

America Online

I'm writing this article for the benefit of all of those who, like me, have managed to ignore the online services available to computer users. Friends have been telling me for years that I ought to sign up for one of the national services—Compuserve, GENie, etc. A fellow SMUG member finally even lent me his old 300 baud Apple modem and his original version of Microphone (the terminal software program) to get me started.

My first tentative attempts to hook up to the local BBS were painless enough. Then I had Bob sit by my side while I tried out Compuserve. Getting signed on was a minor ordeal. I was assigned an “address”: 7655,3507 and a meaningless password. I managed to look around a bit and even download a couple of pieces of software, but the experience was less than totally satisfying: everywhere I went, I was met by long scrolling lists of text explaining choices and giving me the opportunity to memorize arcane commands such as **Go Macpro** and **Go MacFF**. It was as if I had lost my Mac and was trying to get through life with an text-based computer. Ug!

However, I wasn't going to give up so soon. I took the plunge and requested a trial membership with a new online service I had never heard of—America Online. Some time later, a package arrived containing free software and a credit for a free hour of time to try out everything.

This was different. When I ran the software, the sign-up procedures were taken care of automatically. The software even looked at my modem and configured it for optimum results. When I actually got signed on, a human(!) voice came out of my Mac saying, “Welcome!” A screen with eight colored icons showed up: People Connection, Computing and Software, News and Finance, Entertainment, Learning and Reference, etc. Clicking on one of these took me where I wanted to go. Thereafter, most things were represented by files and folders in windows. I felt right at home. MacWEEK recently took a look at AO. They found that “America Online represents all that is Mac: the elegant, finely detailed interface; powerful information processing; ease of use; and attention to the individual.”

Each time you sign on, the process is automatic. The progress of this procedure is shown by highlighted icons for dialing, connecting, and checking your password. (See below.)

•• [Editor: put illustration here.] ••

Most of the time I've spent online has been browsing the downloadable software library, looking for new items for our own PD/Shareware disks. This is easy, too. The library is divided into folders called Desktop Publishing, Business, Graphics, Hypercard, etc. Within these folders are more folders which break things down into logical categories. Within each major area, there's a folder devoted to new files, so that a regular visitor can just look for new items and updates. Downloading is easy, too. If you see something that looks interesting, you can double-click on it for more information. If you decide you want it, just click the Download button. It's that easy.

So (you ask), how much does all of this cost? First you have to have a modem. I bought a Practical Peripherals 2400 baud modem—the same one that my SMUG friend has been happy with for a long time. This cost in the neighborhood of \$100. Now for the online charges.

America Online is very reasonable. The software is free, and people who sign up before January 31 will get two free hours of connect time and a 20 percent lifetime discount. There is a \$5.95 monthly fee which includes one free hour. Additional hours are \$4 during off-peak (evening and weekend) hours, or \$8 per prime-time hour. Let's compare rates. At 2400 baud, off-hours:

America Online	\$4.00
CompuServe	
\$12.50	

CompuServe also charges a monthly \$1.50 fee and has surcharges and "value-added" services for which there are additional charges. You may also find that there is a separate fee for the connection service with CompuServe. America Online has NO additional or hidden fees. For two hours usage, compuserve's charge will be \$26.50 or more, while America Online charges \$9.95.

And how about the quality of the services? I'm not really qualified to answer that one... there are a lot of areas I haven't tried. Here's a list of some of them:

- American Airlines' EASy Sabre™ service lets you make airplane, hotel and car rental arrangements.
- News from USA Today® and eight other wire services.
- Stock quotes.
- Academic American Encyclopedia.
- User Group Information.
- Online Shopping
- Online games
and more.

There are also “forums” where you can go to find information relating to specialized interests. I often check out the Desktop Publishing forum to check for opinions and reviews on the tools of the trade. There are forums for graphics, HyperCard, business, and many more.

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There is also a mail service. If you want to get in touch with some other member (individual or company rep), you can send electronic mail by using the form shown above.

America Online is run by Quantum Computer Services, Inc. It was originally developed in partnership with Apple, and was originally going to be known as AppleLink-Personal Edition.

This is not a review. I haven't fully explored America Online, and I am not an experienced traveller. But I can say from just a few weeks' involvement that America Online has a lot to offer, and at a low price. So don't be shy, like I was—give it a try.

By the way, when you sign off, that friendly voice says, “Goodbye.”

by Jim Alley
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