



Living Well Using Open Source

Are you interested in developing new skills and exploring new interests on the computer, but **having troubles affording** the associated software?

Are you sick of **cleaning viruses and spyware** off your computer? Are you tired of nagware and time-limited trials and sketchy download sites with lots of pop-up ads?

Would you like to use software in a way that **suits your needs** and avoids resorting to piracy?

If so, **open source software** is worth considering. It gives you access to a wide variety of applications that are cheap but work well. Here are some examples:

- **Firefox** lets you surf the web.
- **OpenOffice.org** is an office suite. **PDFCreator** lets you create PDF files from any application.
- The **GIMP** lets you edit photos, and **Inkscape** can be used to create beautiful logos and graphics. **Scribus** lets you create brochures and newsletters, and can even typeset books.
- **Audacity** is a sound editor. **Tuxguitar** lets you compose music.

This handout explains what open source software is, the pros and cons of using it, how to get started, and where to get more information.

What is Open Source Software?

Open source software are computer programs licensed so that you can legally use them and share them with others. In addition, you are allowed to study the software and change it to better suit your needs.

Computer programs that are not open source are known as **proprietary software**.

Open source is also known as liberated software, software libre, free software, or by the acronyms OSS, FOSS or FLOSS. The terms "liberated" or "free" refer to the philosophy of "software freedom". By allowing people to use, improve and redistribute software freely, this philosophy aims to treat computer users **less like consumers and more like participants**. This is one reason open source software is available so cheaply.

Open Source Options

Software includes both **applications** (such as web browsers and word processors) and **operating systems** (such as Windows, Mac OS or Linux) that run on your computer. You might choose to install open source applications, open source operating systems, or both.

One option is to install open source software on a computer that already runs Windows. This is a good option if you already use a legal copy of Windows. Many good open source applications for Windows are collected in the **OpenEducationDisc** we are distributing today.

Another option is to install an open source operating system instead of Windows. One popular open source operating system is **Linux** (also known as GNU/Linux). Linux is often packaged together with applications into **distributions**. There are many different distributions available, but one of the most popular for desktop computers is called **Ubuntu**. Today we have the 8.04 release of Ubuntu available, also known as Hardy Heron.

Installing Linux can be a good option if you have a spare computer that needs software, if your current computer does not have a legal version of Windows on it, or if you are adventurous and will not aggravate the other people who also use your computer.

There is also lots of open source software available for Mac OS X and other operating systems. We are not distributing such software today, but feel free to contact us for resources.

Open Source Advantages

There are many reasons to consider using open source software. Here are some of them:

- You can use open source software **legally and at low cost**. This is especially important because illegal software (especially illegal copies of Windows) do not qualify for security updates, leaving your computer more vulnerable to viruses, worms and other computer nasties.
- Good quality open source projects **take software security seriously**. Ubuntu releases security updates for its software automatically and for free. Open source software - in particular open source operating systems - tends to be much **less vulnerable to viruses and spyware** than Windows. (Open source software does not eliminate security issues, however.)
- **Lots of open source software exists**, including good-quality alternatives to many popular applications. Software for niche interests varies in quality but is often available. Depending on your interest there may already be a community of people who use and develop open source software for that need.
- You can **try different software packages cheaply**, and uninstall them if you don't like them. Linux distributions like Ubuntu collect a wide variety of software into **repositories**, which make discovering, installing and upgrading new software especially easy. (Interestingly, this is only possible because open source software can be repackaged and redistributed freely.)
- With open source software, you usually get **full versions of products** -- not trial versions, ad-laden nagware, or "home" versions with reduced functionality.
- Open source software exists in a **culture of sharing and collaboration**. Users help each other with technical support. Most open source software is free of nag screens and demands to upgrade to a paid product. Open source software is freely given; you can use it without feeling slimy or dishonest. You can also copy installation discs and give them to others legally.
- If you are interested in jobs in the computer industry, open source is invaluable because it gives you **access to the same software tools** that are used to power mail servers, web servers, supercomputers, and smart phones. Developing proficiency in these technologies can make you more employable without costing you a lot of money.
- There are many opportunities to **contribute to open source software**, and you are encouraged to do so. You might support other users, write documentation, file bug reports, or contribute a plugin to make the software you use better. Contributing something back can do a lot to boost your self-esteem. Many projects also accept financial contributions.

Open Source Annoyances

Every decision has benefits and costs, and the decision to try open source software is no different. Here are some of the most common frustrations people face when using open source software, along with some ways people get around these issues.

- **Conversion between open source data files and their proprietary counterparts is not always perfect.** For example, a resume created in OpenOffice.org might look different when opened in Microsoft Word. One option is to distribute documents in PDF format, which is easy to generate and looks the same everywhere.
- You may find that open source software **looks and behaves differently** than proprietary alternatives you are used to. Sometimes features are missing or incomplete in the software, or you have to use the software in a different way to achieve the same result.
- **Getting help** for open source software can be difficult. If your local computer shop (or the wizardly friend or relative you turn to with your questions) does not use or support open source software, you will need to look elsewhere for help.
 - Some online forums (such as the Linux Questions or Ubuntu Help forums) can offer good support. Mailing lists and forums devoted to specific applications also exist.
 - You can participate in a local user group like KWLUG, where people meet and discuss open source issues. The folks at Computer Recycling can also answer some of your questions.
- None of these groups will do all your computer maintenance for you, but they can help you with specific questions and direct you to places where you can get additional help.
- It can **take additional work to get movies and music files to play under Linux** (this tends to be easier in Windows). In some countries, open source software to play DVDs and MP3s is restricted or legally unclear, so Ubuntu and other distributions do not release such software officially.
- **Not all hardware is supported well** in open source operating systems. For example, Linux support for printers, wireless cards and video cards can be spotty. It is best to check that your hardware is supported in Linux before attempting to install it. Sometimes you can cheaply replace components that do not work under Linux with others that do.
- **Open source exists in a "do it yourself" culture.** If features don't exist in software that you are using, you are given the options of waiting patiently, paying somebody to develop the features you want, or developing those features yourself. This attitude can be frustrating, especially to those of us who are less technologically-savvy. Sometimes a different open source project supports the feature you need. Sometimes there are ways to work around the limitation until the feature you need is implemented.
- Like other software, many open source applications **assume you have internet access** when installing and using them. It is certainly possible to install and use most of this software without internet access, but it can be tricky. This is especially true for Linux distributions, which break up applications into packages that depend on each other.
- Because it is so easy and cheap to release open source software, the **software quality varies dramatically**. The health and quality of open source software depends on its support. Applications that are well-supported (by a strong community user base, a foundation or a corporation) tends to work better and be more featureful than software written by lone individuals in their spare time.

Resources

- Computer Recycling will be holding **Introduction to Linux** workshops later this year. If you are interested, you can sign up at the booth or contact Charles (charlesm@theworkingcentre.org)
- As the name suggests, the Kitchener-Waterloo Linux Users Group (KWLUG) consists of people interested in Linux in particular and open source in general. The group runs monthly presentation meetings at the Working Centre, and hosts a lively e-mail discussion list. The group is free to join, and people of all skill and interest levels are welcome to participate in KWLUG activities. See <http://www.kwlug.org> for more information.
- The Kitchener-Waterloo Internet Users Group (KWIUG) is a general-purpose education group that deals with a wide variety of topics relating to computers. They hold occasional meetings and also have a mailing list. See <http://www.kwiug.org> for more information. You can also e-mail Sandy (alexanderh@rogers.com) or Bob (bjonkman@sobac.com) with inquiries.
- The OpenDisc and OpenEducationDisc projects collect high-quality open source software for Windows. <http://www.theopendisc.com>
- Ubuntu is a popular Linux distribution for desktop computers. See <http://www.ubuntu.com> for more information.
- The Linux Questions forum at <http://www.linuxquestions.org> is a web forum which helps Linux users troubleshoot computer issues. It contains a lot of good information in its archives, and the members tend to be friendlier than on many other internet sites.
- The Open Source Alternatives website <http://www.osalt.com> lists open source alternatives to common proprietary software products.