

# PC doctor



I have recently been considering buying a modem and I would like to know what the advantages and disadvantages are of all the different Web services (eg CompuServe and Demon). I would also like to know if there are any additional charges on top of the advertised rates, and what are the differences between the various phone companies (BT, Mercury etc)?

*Daniel Cornell,  
Mansfield, Nottinghamshire*



When you decide to get hooked up to the Internet you can choose from one of two basic connection types. The first can be broadly grouped into what are known as on-line services, supplied and maintained by companies such as CompuServe and AOL.

Signing up for an on-line service will give you not only an Internet connection but also 'value-added' content and facilities such as electronic news, chat rooms and discussion forums. The second type, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), will give you nothing more than a connection to the Internet and if you want services such as news and chat then you have to hunt them down yourself. This is actually not as big a disadvantage as it might sound because such services are readily available free of charge on the World Wide Web (WWW), with more appearing all the time. In either case, the provider will supply you with whatever software you need to get started.

Things start to get a little tricky when it comes to what you will actually pay to use the Internet. Until recently, ISPs and On-line Service Providers (OSPs) have been easily distinguishable by their different charging structures. ISPs charge a flat monthly rate (around £10-£15), while OSPs had a lower fixed monthly charge but billed you for every additional hour spent on line above a set limit (three hours or so). However, that's all set to change as one of the world's largest OSPs, AOL, has just launched a flat-rate service in the UK, and rival MSN (Microsoft Network) has been operating a similar policy for many months.

## Our PC doctor diagnoses a problem with AOL, advises on looking after older PCs and prescribes a treatment for irregular sections in Word 97

As far as the various telephone companies are concerned, it really comes down to how much they charge you to make a call. Connecting to the Internet over a normal phone line costs exactly the same as making a voice call, but when browsing the WWW it's easy to forget that you're running up a phone bill. Most of the telephone companies operate 'frequent caller' discount schemes (such as BT's Friends and Family plan) and you can save money on your Internet adventures by registering your service provider's number in one of these. (For more on ISPs, see our group test in the April 1997 issue.)



At work, I use Microsoft's Excel. We have lots of complex spreadsheets that have been set up for us by external developers, so it's obviously a very powerful program indeed. However, my needs are much simpler.

I'm the organiser of a long-distance running club and we have a growing list of members. We follow a number of set courses each week and I keep track of members' times using pencil and paper, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to keep tabs on which runners have the best times for each course. I've started putting the course times into Excel but I do not know how to pull out the fastest time for each course. Can you help?

*Russell Stanbridge,  
Waterthorpe, Sheffield*



There are a couple of Excel functions that could be useful in this situation. The simplest is MIN, which will return the lowest value of a given range. For example, if you enter MIN(A1:A10) as a formula into a cell, that cell will contain the smallest value from the range of cells A1 through A10.

The VLOOKUP function could also come in handy. This can scan a table of figures (or text for that matter) for a specified value and, when a match is found, return the row value from the adjoining column. So, if you had times in one column and a list of names in the next, VLOOKUP could return the fastest runner's name when used in conjunction with MIN. Excel 97 has a very detailed help file on how to use VLOOKUP, but a quick look at our screenshot should give you a good idea how to use it.

Course A times	Names
21:22	Chris
22:34	John
23:45	Jules
22:10	Scott
25:41	Shelia

Course A best: 21:22 ← Formula is MIN(B3:B7)  
Fastest Runner: Chris ← Formula is VLOOKUP(C9:B2:C7,D)



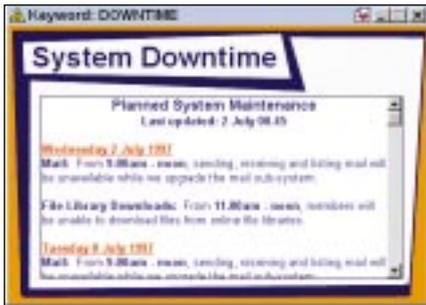
As a subscriber to AOL, I am generally pleased with the service. What does annoy me, though, is the number of times the e-mail service is unavailable. This seems to happen every week, from first thing in the morning until lunchtime. This is extremely infuriating as this is exactly the time I need to get at my mail. Why does this happen? Is AOL sagging under the weight of people trying to get their e-mail?

*Lynne Harlow,  
Helston, Cornwall*





All on-line services and ISPs (Internet Service Providers) shut down their services from time to time for essential hardware maintenance and upgrades. AOL is no exception and being so large it closes down separate parts of the service rather than the whole thing.



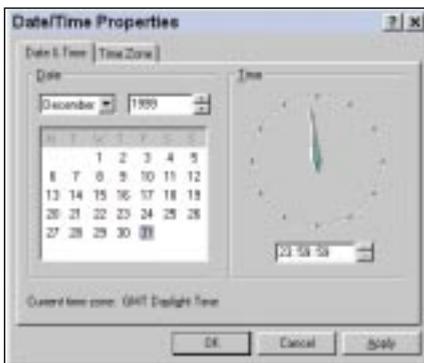
Such 'down time' is scheduled for when the fewest people are using the service – usually the early hours of the morning. Unfortunately, with AOL being based in America, this translates to normal working hours over here.

AOL does forewarn its users about when parts of the system will be unavailable – go to Keyword: Downtime.



After hearing about all the alarm to do with the millennium bug, I wanted to see if my PC is 'Year 2000-compliant'. I was about to set my computer clock to 11.59pm, 31 December 1999 when I suddenly realised that if it wasn't compatible, my PC could crash and destroy all my data. Is there a safe way of finding out if I should be panicking?

*R Pandey,  
Twickenbam, Middlesex*



Despite all of the media attention about the millennium 'time-bomb', few PC users have much to worry about. If your PC can't handle dates beyond 1999, all that will happen is that its internal clock will default to 4th January 1980 on New Year's Day 2000.

For word processing, image editing, browsing the Internet and any application that doesn't rely on date information, you won't notice a change. Any spreadsheets or finance programs that use dates, however, will produce strange results but you won't lose data and your PC won't be harmed.

There's a special feature on PCs and the millennium in the next issue of *What PC?*



I am considering buying a PC, mainly for word processing and games. If I bought a mid-range model, how much – say, over the next five years – should I expect to pay to upgrade it as technology progresses? If I were to spend the whole of my budget on a better model with an MMX processor, how long would it be before it would be unusable for games?

*Lorna Roberts,  
Perth*



If PC developments over the last five years are anything to go by, it's going to be impossible to predict what's going to happen over the next five.

Fortunately, PCs can always be upgraded to a certain point and most models available today should give at least five years' useful service with the odd upgrade here and there. Obviously, the more powerful the PC, the longer it will last and therefore it makes sense to go for the best you can afford (and MMX really is a must for avid games players).

As far as upgrade costs go, it depends on what you buy. Processor upgrades are usually the most expensive and tend to come along every couple of years or so – bank on a couple of hundred pounds for each new one. Graphics cards are constantly evolving, particularly the 3D ones needed for most games and keeping bang up to date will probably set you back £200 every 12 months.

Other PC components are less subject to swift progress. More RAM is always useful and as long as your PC has free memory slots, it can be added at any time. Similarly,

hard disks are getting bigger and cheaper but you really only need a new one when you run out of storage space.

A couple of final points. First, so long as you're happy with your PC and the way it runs applications, there is no need to upgrade it at all – many people are still happily using ancient 286 PCs for their word processing. Second, don't get carried away with upgrading. If you're ever tempted to spend £1,000 on upgrading your PC, don't – sell it and buy a new one.



My recent upgrade to Windows 95 and Office 97 has had me pulling my hair out.

Back in the days of Windows version 3.1, I could make use of the right mouse button in Word to select irregular areas of text. This doesn't seem to be possible in Windows 95, since the right mouse button is used to call up a menu.

Since I can't do it, how can I select a column of tabulated text in Word, so that I can change its format?

*Ellen Putsky,  
Ashford, Kent*



Irregular selection of text is still possible in Word – just hold down the ALT key while making a selection using the left mouse button.

There are quite literally hundreds of similar shortcuts for Word 97 – far too many to go into here. If you're on line, take a look at the page:

[www.microsoft.com/kb/articles/q157/9/35.htm](http://www.microsoft.com/kb/articles/q157/9/35.htm) for a definitive list.



We regret that we cannot provide readers with individual replies but, if you have a question or problem you want to share with other readers, write to us at PC Doctor, *What PC?* Editorial, VNU House, 32-34 Broadwick Street, London W1A 2HG.

If possible, please include details of your hardware and preferably copies of your AUTOEXEC.DOT BAT and CONFIG.SYS files – and for Windows problems, your SYSTEM.INI and WIN.INI files.

The writer of EVERY letter published will receive a FREE Microsoft IntelliMouse and a choice of Microsoft Bookshelf, Publisher 97 or Money 97. Please state which you would prefer.

