

## Designing Clinical Research

Okay, we know that design apps for Windows might seem like an oxymoron. It's true that once it was the Mac that reigned supreme amongst designers, but Windows is fast catching up as a viable operating system for design pros – with a vast array of decent apps to boot.

There are a few outliers (like Sketch), that don't want to adapt away from Apple. But now, mostly, anything Mac can do, Windows can do as well. So, which are the best apps for Windows right now?

This post rounds up, in no particular order, the best design apps for Windows on the market and sum up what you need to know to choose between them. Want more kit options? See our guide to the best laptops for graphic design. Alternatively, if you're more interested in drawing and painting digitally, check out our pick of the best digital art software.

Design apps for Windows

Why you can trust Creative Bloq Our expert reviewers spend hours testing and comparing products and services so you can choose the best for you. Find out more about how we test.

(Image credit: Jason Parnell-Brookes)

(opens in new tab)

Possibly the best known of all design apps for Windows, Photoshop (opens in new tab) has dominated the profession for the last three decades, and remains the go-to for studios everywhere. Indeed, you'll probably struggle get a job without knowing how to use it. If you're a freelancer, of course, you have more scope for using other software, but it will probably be difficult to avoid it altogether.

But is it a any good? Well, with so many design apps for Windows around, you don't stay on top in an ever-expanding industry for nothing, and our most recent testing found Adobe has made strident efforts to update its tool to keep it relevant for 2022. We especially love the new neural filters, and powerful 3D modelling and 3D printing features. Plus, the iPad version is a handy addition (find out more in our Photoshop for iPad review). This app is getting more and more sophisticated by the day; for example, Adobe added cloud documents version history, and support for cloud documents in offline mode.

The main reason to consider an alternative is price. Photoshop, like other Adobe tools, is now only available as part of a Creative Cloud subscription, and that doesn't come cheap.

Having said that, there are discounts to be had (check out the latest Creative Cloud discounts), and if you're using multiple CC tools, then the interoperability between them, and other services like Adobe Fonts and Adobe Stock, can often make the extra cost a good investment in your career. Read more

in our comprehensive Photoshop review.

(Image credit: Beth Crane)

(opens in new tab)

02. Adobe Illustrator Popular and established vector editing tool. Specifications Used for: Illustration, designing vector graphics Payment model: Subscription Free trial: 30 days Platforms: Mac, Windows, iPad Today's Best Deals Adobe Illustrator (opens in new tab) £19.97 /mth (opens in new tab) Visit Site (opens in new tab) at Adobe (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Industry standard + Creative Cloud integration + 3D tools Reasons to avoid - Expensive

First launched in 1987, Illustrator (opens in new tab) has been the natural companion to Photoshop for generations of illustrators and designers, and it's long been considered the standard vector drawing tool for the industry. That dominance is starting to ebb a little, with a rush of new rivals into the space. But it remains one of the most sought-after design apps for Windows, and our recent testing showed exactly how good it is (we gave it a strong four and half stars).

As with Photoshop, its rivals are largely competing on price, and for those whom money is less important than efficiency, Illustrator remains a hugely powerful and versatile tool, that Adobe is constantly making efforts to improve further.

In the most recent update, we especially like the new 3D tools, elegant vector editing and the cloud teamwork function. The biggest additions in recent years have been a Freeform Gradients tool that makes it super-easy to create rich gradients, a Global Editing feature that lets you simultaneously make changes across all instances of a similar object, and a smart cropping tool that automatically suggests crops based on AI. Illustrator has also now launched on the iPad (see our Illustrator for iPad review), and the updates to this app make it much easier for you to share your work with colleagues and collaborators.

More broadly, the issues that apply to Photoshop apply to Illustrator too. On the plus side, its ubiquity makes it a good tool to learn for your career, and the integration with the Creative Cloud can help make your workflow smooth and speedy. On the downside, its decades-old codebase and interface are becoming a little bloated and well, there's that

monthly subscription. Find out more in our Illustrator review.

(Image credit: Serif)

(opens in new tab)

03. Affinity Designer Professional-grade rival to Illustrator, at an affordable price. Specifications Used for: Illustration, designing vector graphics Payment model: One-off purchase Free trial: 90 days Platforms: Mac, Windows, iPad Today's Best Deals View at Serif Europe UK (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Powerful features + Affordable price + Integrates with other Affinity apps Reasons to avoid - Lacks some advanced tools

Since its release for Windows in 2016, Affinity Designer (opens in new tab) has offered PC-using professionals a grown-up alternative to Illustrator, including a complete vector and pixel editing toolset, 10 million per cent zoom, non-destructive effects and adjustment layers, and more.

Our recent testing showed it is excellent value for money and it can handle a heavy load without any issues. While some capabilities in Illustrator are absent, such as distortion or warp effects, most of what you can do in Adobe's tool, you can do in Affinity Designer. And the interface is similar enough that it's easy to pick up and use intuitively.

Coded for the latest computers and tablets, makers Serif claim that Affinity Designer runs faster than Adobe's products, and our experience suggests that's very much the case, as long as you're using relatively modern equipment. Affinity Designer is also staggeringly cheap, and you only pay once: there's no subscription.

That said, Illustrator remains the industry standard of all the design apps for Windows, and so there's somewhat of a chicken-and-egg problem; many studios don't want to use it until all studios are using it. Also, while Affinity Designer is interoperable with sister tools Affinity Photo and Affinity Publisher (see below), there's not yet anything approaching the complexity of the Creative Cloud ecosystem, with its endless number of tools, and integrated Adobe Fonts and Adobe Stock options.

For freelancers who have more freedom to organise how they work, though, this most affordable of design apps for

Windows is certainly worth considering. The app is constantly being improved, for example Affinity introduced a new tool to add contours and line offsets to any shape or path, plus the ability to place linked images and resources. Read more of what we thought in our Affinity Designer 1.10 review.

(Image credit: Ben Brady)

(opens in new tab)

04. Affinity Photo Low-cost rival to Photoshop that's surprisingly capable. Specifications Used for: Image editing and manipulation, photo retouching, graphic design, web and app prototyping Payment model: One-off purchase Free trial: 90 days Platforms: Mac, Windows, iPad Today's Best Deals Check Amazon (opens in new tab) Visit Site (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Streamlined interface + Fast working + Affordable price Reasons to avoid - Lacks some advanced features

Just as Affinity Designer rivals Illustrator, Affinity Photo (opens in new tab) is one of the design apps for Windows that offers an alternative to Photoshop. And we found itâ€™s a pretty familiar experience. Brushes, layers, masks, for example, are all treated in the same way as in Adobeâ€™s tool.

Affinity Photo is not, however, a carbon copy of Photoshop. Indeed, while some designers will complain that Affinity Photo doesn't do everything that Photoshop does, that's kind of missing the point. Essentially, this most budget-conscious of design apps for Windows is not weighed down with hundreds of features that try to please everyone, but is more streamlined for specific tasks. When we tested it, we loved the uncluttered interface and the simplicity of the effective tools.

Rather than a fully fledged graphics suite, Affinity Photo is better described as photo editing software with some good art and design tools, including some distinctive features like a saveable undo history, PSD Import/Export options and a non-destructive workflow. More recent additions include the ability to add liquify adjustments as live, maskable layers.

If you're looking for a full graphic design tool, you're better off â€" as the name suggests â€" with Affinity Designer (above), which has pixel design capabilities alongside its range of vector tools. But if photo editing is

your main concern, Affinity Photo offers some excellent tools and capabilities, at a low, one-off price. Want to know more? See our Affinity Photo review.

(Image credit: Corel)

05. CorelDRAW Graphics Suite Vector-based illustration tool with a broad fanbase. Specifications Used for: Vector illustration, page layout, image editing and manipulation Payment model: One-off purchase or subscription Free trial: 15 days Platforms: Mac, Windows Today's Best Deals CorelDraw Graphics Suite 2021 (opens in new tab) £299 /year (opens in new tab) Visit Site (opens in new tab) at Corel Corporation (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Powerful features + Intuitive interface + Choice of payment models Reasons to avoid - Not cheap

First launched in 1987, CorelDRAW (opens in new tab) is a vector-based illustration tool that's mainly focused on Windows (although in 2019 it did finally launch on MacOS).

So how does it compare with other design apps for Windows? Well, from our testing we found it's difficult to recommend it over Adobe Illustrator for features, while Affinity Designer easily beats it on value for money. But CorelDRAW continues to be popular amongst everyone from artists to graphic designers, so its makers are clearly doing something right.

In recent years, its standout improvement has been the LiveSketch tool: an innovative line drawing solution for designers and illustrators who want to bypass producing thumbnails on paper and freely sketch-out vector art at the source; this is particularly useful on a drawing tablet.

Other cool features in CorelDRAW include Colour Harmony, which lets you change the look of an object from one group of complementary colours to another; Pointiliser, which lets you create vector mosaics; and the way that every layer is represented with a thumbnail representation of the shape in question. More recently, the latest versions (2020, 2021) build on the new features powered by AI, cloud-based collaborative review options, and overall improved performance. Plus there's an impressive bitmap for vector drawing called PowerTRACE.

In short, CorelDRAW may not be the "best" at any one thing, but overall this is solid, well functioning and professional grade software for designers that's got a lot to recommend it. Find out more in our CorelDRAW review.

(Image credit: Abobe)

(opens in new tab)

06. Adobe InDesign The go-to desktop publishing suite for the print media. Specifications Used for: Desktop publishing Payment model: Subscription Free trial: Yes Platforms: Mac, Windows Today's Best Deals Adobe InDesign CC (opens in new tab) £19.97 /mth (opens in new tab) Visit Site (opens in new tab) at Adobe (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Industry standard for print + Good e-publishing features + Continuing granular improvements Reasons to avoid - Requires subscription

Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator were pioneers in their respective fields of image editing and vector graphics. But when InDesign (opens in new tab) arrived on the scene in 1999, it was somewhat late to the party. The market for desktop publishing software at that time was dominated by QuarkXpress. But InDesign quickly took over, largely because of its lower price.

Nowadays, of all design apps for Windows, InDesign remains the industry standard for print publishing. And it's evolved over the years to include some pretty nifty digital publishing features too.

When we last tested it, we loved the collaboration tools, and the fact it switches seamlessly from digital to print. Since then, the main recent innovations have been small but important ones, such as support for endnotes and better font filtering, as well as better integration with the Creative Cloud. But on the whole, Adobe has avoided too much radical change. Updates continue are constantly being made, but they tend to be granular, rather than groundbreaking. An update this April, for example, introduced the ability to map the optical size of your text to automatically set the font size.

And that's actually quite smart, because one of the biggest appeals of InDesign is its familiarity to designers who've been using it for years, if not their entire careers. For those new to it, though, the interface is not that intuitive and so there is a bit of a learning curve. Head to our InDesign review to read more.

(Image credit: Ben Brady)

(opens in new tab)

07. Affinity Publisher Cheap and capable rival to Adobe InDesign. Specifications Used for: Desktop publishing Payment model: One-off purchase Free trial: 90 days Platforms: Mac, Windows Today's Best Deals View at Serif Europe UK (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Easy to use + Affordable price + Interoperable with Affinity apps Reasons to avoid - Lacks some advanced features

Launched in 2019, Affinity Publisher (opens in new tab) is a low-priced alternative to InDesign, and the sister app to Affinity Designer and Affinity Photo. We loved it in our testing, finding it simple to master, intuitive and easy to integrate with other Affinity apps.

One of the cheapest design apps for Windows around, Publisher enables you to work with dynamic photo frames, tables, baseline grids and linked resources, all backed up with end-to-end CMYK, and headline features include advanced typography options, linked text frames, master pages, and facing page spreads.

The focus is very much on print publishing, and it isn't a particularly useful for digital design, not yet anyway. Nor is it as powerful or feature-rich as InDesign. For more in-depth opinion, check out our Affinity Publisher review.

(Image credit: Adobe)

(opens in new tab)

08. Adobe XD Freemium tool for UI, web and app prototyping. Specifications Used for: Web and app prototyping Payment model: Free or subscription Free trial: No, but there is a free version Platforms: Mac, Windows, with iOS and Android app for testing Today's Best Deals Adobe XD - Single App Monthly (opens in new tab) £9.98 /mth (opens in new tab) Visit Site (opens in new tab) at Adobe (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Powerful prototyping features + 3D and VR tools + Free version Reasons to avoid - Premium tools require subscription

Launched in 2016, Adobe XD (opens in new tab) is a vector-based UX design tool that's popular for creating website wireframes and animated, click-through prototypes. Although you don't need a Creative Cloud subscription to use it, we found XD makes it easy to pull in existing design work from other Creative Cloud apps, such as Photoshop or

Illustrator, plus there's a free companion app that lets you preview your work on iOS or Android devices.

There's a free version of Adobe XD, which give you access to a limited number of fonts and 2GB of cloud storage. With a subscription to the full version, meanwhile, you'll get access to the Adobe Fonts Portfolio, 100GB of cloud storage, plus unlimited editors, shared documents and shared links.

Our testing found XD was a powerful tool on launch â€" we especially liked that you can import content from other Adobe apps â€" and Adobe has continued to add newer and better features on a regular basis. For example, you've been able to use voice commands, keyboard input, and gamepad input to trigger between states of components in your prototypes.

And that's good news for PC users looking for design apps for Windows, because not only has rival UI app Sketch not developed a Windows version, it's ruled out doing so (opens in new tab). Find out more on our Adobe XD review.

Photoshop Elements is a lighter and cheaper version of the main Photoshop software (Image credit: Adobe)

(opens in new tab)

09. Photoshop Elements Simplified version of Photoshop that's cheap and easy to use. Specifications Used for: Image editing and manipulation, photo retouching Payment model: One-off purchase Free trial: Yes Platforms: Mac, Windows Today's Best Deals View at Adobe (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Easy to use + One-off purchase + Free trial available Reasons to avoid - Not suitable for pros

Like Photoshop, but don't need all the features and want to save some money? Photoshop Elements (opens in new tab) is a raster graphics editor for entry-level photographers, image editors and hobbyists that, we found, contains most of the features of the professional version, but with fewer and simpler options.

Photoshop Elements is still about twice as expensive as Affinity Photo, so we'd suggest you take out a free 10-day trial of the latter first before committing. But if you're already familiar with Photoshop's interface and don't want to learn something new, it may well be worth the money. Read our Photoshop Elements review for more.



Inkscape is free, open source and surprisingly powerful (Image credit: Inkscape)

10. Inkscape Free and open source vector editor with advanced features. Specifications Used for: Illustration, designing vector graphics Payment model: Free Free trial: N/A Platforms: Mac, Windows, Linux Today's Best Deals Visit Site (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Advanced feature set + Costs nothing + Worldwide community Reasons to avoid - Works slowly

If seeking a free graphic design tool for Windows, check out Inkscape (opens in new tab). This open source vector editor comes with a surprisingly advanced feature set, including complex path operations, node editing, bitmap tracing and path-based text. Plus there's a broad and enthusiastic worldwide community behind it, so if you run into trouble, it's easy to get help and support.

The main downside of Inkscape, and the reason you might prefer to pay for a more sophisticated tool instead, is the speed of its operation, which is relatively slow and clunky. As always, though, that depends on the equipment you have. If you're using a super-speedy machine, you might find it's not a problem, and the fact it's free means it's certainly worth giving it a go.

(Image credit: Canva)

Launched in 2012, Canva (opens in new tab) is a graphic design editor that works in the browser; so you can use it whether you're on a Windows, Mac or Linux computer or tablet. While it's more limited than full-blown design software like Photoshop, it is capable of creating a wide range of graphic assets, from social media graphics to brochure layouts, presentations to posters.

Based on drag-and-drop, and offering a range of templates, our testing found it's a great choice for beginners and amateurs wanting to get started with graphic design but it's not one for pros. Being housed in the browser, it's also great for sharing your work and collaborating with others.

The basic version of Canva is free, but you need to take out a subscription to unlock all the features, and access unlimited folders and thousands of templates. That subscription, though, is still pretty cheap compared to most of the tools on this list. Check out our Canva review for more.

(Image credit: Pixlr)

12. Pixlr Freemium image editor that's ideal for quick edits. Specifications Used for: Photo editing and manipulation Payment model: Free or subscription Free trial: 30 days Platforms: Browser Today's Best Deals Visit Site (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Free version + Works fast + Easy interface Reasons to avoid - Artificial delays on free plan

Pixlr (opens in new tab) is a free photo editor that works in the browser, but is surprisingly packed with features. You can access the free version immediately, without even having to sign in. And it's all very intuitive to use, particularly if you've used any form of photo editing software before.

You don't just get tools for cropping and resizing, but also more sophisticated features such as shape, lasso, wand, liquify and clone tools. It's never going to replace Photoshop, as it's relatively limited: you can't work with RAW or TIFF files, for instance. But for a free app, it's incredibly capable.

In fact, it's so fast that even if you have Photoshop, you'll often find yourself using Pixlr instead when you just want to make a few quick tweaks to your images. Perhaps realising this, the makers have recently added in an artificial delay of a few seconds when you save images, which can be removed by taking out a subscription.

The paid plan also includes access to the more advanced Pixlr E which boasts AI-powered features such as background removal as well as added overlays, templates, and support for 8196 x 8196 image resolution.

(Image credit: Gravit Designer)

13. Gravit Designer Free vector design app from the makers of CorelDRAW. Specifications Used for: Vector illustration, UI design, image editing Payment model: Free or subscription Free trial: 15 days Platforms: Browser or desktop app for Mac OS, Windows, Linux, Chrome OS Today's Best Deals Visit Site (opens in new tab) Reasons to buy + Wide range of features + Free version + Browser or desktop app Reasons to avoid - Subscribe for full features

Gravit Designer (opens in new tab) is a full-featured vector design app that you can use either in your browser or on your desktop as a downloadable app. Popular with graphic designers, product designers and web designers, it has a huge range of features allowing you to work on a diverse range of design tasks, from illustration and printed artwork to UI

and logo design.

Brought to you by the makers of CorelDRAW, you automatically start with a free trial that includes all the features, then you have to take out a subscription, or will be scaled back to the more basic version. This is still pretty impressive: for example, you get 500MB cloud storage and can export PDFs at 72 and 150dpi. But upgrading will allow you to work in CMYK as well as RGB, work offline, export PDFs at 300dpi, get touchscreen support, and access version history.

Read more:

## Reference

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