

HOW TO NOT USE A COMPUTER

This time I would like to tell you how to NOT use a computer. Read carefully. I don't mean How NOT To Use a Computer, but rather, How TO NOT Use a Computer (even if you have one). Put in other words, the message of this article is: You don't need a computer to run a packet station. That is an absolute truth; a computer is not a necessity for a packet station.

Back in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the rage in many offices was multi-user systems. The computer itself was darned expensive - too expensive to give each user their own. The answer was to buy just one, and to sprinkle "dumb terminals" throughout an office, all connected to the same computer by wire. The dumb terminal consisted essentially of a monitor and keyboard, often housed in a single case. In that way, many users could compute simultaneously. It worked, though the computer got slower and slower with every user that logged on to write a letter or run a program. Well, many of those dumb terminals are still around, and they are a ham "gold mine". They are cheap (\$10, 5, free). Some people have been known to give you a dollar to take one away. The punch line is, they will do a great job of running a packet station.

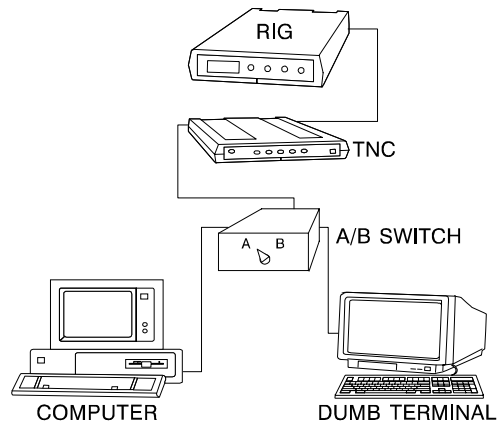
ADM 3, ADM 5, Televideo 950, Wyse and Freedom 100 are just a couple of the many brands out there. Look for one at the next swapfest. You can recognize them because they look like a computer, but they have no floppy drives. Sometimes the keyboard is detached but connected with a coiled cord. In other instances, the keyboard and screen are in a single case. Look at the back - you will typically find two 25-pin female connectors. One is for a printer, the other to communicate with your packet Terminal Node Controller (TNC). Somewhere back there or under a cover in the front will be one or two dipswitches, to set the baud rate, parity and all that other esoteric stuff required by the TNC. Most often those switches will be clearly labeled right on the case.

Once you set those switches properly and connect the terminal to your TNC with the correct cable, you are in business! You can send messages and receive messages perfectly. One can communicate with the world, using a dumb terminal. Piece of cake!

What can't you do? You cannot save a message on a floppy disk, since a dumb terminal doesn't have one. Similarly, you cannot upload a message previously written and saved to a floppy. But you can do everything else, including printing messages as they come over the air. Just hook a printer up to the 25-pin connector mentioned above.

This article is not just about how to not use a computer if you don't have one, it is also about how to not use a computer, even if you do have one! Here is what I do.

As I type these words on my computer, I can glance to the right of it's screen and watch packet messages coming over the air, displayed on my dumb terminal. I could move over a little and type a message on the terminal's keyboard, to be sent out over the air. On the other hand, if I want to capture a message from my TNC to disk or hard drive, or if I want to send a message from disk or hard drive out over the air, all it takes is a flip of the A/B switch (\$7 - \$15) sitting on my desk. That switch will disconnect the dumb terminal from my TNC and connect my computer. The best of both worlds ... I can choose to use my computer for packet, or to use it for other tasks while my dumb terminal handles packet duty and displays what is happening for me to see at a glance! What could be better?



Above is a diagram of the setup. It's really easy! A dumb terminal, A/B switch and extra cable are all that you need. If you invest the time and effort to set up the station as shown, you will never, never go back to a conventional setup. I promise. This setup is just too sweet! Have fun!