Over the past few years we've heard the critics praise, pan, and generally make a lot of noise about the large-selling word processors for PCs—notably Wordstar and its competitors, Multimate, Perfect Writer, and Word Perfect. And while these products are all versatile text handlers, they are also quite expensive. Do you really need to spend $350 to get a good word processor? I don't think so. This month, let's take a look at a word processing package that won't gouge a gaping hole in your checking account.

Wordvision

A new product available from Bruce and James Program Publishers of San Francisco, Wordvision is designed for the IBM PC and compatibles and requires a minimum of 96K RAM. (Of course, the more RAM your system has, the more text you can store, and 256K gives you about 50 pages' worth.) Though its price tag is quite modest, Wordvision is a surprisingly well thought out package, with all the features you'd expect to find in a professional-quality word processor. Now here's the news: it really is friendly.

When you first boot the disk, a menu appears with a choice of options to suit users at various levels of expertise. You can get help from a number of submenus, or—if you become experienced—bypass them and go straight to the writing, editing, and printing functions. But even if you are experienced, you will still probably use the help screens regularly. Wordvision has so many redefined function keys that it would be a herculean task to just remember what they're all used for. When you do go to the help screens—well, stand by for a shock. They are easy to use! Wordvision really distinguishes itself in this category, with "online documentation" that is complete, concise, and simple. Kind of nice, I thought, for a program to put the real meaning of "help" back into help screens instead of sending you once again to the manual. Now there probably isn't a word processing package on the market that is so difficult as to be impractical—if you are willing to put in enough hours of practice on it. Professional writers, for example, won't be hindered even by a program that's much tougher than it has to be (I'm thinking of Wordstar).

But what about more typical users? How often do they really sit down at the screen to do serious word processing? Not quite often enough, I'd guess, to remember all the myriad commands that most programs fling at them. So it's refreshing to find a product that's as easy to operate as it should be.

The manual, too, follows a similar philosophy with its simple layout, color coding, and substantive index. There's a "first use" section, along with explanations of help sequences, error messages, and function keys that are more than adequate.

If I have any complaint about Wordvision, it's that there are too many function keys—31, count 'em. Although they do everything you need—such as easy page formatting and convenient command undoing—they simply take over the keyboard. The company's attempt at overcoming this difficulty—stickers to go over the keys—doesn't really measure up, either. The little things tend to wear out and peel off rather quickly, and generally they're more trouble than they're worth.

But this was my only real problem with an otherwise fine piece of software, and I heartily recommend it to those who are new to word processing as well as to those who've felt the same frustrations I've experienced. If your local software store doesn't carry Wordvision, you can write to

Bruce and James Program Publishers
The Wharfside Building
680 Beach Street, Suite 357
San Francisco, CA 94109

The price? Only $79.95. Now that's a bargain!

This just out...

Convergent Technologies, Inc., has decided to discontinue its versatile lap computer, the Workslate; a company announcement will be forthcoming. In my opinion, the Workslate is a fine product, and with its capabilities as a terminal, speakerphone, and answering machine—as well as a sophisticated microcomputer—it occupies a class by itself. Having allocated corporate resources to cover its other bases, CT will nevertheless continue to support the Workslate. So if you're in the market for a lap computer that does everything but make coffee, keep an eye out for this one. You just might find an especially good bargain on it.

For additional information on Wordvision, circle number 100 on the reader service card at the back of the magazine.