

## A basic introduction to playing music on your computer



**This article covers what digital music is, how it works, how to play music on your computer, computer sound systems and taking your music on the road.**

### What is digital music and how does it work?

Digital music can be quite a confusing subject. Hopefully this will shed some light on it.

We've all listened to music on CDs, cassettes or records before. Essentially, digital music is very similar but instead of listening to music off a disk, tape or record the music is stored in files on your computer. To get the music onto your hard drive you first have to copy it off the CD which it came on. Programs like **iTunes** make this process, called 'importing' or 'ripping', simple.

Once files are imported from your music CDs, they are stored in folders on your computer. On most Windows XP computers this file is called **My Music** and is located inside the **My Documents** folder on your computer.

Digital music files can be stored in several different formats, each with its own file extension. A file extension is simply the three or four letter acronym such as mp3, aac, wma or m4a as well as many others. These files are all compressed music formats which hold the information needed to play your songs back on a computer without the use of the original CD.

The main advantage of digital music is that it allows you to listen to music without having to hunt for the CD. You can also mix-and-match your music so you only listen to your favorite songs rather than the entire album. You can also burn your own favorite songs on CD to play on your house stereo.

### What can I use to play my digital music?

There are many different Digital Music players out there. This article covers two of the most popular players called **WinAmp** and **iTunes**.

Programs such as **iTunes** and **WinAmp** make it very easy to import, organise and play the music files stored on your computer. iTunes is probably the easiest to use and learn so for most users it is ideal. It can be downloaded for free from the Apple website.

#### To download iTunes:

Go to [www.apple.com.au](http://www.apple.com.au) using your Internet Browser > **Click on the tab for iPod and iTunes** > **Click on the Download tab**. Fill in your email address and click **Download**.

Once you've installed it, iTunes is easy to use and comes with lots of easy to follow instructions on how to do things. To access both an overview of how iTunes works as well as detailed instructions on how to rip CD's or organize your imported music:

**Open iTunes** > **Click on Help** > **Click on iTunes and Music Store Help** > Select the topic that interests you.

**WinAmp** is another tried and true favorite for playing music files. More basic than iTunes, it does not have a built in importing function. Its appearance is a little bit leaner to improve speed and provide a no frills music playing experience. It is free (in its basic version) and can be downloaded at [www.winamp.com](http://www.winamp.com).

This article applies to:



Windows Vista



# A basic introduction to playing music on your computer cont'd



## Computer sound systems and the differences between them

If you don't already have a sound card and speakers this section will give you an understanding of what to look for.

Most computers built these days come with a sound card. A sound card is the piece of hardware in your computer which lets you play music files. If you have an older computer that cannot play sounds, or if you have problems playing sound files you may want to **call Gizmo on 1300 275 449** so we can determine whether a sound card can be put into your computer. Sound cards are quite cheap and most can be picked up for under \$100.

Sound cards come in several different varieties. These include simple stereo sound cards, which will produce normal stereo sound (which means there is a left and a right channel sound). More complex models can produce 2.1, 5.1 and 7.1 channel sound. In these instances the first number indicates the number of speakers you can plug in and the number after the period indicates that a subwoofer can be attached. Additionally, if you buy a sound card that has a 5.1 channel output then you will also need to buy some 5.1 channel speakers to make use of all those channels. 5.1 Channel sound is also known as surround sound as there are 5 speakers; centre, front-left, front-right, left-rear, right-rear and a subwoofer.

For most music listeners a 2 or 2.1 speaker sound system is good enough however for DVD viewing and game playing you can really benefit from additional speakers. As a rule of thumb for computer speakers, the more speakers you have the louder the noise that can be produced.

## Taking your music on the road

One of the best things about digital music is that if you buy a portable player such as an iPod or Creative Zen, you can download your music onto this device and listen to it through headphones wherever you go. There are many inexpensive devices available and choosing one over another can be a daunting task for anyone.

Rather than take you through all the digital media players available out there, it is more practical to explain all the features these devices have and what to look for if you're in the market for one.

All music devices have certain features.

**These include:**

1. Storage space
2. Battery life
3. Screen size (either color or black and white)
4. Supported file formats

**Storage Space:** When looking at storage space you have to consider how many songs you want to be able to take with you. Once they are imported onto your computer most audio CD's take up about 80-100mb depending on the file format that you choose to use. Given that the average song will occupy about 5 megabytes of space, a music player that has 1 gigabyte of space can hold roughly 200 songs. A 4 gigabyte version can hold 800 songs and so forth. The question you have to ask yourself is how many songs will I actually listen to? Another thing to consider (and do some research into if you're interested) is whether or not you want the added ability to watch videos on the move through a device which can play both music and videos such as an iPod video).

**Battery life:** This is an easy one. How long will the batteries last when you are using the device and can they be easily replaced? We have found this to be one of the worst features of an iPod. Once the battery becomes a bit old its performance decreases rapidly. This can be a problem if you need a device for long trips.

**Screen size:** If your device has one then it should be big enough to let you easily see what song you're listening to and allow you to make up play lists while you're on the move. Keep in mind that although big screens are pretty, the larger the screen the more power it uses up.

**Supported file formats:** Last but not least it is important to consider what file formats your device supports (and can therefore play) as if your entire music collection is in an unsupported format then it will have to be converted before you can use it on your device. In addition, if you have used iTunes to sort all of your music into carefully constructed play lists and then go out and buy a Creative Zen player, you may not be able copy songs onto the Zen straight from iTunes which would be very annoying and time consuming.