Ready to start your Internet day? Where will you go first? Pick a portal and customize it to your liking, and you’ll get all the info you need to get your day off to a fast and productive start.

Yahoo!: www.yahoo.com

![Customizable Yahoo! Page]

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Yahoo! has had a full decade to figure out how to help Internet users find their way around the Web, and, at this point, it’s pretty much got it all nailed down. Sign up for free at Yahoo!, and you can get an e-mail account and build a personalized My Yahoo! page for easy access to the news and data that matter most to you. If you’re too uninspired to come up with your own design, let the site guide you with any one of eight preset pages that focus on fitness, money, travel, sports, or showbiz. Want to create a Yahoo!-centric digital dashboard for your life? Another preset page will bring together many of Yahoo!’s services, including electronic bill payment, e-mail, calendar, and messaging onto a single page. It’s best, however, to dive into the menus and pick the features you need most, perhaps the asthma watch, the news photos of the day, some shopping specials, and the auto loan monitor. Pick the modules, and then decide how you want to lay them out on-screen for easy viewing. The page will also tell you if you have any incoming Yahoo! e-mail or if you have buddies currently online at Yahoo! Messenger. Add your local weather report, your stock portfolio, and maybe some movie show times, and your online day should be off to an efficient start.

**Tip**

Invest 20 minutes in personalizing your portal, and you’ll save 10 minutes every day. Whatever your interests — sports, lottery numbers, stock quotes, horoscopes, gossip — put them all on your self-designed portal front page where you can scan them in an instant.

**MSN: www.msn.com**

MSN has gone through an excruciating evolution since it first burst on the scene in the mid-1990s to try to grab market share from America Online and convince Net newbies to log on the Microsoft way. AOL’s lead proved to be insurmountable, no matter what Microsoft tried, including one zany attempt to create a TV-like interface that was a hopelessly mixed metaphor for the online world and a real bandwidth hog to boot. Today, MSN is a respectable (but still distant) competitor to AOL in the Internet access business, and any Web user, not just MSN subscribers, can go to its home page and build a customized Web starting point. You will have to have an online identity with Microsoft, something most people get through free Hotmail e-mail accounts. Once you have this Microsoft “passport,” you are more than welcome to sort through dozens of newsfeeds (including those of Microsoft properties and partners such as MSNBC, Slate, *Newsweek*, and *The Washington Post*) and services to help you start your day. Get local news, weather, and city guides, and position them next to showbiz headlines, tech news, or stock quotes. You lay out the page to your liking, putting as much or as little on the screen as you want. The page also serves as a jumping-off point for Web searching and will guide you to all of Microsoft’s other excellent sites, including MSN Money and MSN House & Home. Like any portal, MSN strives to find ways to encourage you to stick around, do some reading, check out a few ads, and maybe do a little shopping. There’s so much here that you’re likely to do just that.
Chapter 1: Portals and Starting Points

America Online: www.aol.com

If you’re one of the 25 million or so subscribers to America Online, your view of the Internet is somewhat different from that of Web users who merely find an Internet service provider, download a browser, and surf from scratch. AOL is an edited Internet experience, a candy-colored and, until recently, maddeningly ad-polluted world that is a happy home to millions who exist contentedly within its boundaries, reading articles, looking things up, chatting, sending e-mails and instant messages, and building home pages. In recent years, AOL’s stunning growth has been halted as surfers abandon their dial-up connections, AOL’s bread and butter, and go broadband, a service that AOL couldn’t provide until recently (and now provides at a price widely regarded as too high). Luckily, this crisis has forced AOL to get more customer-friendly and come up with new versions of its interface that eliminate much of the clutter that has plagued it in the past, giving its subscribers a cleaner and easier-to-use window on the Web. If AOL is your service provider, you begin your Internet day at AOL’s Welcome screen. It certainly behooves you to take as much advantage as you can of its customization features to get rid of headlines and weather reports you don’t need and request precisely the information you want when you first log on in the morning. AOL now lets you turn off the annoying pop-up ads that used to greet you each day with offers to subscribe to a Time Inc. magazine or take a condo vacation in Florida. That feature alone should provide enough impetus to get every AOL user to upgrade to the most current version of the software. (Go to AOL.com to find out what the current version number is.) Power users will tell you that only kids and newbies think AOL is cool and that real Web experts break through its boundaries and explore to the ends of the Internet. In reality, lots of parents find those boundaries—and the control AOL lets them exercise over their kids’ online activities—exceedingly comforting. If you’re new to the Net, check out any of AOL’s innumerable trial offers (some up to 1,000 hours of free access). You may find that it’s a comfortable way to explore the Net.

Tip
Learn to know a search engine when you see one. Sometimes when you type an incorrect URL into your browser, you’ll get back a screen that looks very much like a typical directory or search engine page that asks you if you need help. It’s best to walk away. What you’re seeing is a glorified ad that probably won’t take you where you want to go if you use it to search the Web. Just go to a search engine you know, and do your research there.

Lycos: www.lycos.com

The Lycos mascot, a Labrador retriever frantically digging in the dirt, symbolizes the efforts the portal makes to help you find what you’re looking for. Even if you don’t build a customized page, you’ll find its directory and search tools easy and engaging. The portal, which has made a wide range of acquisitions, including HotWired and Gamesville, since it overhauled itself in 2000, sees the world divided into 18 main topics, with especially strong sections for entertainment fans (it was one of the first sites to offer searching for MP3 files) and for kids, who will find their own mini-portal to
explore. Don’t miss the Lycos 50, a state-of-the-Net list of the most popular searches of the day before, complete with analysis from the witty Aaron Schatz. That’s all fun, but to make the site into a productive starting point, build a customized page and drop TV listings on the lower right, weather on the upper left, lottery numbers in the middle, however you’d like to arrange the 40 or so info-streams from which you can choose. If you sign up for a Lycos e-mail account, you can view it there, and the site will also give you tools to make a Web home page (via its Angelfire or Tripod services). Lycos offers five search engines to help you find what you need, and if you want to be a power searcher, consider downloading its Sidesearch utility. This intriguing add-on runs your search through multiple search engines and presents all the results in a box that runs down the left side of your browser screen. Click on any result in the box, and you jump to that page, but the box stays put to give you one-click access to any other result you’d like to view. It’s a good way to look through several sites without lots of clicking on the Back and Forward buttons.

**My Netscape: my.netscape.com**

Once upon a time (circa 1995) Netscape was flying high. Its browser had 90-percent market share, its IPO broke Wall Street records, and its young and visionary CEO, Mark Andreessen, was the man of the year. Today, Netscape is a humble division of America Online that’s dedicated mainly to providing a customizable portal to people who have stayed loyal over the years. My Netscape is still a fine place to start your computing day, with a three-column design into which you can place the items that matter to you most in any layout you choose. As a registered member (there’s no charge), you get an e-mail account with 5 MB of storage, access to AOL Instant Messenger, and an online calendar into which you can put appointments and birthdays. You’ll also be invited to enter the Netscape Network message boards, which you can visit if you like to spend time chatting about the events of the day with others. Why not add a soundtrack to your surfing while you’re at it? Netscape Radio delivers dozens of free online radio stations in every imaginable format for your listening pleasure. The one thing you won’t find on your custom page is a Web search tool, although whenever you leave the site to read one of the news stories on your menu, you’ll find a Netscape Network toolbar lingering at the top of the screen through which you can search or access your e-mail or instant messaging software with a single click.

**Tip**

About (www.about.com) isn’t just one Internet starting point, it’s 700 starting points, each focusing on a particular subject and hosted by a human guide whose job it is to keep news stories and links fresh. Check the directory to see if there’s a guide in a topic that interests you, and if there isn’t, why not consider becoming a guide yourself?
Chapter 1: Portals and Starting Points

My Way: www.myway.com

“Up to 63 percent faster than Yahoo!” That’s the main claim to fame at this stripped-down portal that’s most notable not for what it has but for what it doesn’t have: annoying banner ads that slow it down. My Way is so proud of its speed that page-loading times appear on every page you visit. It may mean little to you to find out that the page you just picked took .17 seconds to load, but if you’re on a dial-up connection and you notice that ads do in fact slow you down, you’ll soon appreciate My Way’s streamlined design. The site is fanatical about converting users who are entrenched at Yahoo! and MSN. It offers to import your stock portfolio and address book, link to your e-mail accounts, and preserve your bookmarks if you’re willing to come over and sign up for free. Once you arrive, you’ll notice a Yahoo!-like directory of subjects to search, but in this case, the directory is powered by Google, which also provides the site’s default Web search engine. Don’t like Google? No problem. The site features four additional search engines. You can type in your query once and see what all five come up with for you. Sign up for a My Way e-mail account, and you’ll get a relatively generous 6 MB of free storage, with premium storage programs planned for the future. The site is also working on plans to develop a customizable single-page look and integrated chat features so it can become even more of a daily dashboard than it already is. No matter how it evolves, however, it seems a sure bet that the pages will never slow down. In fact, the site amusingly lists 23 things that might slow it down that it promises never to do (including hiring a 24-year-old CEO). How does My Way make money? Through unobtrusive text-only ads (a technique pioneered by Google to keep its pages fast loading). The end result is a delightfully clutter-free site that in today’s Net world of flashing banners and floating pop-up ads is a most refreshing alternative.

Fun

Feeling lucky? At iWon (www.iwon.com), a frantic and highly commercial portal, every click you make earns you entries into the site’s daily drawing for a $10,000 prize. Once a year, the site also gives away millions more in grand prizes. While there’s a snowball’s chance of actually winning the big prize, that doesn’t discourage plenty of visitors. iWon is one of the Web’s most popular sites.