Welcome to *What PC?*

If you've got this far, you've bought, borrowed or stolen a copy of *What PC?*. This means you have at least a passing interest in buying a PC or some computer accessories. That's why we're here. In this section we'll tell you the basics of how computers work – hardware and software – and tell you what to look for and what features you should consider before buying any of them.

Buyers tables

Our comprehensive tables at the back of the magazine list all the major items of hardware and software, together with details of features, prices and suppliers: all in a readily accessible format so you can easily find what you need.

Group tests and reviews

In between the News towards the front and the tables at the back are all the tests and reviews for which *What PC?* is famous. You'll find independent tests of new and interesting items (see the Up Front and In Brief sections) as well as comparative tests of similar products.

Our verdict at the end of each product review includes a quick-reference panel (see below) showing you how we rated the product's performance, features, value for money and so on.

Dynalink 32A P90

Performance	1	2	3	**4**	5
Documentation	1	**2**	3	4	5
Features	1	2	**3**	4	5
Value for money	1	2	3	4	**5**

Our scoring system **explained**

1	Poor
2	Moderate
3	Average
4	Good
5	Excellent

You, the reader, are very important to us and we want to know what you like or dislike about *What PC?*. If you have any comments or suggestions, please address them to the editor. We read every letter sent to us and, even if we can't respond to them all on our Letters page, we listen very carefully to what our readers have to say about the service we provide.

Question Time

Questions about your PC, or the software you use with it, can be answered on our Question Time pages. We welcome all contributions to Question Time, whether from absolute beginners or seasoned computer users.

***Mick Andon**, Editor*

Lab testing

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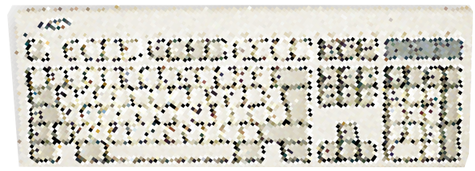
getting started

What is a PC?

A PC (personal computer) is just what it sounds like – a computer designed for personal use and able to carry out a whole range of tasks – rather than one designed for a specific purpose and housed in a big room tended by highly skilled experts.



Control of the PC

It doesn't matter whether you want to sort a list, print a letter or play a game: you need to be able to tell your computer what to do. You can do this with a keyboard and a mouse, both of which are supplied as standard with new PCs, though if you'll be playing a lot of games, you might want to buy a joystick too.

The letter keys on a computer keyboard are laid out in the same way as a typewriter, but there are extra keys related solely to computer work. Although you can control movement on the screen using a keyboard, it's far easier with a mouse, which is a precise hand-held controller that can be rolled on any flat surface.

A computer joystick is modelled on an aeroplane's joystick and is used to control movement in games, as well as being equipped with a host of control and fire buttons.

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What does a PC do?

A computer processes information. You put instructions and information in at one end and the computer processes them in some way to provide results (output) at the other.

This input, process and output sequence is familiar to all of us, though we don't often think of the real world in terms of these particular labels. However, call a washing machine a clothes processor, and you'll get the idea. We expect the output (clean clothes) to be different from the input. The same goes for computers: if we type in lists of names and addresses (customers, perhaps), we expect the computer to process the information in a useful way – perhaps sorting the names into alphabetical order, counting them or grouping them by location. The output can be more printed lists (now sorted) or address labels or, perhaps, hundreds of letters with a different name and address on each one. We also expect the computer to be able to store the details we have typed in for future use. It is the computer's ability to process raw data and turn it into something structured and accessible that makes it so invaluable.