

# 10 Computing Tips and Tricks for Students

*François Briatte*

*June 9, 2018*

This document is part of the “[Computing Advice for Students](#)” series. It is meant to be read after its prequel, “[10 Computing Requirements for Students](#)” and before its sequel, “[10 Additional Computing Tips and Tricks for Students](#)”.

## 1. Backup your data at all times

Rule #1 of computing is: never lose your data. It is frequently broken.

Use [Google Drive](#) to store your (non-sensitive) data.

## 2. Control your screen luminosity

Install Caffeine ([Mac](#), [Win](#), [Linux](#)) to stop the screen from dimming.

Install [F.lux](#) to vary screen luminosity through the day.

Your eyes and your sleep cycles will thank you.

## 3. Use a launcher

To use your computer quicker, learn the keyboard shortcuts of your applications, and install a launcher.

Install [Alfred](#) (Mac). On Windows, [Wox](#) and [Hain](#) look like good [alternatives](#).

Alfred will give you quick application launching, search shortcuts (e.g. Google, Google Scholar, Wikipedia), local file search, music playback control, and a lot more stuff.

## 4. Use a proper Web browser

Use [Google Chrome](#). Any other browser (e.g. [Mozilla Firefox](#), [Apple Safari](#) or Microsoft Internet Explorer) is unlikely to be as secure as up-to-date Chrome.

*Essential security steps* – (1) Always keep your Web browser(s) up to date. (2) Install the [HTTPS Everywhere](#) and [uBlock Origin](#) extensions. (3) Go to <chrome://settings/content/flash> from within Chrome and make sure that Flash is disabled.

To enjoy a basic modicum of browsing privacy, you will also need extensions to block ads and trackers, and to ‘clean up’ your Web sessions. For instructions on how to do so and for further suggestions, see “[10 Ways to Make Web Browsing Faster and Safer](#).”

## 5. Use a password manager

To keep your data secure, use different, complex passwords for every service that requires one. Complexity means [long, random passphrases](#).

Install [Dashlane](#) to store your passwords in an encrypted file on your disk.

Your passwords do not protect you against network attacks: *never* log on to a sensitive website, such as one that stores your credit card details, from an insecure connexion like airport or hotel Wi-Fi.

## 6. Use a bookmarking system

The Web is full of things that you will want to go back to later on.

Either use your browser bookmarks intelligently, or use the [Pinboard](#) bookmark service.

## 7. Use RSS

Among the many Web technologies that are currently disappearing, one does not deserve to die. That technology is called [RSS](#). Its twin technology is called [Atom](#).

Use [Feedly](#) to subscribe to interesting websites via RSS.

Subscribing to websites via RSS feeds will incite you to read from a diverse array of sources in many different languages. For instance, if you are studying political science, you might consider subscribing to blogs like [The Monkey Cage \(RSS\)](#), [Josep Colomer’s blog \(RSS\)](#), [Presidential Power \(RSS\)](#), and the [Project on Middle East Political Science \(RSS\)](#).

## 8. Add to the digital public domain

The Web is a fantastic playground. Share back some of the fun with everyone. Even small contributions to the digital public domain are valuable.

Contribute to Wikipedia, publish a blog, write smart tweets – whatever.

You can contribute to [Wikipedia](#) in any language that you know. You can very easily blog through services like [Blogger](#), [Medium](#), [Tumblr](#) or [WordPress](#). You can tweet on [Twitter](#) or on [Mastodon](#).

## 9. Don't be an idiot

Use computers and the Web to help, not to harm, yourself and/or others.

Do not interpret online pseudo-anonymity as a right granted upon you to be a jerk.

Do not become a virtual prisoner of governments and their allies in the computing industry. You are making it harder for everyone else to live freely.

Do not send emails that look like they were written by a five-year-old.

## 10. Learn some basic computing nerdery

1. Learn how your computer works.
2. Learn how to make your computer work for you.
3. ???
4. **PROFIT**

Step 3: install a plain text editor like [TextMate](#) or [VSCode](#); then, start learning and playing with languages like [HTML](#) and [CSS](#) with websites like [W3Schools](#); last, transition to learning a bit of [scripting](#) and text processing with [regular expressions](#), using [Stack Overflow](#) to get help.

On top of being fun and intellectually rewarding, learning how your computer works will

1. avoid you lots of (minor, or not so minor) computer trouble
2. save you hours of work on whatever you do on your computer
3. extend the lifespan of your computer by many years
4. make your mom think that you are some kind of whizz-kid

So, less trouble, more time, and parental wonderment.

---

*Final note* – All university students are required to learn some computer skills to complement their research and writing skills, and to ensure that the network communications that they share with everyone else at university remain secure. If you are thinking something along the lines of “computers are not for me, and my [humanities, social science] studies do not require me to know how to use a computer properly,” you are seriously fooling yourself.