QUESTION: I'm looking for a free program for burning CDs and DVDs. How do I know the program will be safe to download and install? I'm running Windows 7.

PC CLUB: Free software programs can often perform a task as well as their commercial counterparts but downloading software can frequently lead to trouble unless several precautions are taken. There are reputable sites and well know applications that present little or no risk from becoming infected with bad stuff. First of all, let's define several classes of "free" software:

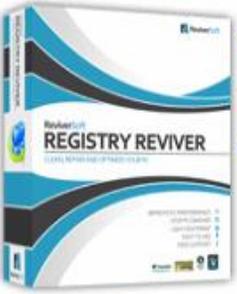**Freeware** – this is totally free and fully functional software.
Shareware or Trialware – this is provided at no cost for a trial period or basically "Try before you buy".
Crippleware – this is software that is "free" but some features are disabled or crippled until you send the author money.
Free Downloads – not always free.

Beware of the term "Free download" since it can mean that you can freely download it but you need to subsequently pay for it to unlock all of the features. So where should you look for freeware? One of the best sites is at Gizmo's site at www.techsupportalert.com. This site is well known and offers quite a variety of freeware. The site actually catalogs the programs and provides links to the actual author's site. Another great free program is a suite of programs that is a great alternative to Microsoft Office. It's called OpenOffice and is available at www.openoffice,org.

One way to get surprised is to search with Google for "best freeware". One of the search results takes you to www.bestfrreewaredownload.com. Many of the programs listed at this site are free but there will be ads for software that is not free – be careful. Look for the term "Sponsored link" which indicates that the software will require payment for it to fully function. If you are wondering how authors of freeware earn a living, they get paid any time someone visits a sponsored link and makes a purchase.

Another category of software which is available as freeware consists of programs for dealing with viruses and spyware. Here are some examples:

Anti-virus – Microsoft Security Essentials available at http://www.microsoft.com/security_essentials/ and AVG Free available at www.avg.com.

Spyware Removal – Malwarebytes available at www.malwarebytes.org and Spybot Search and Destroy available at http://www.safer-networking.org/en/download/.

Now let's find a good, free CD/DVD burning program. If we go to Gizmo's site discussed above and select the Multimedia link and click the link titled Best CD/DVD burning software, you will see a list of recommendations. The one I use is CDBurnerXP available at http://cdburnerxp.se/. Even though XP is in the title, the software is fully compatible with XP, Vista and Windows 7 32-bit or 64-bit.

A great program for cleaning up your temporary Internet files is CCleaner available at www.ccleaner.com. It performs other functions as well so read their web site before using it. If you're looking for a free E-mail program, try Windows Live Mail available at www.download.live.com.

Some of the best freeware programs are tucked away in obscure places. Here's an example of one of my favorites. If you ever need to capture a picture of a portion of your screen displaying an error message, for example, or something more interesting, try the program called PicPick available at http://picpick.wiziple.net/. It's not as full-featured as the professional program called Snagit but it comes close. Snagit is available at www.techsmith.com for $49.95. There are so many of these gems available that I will devote a future article to this topic.

Something you need to consider these days now that Windows 7 is here is if the freeware program will support the new operating system, especially the 64-bit version. The web site will normally state the system requirements but if it does not, I have found that the worst thing that can happen is that the installer will inform you that the program is incompatible. *- Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his Web site at* www.edwardns.com.