

Trails End Computer Club

Bulletin for the month of AUGUST 2013

**Meetings
will
continue
in the fall.**

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Freeware

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During the many years that I have been writing the Computer Hysteria Column, I have been a strong advocate of using freeware. On my computer, the only commercial software is my operating system. All the rest of the software on my system is freeware. Perhaps this frugality has something to do with my Scottish ancestry or I could be considered just plain cheap! In any event, I have done my best to give my readers some tips on freeware that I have used on my system that is exceptional. Free software is a valid choice for the home computer, office computer and Internet server uses. It is very important to remember that freeware is not cheap or an inferior option. Freeware comes in two basic types, free software with proprietary (private) code, and open-source software. Some freeware can be functionally superior to equivalent commercial software and even of higher quality. For example, the Firefox browser was built and developed by a large distributed workforce as opposed to a small centralized one. A large number of programmers can contribute a range of skills, and whose input is graded by peer review. These programs can be tested and developed in a wide variety of locations and situations. These community based projects would cost millions to create

commercially. The bottom line, free software can be of the highest quality and should not be considered inferior to commercial products. The products they generate are among the most successful applications in the world, PHP, MySQL, Apache, and various types of Linux.

What are the best free programs that work the best? It used to be utilities. However, today there are many priceless small programs that work better than the operating systems resident applications. Free software is a viable solution in every possible area of a computer's work. The acceptability of freeware is demonstrated as the standard server solution. Freeware is widely used in PC security situations. Free versions of popular firewalls, antivirus and antispyware programs are often accepted as first choice. How do you find the best freeware to use on your system?

For years I have recommended Gizmo's Freeware be bookmarked on your computer for fast reference when you need fully reviewed and recommended freeware. In August 2010, PC Magazine included Gizmo's Freeware in its "100 Top Websites of 2010." As of November 2011 it was rated by Alexa in the top 3000 sites in English speaking countries and in the top, 5,000 worldwide with more than 100,000 people visiting the site every day. It is also the most bookmarked site under "freeware" at most of the web's major bookmarking services.

Gizmo's Freeware is a community-based site dedicated to keep the site independent and noncommercial. The site is maintained by hundreds of volunteers. Freeware is reviewed for safety and performance by these volunteer editors with comments from users. Gizmo's best freeware list is available at the website and has been used for years to locate the best freeware. You can post on forums, respond to reviews after using the freeware, and even write review depending on your computer skills. I would strongly encourage you to bookmark and visit this website which will save you money as well as increase your computer capabilities.

<http://www.techsupportalert.com>

I will have to admit that I am "hysterical" about this website.



Internet Alerts Can Keep You Informed

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How would you like to know every time your name is mentioned on the Web? Or when there is a breakthrough on a disease that you are following? Or when your favorite actor is starting in a new movie? This is all possible with automated Internet alerts. Read this to see how it works.

Internet alerts are available by many different Internet services. The Weather channel at www.weather.com has free alerts that will give you daily weather alerts as well as alerts for allergens like pollen and also alerts for severe weather. Other alerts will keep you informed of the weather on school days and give warnings for snow and rain. You can apply several customization options such as the time of the alert and the severity that triggers the alert. You can get alerts sent by e-mail and/or

text to a cell phone.

Many news stations also have alerts regarding news, sports, and weather. One of my local North Carolina stations, WRAL (www.wral.com) even has an app that uses GPS to alert you to severe weather no matter where you travel as long as you have your cell phone turned on. While most other alerts are free, WRAL charges \$8 a year for their GPS-based alerts. Check your local news stations for news alerts.

The granddaddy of all alerts, Google Alerts, is a very useful one that you should be aware of. This is one of Google's powerful tools that is completely free. You can use Google Alerts to keep track of anything on the Web. Just surf over to

<http://www.google.com/alerts> and enter a search query.

Then choose your options. You can control how often you get alerts (as it happens, once a day or once a week), the type of Web coverage that triggers an alert (news, blogs, video, discussions, books, or all of these), and you can also choose only the best results or all results. Enter your e-mail address and your alerts will start. You can change or remove an alert at any time. Once you start using Google Alerts, you will be surprised at the results.

Most people start with creating an alert with their own name. My "Sandy Berger" alert tells me when any news article or blog mentions my name. Of course, it also gives me results for the other Sandy Berger. You know -- that guy from the Clinton administration who stuffed documents from the National Archives into his pants. Unless you have a very unusual name, you can expect to get news of others with the same name. That's not all bad. In fact, it can be very interesting.

The Google Alerts can be wonderful if you are following the news about a certain item. For instance, they are wonderful if you are interested in following a certain disease, medical condition or treatment. You can use Google Alerts to follow any current event or any specific public figure, actor, or personality.

If you are a transplant and want to follow the news from your old hometown, this is a perfect way to do it. Just enter the name of your old city and state in the search terms. If you want to be more specific, you can just enter the zip code. This will give you results directly from your old neighborhood.

When you set up a Google Alert, you may want to limit the results to just the best results and once a day. If you let Google give you all the results as they happen, I can assure you that you will be inundated with email.

You are sure to find many different ways to use Google Alerts. In fact, it is good to play with the Alerts a little to get to just what you want. Like any Google search, you can enter as many search terms as you like to narrow the results. You can put names in quotes to get exact matches.

Be creative with your alerts. You can have Google search for coupons for your favorite restaurant. You can use it to follow a company whose stock you may be interested in purchasing. You can use it to follow an item that you want to purchase.

What Are File Types?

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Did you ever try to open a file and the computer wouldn't let you? Did you ever wonder what those three or four letters mean after the dot (i.e. period) in a file name? Well, it all has to do with "file types" also known as file "formats". And the purpose of my article is to give you a good basic overview of "file types".

Why are there different "types" of files? Well, there are many different programs out there that can run on your computer. These programs are written by different people and different companies. If you use a program to create (and save) a new file you will generally need that program to open or use that file. For example, if I use the Paint program to create a drawing, and I save that file in the "My documents" folder, I will need to open the Paint program again to see that file. If I give that file to someone else, that person needs to use the Paint program on their computer to open and see my drawing. In another example, if I create a spreadsheet using the Excel program, I will need to use the Excel program to open that spreadsheet. That's not too hard to understand, is it? The problem is when you try to open a file you did not create on your computer. Suppose, for example, someone sent you a file attached to an email. You need the right program to open that file.

What are some common "file types"? Here are some common file types and the code (three or four characters after the dot in a file name) that is used for each:

.bmp – Microsoft Bitmap image (created by the Microsoft Paint program)

.doc – Microsoft Word document (2003 version)

.docx – Microsoft Word document (2010 version)

.exe – an "executable" file (i.e. a program)

.html – Hypertext Markup Language (used for creating web pages)

.jpg – Photo, picture, or drawing image

.mpg – a movie or video

.pdf – Portable document format (Microsoft WordPad program)

.ppt – Microsoft Power Point

.rtf – Rich Text Format, a basic text file

.xls – Microsoft Excel spreadsheet

And there are only a few thousand more! You can get the huge list by using Google and entering "file types" or you can learn about a particular file type by entering it in Google as well. The point here is that if a program can create a file you need the same program to open or use that file.

Now having said all that, there are programs than can open and save more than one file type. If you have a digital camera and take photos, for example, each photo is a file and each photo is probably a ".jpg" file (or file type). But there are MANY

programs out there than can open these types of photo files and work with them – Picasa, FastStone Image Viewer, Windows Photo Viewer, Adobe Photoshop, and the Paint program are just a few. They can all open and work with .jpg photos. On the other side of the coin, a program may be able to save the same file as different file types. For example, if I create a new document using the Microsoft Word program, when I save the file (using “Save as...”) I can select from several file types at the bottom of the “Save as...” window. If you left-click your mouse on the small black triangle arrow at the right end of the “Save as type” box you will get a list of the different files types that Microsoft Word can use to save your document – such as “rich text format”, “plain text”, or other old versions of Microsoft Word. So here are the key lessons for today:

1. If you use a program on your computer to create and save a file you will always be able to open that file again because you have the program that created it to begin with.
2. If you try to open a file that you did not create (such as a file someone sent to you via email) you may not be able to open it unless you have a program on your computer that can open that file type.
3. If you receive a file from someone that you cannot open, contact them and ask them what program they used to create that file. If you do not have that program, ask them to send the file to you in a different format – one that you can open with a program you do have.
4. Use Google to find out more information. Perhaps there are some free programs on the internet that will allow you to “open” and “read” a file.

Hopefully this is not too difficult to understand. It really is not the computer’s fault (this time, anyway) and it’s not your fault either if you cannot open a file someone else has given you. It’s like someone giving you a machine made in another country which uses the metric system. You will need metric tools to work on that machine. Or maybe I can just ask my mechanic for help.

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