



CHARACTER CRUNCHING

By far the most popular serious use for microcomputers is word processing. Most people need to produce documents such as letters, reports or essays from time to time, and a word processor makes all of these tasks much easier. We take a detailed overview of the subject, and discuss some of the more popular packages.

Word processors are really nothing more than computerised versions of the typewriter. Text is keyed in through the computer keyboard and appears on the screen. Changes can be made easily without the need for retyping the whole document and once the wording is correct, the text is printed out by a computer printer.

Apart from a general fear of computers, the only thing likely to put people off beginning to use a word processor is the problem of not feeling at home using a keyboard. Yet it is easier to get started using a keyboard on a word processor than on an ordinary typewriter. The inevitable mistakes of the fumbling two-fingered typist having a first go on a typewriter can create an awful mess. These can be put right in seconds on a word processor to produce copy that is perfect the first time it is printed — and that is a real confidence builder.

Just about any home micro can be used for word processing, but some are not as well suited as others. In some cases this is because good word processing software is not available for the particular machine; in other cases it is the micro and its peripherals that are not suitable to the task.

The cost of even a simple word processing system can be quite high, as the necessary extras can easily cost twice as much as the computer itself. Usually the most expensive single item is a printer. Without access to a good printer there is little point in having a word processor package. For the foreseeable future just about all word processed text is going to end up printed on paper — the age of electronic mail, where all text is sent directly from one micro to another, is still a long way off.

Even the simplest printers are fairly expensive, and yet the quality of the printing they produce is relatively poor. In many cases word processing demands high quality printing. After all, there's little point in spending your time with a word processor getting the wording of a job application letter just right if the result is then printed out on a dot matrix printer. Daisy wheel printers offer better quality printing but are slow and expensive, although prices are coming down quite quickly. Some electronic typewriters can have interfaces fitted to them so that they can be used as computer printers. This may help save money for people switching from typing to word processing.

One solution to the dilemma of gaining access to a quality printer is for several friends or a computer club to share the cost of the machine between them. Users would still have the problem of interfacing their micros to use the printer. With some computers this is easy because they have standard interfaces, so each user will only need to buy a suitable cable to link the two together. Other micros, such as the Commodore and Atari machines, have interfaces that limit them to their

BBC Micro

The combination of BBC Micro and Torch disk pack allows business software to be used, including the excellent Wordstar. The cost of the system is, however, higher than many business micros. Admittedly a cheaper printer could be used, and the Perfect Writer software that is included in the price of the Torch disk pack could be used instead of buying Wordstar. This would bring the price down to about £1,500.

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| BBC Micro | £399 |
| Torch disk pack | £804 |
| Wordstar | £340 |
| Silver Reed EXP 770 | |
| Printer | £1,024 |
| Printer Cable | £10 |
| TOTAL | £2,577 |



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