

Skype

Somewhere between email and the telephone lies the joyous communication tool called instant messaging. Plenty of IM programs run on Windows, but in 2011, Microsoft bought a popular one of its very own—Skype—for \$8.5 billion that it found under the couch cushions. Today, it's yours free.

(Oh, all right, it's always been free. Which is one reason it has 700 million people using it.)

What form Skype takes depends on which version of Windows 10 you have, and when you got it, and which software update you've downloaded; Microsoft keeps tinkering with it.

But the essence is always the same. Skype does a few things very well. They are:

- **Instant messaging.** Instant messaging combines the privacy of email and the immediacy of the phone. You type messages in a chat window, and your friends type back to you in real time.
- **Unified chat/text messages with phone.** This is huge. If you and your conversation partner both have Skype, then you both can move freely from phone to tablet to Mac to PC. Your conversation appears in real time on all your gadgets simultaneously. If you started texting someone on the train home, you can sit down at your PC and open Skype—and pick up right from where you left off.

The chats are a lot more flexible than regular text messages. They can be much longer than 160 characters. They can include photos, movies, or other kinds of files.

And they don't count as text messages. They're routed through the Internet rather than the cellphone voice network. As far as your cellphone company is concerned, you're not texting at all, and therefore you don't have to pay for a texting plan.

- **Free long distance.** You and a buddy can also chat *out loud*, by talking, using the Internet as a free long-distance phone. Wait, not just the two of you—the 25 of you, thanks to Skype's group calling feature.
- **Free videoconferencing.** If you and your buddies all have fast Internet connections, then up to 10 participants can join in *video* chats, all onscreen at once, no matter where they happen to be in the world. This jaw-dropping visual stunt can bring distant collaborators face to face without plane tickets—and it costs about \$99,900 less than professional videoconferencing gear.

Getting on Skype

Skype may be on your machine already (try doing a search for it), or you may have to download and install it from skype.com.

Either way, Skype requires that both you and your chat partners have free Skype or Microsoft accounts. During the setup process, therefore, you're asked to create one if you don't already have one (Figure 1).

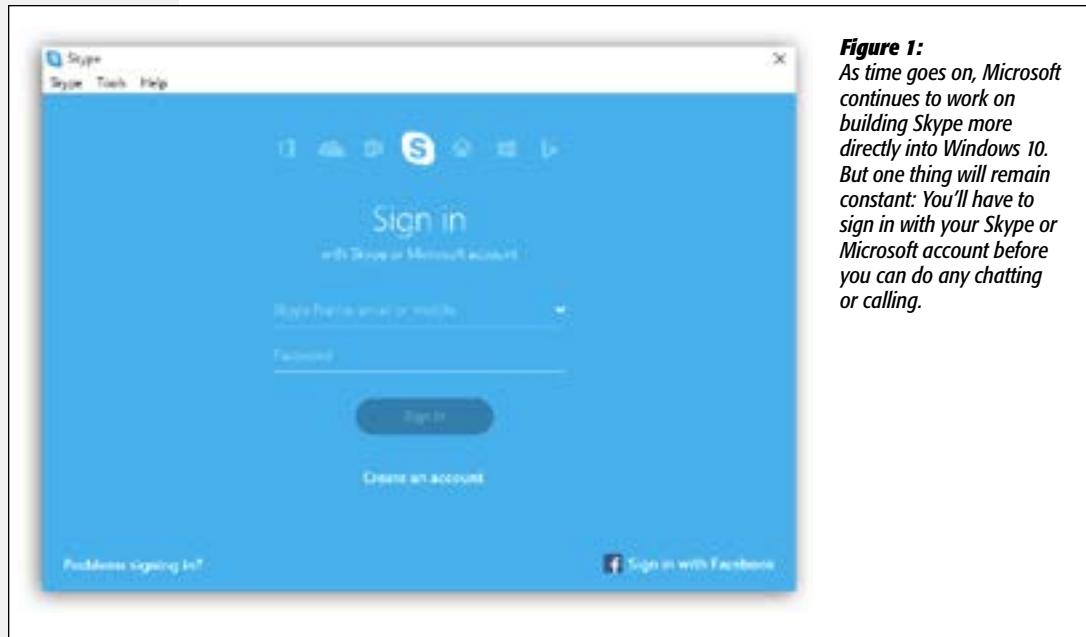


Figure 1: As time goes on, Microsoft continues to work on building Skype more directly into Windows 10. But one thing will remain constant: You'll have to sign in with your Skype or Microsoft account before you can do any chatting or calling.

Filling your Contacts list

You won't have much fun Skyping if you don't have someone to Skype with. That's the purpose of the Contacts list—an address book for the digital age.

It's easiest to add a buddy to this list if you know that person's Skype account name/address—for example, *bunnyface23* or *harold1968*—or email address. But you can also shoot blind: type that person's name into the Search box, and see if you get any results. If you find the person you're looking for, click Add to Contacts. (The person has to accept your invitation before you can actually communicate with Skype.)

Let the Typed Chat Begin

If you've ever corresponded with someone in Skype before, you'll see that name in the Recent tab of the left-side list of contacts. Click the name and then start typing into the message box at the bottom. The "conversation" with that person continues, even if the last exchange was months or years ago.

You Invite Them

To start chatting with someone you've never corresponded with before, click the person's name in the Contacts list at left. Then just type what you want to say into the message box at the bottom of the window. As you correspond, the conversation appears in speech bubbles, scrolling up like a screenplay, making it easy to identify who said what—and to scroll back up to see what someone said earlier. (See Figure 2.)

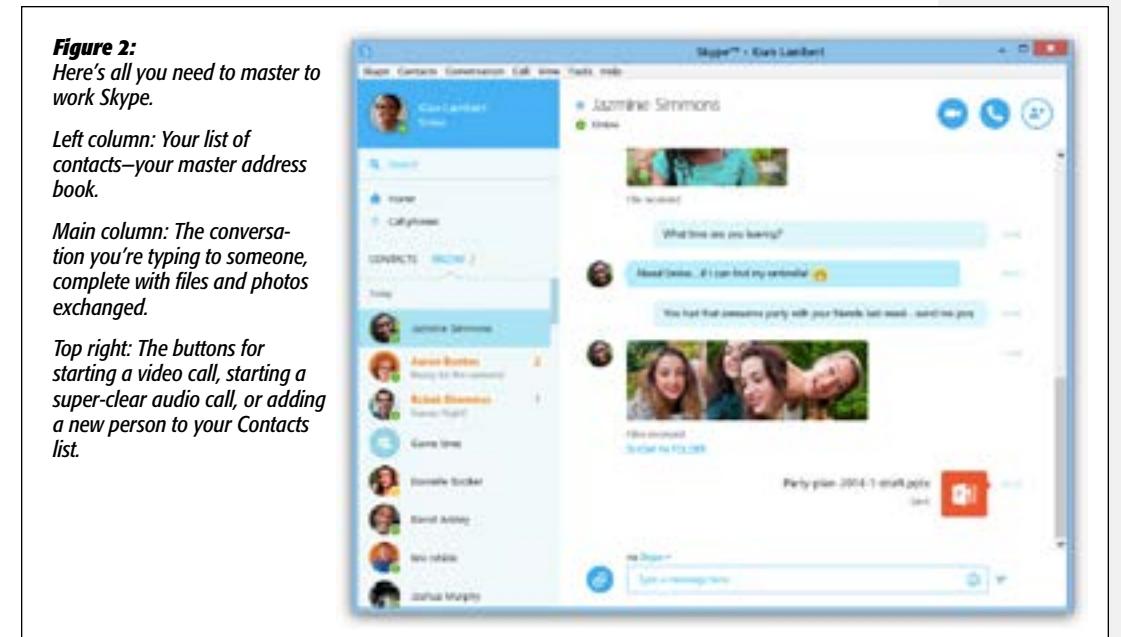


Figure 2: Here's all you need to master to work Skype.

Left column: Your list of contacts—your master address book.

Main column: The conversation you're typing to someone, complete with files and photos exchanged.

Top right: The buttons for starting a video call, starting a super-clear audio call, or adding a new person to your Contacts list.

They Invite You

If someone invites *you* to chat, a notification appears on your taskbar. If you tap or click it, the Skype window opens. Click in the message box at the bottom and type your witty reply.

Fun With Chat

As you get used to type-chatting in Skype, you'll discover its advantages over regular text messages. For example:

- **Format your text.** You make text **bold** by surrounding it with asterisks, **like this**, or *italic* by surrounding it with underlines, *_like this_*. (It doesn't change to bold and italic until you press Enter to send it.)
- **Insert a smiley.** When you choose a smiley from the quick-access menu of emoticons (at the right end of the text-reply box), Skype inserts it as a graphic into your response.

On the other hand, if you know the correct symbols to produce smileys—typing :) produces a yellow happy face, for example, and <3 produces a red heart—you can save time by typing them instead of using the pop-up menu. Skype converts them into smiley icons on the fly, as soon as you send your reply.

- **Send a file.** Drag a file's icon from the desktop into the box where you normally type. (This trick works well with pictures and movies, because your conversation partner sees them right in his Messages window. And it can handle huge files.)
- **Get Info on someone.** If you right-click a name in your Contacts list and then choose View Profile, you get a little info window about your buddy where you can see her name and photo. You can edit her name, too.
- **Block this jerk.** If someone is annoying you, disrupting your day with notifications, right-click his name in the Contacts list; from the shortcut menu, choose Block This Person. You've just muted that annoying person.
- **Juggle conversations.** You can keep a bunch of chats going simultaneously, thanks to the individually listed chats at the left side of the window. Just don't forget which chat you're in before you say something snarky!

If you have multiple machines running Skype, your conversation appears simultaneously on all the gadgets. That's extremely useful, because it means that you can (for example) start texting on your phone when you're out and about and pick up seamlessly on your PC when you get home, enjoying the real keyboard and big screen.

While the other guy is typing, you see the phrase "Bob is typing..." above the message box, so you know he's working on a response and not just ignoring you.

Skype also means that you can *keep* your text messages. They're not locked onto your phone, like regular text messages, and they don't scroll away forever, like regular text messages. You can archive them, search them, copy and paste them, print them, forward them, and so on.

Skype blurs the line between text messages, chats, and email. And it gives birth to this frequently asked question: "Are you on the phone or the PC?" Now there's no way to know.

Audio or Video Calls

If you find that typing is losing too much emotional nuance, you can jump into an audio or video call at any point—just click the ☐ or 📞 icon at the top of the window. Or open the Call menu and choose Call or Video Call.

In any case, Skype starts ringing the other person—it actually sounds like a futuristic phone-ringing sound. If that person is online, running Skype, and interested in talking to you, you'll suddenly hear her or see her video image, right on your screen.

Calling All Phones

The one great obstacle to Skype's domination of the world's communication is, of course, that you can't Skype someone who isn't also on Skype.

Or can you?

If you're willing to pay a couple of cents a minute, you can call actual phone numbers from within Skype, and talk to people on their actual phones. To pull that off, you buy something called Skype Credit in advance.

You'll find Add Skype Credits buttons in plenty of spots within the app, but here's one way to find it. Click "Call phones" (just about the Contacts list), or choose Call→Call Phones. Then, on the dialing pad, click Add Skype Credit.

Hope you've got something to say!