

The Best Free Software of 2022

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Full article at <https://www.pcmag.com/picks/best-free-software>

You want powerful software? You don't have to pay for it. Everything you need to be productive and secure on your PC is on this list, and it's all totally free.

It's a mobile world, but we have not fully abandoned the desktop. The real work (and a lot of the play) of computing requires a full personal computing system, and to get the most out of that, you need software.

Software can be expensive, but free programs have been a mainstay of the desktop experience for decades, and today's offerings are pretty powerful. You can find all manner of free audio and video editors, office suites, file utilities, organizers, photo converters, and more. Software developers can adopt an ad-based model, donation-ware to keep things afloat, or a shareware/freemium model that charges for extra features.

To be included in this roundup, the software must be available directly from the developer/creator/original publisher. It should (typically) have a Windows-based download—no browser extensions here because we're not all on the same browser. However, we've included web-based apps that are as good as, or better than, most downloadable programs. If the software is on a tiered sales model, the free version cannot be trial-ware. It has to have at least a free-for-life option. Preferably, the program had an update in the last year or two, and the program should have little or no advertising to support it. Finally, this list is about software for productivity; there are plenty of other places to find free PC games.

Something to always watch for: crapware installers. To make ends meet, many creators of otherwise great free software, or the services that offer the programs for download, bundle in things you don't want. Worse, the installation routine obfuscates the steps, so you provide the unwanted program tacit permission to be installed. For more about how to spot and avoid this problem, see [How to Rid a New PC of Crapware](#).

A related pro tip: Only download desktop software from the maker of the software directly. It's not foolproof—after all, developers want to eat, too—but it helps.

For more free software, check out [The 100 Best iPhone Apps](#) and [The 100 Best Android Apps](#).

Did we miss any free programs you can't live without? Let us know in the comments.

BEST FREE AUDIO/VIDEO SOFTWARE

Best Free Audio Editing Software

Audacity 4.0

[Windows, macOS, Linux](#)

Open-source [Audacity](#) can record and edit audio files on more tracks than you can imagine. It then outputs exactly what you need. It is perfect for noobs and pros alike, on any desktop OS.

MSRP Free

Best Free Video Converter

Handbrake 3.5

[Windows, macOS, Linux](#)

No one would call [HandBrake](#) simple, but for power and comprehensiveness, it's hard for any other video transcoder to compete. Transcode means to convert; Handbrake will turn almost any video format into another video format. It's free, it's open-source, and it has years of practice.

Best Free Video Editing

Shotcut 3.5

[Windows, macOS, Linux](#)

While it lacks the slick interface found in most other video editors, Shotcut's got lots of other powers, all without paying—you have nothing to lose but time in trying it out. You can undock panels as you work, customizing the editing on screen, which is great on multi-monitor setups.

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Best Free Game Recording/Streaming Software

Streamlabs OBS

Windows, Web, iOS, Android

Stream your video gaming with Logitech's Streamlabs Open Broadcasting System (aka SLOBS), directly to YouTube, Twitch, or Facebook. You can even switch between gameplay and your own camera to make some commentary. There may be a bit of a learning curve due to the power it wields, but you can find plenty of help online.

\$0.00 at Streamlabs

Best Free Video Player

VLC media player

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android

The premier way to watch just about any video, ever, no matter what the weird codec, VLC media player has features like auto-rotating those smartphone videos taken at the wrong orientation, and resuming playback from where you stopped. Seriously, VLC plays back anything on all desktop platforms, and it guarantees it comes with no ads, tracking, or spyware. (For more, read [How to Play DVDs in Windows 10](#).)

MSRP Free

BEST FREE COMMUNICATION SOFTWARE

Best Free Messaging Software

Discord 4.5

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android, Xbox, PlayStation

Millions of people worldwide use Discord for text and voice and video chatting—mainly while kicking each other's arses in online games or watching streams of gameplay from services like Twitch or Caffeine. Even Microsoft wanted to buy it. You can spend a monthly (\$9.99) or annual (\$99.99) fee to go premium for better video/audio quality and to upload larger files.

Per Month, Starts at \$9.99

Best Free Remote Access

TeamViewer 4.0

Windows, macOS, Android, iOS, browsers

PCMag's top pick for software to take control of other computers is TeamViewer. Almost everything you need is free for personal use: desktop sharing, file transfers, and even chatting with remote users. The setup couldn't be easier. Take control of a remote PC over an internet connection with the app, or use a browser (even in Chrome OS) with the TeamViewer extension. (That said, remote access tools can be abused, so don't turn it on unless you're on the phone with the person you're allowing access to. Turn it off after.)

Best Free Video Conferencing

Zoom Meetings 4.5

Windows, macOS, Linux, web, iOS, Android

Want to host an online conference for you and 100 of your closest friends? Zoom Meetings can let them all view what you're showing (or just your face) for up to 40 minutes from any device, even a smartphone. Plus, you can chat all you want. It's a PCMag Editors' Choice award winner, and it made our list of the Best Tech Products of 2021, too. (Also check out our guide to top zoom tips.)

BEST FREE WRITING AND DESIGN SOFTWARE

Best Free Desktop Publishing Tool

Scribus

Windows, macOS, Linux

Scribus is the open-source equivalent of Adobe InDesign for desktop publishing, or as close as you can get. It has built-in color separation and management and a lot more, all for nothing.

Best Free Writing Tool (Screenwriters)

Trelby

Windows, Linux

Fancy yourself a budding screenwriter, but lack the funds to buy high-end tools like Final Draft? Trelby does a damn fine job of helping you keep the formatting correct, remember character names, and even import and export to formats used in Hollywood.

Best Free Writing Tool

yWriter 3.5

Windows, macOS, iOS

The highly structured interface of yWriter is there to help the budding or experienced novelist get a real handle on their story and the characters who may be trying to overtake it. The program is full of stats on what you have written, giving you a data-driven writing experience. yWriter doesn't have the depth of Scrivener, but it does have a much lower price (Spoiler: It's free! Or you can make a donation.)

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BEST FREE ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE

Best Free Maps Software

Google Earth Pro

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android

As if high-end software that lets you fly across the globe isn't cool enough—especially with all the same features as its online/mobile sibling, Google Maps—Google Earth Pro for the desktop is totally free. It includes advanced features such as high-resolution printing, distance measuring, and global guided tours. Although it also comes in web and mobile versions, the desktop version is the only one that lets you also view satellite images of the moon and Mars. (Plus, it has star maps.)

Best Free Media Center

Plex TV

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android, Xbox, PlayStation, Smart TVs, media hubs, NAS devices

If you don't know or care what a media server is—you just want to stream your videos and music collection around the house—Plex is probably for you. Install it on all your devices, point it at some media, and those audio and video files become available on everything...even remotely over the internet

Best Free Social Media Software

TikTok Windows

Windows, iOS, Android, Web

You probably think of TikTok as a mobile-only phenomenon. But not only can you access the video wonderland on the desktop at TikTok.com to see your For You page, but there's also a well-done app for it right in the Windows Store. TikTok Windows won't work with your webcam, but you can use it to upload video you edit to perfection with desktop video tools. It's all free but has ads for support—just like on the mobile versions, they show up looking like videos you might want to see.

\$0.00 at Microsoft Store

BEST FREE IMAGING SOFTWARE

Best Free File Viewer and Converter

Faststone Image Viewer

Windows only

View, manage, and compare your images with this fast and intuitive freebie. FastStone Image Viewer supports a slew of image formats, plus a ton of RAW image formats from specific digital camera manufacturers. It has companion apps for screenshots and photo resizing.

\$0.00 at FastStone

Best Free Graphics Software (Vector Editing)

Inkscape 3.0

Windows, macOS, Linux

Adobe Illustrator is the high-water mark of vector image editing, but it has the premium price to match. You can still get cross-platform Scalable Vector Graphic (SVG) image creation with the free Inkscape. You'll have to work a little harder to learn it, but it may be exactly what a talented (but cash-strapped or subscription-shy) artist needs.

MSRP Free

Best Free Graphics Software (Bitmap Editing)

Paint.net

Windows only

Is Paint.net a perfect replacement for Photoshop? Nothing is as powerful, but at this price—free—Paint.net is pretty close. For any minor (and some major) picture manipulation, it's fast, comprehensive, and easy to use.

BEST FREE PRODUCTIVITY SOFTWARE

Best Free PDF Reader

Foxit PDF Reader

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android, Web

Just about any browser will read a PDF. But Foxit PDF Reader is free for not just reading, but also annotation collaboration on the files (at least with the Windows version; other versions may be more limited). Send PDF files between them and even update the contents after the fact, thanks be to the cloud. (For more, read [How to Convert PDFs to Word Documents and Image Files.](#))

Best Free Office Suite

LibreOffice 3.0

Windows, macOS, Linux

Free office suites aren't many, and only one is a download for the major desktop operating systems. The open-source LibreOffice, now in version 7, suffers a bit in the polish department, lacks collaboration features, and sports an overstuffed toolbar interface that might remind you of Microsoft Office a decade ago. But it's powerful nevertheless, and it easily converts/imports files from other systems. It comes with a word processor (Writer), a spreadsheet (Calc), a presentation program (Impress), a vector drawing program (Draw), and even a full database (Base) and math-formula editor (Math). And it's all utterly and completely free.

MSRP Free

Best Free Note-Taking App

Microsoft OneNote 4.0

Windows, macOS, iOS, Android, Web

Once just a part of Microsoft Office, the sublime OneNote has become a free, standalone powerhouse for note-taking across all the major OSes. It still works with Office, syncs data across all platforms, and has full online access via Office.com, with storage via OneDrive. That's why it's our Editors' Choice pick for note storage.

Best Free Browser

Mozilla Firefox

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android

The venerable browser Firefox remains highly customizable; strong on security, privacy, and performance; and supports a slew of new standards. (For more, read [Which Browser Is Best?](#), plus our [Top Firefox Tips](#).)

MSRP Free

Best Free Text Editor

Notepad++

Windows only

Notepad++ is nothing like the anemic Notepad most Windows users grew used to over the decades. This free download has tabs, color-coded nesting text, WYSIWYG printing, and even support for macros. It's a must for hand-coders or any writer who wants a minimalist interface.

BEST FREE SECURITY SOFTWARE

Best Free Antivirus

Avast One Essential 4.5

Windows, macOS, iOS, Android

Our Editors' Choice award winner for free antivirus this year, Avast One Essential really is essential if you've got a Windows computer. It's a top-scorer against malware in lab tests, and it did great in our hands-on tests, too. It has a whole new look, and it offers more free protection than ever.

MSRP Free

Best Free Password Manager

Bitwarden 4.0

Windows (including a Microsoft Store app), macOS, Linux, Android, iOS, browser extensions

You'll see many password managers out there, and a few of them have a free tier, but none is so completely free as the fully open-source Bitwarden Free. (You can pay for extra features, if you want them.) The free version has unlimited password storage and full sync across all your devices. It even includes a full multi-factor authentication app. (For more, read our [guide to the Best Free Password Managers](#).)

MSRP Free

Best Free Secure Browser

Brave

Windows, macOS, Linux, Android, iOS

Do you want to stop the trackers watching you online dead in their digital tracks? Going incognito on a standard browser isn't enough. You need to use a full-on privacy browser, one that blocks the cookies and especially the fingerprinting of your whole browser and computer. Brave is one of a slew of them with a rating for strong protection from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, but it also adds in advanced protection against fingerprinting. (For details, read [The Best Private Browsers](#).)

MSRP Free

Best Free VPN

ProtonVPN 4.5

Windows, ChromeOS, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android

You probably should pay for a VPN, but you can skip it with a tool like the PCMag Editors' Choice award winner ProtonVPN, albeit with a few restrictions. That said, it's not just our pick for the best free VPN, it's our best VPN overall, period. With ProtonVPN, your bandwidth is not limited, and the focus is mainly on keeping you secure. (For more, read [The Best Free VPNs](#).)

MSRP Free

BEST FREE UTILITIES

Best Free Backup and Synchronization Software

IDrive 4.5

Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, Android

You get 5GB free from IDrive to back up files from all your devices. If that's enough capacity for you, you'll find this service more than up to your needs. It'll even back up your photos and videos from Facebook. That's why it's a PCMag Editors' Choice award winner for backup services suitable for remote workers.

Best Free File Recovery and Deletion

Recuva 3.5

Windows only

Recuva (say it out loud) is a must on the tool belt of any techie: It's the key to helping recover a lost file. It's easy to understand, but note: It should really be installed before you lose a file. It's a portable application, too, so you have the option to run it from a USB thumb drive.

MSRP Free

Best Free File Transfer Program

Teracopy

Windows, macOS, Android

Sure, Windows itself copies files between folders and drives just fine. But TeraCopy can take over that job and make it sing—it's faster, and the interface for making copies is better looking. Plus, it provides more information and feedback, and it can even recover from transfer errors.

Best Free Screen Capture

Microsoft Snip

Windows only

Even those with modest screen-capture needs would say the old Snipping Tool in Windows was lacking. Now Windows 10 and 11 users have Windows Snip & Sketch, an evolutionary leap akin to protoplasm turning into hominids—albeit still lacking things like video and voice capture. Still, the ability to annotate a screengrab will make all the difference versus what was available before. (For more, read [The Best Screen Capture Apps](#).)