

Microsoft Office 97

Tested over six months

A valuable upgrade and a great timesaver, don't knock this suite until you've tried it.

I didn't pay much attention to the hype when Office 97 was released last year. After reading reviews condemning the package as slow and bloated, I came to own a copy six months ago only because, being an existing user of Office 95, the upgrade was free. I thought it only fair to test the product myself before writing it off, and I'm glad I did.

As a student I use all five of the Office family members. The main applications integrate extremely well. The toolbars are strikingly similar throughout the suite, and the excellent design and user-friendliness are standard Microsoft. The applications use common tools such as the Clipart Gallery, from which you can access the vast clipart collection on the CD. Copying and pasting information between the applications is easy, though in my case very slow.

Web integration seems to be Microsoft's next step towards world domination. While editing and viewing Word documents, web and email addresses are automatically converted to links, which you click on to launch Internet Explorer. Word 97 can edit and save HTML documents, and includes a toolbar devoted to web-page tools, whereas all Office applications include the web toolbar. The "Microsoft on the Web" menu provides quick links to various parts of the Microsoft web site.

A big improvement on previous versions of Office is the introduction of VBA (Visual Basic for Applications). I can use exactly the same skills in Access to create macros in Word and Excel, with the result that I don't have to spend hours searching through online help files looking for a command.

With Office 97 you get much more than the five flagship applications, and the CD includes a wealth of utilities and resources. The Office ValuPack contains

► **WORD 97 CAN EDIT AND SAVE HTML DOCUMENTS, AND INCLUDES A TOOLBAR DEVOTED TO WEB TOOLS**



information and software updates, as well as a small collection of True Type fonts. Although the Office Binder is a

are underlined in red and grammar mistakes are underlined in green. This isn't helpful to me, as I'm red/green

Web integration seems to be Microsoft's next step towards world domination

complete waste of space, the Photo Editor is extremely useful for small operations such as converting images from one format to another.

On the downside, the email compatibility glitch in Outlook is a problem, and I find it easier to use Outlook primarily for faxes, contacts and phone dialling, leaving the email handling to the more capable Outlook Express.

There are only two major problems that directly affect me. The first comes when I try to work on the same file at home and at school — nightmares of Access come to mind. The school uses version 2, I use version 8, and there's no option to save in an earlier version.

The second problem is possibly the most annoying and frustrating feature I have ever encountered in all my experience with computers. In Word, misspelt words

colour blind. But these are things I have learned to live with. No review of Office 97 would be complete without mentioning Find Fast. On my P75 it seems to achieve just one thing: to slow everything to a crawl. At least it's easy to remove.

Overall, Office 97 has been a worthwhile upgrade. The wizards and templates are superb for creating a week's work in just a few hours, leaving more time for other, far more important aspects of life, like the World Cup.

GRAHAM STONEMAN

PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

Price £420 (street)

Contact Microsoft 0345 002000

www.eu.microsoft.com

Good Points Consistent interface, web features, standard macro language.

Bad Points Idiotic grammar suggestions, compatibility problems with earlier versions.

Conclusion A valuable upgrade, though not recommended for low-class PCs.

Psion Siena

Tested over eight months

Can the Series 5's little sister, the Siena, teach its bigger sibling a thing or two?

The Siena is simpler, smaller, lighter and much cheaper than Psion's Series 5. Mine stores all my contacts, ideas, appointments, notes and figures. The only problem I have with it is that my fingers are too big for its dinky little keys. The keyboard is fine on a solid surface, but on a train, for example, I have to hold the Psion in my left hand and type with my forefinger. The superb screen is zoomable and you can adjust the contrast.

The Siena boasts a word processor with most of the usual features: a spreadsheet with graphs; a wonderful schedule manager with views, alarms and to-do lists; a customisable address database; world time with international dialling codes; a calculator; and even its own programming language (OPL) so you can write your own applications. Third-party software, including games, is

available from the internet. Siena-to-PC data transfer is via a serial cable and a Windows package which converts Psion files into other formats. There is no internal expansion — you get what you pay for, which is either 512Kb of RAM or a whole megabyte. Files are compressible in some applications, which saves memory. Battery life works out at 25 to 30 hours, and the Siena can take rechargeable batteries. It has built-in power management, too.

This isn't really a machine to keep IBM's group accounts, but it's perfectly adequate for quick figures and notes: I actually wrote this review on the Siena.

JOE TARRANT



PCW DETAILS

★★★★

Price 1Mb model, £169.95

Contact Psion 0990 143050

www.psimon.co.uk

Good Points Excellent screen and portability.

Bad Points The keyboard can be difficult to use — especially if you have big fingers.

Conclusion Perfect for anyone who wants to travel light.

Panasonic Panasync/Pro 7G

Tested over six months

Sometimes, attractive things do come in large packages. This is one of them.

There are times when you really need to buy the nicest piece of hardware you can afford. So when my trusty 17in monitor died at the hands of unwanted intruders three months

ago, I took the opportunity to go the whole hog and replace it with a nice, shiny, huge PanaSync/Pro 7G 21in monitor. The Pro 7G is basically a two-foot cube, tapering slightly at the back. And since it weighs in at just under 30kg, moving it is not for the faint-hearted, hence the two-year on-site warranty. Connections are for the standard PC 15-pin D connector (detachable cable supplied) or via five BNC connectors, RGB and V&H sync. Additionally, the Pro 7G will connect to a Mac via an adapter (not supplied). These days,

21in doesn't mean 21in, but there are 20 fine inches of viewable screen. With a dot pitch of 0.25mm, that's nearly two million pixels, permitting screen resolutions up to 1600x1200. Scan rates peak at 75Hz for all modes except standard VGA. Controls are simple: four buttons on the front panel are used to navigate the 19 options available via the on-screen display. As well as screen dimensioning tools there are adjustments for video

level, colour temperature, moiré reduction (horizontal and vertical) and input select, and five different languages to do it in. With 13 memories, each time you change resolution or scan frequency, the monitor remembers the settings and recalls them. Oldest settings are lost first if you have more than 13, which is pretty unlikely.

Despite its size, I happily recommend the Pro 7G. I use it with a dual PII running NT and Matrox Millennium II.

NEIL G JARMAN



PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

Price Discontinued. The replacement is the P110 at £920 RRP (ex VAT), street price £800 (ex VAT)

Contact Contact Panasonic 0500 404041

Good Points Great picture, great performance.

Bad Points A desk-guzzling monster.

Conclusion The perfect present for the graphics-mad user.

Concise Oxford Dictionary with sound

Tested over six months

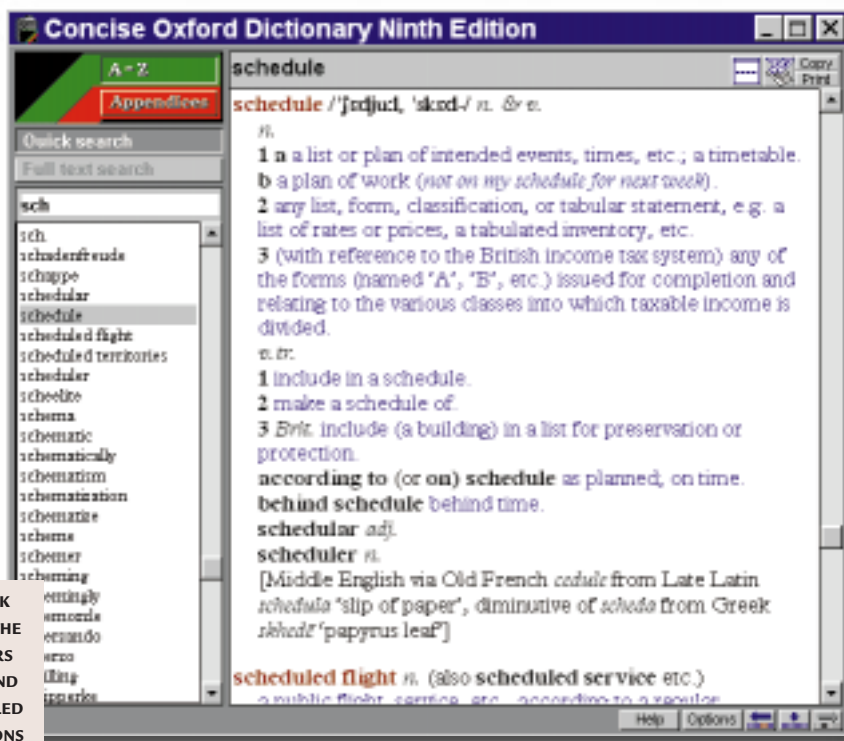
Always getting your tongue in a twist? A 'talking' dictionary could be just what you need.

For the serious writer, or indeed reader, a good dictionary is essential. While all the main word processors have built-in spell checkers, these do not contain definitions. And although dictionaries in book form enable you to find a word out of thousands of definitions in just seconds, they still have some limitations — one of the main ones being how they convey the pronunciation of a word. Usually, this is accomplished by a collection of letters and special characters used to describe well-known sounds. I always had problems with this information, until I bought the Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD) on CD-ROM with sound. The COD ninth edition comes supplied on a single CD and contains 140,000 definitions. A

setup program gives the choice of quick (8Mb) or full (26Mb) installation; the full version copies the text data to hard disk. Both installations keep the sound data for pronunciations on the CD-ROM, because of the large amount of space it requires. Once installed, a custom browser provides access to the definitions. The simplest way to find a word is to click on the Quick Search button and enter the first few characters of the required word in the text box below. The word index display along the left of the browser window updates after every character entered. When the required word is found in the index list, a single click displays its definition in the wider Definition pane on the right.

The online version of COD also displays those cryptic pronunciation characters; when you double-click, you hear an audio pronunciation (you need a sound card). For a word like "schedule", multiple pronunciations are provided; not all audio CD-ROM

► **CLICK ON QUICK SEARCH, ENTER THE FIRST FEW LETTERS OF THE WORD, AND UP POPS A DETAILED LIST OF DEFINITIONS**



ictionaries do this. Definition text can be copied into other applications, and you can also copy words from Microsoft Word, say, and paste them into the Quick Search text box for easy location.

The online version of COD also displays those cryptic pronunciation characters

There are also extensive in-built hypertext facilities. If you don't understand the meaning of any word used in a definition, double-clicking on that word takes you to its definition. Besides the location of specific words, COD also provides a "Full text search" facility, which can find a word in the definition of any word within the whole dictionary. This is very useful when you need to find out in what context a word is used. For example, the word "computer" is found in the definition of Algol, artificial intelligence, Basic, binary code, bug, bus, and central processing unit. The search word "computer" is highlighted in yellow each time it occurs

in the definition of the other words listed. The word index on the left conveniently shortens from its usual complete list of all words to just those words containing the search term. Finally, the COD has 20 appendices to supplement the standard word definitions. These provide information ranging from "Abbreviations used in the dictionary" through to a "Style guide" for English grammar usage.

With sophisticated search facilities, clipboard support, up-to-date definitions and audio pronunciations, COD is a valuable resource.

SIMON WILKINSON

PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

Price £19.99

Contact 01865 556767

www.oup.co.uk

Good Points Being able to hear the way words should be pronounced.

Bad Points Nothing springs to mind.

Conclusion The answer to a writer's prayers.