

COMPUTER GEEKS
PRESENTS

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Survive and thrive in a digital world

Computing on the Go with PortableApps

Tech Tip 128 - Scott Nesbitt



Taking your computing wherever you go usually means carrying a [notebook computer](#), a [PDA](#), or a smart phone like the [BlackBerry Pearl](#). But, you really don't need anything that big to compute on the go. All you need is a [USB flash drive](#) (also called a *USB key* or a *USB thumb drive*) and a free set of programs called [PortableApps](#). Then, you can do your work, communicate with friends and family, and more simply by plugging into a computer running Windows.

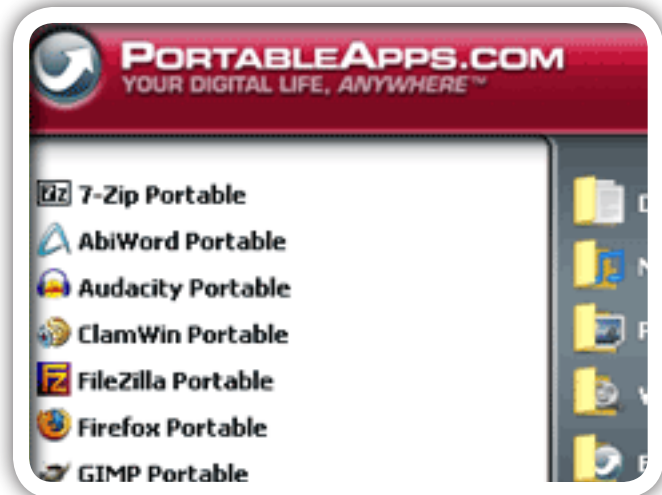
Getting to Know PortableApps

PortableApps is a suite of [Open Source](#) software that has been specially rewritten to run quickly and smoothly off of a USB drive. Some people even use PortableApps with a portable hard drive or an [MP3 player](#) like an iPod. You download one of the three [PortableApps packages](#) -- which weigh in at 1 MB, 30 MB, and 90 MB re-

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spectively -- and whatever additional software that you want.

All you need to do to use PortableApps is plug your USB drive into a PC running Windows. From there, it should start up automatically. If not, just run the program StartPortableApps.exe on the USB drive and a menu will appear on the Windows system tray. Just click the application that you want to run, and you're ready to go.



The applications run right off of the USB drive. PortableApps doesn't touch the hard drive of the computer that you're plugged into. It only uses a USB port, some memory, and the computer's Internet connection.

What You Get

The PortableApps packages provide the framework -- [file system](#), folders, and menus

-- to run a variety of popular Open Source applications. Like what? How about the [OpenOffice.org office suite](#), the [Firefox Web browser](#), the [Thunderbird email client](#), a number of graphics and Web tools, [VLC](#) (a player for audio and video files), and even an [antivirus tool](#). You can get a full list of the available applications [here](#). The software available for PortableApps will cover most of your needs quite nicely.

You can install and remove applications as you see fit. Just run an executable to install the application. To remove it, just delete the application's folder on your USB drive. Once installed, the applications that make up the suite run quite quickly and smoothly. Depending on the speed of the computer that you're plugged into and how much memory it has, you'll notice very little difference between the performance of PortableApps and software installed on a hard drive.

Drawbacks

PortableApps is a fine piece of software, but it has drawbacks for some people. You might not be a fan of Open Source applications, or may be wary of them because there's no real company behind them. You might prefer commercial applications, and not want to worry about having to learn something new.

For some, the lack of games -- PortableApps only comes with a simple version of [sudoku](#) -- might be a tick in the negative column. In fact, I've heard people complain about the overall lack of software that is available for PortableApps. While there are only 27 pieces of software that come with the suite, they're not the only ones around. You can find more software by checking the [PortableApps forums](#).

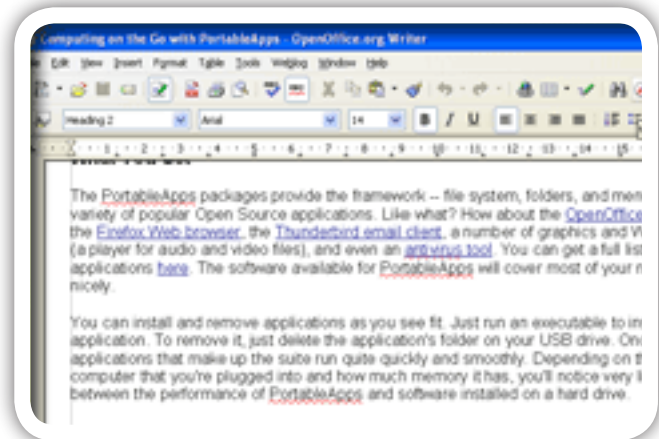
Even though Windows is the dominant operating system, there are large

numbers of Mac and Linux users. Unfortunately, PortableApps won't run on those operating systems, so if you're a user of one of these, then you're out of luck.

On top of all of that, a PortableApps is slow to install. The three times that I installed it, the base package took over 10 minutes. Applications also install slowly. With many, the install process seems to freeze about half way though. In many cases, you have enough time to go grab a snack while a program is being installed.

How & Why?

So, why would you want to use PortableApps? If, for example, you're traveling and don't want to risk taking your computer,



then PortableApps is a perfect way to take your computing with you. It's small, light, and will work with most modern computers -- say, at an Internet cafe, a library, a hotel business center, or even a PC belonging to a friend or family member.

How you use PortableApps is up to your imagination. I know of at least two writers who use PortableApps for a variety of writing and blogging tasks whenever they're away from home, either out of town or just across town. I used PortableApps to write this [TechTip](#) as well as a number of other articles.

At a recent professional conference, my business partner and I were asked to conduct a number of interviews. While I had sound recording and editing software called [Audacity](#) on my ThinkPad, he didn't have it on his computer. Luckily, I had a USB flash drive with PortableApps and the [portable version of Audacity](#). He was able to do his interviews without a hitch, and without having to contend with the hotel's sometimes spotty Internet connection in order to download Audacity.

Choosing the Right USB flash drive

I tested PortableApps using three USB flash drives that I had lying around. Two were generic and one was of decent quality. -- one was a giveaway and the other I bought at the [HongQiao market in Beijing](#) last summer. The third was a [SanDisk USB flash drive](#). The two generic drives performed reasonably well, but I noticed that the access and write times were slow. The USB flash drive that I bought in Beijing suddenly failed. The SanDisk drive, though, is still performing very well. The lesson here: buy the best USB flash drive that you can afford.

USB flash drives are fairly cheap. You can get a [good one or two Gigabyte USB drive](#) for under \$25 if you look around. You should stick to well-known brands. As I mentioned earlier, a SanDisk USB drive is working well for me. Other people I know who use PortableApps have had no complaints using their [Toshiba](#), [Kingston](#), or [Imation](#) drives. On the cheaper end, I know someone who swears by her [Transcend USB flash drive](#).

As far as the capacity of the drive goes, that will depend on which PortableApps package you're using. If you're using the smaller one,

then a [256 MB USB drive](#) will be fine. If you're using the large packages, I'd suggest getting a [512 MB](#) or [1 GB drive](#). Remember that you'll need space not only for your applications, but for your files as well.

Conclusion

PortableApps enables you to compute on the go in a package that literally fits in your pocket. While PortableApps won't replace your [desktop](#) or [notebook](#) computer, it's a quick, easy to use, and convenient way to get work done while you're away from home. You don't have to worry about losing or damaging an expensive piece of hardware or leaving your "footprint" on a computer that's accessible to the public.