



Stop wasting your life on hold for tech support

Classes, user groups, books, forums and other resources usually have the answer first

Owning a computer can sometimes be quite a headache. Programs don't perform as you expect, or you've forgotten an important sequence of commands to get the result you want, or outside influences (like viruses or spyware) all conspire to slow down and disable our machines, or even compromise our personal records or destroy our data.

There is a lot of help out there – much of it free or inexpensive – but finding it can sometimes be as frustrating as the problems to which you seek solutions. This week, I'll try to throw you frustrated users a lifeline through various channels of help – computer classes, local user groups, books, helpful forums and usenet newsgroups. Each in and of itself is a wealth of useful information, but in combination you can find a “cocktail” of resources to fit anyone's learning style.

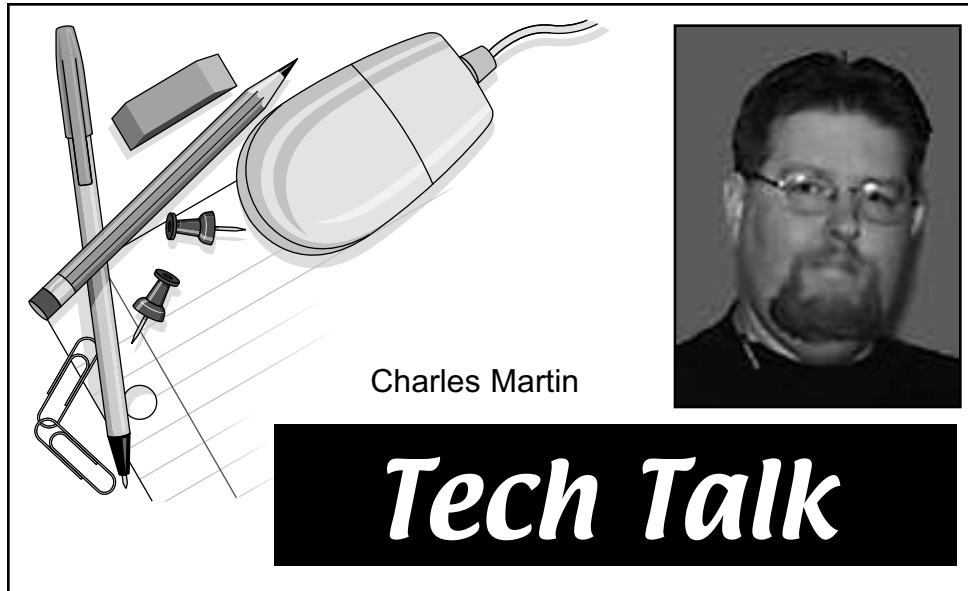
Go to the Head of the Class

Computer classes are an excellent way to get a quick grounding or an overview of a particular aspect of computing, or even a general introduction. Us geeky types may know a lot about computers, be very comfortable with them, even be able to talk about them at length – but we often forget that there are still people out there who are either just getting started with personal computers, or have been using them for years but only in a very limited way and thus intimidated to experiment beyond the very small sphere of activity they feel comfortable with.

There are essentially three kinds of computer classes – ongoing lessons either in your home (one on one) or in a classroom, seminars offered by companies or groups (usually focusing on a specific product or skill set), and “demos” – free demonstrations of features or general skills of computing, usually offered by computer makers directly.

Your best bet is to investigate the free or low-cost options available to you first, and that usually means checking out demos offered at local computer sellers. The Apple Store at Millenia Mall offers almost continuous free demos on their operating system, as well as demos on using Macs to work with photos, video, the Internet and even music – visit www.apple.com/retail/millenia/ to see a schedule of events.

CompUSA (in Altamonte or in south Orlando near the Florida Mall) also offers classes covering most of the basic functions people buy PCs for: e-mail, accounting, eBay, Web surfing and so on. These demos run an average of three to six hours, but instead of buying admission to a single class, you purchase blocks of time (the longer a “subscription” of classes you sign up for, the less it will cost per class). One nice feature of CompUSA's classes is that you are free to re-attend a scheduled class again within 90 days if you feel you need a refresher.



Charles Martin

Tech Talk

One of the most underappreciated resources in our area are the technical courses offered by “tech schools” like Winter Park Tech, the closest dedicated tech/vocational/adult education center to the east side of town (Colonial, University and Timber Creek high schools all have some Adult Continuing Education classes as well).

The classes, which usually meet once or twice a week for up to six weeks, have an incredibly modest cost (around \$40) and an amazingly talented (and patient!) staff who not only know computer programs, but know how to teach them to people who suffer some intimidation. You can find out more about the Tech Centers in Orange County by visiting www.reinventme.ocps.net/ourlocations.htm.

Of course, nothing beats one-on-one, in-home instruction, but it's often the most expensive method of getting trained on a computer, and your success depends as much on the instructor as on your willingness to learn. For many, however, the freedom of getting hands-on experience on your own machine reinforces the learning better than taking notes in a class.

User Groups and Seminars

User groups are regular gatherings of people united by their enjoyment (or just ownership) of a particular computer platform. This is one of the more social and fun ways of learning computers, though of course there's no guarantee that what the group as a whole wants to learn about at a particular meeting is anything you're interested in. Still, for a good overall grounding in what computers can do for you (and why you'd want them to), along with a great way to meet friends and find answers to questions, user groups are hard to beat.

There are three main computer groups in the Orlando area. Each of the groups support and explore the abilities and frustrations of Windows (Central Florida Computer Society, or **CFCS**), Mac (Florida Macintosh Users Group, or **FL-MUG**) and Linux Enthusiasts and Professionals of Central Florida (**LEAP-CF**). There is also **SeniorNet**, a loose affiliation of volunteers who teach computer classes on the basic level at the Marks Street Senior Center, and **AppleCorps@UCF** dedicated to UCF Mac users.

The Central Florida Computer Society has been around seemingly forever. First incorporated in 1982, the group boasts 300 members and meets on the third Sunday of each month at the Orlando Science Center for their general meeting, which usually covers universal topics like virus protection, upgrading, maintenance and commonly-used software. They also have a number of “special interest group” (SIG) meetings, dedicated to Access (the database program), Web developers, digital photos/video, Microsoft Office, and Palm users.

Membership is \$36 per person per year (additional household members can join for \$24 per person per year). Their Web site is www.cfcs.org.

Very similarly, FL-MUG offers roughly identical services to their Mac-using members. General meetings focus on learning new skills and exploring commonly-used software, while their SIGs take up everything from business and legal software to just a social lunch group. Like CFCS, the Mac group meets at the Orlando Science Center, but on the *second* Thursday of each month. Dues are \$45/year for individuals (or a couple for \$60/year) and the group (of which I am an officer, it should be noted) boasts 100 members.

Benefits include prizes distributed at general meetings, a monthly newsletter and discounts. Windows users are always welcome to “come explore” this friendly alternative to PC hardware and software. The Web site for them is www.flmug.org.

LEAP-CF is a smaller group of dedicated Linux users who band together largely to help each other navigate the myriad paths of Linux, an open-source operating system that serves as a useful – but rough around the edges – alternative to Windows. They hold monthly meetings on the third Thursday of the month at the DeVry Technical Institute near the Millenia Mall, and also have monthly “Installfests,” where the community comes together (bringing their computers with them!) to install the latest releases of the various “distros” of Linux, as well as

hack together things that aren't working properly (like a printer driver for an obscure piece of equipment).

Linux users tend to be the sort of people who have already mastered Windows and are looking for more challenge from their computer (or seek to avoid some of the myriad problems Windows users face). They run a mailing list as well, and their Web site is www.leap-cf.org.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forums ...

Web site “forums” (user discussion areas) and Usenet groups can connect you with a whole world full of experts who want to help you. The trick to getting a lot out of these forums is twofold: first, you have to find them, and then you must be able to articulately explain what you want. Ignore that last bit of advice at your peril – user forums aren't known for their civil behavior. It's a lot like walking into an Old West saloon while a full-scale brawl is going on and asking for directions.

Still, the quality and community of the gurus is often superb, and the price is certainly right: it's free! For an example of a forum dedicated to helping people with questions, you'll want to take a look at the discussion area of www.videohelp.org, a forum dedicated to helping computer owners struggling with video editing. Mac owners might want to check out the fun at www.dealmac.com or www.appleswitcher.com for a heady mix of good advice and bite-your-head-off debate (PC owners can use www.dealnews.com).

There's also a plethora of “mailing lists” out there, e-mail-based Q&A forums that focus on getting gurus and newbies together. Good places to start include groups-beta.google.com and groups.yahoo.com.

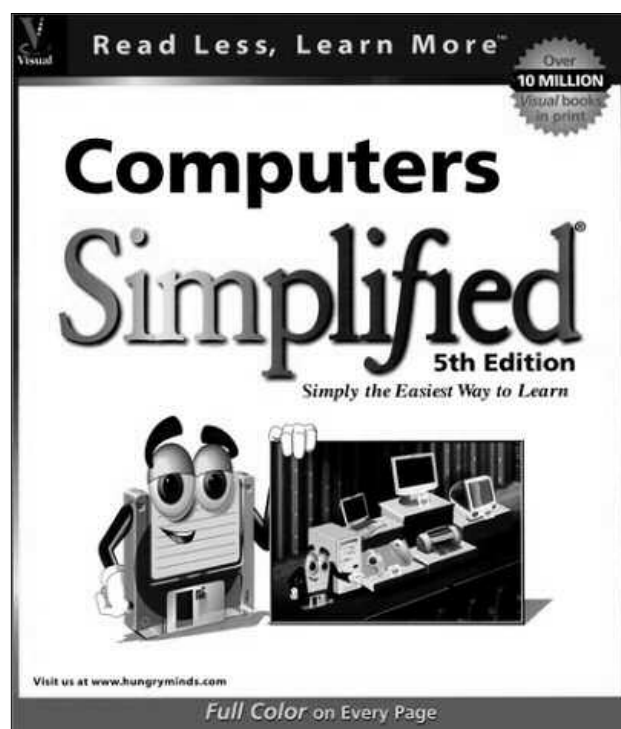
Usenet groups are often even more wild and lawless (take the Old West analogy above and insert annoyed Klingons), but don't clutter your inbox. Do a Google search on Usenet to find a good Usenet reader, then hunt for discussion groups that cater to your specific area of interest.

Finally, we should mention the value of computer books. Instruction manuals, written with the kind of clear language and opulent illustrations that should have been part of the original program, are the single fastest-growing area of publishing.

For people who are actually trying to learn a particular program of skill set, I particularly recommend the “Visual QuickStart Guides” and the “QuickProject Guides” from Peachpit Press (www.peachpit.com) or just visit www.amazon.com. For those learning (or struggling with) Adobe programs, the excellent “Classroom in a Book” series (available at big booksellers everywhere) is a good tool for the serious-minded.

For those who are actually pretty advanced (particularly the more geeky areas like programming), the O'Reilly company (not to be confused with windbag media personalities) publish a great line of intelligent essays for nerdification (www.oreilly.com).

As you can see, we haven't even scratched the surface of the pool of helpfulness out there. Hopefully, you now realize that there's no reason to fight computer problems alone (or by being held hostage for hours on telephone “hold” with a guy who's only going to blame some other company for your problems). There are scores of people on the other end of the Internet just waiting for your question and who will do their level best to help. Take advantage of them, and don't feel guilty – they love it.



Books such as this one allow learners to absorb knowledge at their own pace, and cover the basic concepts visually.