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Microsoft Office 2004 for Mac Standard Edition review: Microsoft Office 2004 for Mac Standard Edition

Microsoft Office 2004 for Mac Standard Edition

Ben Patterson

May 19, 2004 3:30 a.m. PT

7 min read 

Review summary

The debut of the new version of Microsoft's mammoth Office for Mac seems anticlimactic after the hoopla surrounding Office X. However, when we cracked open the hood of Office 2004 for Mac, we were pleasantly surprised. The latest revisions of Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Entourage each have at least one new feature we can't live without. Should you upgrade? If you're still using Office 2001, the answer is yes. The improvements in Word and Excel alone are worth the \$239 upgrade, and Office's new compatibility reports (see Features) will help ensure that you can



still use your older documents. If you're an Office X user, you'll probably appreciate the stability improvements in version 2004, while heavy Word users will crave the new Track Changes functionality. If you don't want to buy the whole suite, Microsoft is also selling the three productivity apps--Word, Excel, and PowerPoint--separately for \$229 (\$109 upgrade) each.

	Student Edition	Standard Edition	Professional Edition
			
	Check latest prices	Check latest prices	Check latest prices
Includes	Word 2004 Excel 2004 PowerPoint 2004 Entourage 2004 MSN Messenger 4.0	Word 2004 Excel 2004 PowerPoint 2004 Entourage 2004 MSN Messenger 4.0	Word 2004 Excel 2004 PowerPoint 2004 Entourage 2004 MSN Messenger 4.0 Virtual PC for Mac Version 7.0 with Windows XP Pro
Full price	\$149	\$399	\$499
Upgrade price	N/A	\$239	\$329
# of licenses	3	1	1

Installing the new Office for Mac is simple and painless. The Setup Assistant lets you pick from standard, full, or custom installations using a list of check boxes. If you're a power user--or if you can't be bothered with the setup wizard--you can simply drag and drop Office 2004 onto your hard drive. Unlike the Windows version of Office, there's no product activation in Office 2004. The Standard and Professional editions include a single user license, while the Student Edition provides three licenses.





Choose your flavor. Select from a standard, full, or custom installation.

You'll need Mac OS 10.2.8 or later to use Office 2004. The full (drag-and-drop) installation will claim a good 525MB of hard drive space, although Microsoft recommends 630MB of free space.

Collaboration

Project Center is Office 2004's big idea for collaboration, but it's only partially successful. A component of Entourage, Project Center brings together all the files, e-mail, events, to-dos, and deadlines for a given project. If you're using Office on a network, you can share projects with your fellow users, who will see the latest items and deadlines. Project Center will also back up your project items in one fell swoop, a feature that could come in handy if your server crashes.



Project Center organizes all files associated with an assignment, but it's not as robust as Microsoft Project.

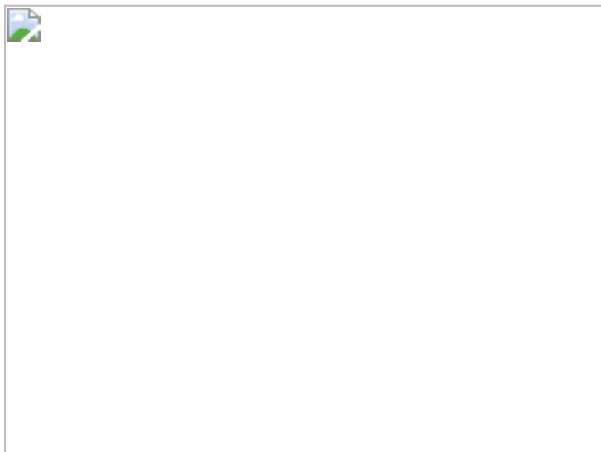


The idea of grouping files, e-mail messages, and tasks under one project is great; however, Project Center won't satisfy project managers in a serious office environment. You can set a due date for the project but not deadlines in between. You could add multiple deadlines as events in the calendar, but you don't need Project Center to do that. You can group project e-mail by subject, but why not just do that in Entourage? As it stands, Project Center isn't powerful or versatile enough to compete with Microsoft Project, and casual project managers might as well stick with the standard Entourage tools and an organized file directory.

Communication tools | Productivity

Communication tools

The most eye-catching change for the suite's PIM application, Entourage, is its new three-column layout: your e-mail folders reside in the left column, your list of messages sits in the middle, and the preview pane is on the right. The new layout doesn't save much real estate, however, and once the novelty wore off, we switched back to having the preview pane below our list of messages. The good news is that Entourage's e-mail handling gets a shot in the arm with its new ability to group and collapse messages by date, subject, sender, size, and so on--a particularly handy feature when you're combing through a year's worth of e-mail. Microsoft also improved Entourage's junk mail filter. In our tests, the filter snared a good 90 percent of the spam targeting our in-box (including the spam missed by Apple Mail, which we've been faithfully training for several months).



Check out the view. Entourage sports a new three-column layout.



One problem with Entourage X was that it was almost impossible to import e-mail or contacts from Apple's Mail and Address Book apps. The new Entourage, on the other hand, absorbed all our Mail and Address Book data like a sponge. You can even drag and drop Address Book contacts directly into Entourage (although any images associated with your contacts will be lost in translation). If you're setting up your e-mail accounts for the first time and are using a well-known ISP, Entourage 2004 will fill in your settings for you. In our tests, Entourage handled our Yahoo and Verizon POP accounts with ease, and we were soon sending and receiving messages without a hitch.

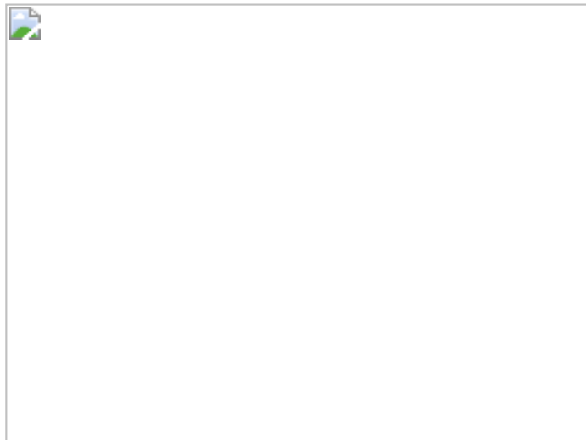
We're much happier with the calendar printing options in Entourage 2004 than those in version X. You can now print your calendar in appointment book formats such as Day Time, Day Runner, and FranklinCovey, and you can customize which tasks get printed. We ran into trouble with the online calendar, however. We couldn't drag existing events from one time slot to another with finesse. For example, appointments kept snapping into the wrong hour. We also wish appointments were color-coded according to your status (busy, out of office, free) as they are in Outlook. You can color-code events with e-mail labels such as Work and Family, but that's not quite the same thing.

Productivity

Office 2004 heavyweights Word, Excel, and PowerPoint sport an impressive arsenal of improvements. One obvious change that cuts across the three big productivity apps involves the floating palettes, which now turn translucent when you're not using them--a cool if ultimately pointless feature. More substantial is the new Office Toolbox, which pulses red when it detects compatibility problems between your document and other versions of Office (a much-needed addition). In our tests, compatibility between Mac and Windows platforms was pretty seamless. The only compatibility problems that crop up are with Office 2004-specific features. For example, in Notebook Layout View, the Toolbox reported that "Recorded audio will not be accessible in earlier versions of Word." Other features of the toolbox include the ability to collect clipboard items in a new scrapbook tool; look up words in the dictionary, thesaurus, and encyclopedia (in Word only); and open the new Project Center (see Setup and ease of use for more details).

Word 2004 gets off on the right foot with the improved Track Changes feature, 

which adds color-coded notes for comments and text deletions on the right side of the page. This is an enormous improvement over version X, but why not detail all tracked changes in the comment balloons, instead of just deletions? However, MSN Messenger for Mac is now integrated into Word, so you can send an instant message to your coworker about a specific comment. We also like the new Smart Buttons, a feature borrowed from Office XP that, among other things, gives you the option of keeping the source formatting of pasted text or matching the format of your current document.



Stay on track with Office for Mac's new color-coded Track Changes feature.

The Navigation Pane is a long overdue feature that gives you a thumbnail view of your pages in the left-hand column (similar to the view you get in Adobe Acrobat). Finally, the new Notebook Layout View lets you take notes in a ruled notebook format, complete with collapsible outline headings and the ability to record and embed audio clips into your notes, which could come in handy if you're in a meeting or conducting an interview. You can even record audio during presentations and time-stamp them for quick reference.

While Excel 2004 didn't get an extreme makeover like Word did, the spreadsheet warhorse boasts the new Page Layout view--essentially a page preview mode that lets you edit and manipulate objects (including headers and footers) as they appear on the printed page. As with Word, Excel takes good advantage of Smart Buttons. It's perfect for, say, fixing broken formulas and choosing the sequencing for a series of cells.

PowerPoint 2004 brings an impressive new feature to the conference room:



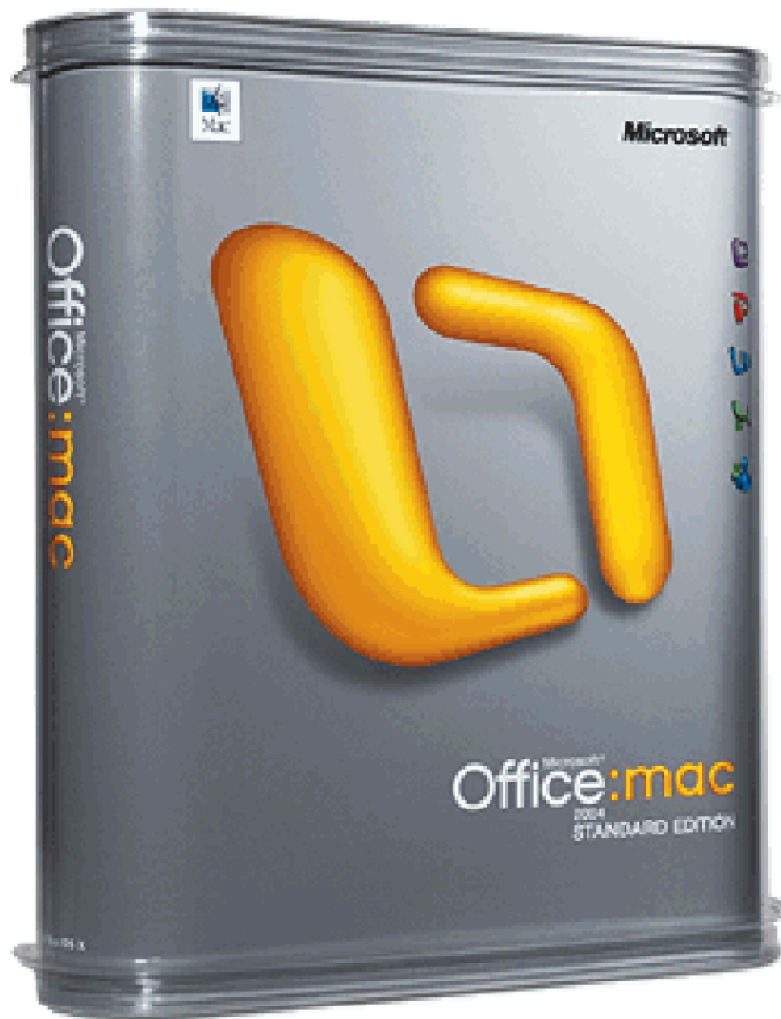
Presenter Tools, which helps orchestrate your presentations, especially if you have the luxury of using two screens. On one screen, your audience sees the standard PowerPoint presentation; on your screen, you see the current slide, a small window that displays the on-deck slide, a thumbnail view of all the slides in the presentation (clicking a thumbnail jumps to that slide), and an area for the notes you'd typically scribble on index cards. Besides Presenter Tools, the other new features in PowerPoint are unremarkable. You get several new transitions (some more cringe-inducing than others), animation effects (now grouped into Basic, Subtle, Moderate, and Exciting), and more than 200 templates, such as business forms, labels, and newsletters. Microsoft Office 2004 for Mac comes with a robust set of help files that should be able to guide you through the laundry list of features. If you need to troubleshoot, however, you'll probably have to call or e-mail Microsoft for help, and it may end up costing you.

The cheapest way to get help is from the various Microsoft Office newsgroups, which you can access from Microsoft's support site. The user forums, however, are hit or miss. You might get a quick, helpful answer from a fellow user, or you could get a snarky remark and nothing more. In other words, you're on your own.

If you'd rather get help directly from Microsoft, you can either call or e-mail for assistance. The first two calls or e-mail queries are free (although toll charges apply), but after that, you'll have to pay \$35 per incident via a toll-free number. Incidentally, support for installation issues is free and unlimited. Phone support hours are Monday through Friday 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., and Saturday through Sunday 6 a.m. to 3 p.m., PT, and the company promises a 24-hour turnaround for e-mail questions (Monday through Friday).

During our tests, we were pleasantly surprised by the speed and quality of phone tech support. We called on a weekday morning, and a friendly technician was on the phone within five minutes. Our questions were answered quickly, and we received a follow-up e-mail 10 minutes after we hung up with the technician.





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Microsoft Office 2004 for Mac Standard Edition

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