upgrading with its helpful safety tips and trouble-shooting.

The Complete Idiot's Guide To Microsoft Office 97 Professional
Joe Kraynak and Sherry Kinkoph. Que. £18.49. ISBN: 0-7897-0950-3.
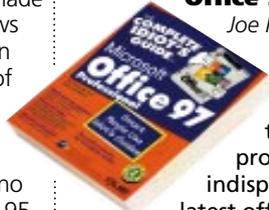
We're big fans of the *Idiot's Guide* series, mainly because the books tend to contain exactly what they proclaim. In this case the content is an indisputably simple guide to Microsoft's latest office suite, Office 97 Professional.

As with all the computer-related Idiot's Guides, this one has a tear-out key guide at the front – although this is less comprehensive than previous efforts simply because Office 97 is such a huge program. The rest of the guide covers topics as basic as creating your first Word document, and goes all the way up to configuring Outlook to receive e-mail messages.

Not surprisingly, *...To Office 97 Professional* is more accessible than either of Microsoft's manuals (printed and on line), but it doesn't really add a great deal to them. Overall, this is a great book but one that's only worth buying if you're having difficulties using Office 97.

The What PC? Guide to your PC
Rob Young. pp 431. Prentice Hall. £13.95. ISBN: 0-13-67952-5.

If you're new to the world of computers, magazines such as *What PC?* are invaluable for giving you an insight into all the terms and jargon. A magazine won't, however, tell you everything you need to know in a single issue. The *What PC? Guide to your PC* sets out to do just that.

The Guide begins with the basics – what is a computer and how does it work? Thankfully for novices, this book is written in a non-technical and understandable style. Chapter two goes on to cover PC peripherals, including the sometimes tricky business of installing and configuring expansion cards. Buying advice is also given.

Much of the guide is understandably devoted to Windows (both 3.1 and 95) but there is also ample coverage of basic software tasks and various common applications are covered. For anyone about to dip their toes into the world of PCs, the *What PC? Guide to your PC* is perfect for when you want to find out something new.