Your New Computer

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Getting a new computer is just about as exciting as buying a new house or car. Your computer is an investment in entertainment and productivity. Just like your other cool new things, you want to protect your new computer and get the most out of it. Here are some basic tips to get you started.

Electricity

The obvious point here is that without the correct electricity, your computer will not work right. The not so obvious point is although normal; variations in electric current can damage your computer. This is why you should use a *high-quality* Surge Suppressor or Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS).

Surge Suppressor

A common mistake that new computer owners make is to go into their local hardware store or mass merchandiser and purchase a power strip. These usually cost between five and fifteen dollars, depending on number of outlets and brand. Power strips do not protect your computer; although most have circuit breakers built into them, they do not feature power protection or filtering capabilities.

When selecting a Surge Suppressor, consider the device with the highest Joules rating and check for included insurance. Reputable companies like APC and Trip-lite include insurance policies for your computer equipment if damaged by an electrical surge while using their device. A proper Surge Suppressor should cost $25 to $50, depending on the features and protection rating.

Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS)

Surge suppressors help protect your computer in the event of a power surge or spike. What they don't do is protect your computer from power failures, whether a full blackout or a low voltage brownout. These can damage your computer also; or at least cause you to lose valuable data if you hadn't saved just before the power failure. UPS devices will supply electricity in the event of a power failure or brownout, allowing you to save your data and gracefully shutdown your computer.

UPS devices offer a wide range of backup electricity time; naturally the more electrical time provided by a UPS, the more expensive it will be. When you select a UPS, consider the power consumption of your computer. Tube-based monitors use substantially more electricity than an LCD or Plasma panel; gaming computers use more electricity than those intended for general use and productivity.

Do not plug your laser printer into the UPS. Laser printers draw too much electricity, wasting battery time and may damage some UPS devices – just use a surge suppressor for these. If you expect to need to print during a power failure, consider an inkjet printer which uses less electricity.

Shut It Off

When you turn on your computer, go ahead and leave it on if you expect to return within a couple hours; but if you are going to be away from your computer for several hours, shut it off. Turning off your computer extends the life of the components and saves electricity.

Read my article "Conserving Energy with Your PC".

System Security

If you are connecting your computer to any kind of network, especially the internet, you need to use security software to protect your computer and data from malicious software like viruses and spyware. Malicious software is designed to automatically spread from computer to computer for the purpose of stealing information or causing damage to the computer.

Norton Anti-virus and McAfee Anti-virus along with their respective full suite products are the de facto standard in security software – beware, they have also become the most bloated and slow security software on the market. What do I use? I use Microsoft Live OneCare – this is a robust security product that is light-weight and designed by the manufacturer of my Operating System (Windows) ensuring compatibility and efficient integration.

Backup

The first rule of computing is SAVE; Save your work, Save Often, and Save before you print.

The second rule of computing is BACKUP; Backup anything you want to save.

Computer hard drives have been developed and improved upon over the past 40 years, increasing their capacity and reliability. Hard drives contain moving parts; very fast moving parts. Unfortunately, hard drives still fail and even if your hard drive doesn't fail, a virus could still damage your data.

When working with your data, always work from your hard drive. You can protect your data by backing it up, or copying it, to another drive. An excellent choice is to periodically burn the data to a CD or DVD – then you have a permanent archive – or you can copy the data to an external hard drive. You may have noticed I didn't mention flash (thumb) drives. Thumb drives have a high failure rate when used repeatedly, especially when not properly removed from your computer.

Some security softwares feature automatic backup tools; Microsoft Live OneCare is an example. If you have a server on your network or an external hard drive attached to your computer, then you can setup automatic backups to help protect your data.

Keep It Clean

To extend the life and usability of your computer you need to keep it clean, physically and logically.

Remove Unnecessary Software

Many software products add extra components to your system startup and even when you are not using the software it may still use some memory and processor capacity. If your computer came with software preinstalled or you installed software that is not being used, uninstall it from the system. Some examples may include RealPlayer, QuickTime, Music Match, and Modem Utilities.

Clean the Fans

The fans and heat sinks within your computer will build up dust over time; if you have pets or smoke, these components will become blocked quicker. Periodically, unplug your desktop computer and carefully vacuum the inside, paying special attention to the fans and heat sinks. If you accidentally unplug a cable, carefully put it back in its place. Do not disassemble your laptop, instead vacuum the air intake for your fans and use compressed air to blow in through the regular air output to clear dust.