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Q & A

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Opening New Windows on a Macintosh

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Opening Windows

On a Macintosh

Q. I have a Macintosh and want to run .exe files on it, but it will not open them. Is there a Mac program that will let me play the files?

A. The extension .exe stands for executable file, and it is typically the file type used by programs written to run on Windows and DOS systems. When a computer runs a program for you, it is "executing the file." This can be a good thing for programs you want to use, but if you see .exe files you weren't expecting attached to e-mail messages, be wary, as computer viruses can also be executable files.

Software programs written specifically for Windows hardware usually won't run on current Macintosh machines without special software. Programs like Virtual PC, however, let you mimic a Windows system on your Mac. You can run most software written for Windows and use some networking functions and hardware devices designed for the PC.

Virtual PC, which has been around for several years and is now owned by [Microsoft](#), comes in versions that emulate Windows XP or Windows 2000 on your Mac OS X computer. It sells for \$250 or less, depending on which version you buy. It is included - along with Word, Excel, PowerPoint and the Entourage e-mail program - in the \$500 Professional Edition of Microsoft Office for Mac. (More information on all these programs is at microsoft.com/mac.)

Although emulation software for the Mac can run Windows .exe files, it usually can't run the programs as quickly or as efficiently as a standard Windows computer. Depending on your Macintosh hardware and the type of Windows program you are trying to use, the software may run excruciatingly slowly. You probably don't want to consider it for processor-intensive uses like video games.

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Widgets Made

For the PC

Q. Is there an equivalent of those little Mac OS X "widget" programs for Windows XP?

A. Widgets are small, colorful miniprograms that do all sorts of useful things, and they run in the Dashboard area of Mac OS X 10.4, also known as Tiger. On [Apple's](#) Web site, you can find Dashboard widgets that download news, stock and weather reports to the desktop, provide currency conversion rates, track packages, display the phases of the moon, look up song lyrics and even stream video from the PandaCam at the San Diego Zoo.

You don't need to have Mac OS X 10.4 to wallow in widgets, though. [Yahoo's](#) free Konfabulator program ([konfabulator.com](#)), which has been around longer than Mac OS X 10.4, lets you run widget programs on Windows 2000 and XP systems - as well as on earlier editions of Mac OS X, including 10.2 and 10.3.

Once you have Konfabulator installed and running on your computer, you can add widget programs. Hundreds of free widgets for Windows and Macintosh computers are available to download at [widgetgallery.com](#).

If you use widgets on your Mac OS X 10.4 system, you can find more than 1,200 to download at [apple.com/downloads/dashboard](#). New widgets are added regularly. One that appeared last week lets you keep up on news headlines about Hurricane Katrina and send a donation to the Red Cross to help with relief efforts.

Scrubbing Away

Sensitive Data

Q. What's the best way to make sure all information is completely erased from my hard drive before I donate my computer to charity?

A. Simply reformatting a hard drive does not erase the data stored on it. If you have ever used the computer for storing financial and other deeply personal information, you should definitely make sure all the data on the drive has been thoroughly obliterated so no one can recover it after you give away the computer.

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Photo: An early computer, the "mechanical mind" developed at MIT, 1927.

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For example, WipeDrive (\$40 at accessdata.com) for Windows is a disk-erasing utility that is approved for use by the Defense Department. Eraser (heidi.ie/eraser) is a free disk-wiping program for Windows, and ShredIt (\$30 or less at mireth.com/shredit.html) can erase files and drives and comes in versions for most Windows and Macintosh systems.

Some utility software packages may include a disk-erasing program, but you may also find other options by checking the Web and directory sites like dmoz.org/Computers/Software/File-Management/Deletion.

Questions about computer-based technology may be sent to QandA @nytimes.com. This weekly column will address questions of general interest, but e-mail and letters cannot be answered individually.

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