Crossing the Digital Divide
"Free Stuff", Volume 5
by Joseph Feigon

For those who've just joined in, this is the fifth volume of ***Crossing the Digital Divide,*** my weekly chime about the Internet, and the tools we can use to explore the world around us.

We've covered basic security, getting connected, backups, and essential playground rules. Let's go beyond the standard suite of tools from Apple or Microsoft.

Google:

Google is far more than search. Free email accounts (yourname@gmail.com), free word processing and Excel like spreadsheets (Google Docs), free Cloud storage, free phone numbers, free calendar/scheduling tool, and the strongest, quickest, most secure browser (Chrome). Granted, if you sign up for Google, your addressbooks, your documents, your search history, your location, and your shopping habits are being used by Google Analytics to customize advertisements you see while browsing. No, there's no person watching your activity, it's all numbers, but it can be spooky. Remember: there are no secrets on the web.

You may want to create documents or spreadsheets or presentations without an Internet connection. LibreOffice and OpenOffice are 100% free, and work the same on a Windows PC or Mac. Both Libre and Open Office are compatible with Microsoft Office. While there are strong reasons to pay for software that solves a particular problem (like accounting software), you may find, once a particular challenge has been described, there may well be free software packages available to you.

PDF: Portable Document Format
Adobe Corporations' engineers wrote the original code to process Post Script, a computer language designed to get words and images out on paper. Adobe's Acrobat Reader is free. Once a document is in PDF format, it's locked (mostly), and will look the same on a Mac, a PC, a cheap printer, or a glossy. PDF is the ultimate 'any device friendly' product we see daily. Acrobat Reader is a solid package with an active update process from Adobe.

VLC Player: audio/video playback application
I'm not a fan of proprietary tools, but there's a place where they make sense. Most audio files are in WAV (directly from an audio CD) or MP3 format. Windows media and Apple's iTunes have their own formats. Audio files created on a Windows PC (.wmv) aren't easily converted to iTunes compatible, ACC/mp4 format. Frustrating. VLC doesn't care where the files were created – ogg, wav, wmv, mp3, mp4, acc, flac are all supported. AVI, MPG-2, MPG3 video files are supported. This is a must have for anyone with a music collection.

Malwarebytes: anti-malware application
90% of the calls I get to clear infected PC's could have been avoided if the owner had installed and used malwarebytes. The Free version can be run as often as needed, the licensed versions run full-time. Best $25/year you can spend if you spend a lot of time surfing the web. Great tool.

Mozilla Thunderbird: email / calendar / task manager for Windows, Mac and Linux

Thunderbird is one of the easiest to use, most customizable, non-web based email tools I've used in years. Thunderbird supports POP, IMAP and Exchange-hosted email accounts, has a solid calendar and task list manager, and looks the same on Mac, Windows or Linux.

Cloud Storage: Dropbox, Google Drive, Adrive, Box, Azure
5 GB here, 5GB there, if you can keep track of where you keep your important files backed up, you can have free storage.

I hope this gets you started. Remember good passwords and manners. If you've got a pressing question, send a letter to the editor, we'll get you some answers in an upcoming column.