Learn about Hallways

Why a computer should be a place you walk through rather than a list you scroll, how a Hallways palace is built, and answers to the questions people ask most.

The problem with lists

A computer asks us to remember names. Which folder did I save it in? What was the file called? Is that website in my bookmarks, or in the bar, or did I only ever search for it? The desktop fills up, the Start menu grows, and every program arranges its things its own way.

For someone who can see the screen, this is tiring. For someone who uses a screen reader, it is much harder: every list is heard one item at a time, every folder is a new list, and nothing has a shape to hold on to. Finding one document can mean walking down several long lists, each time from the top.

Yet all of us find our way around our own home without effort, even in the dark. We don't remember where things are by their names; we remember them by their *places*.

The memory palace

The ancient Greeks and Romans knew this. An orator who had to give a long speech without notes would imagine a building he knew well, and place each

part of the speech in a room along a path through it. To remember the speech, he walked through the building in his mind, and found each idea where he had left it. This is the **method of loci**, from the Latin for “places”, often called the memory palace. It is still the technique memory champions use today.

It works because the part of our memory that knows places is old, strong and nearly effortless. A route through a building is remembered as a whole: what is to the left, what comes next, what is at the end of the hall.

Hallways builds that palace for real. Instead of folders and lists, your computer becomes a building with floors, hallways and rooms. The things you use sit on the walls, each in its own place, and they stay there. You go to them by saying where they are, or by walking there.

How a palace is built

Floors

Each floor is a palace of its own. Many people keep everyday life on the first floor and work, projects or archives on the others. An elevator joins them.

Hallways and crossings

Hallways run north, south, east and west, and meet at crossings with plain names: the south crossing, the center crossing. Favorites is the first hallway you see.

Rooms

Rooms open off the hallways: a Library for books, an Office, a Gallery for photos, rooms for projects. Each wall of a room holds panels.

Panels

A panel is a board on a wall with a name on its sign, such as “News podcasts” or “Tax returns”. Some panels have a fixed number of places; others scroll and can hold a whole folder.

Portals

A portal is one thing on a panel: a program, a document, a folder, a website, a book, a photo album, a person. Opening a portal opens what it leads to. A portal can carry notes and, locked with your code, a user name and password.

Stations

Stations are alcoves for everyday tasks, done entirely by voice: writing documents, reading and sending email, finding contacts, checking your calendar, changing settings.

Special places

The Sorting Room receives new things to put away and keeps deleted portals until you empty it. The Vault keeps what is private, behind your code. Local assets has a room for each of your computers, for the things that live on that computer only.

The rules Hallways follows

1. **Everything has one place, and stays there.** Nothing moves unless you move it. Hallways never rearranges your palace for you, because a place you learned today must still be there tomorrow.
2. **Places have names you can say.** Every floor, hallway, room, panel and portal has a name, and “goto” and the name takes you there. Hallways looks nearby first, then further away, the way you would.

3. **You always know where you are.** Hallways says where you are as you move, what is in front of you when you ask, and what you can do there.
4. **The same palace on every computer.** Your palace is kept in your own OneDrive, so the rooms and portals are the same at home, at work and on a laptop.
5. **Voice first, but never voice only.** Everything can be done by voice, by keyboard, or with the mouse, and Hallways works alongside the NVDA screen reader.
6. **Your things stay yours.** Your originals are never moved, and your palace lives in your own OneDrive. Private details are locked with a code that only you know.

Who it is for

People who are blind or have low vision

A structure you can hold in your head instead of lists heard one item at a time. Short spoken commands take you straight to what you want, and spoken orientation tells you where you are. Email, writing, contacts, calendar and books are all reachable by voice.

Everyone else

A calm, visual desktop where things are found by where they are. Useful for anyone who juggles many projects, for older users who find folders

confusing, and for anyone who would rather say “goto taxes” than search for a file.

Questions and answers

What do I need to use Hallways?

A Windows 10 or Windows 11 computer with a Microsoft account, OneDrive, an internet connection and a microphone. A headset works best in a noisy room. NVDA is optional.

Does it replace Windows?

No. Hallways is a program that runs on Windows. It opens your usual programs, documents and websites; it simply gives you a better way to find them. You can switch back to Windows at any time.

Are my files moved or copied?

Never moved. When you put a document from this computer on a panel, Hallways keeps a copy in its OneDrive folder, so that the document opens on all your Hallways computers. In your computer's own room in Local assets, a portal points to the original instead, and works on that computer only. Programs, folders and websites are never copied. Deleting a portal never deletes your original file.

Where is my palace kept?

In a Hallways folder in your own OneDrive. That is how the same palace appears on each computer you use. Hallways also signs you in to a small cloud account, linked to your Windows email, which keeps your profile.

Is my voice sent anywhere?

No. Voice commands are recognized on your own computer.

What is sent outside my computer?

Some features use Google services. The stations read and send email through Gmail and read your Google contacts and calendar, if you connect them. Writing help, photo descriptions and the assistant send the text or the photo concerned to Google's Gemini. You can turn the assistant off in Settings; then nothing is sent to Gemini.

What is the 4-character code?

A code you choose on the first start. It locks the private parts of your palace: user names, passwords and notes kept in portals, and the Vault. It also protects the palace from changes made by mistake. The code is stored nowhere, not even by us: if you forget it, what it locked cannot be recovered.

Does it work with my screen reader?

Hallways speaks on its own and works alongside NVDA. It uses no keys that screen readers keep for themselves. Other screen readers have not been tested yet.

Can I use it without speaking?

Yes. Everything can be done with the keyboard, and with the mouse if you see the screen. You can also type any voice command.

Does it work with BARD books?

Yes. Hallways works with BARD Express from the National Library Service: it makes a portal for each book on your BARD bookshelf, plays and pauses by voice, and keeps BARD's own windows out of the way.

Which languages does it speak?

English for now.

What does it cost?

Hallways is in early testing, and testers use it free of charge.

How can I try it?

Sign up as a tester. You get the download and the getting-started guide right away.

Accessibility

Hallways is built to be used without seeing the screen. Every command can be spoken, typed or given by keyboard, Hallways says where you are and what is around you, and the stations are designed as spoken conversations. Visually, the palace uses large signs, strong colors at the crossings and a high-contrast layout.

Hallways is early software, and some parts are not finished: some dialogs are still easier with the mouse, and only NVDA has been tested. If something stops you, we want to know. This website follows the same aim: it works with screen readers, the keyboard and zoom.
