

The Best Ways to Buy Microsoft Office – and the Ways You Can Avoid Buying It!

This article shows you:

- The pros and cons of buying a retail copy of Office
- How an Office 365 subscription works
- Ways you can use certain Office programs for free
- The free software that rivals Microsoft Office

If you want to create text documents, spreadsheets, presentations and databases (among much else), received wisdom has it that you'll need Microsoft Office. But what's the best way to get a copy of Office without paying more than necessary? And is there any way to do all this without paying anything at all?



In this article, I'll explain the various ways you can get your hands on a copy of Microsoft Office, and the pros and cons of each. I'll also introduce you to some free alternatives – perhaps one of those would fit the bill?

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Option 1: Buy Microsoft Office

Buy a copy of Office to keep

Microsoft's famous Office suite has been with us for over 30 years now, and the traditional way of getting a copy has long been to buy it in a box, bring it home, insert the disc and install it. Our first option involves doing just that – or, at least, the modern equivalent.

If you were to do that today, you'd be buying the current version. As for quite a while now, Microsoft has released a new version of Office every three years, so older versions are Office 2016, 2013, Office 2010 and Office 2007.



The newest version of Office came out in 2021 so if you have bought Office since then or are considering buying Office in the near future, it is likely to be this version. However, lots of Office users remain on older versions. Although the details I'll be giving below relate to Office 2019, there's no reason to suspect those for Office 2021 will be significantly different.

Office 2021 and all future versions that we know of, will be available only with an Office 365 subscription. We'll explore this (and ways to get around it) on page 5.

The pros and cons of buying Office

Keep it and use it forever

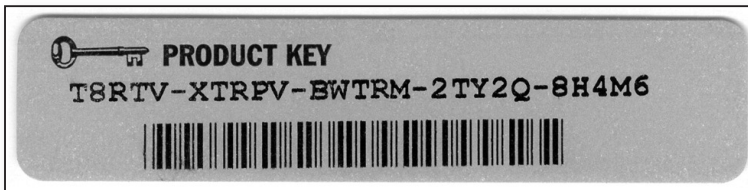
- **Pro:** once you've paid for it, you can keep it and use it forever. I still have a copy of Office 2007 on my PC, and although I rarely use it (I have Office 2016 too), it works as well as it did 10 years ago.

No sudden changes!

- **Pro:** related to the point above, you have the benefit of familiarity. You know it won't be suddenly updated to a new version that looks different or loses features you value.

- **Con:** you can only install it on one PC. It comes with a 25-character product key (like the one pictured below) which you type during installation, and this key will only be accepted if it has never been used before. That makes this an expensive option if you need Office on two or more PCs since you'll have to buy a separate copy for each PC.

For use on one PC only



- **Con:** you're stuck with the edition you choose. I'll explain the various editions in a moment, but let's say you buy the cheapest and later decide you need to use one of the programs that wasn't included in that edition – Publisher, perhaps. All you can do is buy a more expensive edition of Office to replace this one, or buy a copy of Publisher by itself, and either solution will probably cost you more than if you'd made the right choice to start with!

You may not have all the programs you need

Choosing your edition of Office

The complete Microsoft Office consists of seven programs. We'll quickly run through what those are, and then I'll explain which programs are included in each edition.

Office consists of seven programs

Word: the world's favourite word-processor.

Excel: a spreadsheet program.

PowerPoint: a slide-based program for creating business presentations.

OneNote: a scrapbooking and note-taking program.

Outlook: an email, calendar, address book and task-management program.

Publisher: a document-design and desktop-publishing program.

Access: a powerful (but complex) database program.

Choose from three editions of Office

Each of these programs is available individually, albeit at a price of around £110 each. Unless you really do want just one of the programs, it's usually more cost-effective to buy one of the Office editions:

- **Home & Student** is the basic edition, consisting of Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote.
- **Home & Business** includes the same four programs as that basic edition, plus Outlook.
- **Professional** is the big one, giving you all seven programs.



You might well save 10–20% on the price by buying from a computer shop or an online store like Amazon or eBay. However, beware of offers of ridiculously-low prices, such as the Professional edition for a mere £20. You'd be buying something you're not entitled to use (and the seller isn't allowed to offer), and you'll find either that the product key is refused as soon as you enter it, or Microsoft deactivates it some-time later.

Buying and installing Office

Buy and install from Microsoft's website

I'll start by assuming you're happy to buy directly from Microsoft, which, while it probably costs a little more, gets Office installed and ready to use straight away. Start by visiting the address below:

www.microsoft.com/en-gb/store/b/office

Here you'll find the Home & Student (for PC) edition, and if that's the one you want you can click the **Shop now** button below it. If you want either of the other editions, click the **For business** link a little further up the page and you'll find the Home & Business and Professional editions: these don't have a 'Shop now' button for some reason, but you can click the name of the one you want.

Select your chosen edition

From here, whichever edition you want, you click the **Buy and download now** button, pay for your purchase, and then click an obvious button to download and install the edition you've bought. It's a neat and easy way to buy, and you'll be up and running within a few minutes.

Pay, download and install

If you prefer to buy this elsewhere, the process works a little differently:

- You might buy Office 2019 in a box, with a DVD and a 25-character product key, in which case you'll insert the DVD (which starts the installation automatically) and type the key when prompted.
- More likely, you'll be buying a smaller box which just contains the 25-character key on a card (or, if you buy online, you may receive the key by email). In that case, as the accompanying instructions should tell you, you visit www.office.com/setup, type your product key and then click a link to download and install the edition you've bought.

You may be buying a DVD...

... or a card containing a product key

Option 2: Pay for a Microsoft Office 365 Subscription

Microsoft introduced a new way to own Office: by paying a regular subscription fee. It's become so popular that it will soon become the only way.

The most popular way to use Microsoft Office

The subscription is named Office 365 and it comes in a choice of two editions:

The two editions of Office 365

- **Office 365 Personal:** this gives you the complete current version of Microsoft Office (all seven programs listed on pages 3 and 4) to install and use on one PC (desktop or notebook) and one tablet for a fee of £59.99 per year (or, if you prefer not to commit yourself, a slightly-pricier £5.99 per month).
- **Office 365 Home:** again this provides the complete current version of Office, but for up to five PCs and five tablets. For this the price is £79.99 per year, or £7.99 per month.



With either edition there are a couple of extra incentives that may or may not sway you. You get a massive 1 TB (one terabyte, or 1000 gigabytes) of storage space at Microsoft's OneDrive cloud-storage service, and 60 minutes' call time to landlines and mobile phones per month using Skype.

In the case of Office 365 Home, each of the five users gets the same benefits, so if you decide to share your subscription with up to four friends or relatives, they'll all receive 1 TB of OneDrive storage and 60 Skype minutes too.

Regular updates while you continue subscribing

I've referred to the 'complete current version' of Office above, and that's a key point. As time goes on, you'll regularly receive updates and new features to keep Office up to date – provided you continue paying your subscription, of course!

The pros and cons of subscribing to Office 365

- **Pro:** automatic updates mean you won't be stuck with an increasingly out-of-date version of Office. *Kept up to date*
- **Pro:** the cost is spread, saving you having to stump up almost £400 at once (assuming you'd otherwise have chosen the Professional edition). *Lower cost*
- **Pro:** if you replace a PC, you can move your copy of Office to your new one – you won't lose it. You just 'deactivate' the copy of Office on that PC, and then install it on your new PC. (When 'deactivated', the Office programs can be used to open, read and print Office documents, but not create or edit any.) *Easily switch PCs*
- **Pro:** by getting together with up to four relatives and friends to pay for the Home edition, you could each have Office 365 absurdly cheaply! At £80 a year (ignoring the odd penny), that's a mere £16 each. One of you agrees to take out the subscription, the others promise to hand over their share every year, and everyone is quids-in. *Share the cost with others*
- **Con:** most obviously, if you stop paying the subscription fee, you lose the use of Office (as does anyone sharing the subscription in the case of Office 365 Home). You'll be able to use the programs to open, read and print documents, but that's all. At the same time, of course, you also lose the additional benefits of that OneDrive storage space and the free Skype calls. *Limited use if you stop paying*
- **Con:** if you only ever use a couple of Microsoft Office programs – and particularly if they're programs included in the cheapest retail edition, Home & Student – then paying £60+ a year for them may not seem such a bargain when you could probably pick up a copy of Home & Student 2019 for a one-off payment of around £90 later in the year. *You might be paying for more than you need*

Buying and installing Office 365

You need a Microsoft account

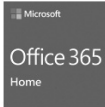

To sign up for an Office 365 subscription (or to install Office if a subscriber has invited you to share their Home subscription), you'll need a Microsoft account. You quite likely have one of these already, particularly if you use Windows 10 or 8.1, and certainly if you already use a Microsoft online service such as OneDrive or Outlook.com. If you haven't, you can create one quickly by visiting login.live.com and supplying an email address and a good, strong password.

How to take out an Office 365 subscription

Now you're ready to sign up for your Office 365 subscription. Start any web browser and visit this address:

www.microsoft.com/en-gb/store/b/office

On the page that appears, part of which is pictured below, choose which of the two editions you want and click the **Shop now** button beneath it.

 <p>Office 365 Home</p> <p>★★★★★</p> <p>£79.99 per year £7.99 per month</p> <p>Shop now</p> <p>Best for households. Includes always up-to-date Office applications and extra OneDrive storage for up to 5 users.</p>	 <p>Office 365 Personal</p> <p>★★★★★</p> <p>£59.99 per year £5.99 per month</p> <p>Shop now</p> <p>Best for individuals. Includes always up-to-date Office applications and extra OneDrive storage for 1 user.</p>
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Sign in and choose how to pay

From here, you'll be asked to sign into your Microsoft account, specify your chosen method of payment and whether you prefer to pay monthly or annually, and make the first payment. Finally, you'll arrive at a 'My Office Account' page which is where you manage your Office 365 subscription.

Assuming the PC you're currently using is the one (or one of the five, for the Home edition) on which you want to install Office, you can then click the **Install** button on this page and then sit back and wait while Office is downloaded and installed.

Wait while Office is installed

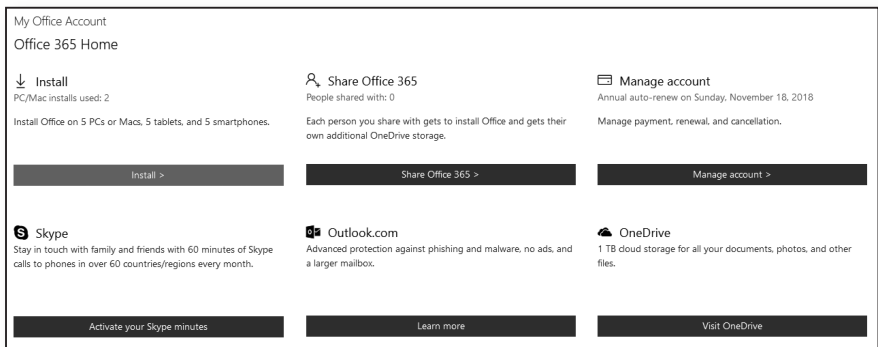
Managing your Office 365 subscription

Once you're an Office 365 subscriber, any changes you want to make take place at your personal 'My Office Account' web page, reached by visiting this address:

Manage your subscription online

www.office.com/myaccount

and signing in with your Microsoft account's email address and password. Let's run through the most obvious things you might want to do:



Install Office on one of your own PCs or tablets: visit this page using the PC or tablet on which you want to install Office and click the **Install** button. On the next page, click another **Install** button and wait while Office is downloaded and installed.

Install Office on one of your own PCs

Share your Home subscription with someone: if you'd like a friend or relative to be able to use one of your five Home edition licences, click **Share Office 365**. From here, the simplest option is to click **Email Invitation**, type that person's email address (carefully, to ensure you don't

Invite a friend or relative to install Office

accidentally offer it to someone you don't know!) and click **Send**. That person will be sent a link by email to follow, signing in with their own Microsoft account details and clicking similar **Install** buttons.

Move a copy of Office to a new PC

Move Office from an old PC to a new one: if you've installed Office on a PC or tablet and you no longer use that PC (or, at least, you no longer need to use Office on it), the first step is to 'deactivate' Office on that PC. Click **Install** and you'll see a list of the names of the PCs on which Office is installed and the date it was installed on each. Identify the PC with the unneeded copy of Office and click **Deactivate Install**. That increases your pool of available, unused licenses by 1. You can then install Office on your new PC, as explained on the previous page.



The first part of this routine, deactivating Office, can be done using any PC – you don't necessarily have to do it using the PC on which the unneeded copy of Office is installed. Therefore, if you've already erased or destroyed the hard disk of an old PC, for example, you don't have to regard that Office licence as now lost.

Check and change subscription details

Finally, clicking **Manage account** allows you to check when your subscription is due for renewal and your next payment is due, change or update your payment details, switch from the Personal to the Home edition (or vice versa), or cancel your subscription.

Option 3: Use Microsoft Office Online for Free

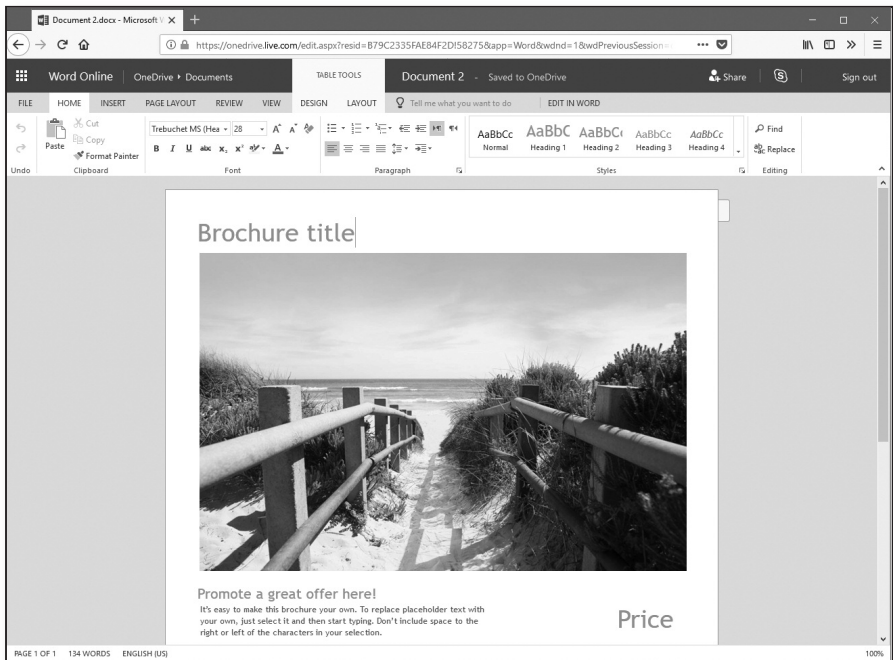
A good choice for light use

So far we've looked at the ways to buy Microsoft Office, but perhaps you'd prefer to use it for free, particularly if you don't need to use it very often? If so, that's certainly possible, although it involves a few sacrifices.

This option is called Microsoft Office Online. It's free for anyone (with a Microsoft account) to use, and it works in any web browser. Here's a quick run through the basics, including those sacrifices:

Use free online versions

- As the 'Online' in the name hints, this is a web-based version of Office. That means you're actually using a web page rather than a program to work on your documents, but as the screenshot of Word Online below illustrates, the differences between these versions and the 'real' Office programs aren't obvious.



- Only Word, Excel, PowerPoint and OneNote are available.
- You lose a few advanced features in these Online versions: there's no AutoCorrect in Word, for example, and some Ribbon options have gone.

Four programs

Fewer features

Open files from OneDrive only...

- Documents can only be opened from your OneDrive account, so to edit a document that's currently on your PC, you must first upload it to OneDrive.

... but they can be saved to your PC

- Changes you make to a document (one you're editing, or a new one you're creating) are automatically saved to your OneDrive account – there's no need to click **Save** (and in fact there's no Save button). However, you can choose **File > Save As > Download a Copy** to save a copy of a document to your PC too.

Sign in and click the program you want to use

If you'd like to try Office Online, visit tinyurl.com/pcksOfficeOnline and click the tile of the program you want to use. You'll be prompted to sign into your Microsoft account, and from there you'll arrive at the Start page of the program you chose. You can then either pick a document to open from your OneDrive storage or pick one of the templates to start work on a new document.

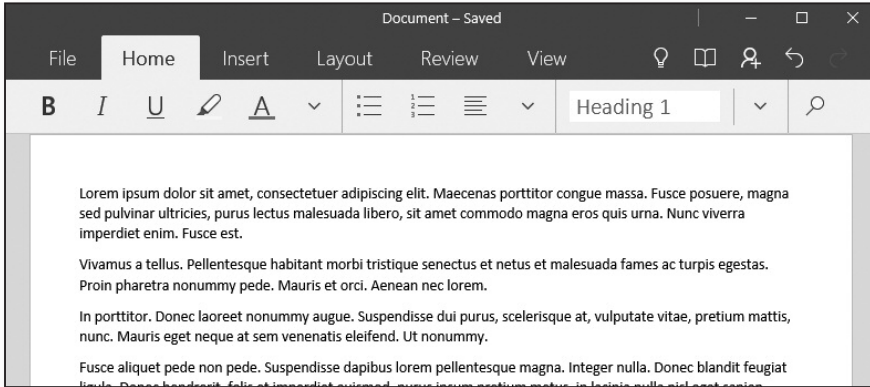
Option 4: Free Mobile Versions of Word, Excel and PowerPoint

Simplified versions aimed at tablet users

The final option from Microsoft, also free, is Office Mobile. This consists of cut-down, much-simplified versions of Word, Excel and PowerPoint aimed mainly at users of tablet computers: you'll find that the buttons and options are all much larger and more widely-spaced to make them more finger-friendly on these touchscreen devices (which also partly accounts for the removal of so many buttons and features).

Sometimes simpler is better!

The removal of all those features isn't necessarily a bad thing, as the screenshot opposite demonstrates: I'm sure many of us would appreciate a version of Word or Excel that concentrated on just the basics. But that's not the only catch to these 'Mobile' versions.



First, they're only available to Windows 10 users. Second, they're only truly free if used on a tablet whose screen measures 10 inches (diagonally) or less, meaning only the smallest tablets. Although you can still install them on larger tablets, notebooks and desktop PCs, they'll work in read-only mode, letting you read and print documents, but not create or edit them.

For Windows 10, and only free on small tablets

The exception is if you're paying for an Office 365 subscription (which is what I mean by saying they're not truly free if used on larger devices). In that case, you can install one or more of the Office Mobile programs on any PC or tablet and have full use of them. You might do that if you just prefer these simpler versions. Or perhaps you have an Office 365 Personal subscription, you've already installed Office on one PC and one tablet as permitted, but you need some way to edit Office documents on a second tablet.



The Office Mobile programs are available individually – you don't have to install all three – but you can only get them from the Microsoft Store. Curiously, though, if you open the Store app and search for them, you won't find them. It doesn't seem to matter what you type into the Search box, they won't appear. Since Microsoft would

Download them individually from the Store

Create a folder for the new photos

rather sell you an Office 365 subscription, it apparently prefers to keep these under its hat.

Here's the trick to finding them. Type the appropriate address below into the address box of any web browser and press **Enter**:

Word Mobile: tinyurl.com/pcksWordMobile

Excel Mobile: tinyurl.com/pcksExcelMobile

PowerPoint Mobile: tinyurl.com/pcksPowerPointMobile

This will open the Microsoft web page for the corresponding program, where a **Get the app** button will open the Store app and take you straight to the cunningly-hidden page you need. However, you should find that the instant that web page opens, the Store opens too and takes you to that page automatically.

Option 5: Choose a Free Alternative to Microsoft Office

Free competitors to Microsoft Office

When you see the word 'Office', you probably think of Microsoft Office automatically. But Microsoft doesn't have the field to itself: several other companies offer their own suites of office software which can do much of what Office does.

Each can open and save Office documents

Over the next couple of pages, I'll introduce you to the three most popular Office alternatives. Each of these is free, and each is compatible with the Microsoft Office document formats, allowing you to create, open, edit and save a Word document, an Excel spreadsheet or a PowerPoint presentation.

LibreOffice: www.libreoffice.org

The best-known free office suite

LibreOffice is probably the best-known of the Office alternatives and it's completely free: there's no 'Pro' version trying to part you from your money, and no ads occupying chunks of the windows.

LibreOffice consists of six programs:

- **Writer** (the equivalent of Word)
- **Calc** (the equivalent of Excel)
- **Impress** (the equivalent of PowerPoint)
- **Draw** (a drawing/artwork program)
- **Base** (the equivalent of Access)
- **Math** (for creating mathematical formulas)

Six programs included

The programs all look a little outdated now, with old-fashioned menus and toolbars rather than the Office-style Ribbons, but that doesn't make them any more difficult to use (and you might actually find them easier to use).

No Office-style Ribbons...

What you don't get is any equivalent of Microsoft Publisher, and there are no counterparts to Outlook or OneNote. Somewhat uniquely, however, you do get a very good database program in Base, and all the important features of Word and Excel have their equivalents in Writer and Calc.

... but all the features you need

LibreOffice receives frequent updates and new features. You can find help and instructions at documentation.libreoffice.org and download free extensions (which add extra features) and ready-to-use templates from extensions.libreoffice.org. All in all, if you're looking for the quality of Microsoft Office without the price tag, LibreOffice is hard to beat.

Add extensions and find templates

SoftMaker FreeOffice 2016: www.freeoffice.com

Along with FreeOffice, the company offers an 'Office Standard' and an 'Office Professional', so this free offering doesn't contain every possible feature: there are no options to print envelopes or labels in the word processor, and there's no thesaurus. Perhaps more problematically, although FreeOffice can open all types

Free, but with a few limitations

of Word, Excel and PowerPoint files, it can only save in the old file formats (.DOC, .XLS and .PPT).

Three programs included

Free Office consists of three programs:

- **TextMaker** (the equivalent of Word)
- **PlanMaker** (the equivalent of Excel)
- **Presentations** (the equivalent of PowerPoint)

All the essentials are covered

Like LibreOffice, the programs use menus and toolbars rather than Ribbons, making them look rather like old versions of Microsoft Office, but they cover everything most of us would ever have needed from the 'real' Office.

WPS Office Free: www.wps.com/office-free

A modern look that mimics Microsoft Office

If you prefer an Office suite that looks more modern, this is for you. WPS Office Free uses familiar-looking Ribbons, and everything is in much the same place you'd find it in Microsoft's counterparts, making a switch from the 'real' Office fairly painless.

Three programs included

WPS Office Free consists of three programs:

- **Writer** (the equivalent of Word)
- **Spreadsheets** (the equivalent of Excel)
- **Presentation** (the equivalent of PowerPoint)

Some features cause an ad to be displayed

Besides covering all the basics of mirroring Microsoft Office's features and letting you open and save Office documents, each program has a neat system of tabs (like a web browser) when you have two or more documents open at once, and a few other unique features. The one catch is that some features cause an ad to be displayed for a few seconds, which might start to get on your nerves! You can get rid of the ads by subscribing to WPS Office Premium for \$30 per year, but that puts you back into Office 365 territory again (albeit it at a much lower price for a smaller suite).