

Software Lexicon

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How do you know whether the software you're downloading is truly free? And what does "free" mean exactly? Here's a quick guide to the terminology of "free" and "almost-free" software.

adware: Advertising-supported software or Web services. Often (but not always), a paid alternative lets you remove the ads.

freeware: Programs that you can download, install, and run without charge or limitation of any kind. Freeware may be from a company or an individual, who may or may not provide support.

malware or badware: Malicious software--often installed surreptitiously alongside seemingly legitimate free programs--that can slow down your computer, insert extra ads into Web pages, and spy on your online activities.

open source: Software that is free to run--and for which the source code is available, so you can modify the software (if you're a programmer). Most open-source software is supported by volunteers, if at all.

shareware: Software that is free to run for a limited time, after which you're asked to pay a fee. Shareware may "nag" you to register (and pay) after the trial period is done, but should remain fully functional.

trialware or demoware: Software that you can run for a limited time, after which it stops working unless you purchase the full version. In some cases the demo may continue to function but loses certain features after the demo period.

Here's a selection of great free software that for some classroom applications will remain substantially useful for years to come.

[CCleaner](#): Over time, your PC gets gunked up with old browser cache files, cookies, and other bits and pieces. CCleaner finds this digital detritus and zaps it.

[Free Download Manager](#): If you're continually downloading files, this Internet Explorer companion can help. It speeds up single-file downloads, resumes interrupted downloads, manages your bandwidth usage, and schedules multiple file downloads for specific times. You can even use it to grab every page from a Web site.

[Wikipedia](#): Anyone can contribute to this online encyclopedia, so take its articles with a grain of salt. But Wikipedia is a clearinghouse for general info on almost anything. And you can access it from a PDA via Wapedia.

[WordWeb](#): This handy utility provides a dictionary and a thesaurus that work in any application on your computer. Simply highlight a word to get a definition, synonyms, and other information.

[WriteBoard](#): For collaborative editing, you can't beat WriteBoard. It lets you create, edit, and share documents with others--directly in your browser. You can even compare versions to see changes.

[OpenOffice.org](#): Though it's a full-fledged, Microsoft Office-compatible word processor, spreadsheet, presentation package, and database, OpenOffice.org won't cost you one thin dime. It's solid enough (and sufficiently compatible with Office documents) that you may never have to invest in an office suite again.

[Pegasus Mail](#): A long time favourite among e-mail power users, Pegasus takes a little getting used to--due to its many options and unconventional interface--but it provides a huge amount of control over your mail, including mail merges and a greater range of flexible filtering options than many other free e-mail clients offer.

[eFax Messenger](#): If you don't mind having your fax number in an area code other than your own, eFax is a big improvement on the fax machine that sits in many of our schools turning perfectly good paper into printed junk mail. You can receive faxes free of charge, viewing or printing them via the service's eFax Messenger software.

[Skype](#): People who like to gab on the phone may like Skype, which has been offering free PC-to-PC voice calls (with text chat and file transfer capabilities) since 2003. It's easy to set up and has a huge user community. The current version makes video chat available. But Skype-to-telephone or telephone-to-Skype calls cost you money.

[Ta-Da List](#): This straightforward to-do list manager lets you create lists, reorder items, and check them off when completed--from the comfort of your browser.

[FreeMind](#): Psychologists say that an effective way to take notes is to put them in a "mind map"--a free-form tree structure that mimics the way your brain works. FreeMind does exactly that. It acts like an outliner--except that, instead of working with headings and subheadings, you create nodes and subnodes that branch from a central point. Each node can contain text, pictures, special icons, or colourful formatting. FreeMind is useful for taking notes in class, outlining books, or even planning a route to world domination. Students seem to like this one. :-)

[Yahoo Briefcase](#): Its interface is almost starkly simple--which is why I like Yahoo Briefcase. It's one of the easiest ways I have found to store and share files online.

[Spybot Search & Destroy](#): Spyware can slow your system, monitor where you surf, and even make your browser malfunction. Though no tool is a cure-all, Spybot is a powerful antidote to many ills. In addition to finding and deleting spyware, Spybot can

continuously monitor your system for changes, giving you an opportunity to permit or disallow critical Registry modifications before they happen.

[ZoneAlarm](#): This firewall keeps watch over inbound and outbound Internet connections, helping avert attacks by hackers and spyware programs. It seems to offer greater control and, for me, is easier to use than Windows XP's built-in firewall. Make sure that you download the basic firewall, which is free for personal and non-profit use.

[Google Picasa](#): Forget the clunky image gallery software you got with your digital camera. For me, there seems no easier way to organize, touch up, and share photos than Picasa.

[The GIMP \(GNU Image Manipulation Program\)](#): If you can't afford to spend hundreds of dollars on Photoshop but still need sophisticated image-editing software, consider the GNU Image Manipulation Program, aka the GIMP. It features an arsenal of image tools for retouching, layer-based composition, and more.

[Yahoo Mail](#): Quick and easy to use. Yahoo's synchronization utility lets you sync your Yahoo Mail address book with Outlook, Outlook Express, or a Palm device.

[LiveJournal](#), [MySpace](#), and [Xanga Classic](#): Blogging services specifically aimed at a younger audience. They include features for easily creating lists of friends and then seeing those friends' posts. Plenty of customizable options, and uploading music and image files is easy.

[RssReader](#) and [Feedreader](#): Two fine choices in PC-based news readers. Both display your feeds simply and cleanly.

[Vimeo](#): It may be the easiest video service to use. Videos are not streamed on playback, but a link lets you save files locally.

[Streamload Mediamax](#): Want to share lots of big files in addition to videos? Try Streamload Mediamax. For watching videos, Mediamax has a promising-looking frame-by-frame view that enables you to look at selected stills. Mediamax even lets you download the original video files so you can play them back locally.