

# Microsoft Office 2004 for Mac

If it went away, the Mac would be dead. Question is, should you buy Microsoft Office just to keep the Mac going or is it actually worth the money?



Love 'em or hate 'em, at least Microsoft is still developing Mac software. The continuing existence of Office for Mac is perhaps one of the main reasons why the Mac is still a viable business tool: many IT managers would whip every surviving Mac out of their offices if there were no officially endorsed product from Redmond capable of opening Word, Excel and PowerPoint documents.

It's not just a tool for opening documents, though – compared to every other productivity suite available for the Mac, Office 2004 is in a class of its own. There are basic word processors, such as Nisus Writer, spreadsheets such as Mesa and even complete office suites such as OpenOffice and (shudder) AppleWorks, but none of them come close to Office 2004 in terms of capabilities, power and ease of use. It really does blow the opposition away. If you're planning on doing anything more complicated than typing a letter, doing your bills or sending the occasional email, 'Life for the Office', as it should be called, is definitely the package for you.

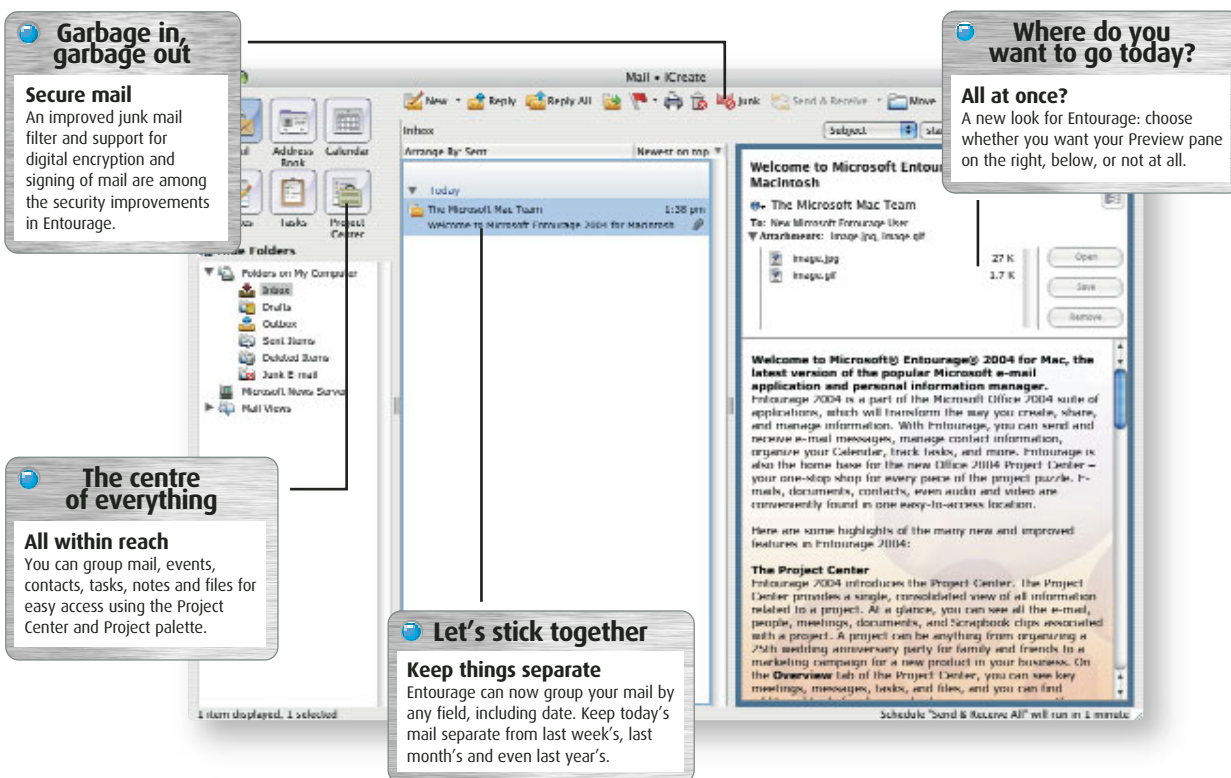
But if you have a copy of Office already, you'd be forgiven for asking if the £190 upgrade price is justified (everyone else does). Are there enough new features in Office 2004 to justify foregoing that mini iPod? This is where it gets tricky.

While there have been speed and stability improvements to all the four main programs in Office for Mac, only old reliable Word and recent newcomer, Entourage, have seen any real changes. Excel and PowerPoint – the presentation package that has committed more crimes against good design and caused more fatalities at conferences and sales meetings from terminal boredom than any other piece software – are pretty much indistinguishable from their Office X counterparts. They've just had a bit of eye candy added.

## Word up

Word has seen more changes. Laptop owners will probably gain the most from the introduction of a new document type: the Word notebook. This is supposedly a way to 'capture your thoughts and ideas in the equivalent of an electronic notebook'; in non-marketing speak, it's really an extra template which has a different layout

## Up close with the new Entourage



view, and pre-formatted headers and footers to help keep track of your work. What is definitely new is the ability to record notes while you're typing and have them embed in the Word document. Although it's unlikely to be a hit in sales meetings, this feature is bound to be useful to students, particularly in light of the extremely good value of the Teacher and Student edition.

The other big Word-specific addition is a new toolbox palette. This provides access to the built-in thesaurus and Encarta World English Dictionary as well as Microsoft's online Encarta Encyclopaedia and MSN search engine.

### Entourage boost

It's Entourage that has had the biggest upgrade. On the email side, it now properly supports Exchange servers, although it lacks all the bells and whistles of Outlook. Demonstrating that at least some parts of Microsoft have a clue about security and spam, there's support for digital signing and encryption of messages, warnings if applications try to access your address book or send mail, and an automatic block on downloading pictures in HTML email (which you can override). The spam filter remains rubbish, however.

Entourage is also now the home of the 'Project Center', a kind of Microsoft Project-lite designed to group emails, contacts, events, tasks, notes and documents related to a particular project. It's simple and easy to set up, with a Project palette appearing in all the Office programs. Compared to the capabilities of Project, though, it is anaemic; anyone used to Gantt charts will be disappointed. For smaller scale efforts, though, it might prove of use.

More of this kind of integration between the individual programs can be seen in the Scrapbook palette, an improved version of the multiple clipboard feature seen in Office 97 for Windows onwards. As well as being able to copy into and paste from the scrapbook from any Office application, you can use the scrapbook to paste

images, clippings and other files stored in a project's repository. This is genuinely useful in everyday use.

MSN Messenger is the strange bedfellow to all these Office apps. You'd be forgiven for thinking that there's nothing new in the version 4.0 supplied with Office 2004. Cosmetically, it's virtually identical to the current version. But Microsoft intends it to be a vital collaborative tool. Word users can now chat with others about their documents and review changes using Messenger, without having to leave Word; contacts in Entourage all have a Messenger id field and a button for messaging them if they're online; and the Project Center offers a button for sending shared project files using Messenger. Given the extent of the integration, it seems odd that Messenger doesn't include any of the collaboration features of its Windows cousins, such as 'whiteboarding', but perhaps we should be grateful for the scraps thrown from the Windows banquet table.

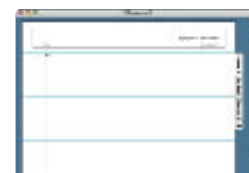
Other additions are minor. Smart buttons are a useful little Office-XP acquisition that highlight possible tasks and problems. More Aqua graphics and transparencies are scattered throughout. That embarrassing inability to deal with long filenames has now been expunged. And printing is improved in both Entourage and Excel.

### Consider your needs

The Standard edition and the Teacher and Student edition are undoubtedly worth the money. A Professional edition that includes Virtual PC 7 should be out in a few months: since that includes both a Windows licence as well as Virtual PC for roughly £80 more, that will prove even better value than the Standard edition if you need to run PC programs.

But although there are some good, solid improvements over Version X, Office 2004 isn't totally compelling as an upgrade. Consider your needs carefully to see whether Office meets them - and if they justify spending £200.

**1** A new document view in Word called Notebook provides an easy way to organise your work as well as transcribe talks.



**2** Smart buttons provide easy access to tasks and warning messages. In Excel, you might be warned your formulas have problems.



**3** In response to the tasteful nature of Keynote, Microsoft has improved the quality of PowerPoint's slides. But there's little else that's new.



**4** Although there's not much new in Messenger, both Word and Entourage are now well integrated with the instant messaging program.



URL: [www.microsoft.com/mac](http://www.microsoft.com/mac)  
SRP: Standard Edition: £322.29  
Standard Edition (upgrade): £189.99  
Student and Teacher Edition: £99.99  
Professional Edition: £398.33

What's good: Speed improvements, improved Exchange support, greater integration between individual programs, smart buttons, the toolbox

What's bad: Lacks many features and programs of the Windows version, the junk email filter is still sub-standard, no real improvements have been made to Excel or PowerPoint

Overall 85%