.01 Why America Online and not some other service?

Price AOL attracts many of the people who racked up huge CompuServe bills. Don't be fooled by CompuServe's $8.95 a month charge for basic services. Good stuff like chat areas, downloading, and worthwhile message boards cost $4.80 an hour at 2400 bps and $9.60 an hour at 9600 bps. At 9600 bps, CompuServe costs nearly three times as much as AOL.

File libraries There's no better service for downloading freeware and shareware. The file descriptions are thorough and the files have descriptive, Macintosh names. You can download files in batches and have AOL disconnect when the download is finished. After disconnecting, AOL automatically decompresses the files. Files can be attached to mail sent to other AOL members.

Internet services For no extra cost, AOL members have access to easy-to-use Internet mail, Usenet newsgroups, and Gopher and WAIS databases. Telnet logins and ftp file transfers are to be added later. For Internet access, AOL's only competitor among major online services is Delphi. Delphi's interface is weak, even for a command line interface. On the other hand, if you mainly want mail, gopher, ftp, and telnet, Delphi is a good low-cost choice. Local Internet providers in your area may be able to provide an even better value.

Interface AOL has an easy-to-use graphical interface. CompuServe's interface for message boards is better, and AOL could learn some things there, but AOL wins overall. AOL is light years beyond command-line services.

Friendly atmosphere People make an online service fun to use. AOL makes personal interaction easier than other services. You can chat in real time in the chat rooms and conference areas. Instant Messages provide an easy way to chat privately in real time. AOL users create their own screen names, so no one is stuck with an inscrutable ID number.

I'm not trying to put down anyone's online service. I mean, I really do have a life. Honest. Depending on your needs and the services available in your area, you may find that another online service is better for you. For many people, I really think AOL is the best choice.

2.02 What do I need to join America Online?

1. The America Online software, a registration code and password

2.   A credit card or U.S. checking account.

3.   A phone line. You can use the same phone line you use for ordinary telephone calls.

4.   A computer. To use the America Online 2.1 software for Macintosh, you need at least a Macintosh Plus with a hard disk, System 6.0.5 or higher, and 750K of free RAM. The AOL software is also available for the Apple][, DOS, and Windows operating systems.

5.   A Hayes-compatible modem.

If you're buying your first modem, do yourself a favor and get at least a 2400 bps modem. 2400 bps modems are so cheap that it doesn't make sense to buy anything slower. If you can afford a faster modem, for Pete's sake buy it. A fast modem will save your sanity. And because AOL charges the same rate for 2400 or 9600 bps access, a fast modem will save you money. Speed is a really, really good thing.

2.03   Where do I get the America Online software?

There are at least five ways to get the software. In each case, you'll get the software and ten free hours on America Online. Those ten hours must be used within thirty days of the day you first sign on. See chapter 14 for details. You can't just get a copy of the software from a friend, by the way. To join AOL, you'll need a registration code, which comes with the software. A code can be used only once. If you have the software but no registration code, call customer service at 1-800-827-6364.

1.   If one of your friends is an AOL member, ask them to order the software for you. Your friend will get five free hours for signing you on. See chapter 14 for details.

2.   The quickest way to become a member is go to your local bookstore and buy _The Official America Online Membership Kit & Tour Guide--Macintosh Edition_, which includes a floppy disk with the AOL software. Another edition of the book is available for the PC. For more information, see chapter 14.

3.   AOL usually advertises in _Macworld_ and _MacUser_ magazines. The advertisements include a postcard to order the AOL software.

4.   You can order the software by calling 1-800-827-6364, extension 7776.

5.   The AOL software is often bundled with commercial software, Performa computers, modems, and other products. Lest you be enticed to buy a product because it comes with America Online, remember that the AOL software is available at no cost through other channels.

2.04   Can I access AOL without AOL's custom software?

No. America Online's graphical, easy-to-use interface depends on its custom software. Likewise, you can't use the custom AOL software to call other services.

2.05   What does America Online cost?

The basic monthly fee is $9.95, which includes five free hours. Additional time beyond the five free hours costs $3.50 per hour. There is an additional $2.00 a month fee to have your bill debited from a checking account. The rates are the same regardless of the time of day you call, the day of the week you call, or the speed of your modem. Charter members pay slightly lower rates. The fees are calculated per minute. Partial minutes are rounded up to the nearest minute.

Members calling from outside the continental United States pay an additional twenty cents per minute access charge. Access charges apply at all times, even in otherwise free areas. The access charges go to the access providers, such as DataPac, SprintNet, and Tymnet. See chapter 5 to learn more about access providers.

2.06   How do I pay my bill?

America Online accepts major credit cards, debit cards, and direct withdrawals from a U.S. checking account, but does not accept payment by check or money order. America Online accepts American Express, the Discover Card, Master Card, and VISA. School accounts must be paid with a purchase order.

2.07   What Internet services does AOL offer?

AOL offers Internet mail, mailing lists, Usenet newsgroups, and Gopher and WAIS databases. FTP and Telnet are to be added in the future, but there are no firm release dates. You can access AOL's Internet features by using keyword "internet".

2.08   What's a good screen name?

When you join AOL, you'll need to create a screen name. A screen name is your online name and electronic mail address. The screen name you create when you join is your master screen name. It can't be deleted or changed, so you should pick a good one. Here are some suggestions:

The rules   A screen name can be three to ten characters long, and can contain letters, numbers, and spaces. Offensive names aren't allowed. Some names are reserved. I wanted to be "MacAOLFAQ", but only staff members can have "AOL" in their name. Screen names aren't case sensitive or space sensitive: if someone is using "Bob", you can't use "BOB" or "B o b".

"Bob" is already taken   So are "Robert" and "Robbie" and "Bobby" and "Rob". If you try to use a name that's already in use, AOL will offer an alternate name. If you try "Bob", AOL will offer "Bob7462382" or something, always offering a ten-digit name. Avoid numbers in your screen name. Numbers will be hard for you and your friends to remember. Try a name like "BobInTN" (Bob in Tennessee). Use your imagination.

Avoid all caps names   In the online world, all capital letters mean you're shouting. "BOBINTN" looks like a loud drunk. "BobInTN" looks like a fishing buddy.