

Microsoft Student 2008

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Homework assignments are the bane of most students I know (not to mention their hard-pressed and nescient parents). This is mainly because of the tedious and mind-numbing chores of data mining and composition. Additionally, as knowledge multiplies every 5-10 years, few parents and teachers are able to keep up.

Enter Microsoft Student 2008: a productivity suite which includes English and foreign language dictionaries, thesaurus, quotations library, assignment templates, tutorials, graphing calculator software and a Web Companion. MS Student comes replete with the entire Encarta Premium 2008 encyclopedia and its dynamic atlas and provides online access to the feature-rich MSN Encarta Premium through October 2008.

The previous versions of Encarta included a host of homework tools. Two years ago, these have evolved into a separate product called Microsoft Student. Since then, it has been gainfully repackaged and very much enhanced. This year, for the first time, MS Student can be downloaded from the Web or purchased as a standalone, packaged product (DVD only).

Among the new or revamped features: free online access to MSN Encarta Premium, Step-by-Step Math Solutions calculator, Step-by-Step Math Textbook Solutions, Triangle Solver, Equations Library, tutorials, and foreign language help.

To augment the performance of MS Student 2008, Microsoft offers "Learning Essentials": preformatted report and presentation templates and tutorials designed for Microsoft Office XP and later. MS Student's templates are actually clever adaptations of the popular Office suite of products: Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. They help the student produce homework plans and schedules, science projects, book reports, presentations, research reports, charts, and analyses of problems in math, physics, and chemistry. Detailed step-by-step tutorials, Quick Starters, and pop-up toolbars (menus) guide the student along the way in a friendly, non-intrusive manner.

The Ace in MS Student's deck is Microsoft Math. It is a seemingly endless anthology of tools, tutorials and instruction sheets on how to grasp mathematical concepts and solve math problems, from the most basic (e.g., fractions) to mid-level difficulty (e.g., trigonometric functions). And if this is not enough, there's free access to HotMath, an online collection of math study aides and problem solvers.

The graphing calculator is a wonder. It has both 2-D and 3-D capabilities and makes use of the full screen. Aided by an extensive Equations Library, it does everything except cook: trigonometry, calculus, math, charting, geometry, physics, and chemistry. And everything in full color! Triangles get special treatment in the Triangle Solver. The most vexing trilateral relationships and rules are rendered simple through the use of enhanced graphics. The Equation Library, though, is disappointing. It holds only 100 equations and calculus is sorely neglected throughout.

MS Student provides a powerful English-Spanish-French-German-Italian dictionary. It helps the student to translate and conjugate verbs. The synergy between this product and the impressive foreign language capabilities of MS Word creates an effective language laboratory which allows the user to study the languages up to the point of completing assignments using specialized foreign-language templates.

For the student keen on the liberal arts and the humanities, Student 2008 provides detailed Book Summaries of almost 1000 classic works. Besides plot synopses, the student gets acquainted with the author's life, themes and characters in the tomes, and ideas for book reports.

Similar to the Encarta, MS Student's Web Companion obtains search results from all the major search engines without launching any additional applications (such as a browser). Content from both the Encyclopedia and the Web is presented side by side. This augmentation explicitly adopts the Internet and incorporates it as an important source of reference - as 80% of students have already done.

I am not sure how Microsoft solved the weighty and interesting issues of intellectual property that the Web Companion raises, though. Copyright-holders of Web content may feel that they have the right to be compensated by Microsoft for the use it makes of their wares in its commercial products.

MS Student would do well to also integrate with desktop search tools from Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, and others. Students will benefit from seamless access to content from all over - their desktop, their encyclopedias, and the Web - using a single, intuitive interface.

Microsoft would do well to incorporate collaborative and Web publishing tools in this product. MS Student does not equip and empower the student to collaborate with teachers and classmates on class projects and to seamlessly publish his or her results and work on the Web. Future editions would do well to incorporate a NetMeeting-like module, a wiki interface, and an HTML editor.

All in all, MS Student 2008 is a great contribution to learning. Inevitably, it has a few flaws and glitches.

Start with the price. As productivity suites go, it is reasonably priced had its target population been adult professional users. But, at \$50-100 (depending on the country), it is beyond the reach of most poor students and parents - its most immediate market niches.

MS Student 2008 makes use of Microsoft's .Net technology. As most home computers lack it, the installer insists on adding it to the anyhow bloated Windows Operating System. There is worse to come: the .Net version installed by MS Student 2008 is plagued with security holes and vulnerabilities. Users have to download service packs and patches from Windows Update if they do not wish to run the risk of having their computers compromised by hackers.

Fully installed on the hard disk, MS Student 2008, like its predecessors, gobbles up a whopping 4 Gb. That's a lot - even in an age of ever cheaper storage. Most homesteads still sport PCs with 40-80 Gb hard disks. This makes MS Student less suitable for installation on older PCs and on many laptops.

Finally, there is the question of personal creativity and originality. Luckily, MS Student does not spoon-feed its users. It does not substitute for thinking or for study. On the contrary, by providing structured stimuli, it encourages the student to express his or her ideas. It does not do the homework assignments for the student - it merely helps rid them of time-consuming and machine-like functions. And it opens up to both student and family the wonderful twin universes of knowledge: the Encarta and the Web. Also Read: The Six Sins of the Wikipedia Microsoft's Encarta and MS Student 2007 The Britannica 2007 Opens to the Web Old Reference Works Revived The Encyclopedia Britannica 2006 Revolt of the Scholars The Idea of Reference The Future of the Book The Kidnapping of Content The Internet and the Library Interview with Tom Panelas The Future of Online Reference Will Content Ever be Profitable? The Disintermediation of Content The Future of Electronic Publishing Battle of the Titans - Encarta vs. the Britannica Free Online Scholarship - Interview with Peter Suber Microsoft Embraces the Web - Encarta and MS Student 2006=====

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