

**Your guide**  
to helping older  
people use the  
internet



# About this guide

## Who is this guide for?

If you want to show older people how to use the internet for the first time, or help someone to improve their skills, this guide is for you. It doesn't matter if you're helping a friend or family member, or someone you support as part of your job or volunteering role.

Inside, you'll find lots of tips on how to get started. There's also advice if you're interested in setting up long-term learning for a group of older people.

You don't need to be a computer expert to be able to provide good help. If you feel confident using the internet by yourself, you know enough.

## How to use this guide

You can use this guide in different ways. You can read through it all, before you get started. Or you can dip into it whenever you need to. Even if you've been helping someone with the internet for a while, it can still be useful. The contents page explains where you can find different topics.

This guide is produced by Good Things Foundation, a national charity that helps people to get online, in partnership with the Centre for Ageing Better, an independent charitable foundation working towards a society where everyone enjoys a good later life.



Good Things Foundation has a free website called Learn My Way that's specially designed for people new to using computers, tablets, smartphones, and the internet.

You can find it at **[www.learnmyway.com](http://www.learnmyway.com)**. It has lots of simple topics, written in plain English. You might find it a useful teaching tool, and you might even learn something yourself.

Please email **[hello@goodthingsfoundation.org](mailto:hello@goodthingsfoundation.org)** if you would like a digital version of this booklet.

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# Important things to remember

Whoever you are, and whoever you're helping with the internet, there are some things to remember which will make your life easier.

# One step at a time

Learning to use the internet might be a rather scary idea for someone who's never been online. Start small.

- Explain that you don't want to show them everything, but you think there are one or two things that they might find useful. Explain what the benefits are, and give them the chance to ask questions.
- Agree simple goals, at least to start with: on the first day it could be just checking the weather or what's on TV, which can give older people a sense of instant achievement. But also think about more complex, longer-term goals, like having a video call with a relative.
- Don't rush them: if they're not ready to start right now, try and agree a time that you can both put aside.
- Let them feel in control. Tell them they can stop anytime they want to.



# The right language

Computers and the internet have their own language: words and phrases that can be confusing to someone who's not familiar with them. Often, knowing this new language isn't even essential, at least in the beginning.

You might think that you don't use complicated computer terms - or that you even know any. But remember, even the simplest words might seem complicated to the older person you're helping.

- Find familiar words for unfamiliar things, like 'picture' instead of 'icon'.
- Explain what's happening with everyday examples: for example, you could say a computer updating itself is 'giving itself a service'.
- There's no right or wrong way to explain things, as long as it works. Stop and ask the person you're helping: 'does that make sense?' And remember that what works for one person, might not work for someone else.
- Only name and explain the things someone needs to do the task at hand. Save the more detailed answers, exceptions and alternatives for another day.

### Who's driving?

When someone learns to drive, they sit in the driving seat! Most people learn best by doing, not by watching someone else.

- Let the person you're helping control the device - holding it if it's a tablet or smartphone, or having control of the keyboard and mouse of a traditional computer.
- Reassure them that you'll step in if there's a problem, and that there's no way they'll damage the device just by touching it.
- The aim isn't to move forward as quickly as possible. Resist the temptation to lean in and do something for someone just because they're doing it slowly.
- At the same time, know when to step in. Getting completely stuck can be really offputting, especially for someone who's only just started. If you don't think someone can move forward at all with just you explaining, tell them that you'll sort out the problem - but make it clear that they've not done anything wrong.

# Patience, patience, patience

The most useful thing for someone to learn is not technical skills, but the confidence and motivation they need to carry on by themselves.

- Be prepared to repeat things - maybe more than once. And never draw attention to the fact you're repeating, or how long it's taking someone to complete a task.
- People aren't learning machines. If someone complains that they have forgotten (or will forget) something, remind them that this is completely normal and doesn't mean that they can't learn with practice. You can suggest they make notes, or do anything else that will help them remember.
- Don't assume knowledge - if someone thinks they're 'supposed' to already know something and they don't, they can feel like they've failed before they've even started.
- Older people can find it helpful to have written notes. They can write these themselves (which can help them remember), or you can do it for them. Whoever's writing, make sure any notes are clear. Ask someone to try and repeat something, just using the notes - this will help you to find out if anything's missing.





# Getting ready

Once you've got someone's interest, it's time to think about how you'll start to support them. The experience should be enjoyable for both of you! Here are some tips on how to get it right.

# Make time

People need space and time to take in and process new information and learning, and some people will need more support than others.

- Make sure you and whoever you're supporting has some uninterrupted free time. It doesn't have to be long - in fact, you shouldn't try and do too much at once - but constant interruptions and needing to stop midway through an activity don't make for a good learning experience.
- If you have several people who need support, make sure you can provide 1-to-1 support if required without people having to wait for a long time. It might not make sense to try and get everybody started at once. Or you could see if there's anyone else who can help: it could be a colleague, a neighbour, or a volunteer.
- Don't leave people waiting. If you only help someone a few times, they probably won't get to the point where they can go online by themselves. Even if they do, they might need a little extra help if something unexpected happens.

# Make space

- Choose the right place. A good place to learn should be reasonably quiet. Make sure that it's not too warm or cold, and ideally has natural daylight - without the sun getting in anyone's eyes.
- Make the learning experience friendly and comfortable. It doesn't need to feel like a classroom, and you only need tables if people are using laptop or desktop computers. If people are using tablets or smartphones, they can relax in comfortable chairs.
- If you're helping people in a community setting (like a care home or sheltered housing scheme), don't hide behind closed doors. Try to provide support where others can see it, and come and ask questions if they want to. If they can see that what you're doing is fun and informal, it will help them to understand there's nothing to fear.
- Learning often happens best when it's a social occasion. If someone has the confidence to explain things to someone else, pair them with a less experienced person. Games can be a good way to do this - there's some advice on this on page 28.
- If you can, make sure that tea, coffee and biscuits are available!

# Prepare in advance

*There's some advice in the next section on what you can do if there is no internet connection available.*

There might be a few technical problems you need to deal with. This is perfectly normal and usually easy, but it makes sense to do it in advance. If the people you're supporting think from the outset that computers and the internet are nothing but trouble, it will put them off.

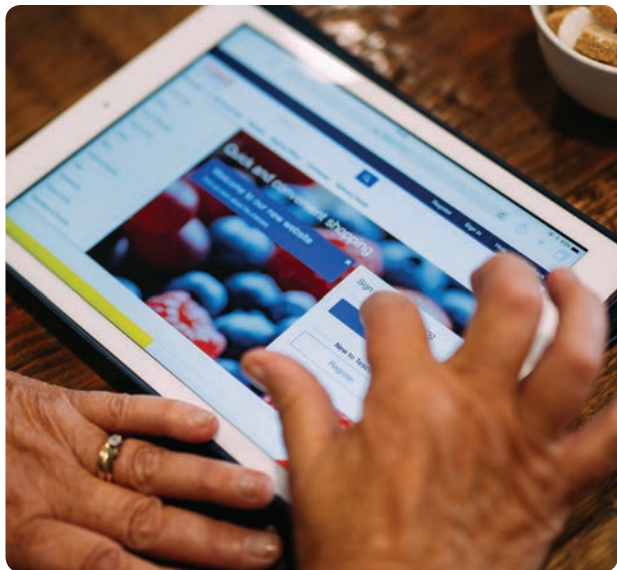




- Check that you can connect to the internet without problems. Use your own device to connect to WiFi, and browse the internet to make sure the connection is fast and stable. Try different parts of the room - maybe some places are better than others.
- Make sure that you know the right WiFi network name, password, and any other details you might need to get online. Although your own device might remember these things for you, somebody else going online for the first time might have to enter these details.
- Make sure any devices you're using are fully charged, with software updated. This means you can avoid error messages and blank screens just when you're trying to get someone interested!

# Different kinds of devices

'Computers' covers a lot: as well as different devices from smartphones to laptops, there are also the differences between different operating systems (e.g. Windows and iOS). You don't need to be an expert in all of these, but there are some things you should bear in mind.



- If the person you're helping already has their own device, make sure you have some idea of how it works. Hitting a couple of snags is fine - but it won't be a good experience for either of you if you're doing everything by trial and error.
- If you can choose a device for the person you're supporting, make sure you understand what they want to do in advance. If someone wants to do a lot of typing, they might prefer a keyboard to a touchscreen.
- In addition, make sure to take into account things like dexterity and eyesight. Will they find a mouse easy to use? Can they read the text on a smartphone?
- The person you're supporting might feel overwhelmed by all the different types of device. Explain that, once you start using the internet, websites work in much the same way whatever device you're using. If they can learn how to use the internet on one device, they can do it on another.
- If someone is using a computer keyboard for the first time, the number of keys might seem daunting. Explain that they'll only have to use a small number of keys to do what they want to.





## **What to do if there's no device or connection**

If the person you're helping doesn't have a WiFi connection, this can make things difficult. If they don't have access to the internet while you're around, they might forget what they've learned when you're not there. Also, it's harder for them to enjoy the benefits of being online if they don't have regular access. If they can't afford an internet connection, or they're not convinced that it's worth their money, here are some ideas that might help.

# What to do if there's no device or connection

## Getting a connection

- If you have the budget, invest in a mobile broadband device which allows a tablet or computer to connect wirelessly to the internet by creating what is known as a WiFi hotspot. See page 24 for more information.
- This includes 'dongles', which plug into the USB port of a laptop or desktop computer, and WiFi hotspots, which don't need to be plugged in and suitable for connecting tablets.
- There's some advice on page 25 about different payment options. But whatever you choose, search for online advice, look for good reviews, and make sure you know how the device works before you show someone else how to use it.

## Finding a free internet connection

If the person you're helping has a device that connects to the internet, they may be able to access a free internet connection. As well as free WiFi available in places like pubs and cafés, there is often WiFi access in communal areas of sheltered housing schemes and care homes. Ask to find out if this is available - it might even be possible for someone to connect to a network that is used by staff.

# Mobile broadband connection options

If you want to get someone connected and are limited to mobile broadband, here are some options:

**1. A long-term contract for a dongle or WiFi hotspot (12-24 months).**

There are usually no upfront costs and the cost per month is low: around £10-£15, depending on the monthly data allowance. However, whoever signs the contract is tied to it for as long as it lasts.

**2. A short-term contract (1 month), which you can choose to renew or not on a monthly basis.**

In these cases you'll usually need to pay upfront for the dongle or WiFi hotspot itself: this can be around £30 for a dongle, but ranges from £60 to over £100 for a WiFi hotspot. Once this is paid, monthly costs range from around £10 to around £30, depending on data allowance.

**3. Buying a dongle or WiFi hotspot outright, and a 'pay as you go' SIM card to use with it.**

This can be cheaper than option 2, but a little more work as you'll have to buy these things separately. You can find hotspots on Amazon, eBay or the high street for around £15-£60. SIM cards with a reasonable data allowance can cost as little as £6-£15, and are available in contract lengths as short as 1 month.



#### **4. A tablet that can connect to the internet without any extra equipment, the same way as a smartphone can.**

This is the easiest option for the person you're helping, but not necessarily the cheapest. 4G tablets are often more expensive and you will have to get a SIM with pay-as-you-go data or a contract.

## Help with paying for a device or connection

If the person you're helping can't afford a device or internet connection, or isn't ready to make the investment, there are a few different options:

- Housing associations often have schemes to help tenants get online. If the person you're helping lives in a housing association property, check the association's website for information.
- Find out if your local authority has a similar scheme in place.
- If you're an employee or volunteer helping older people, ask someone else in the organisation how you can go about making a case for a small investment that will make a big difference.
- See if there's a local Digital Inclusion Hub near you ([www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/find-centre](http://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org/find-centre)), or other organisation that helps people with computers and the internet, that could give you some advice.





## What can you do online?

If someone doesn't have a clear idea of what they want to do online, here are some ideas of accessible, popular online activities that you could try with them.

You can find lots more free advice and ideas for the people you're helping, or for yourself at Learn My Way ([www.learnmyway.com](http://www.learnmyway.com)), the free learning platform provided by Good Things Foundation.

### Playing games

Online games are fun, but they can also serve a useful purpose. They can help older people to learn how to use a device, without thinking of it as 'learning'.

There's a separate guide available from Good Things Foundation called 'Your Guide to Using Games to Teach Tablet Skills'. Email [hello@goodthingsfoundation.org](mailto:hello@goodthingsfoundation.org) to order a copy.

Here are a few tips to help you get started.

- Find a game that the person you're helping is interested in. You could start with online versions of games they already know, like chess or card games.
- Sit with them as they play - or play with them - and notice how they're getting on. Do they seem nervous, or struggle with touchscreen gestures or using a mouse? Games can allow you to assess confidence, skills and ability - without having to make someone sit a test.
- Make sure the game you choose is at the right level, both to understand, and with the speed and dexterity needed. Too easy, and people will lose interest, too hard and they'll get frustrated.
- Find the social angle. A keen chess player may be excited to find they can play with other people online.

# Email

The person you're supporting might not have much use for email, but an email address is still an important thing to have - it will allow them to register for all kinds of online services, such as online GP services and others.

- Choose a web-based email service like Gmail or Outlook: these are free and easy to use, and have apps if the person you're helping has a tablet or smartphone.
- Make sure the person you're helping makes a note of their email address (you can make a note of it yourself), and creates a password that is secure and easy for them to remember. If they want to write something down to help remember it, suggest that they write a clue - not the password itself.
- Even if they won't need to use email much, it's useful to send each other a few emails to get them used to it.

### Hobbies and interests

Most people have a passion or something they're interested in - ask them and they'll probably tell you what it is. They might be happy to pursue it offline, but you can show them how the internet gives them unique opportunities. Hobbies and interests can also be a great way to introduce the internet a little bit at a time. While you're chatting, you can bring up websites, photos or videos, and show people the possibilities. Here are a few suggestions.

- There are lots of free websites that allow people to start finding out about their family history, much more quickly and easily than looking offline. Some websites are completely free, while others have a free trial period - ideal if people want to try without commitment.
- YouTube is a great source of videos on hobbies, from fishing to crafting. Find out what the person you're helping is interested in, and try and find some good channels or videos in advance.
- There are free websites that allow people to be creative. Adding effects to photographs or 'painting' on a touchscreen can give a real sense of achievement. It helps if you have the facilities to print out any masterpieces!

# Skype

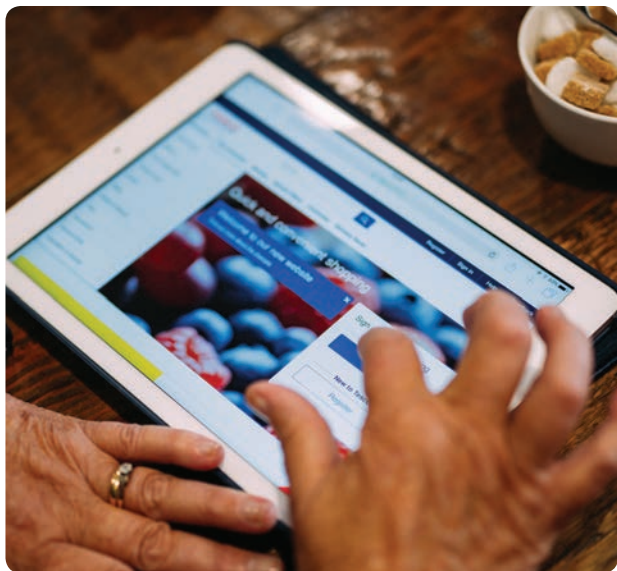
The video call service Skype is a very popular way to keep in touch with family and friends. It's free, and allows people to see each other from a distance. If the person you're helping has family living far away, they might be interested.

- If you're helping someone to make a Skype call to someone close to them, make sure it goes right. Get them to make a practise call to you in the next room. This will get them used to using Skype, and allow you to check that sound and picture quality are good.
- It can be a good idea for you and the person you're helping to get in touch with the person they want to call, to let them know what you're planning. That way they can be ready and set up at an agreed time.
- Remember you can also make video calls through WhatsApp, Google Meet, and on Apple devices through FaceTime. If Skype is hard to use, or doesn't give a good quality call, try alternatives.

## What can you do online?

### Social media

Like making video calls, social media is a very popular way to keep in touch with family and friends. It's especially appealing because it's easy to find someone you've not been in touch with for a long time. There are very simple rules to make social media a positive experience.





- Older people might have preconceptions about social media as a waste of time, or a place where people aren't nice to each other. You might need to start by explaining the benefits, and how it's easy to avoid unpleasant behaviour.
- Help them to connect with people, especially those they might have fallen out of touch with.
- Show them how easy it is to share things like photos and links.
- Don't make a big thing of it, but tell them a little bit about 'netiquette' (being polite online). This includes not typing in capitals, and not calling names. They might not realise that what they say could be seen by a lot of people.
- Make sure older people don't feel overwhelmed by social media. Show them how to switch off notifications, or unfollow people on Facebook, so they're not swamped.





# Staying safe online

Once older people start using the internet for the first time, they have to start dealing with the risks that go with it. They may have heard that the internet can be a dangerous place, and without personal experience it can be hard for them to put this information into context. If they want to become confident internet users, you will need to help them deal with these issues.

# Staying safe: General tips

- Don't brush the issue under the carpet. Don't pretend risks don't exist, and deal with misunderstandings with respect. Getting plenty of information and asking questions helps people to feel confident and in control of the situation.
- Make it clear that, if you follow some simple steps, it's easy to stay safe.
- Make sure the person you're helping understands to stop what they're doing, and not agree to anything they're not sure about, without checking with you or someone else they trust.
- If the person you're helping wants to find out how to keep children safe online, there's plenty of reliable information available - the BBC and Childline websites are a good place to start.
- If the person you're helping mentions an unusual email or phone call, or has seen something online that they're not comfortable with, ask them to give further details. You can report problems or request information on different websites, including the police and Crimestoppers. Run an internet search describing the problem, to find the most appropriate route.

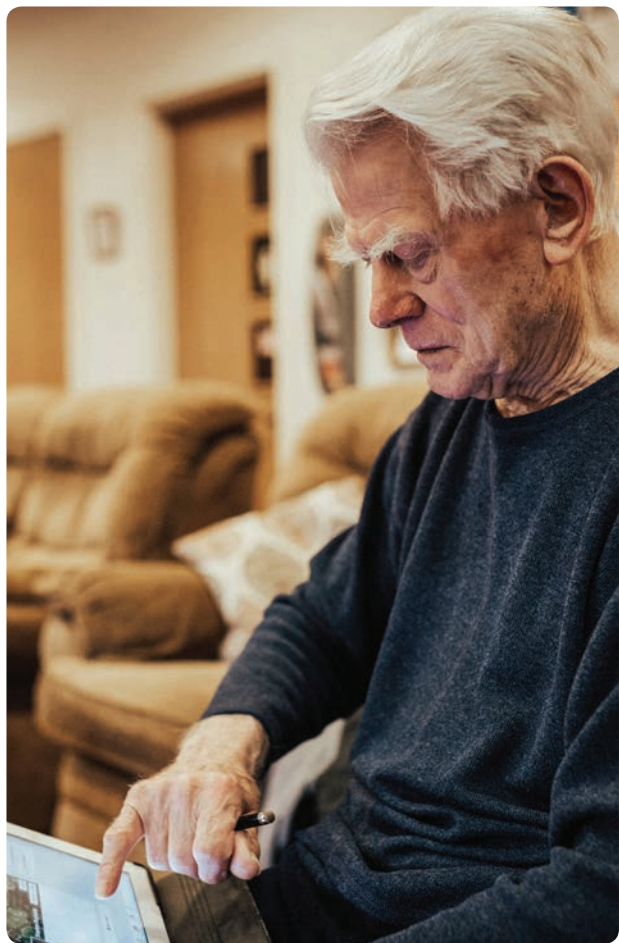
## Viruses and software

- Install good antivirus software on the device of the person you're helping; a lot of trustworthy options don't cost a penny. Search online for 'best free antivirus software' to see what's currently available.
- Make sure that software on their device is up-to-date. Most software will tell you if a newer version is available. Viruses and malware can slip past antivirus programs and infect devices by exploiting programmes that haven't been kept up-to-date.

# Shopping and banking online

Even fairly confident internet users can feel unsure about shopping or banking online. Going from just looking for information to entering personal financial details is a big step. If you think the person you're supporting could benefit from the cost savings and convenience of transacting online, there are some important things to remember.

- There are websites where you can find reliable, clear information that will help you to explain to someone how they can stay safe. For example, the Money Advice Service has pages dedicated to online shopping.
- As with anything else, don't force the issue. If they're happy to shop and bank offline, leave the conversation - at least for today. Older people especially can enjoy visiting banks and shops in person. People are motivated by more than just convenience!









# Thinking about the long-term

Helping people with computers and the internet might only be a small part of what you do, and it certainly shouldn't take over your life. However, older people may need to go through something many times to understand it properly. And even once they're doing things for themselves, problems may crop up which they can't solve without help. Only giving short-term help might lead to them stopping using computers and the internet completely.

### What to expect

It's relatively easy to support a person or group for a few weeks on some fixed topics, but this kind of help won't be enough for those who are just getting started. Ideally, learning should be open-ended, and flexible enough to deal with issues as they arise. If you're offering support on your own, this might sound daunting but providing long-term help doesn't have to be a lot of work. Here are some ideas to help make it work.

- **Set expectations.** Make sure whoever you're helping knows that you're not available to help them with computer problems 24 hours a day. If they need extra help, agree a time that's convenient to you, and set a limit on the amount of extra help you provide in a week.
- **Stop problems before they start.** Recurring problems often have a simple solution. People are less likely to forget passwords if they have good password reminders kept in a memorable place. And technical problems are often the result of software not being up to date. If people keep coming back with the same problems, try and find a way to deal with the root cause.

- **Know when to signpost.** More advanced technical problems might be a job for a professional. The person you're helping might not know who to trust, so help them to find someone who seems reliable. Search online for 'computer help' and a local place name to find local IT support businesses.
- **Get buy-in.** If you're in paid work or a formal volunteering programme, talk to your manager about getting some help. This could be volunteers, equipment, or funding – it's worth asking!

### Finding extra help

- **Encourage peer support.** If you know an older person who you think could teach others, talk to them about becoming a volunteer. Ideal volunteers will be enthusiastic, active, and well-connected with their peers. Remind them that they don't need to be experts in computers, and can use this guide to help them.
- **Find some volunteers.** You can find lots of information about getting started with volunteering the website of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), and advertise opportunities via your local Council for Voluntary services (CVS) organisation or on a national volunteering platform like <https://doit.life/volunteer>
- **Safeguarding.** It's essential that volunteers and the people they're helping are kept safe. If you don't know anyone to ask about this, you can get really useful advice from NCVO, or contact your Local Authority Safeguarding team who often run introductory training courses.

- **Find local help.** There may be local organisations that can help you with things like providing equipment, volunteers, or funding. Approach your local authority, local college, or find out if there's a hub in your area (see below).
- **Join the National Digital Inclusion Network.** It's free, and can help you in lots of ways. You can get expert help and advice, apply for funding, and you'll receive free marketing and other materials. If you'd like to join the network, or find out if there's an Digital Inclusion Hub in your area, visit: [www.onlinecentresnetwork.org](http://www.onlinecentresnetwork.org).
- **Get in touch with us.** Good Things Foundation is the organisation behind this guide, and the National Digital Inclusion Network. We're a Government-funded national charity committed to social change, especially helping people with computers and the internet. If you'd like free advice on setting up a new class, you can email us at [hello@goodthingsfoundation.org](mailto:hello@goodthingsfoundation.org) or call **0114 349 1666**.

## Your notes

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