Basic Computer Terms

application
> An application (often called "app" for short) is simply a program.

boot
> Starting up a computer is booting it. If the computer is already running, turning it off and restarting is called rebooting.

browser
> A browser is a program used to browse the web. Some common browsers include Netscape, Firefox, and IE (Microsoft Internet Explorer),

bug
> A bug is a mistake in the design of something, especially software. A really severe bug can cause something to crash.

chat
> Chatting is like e-mail, only it is done instantaneously and can directly involve multiple people at once. While e-mail now relies on one more or less standard protocol, chatting still has a couple competing ones. Of particular note are IRC and Instant Messenger.

click
> To press a mouse button. When done twice in rapid succession, it is referred to as a double-click.

cookie
> A cookie is a small file that a web page on another machine writes to your personal machine's disk to store various bits of information. Many people strongly detest cookies and the whole idea of them, and most browsers allow the reception of cookies to be disabled or at least selectively disabled, but it should be noted that both Netscape and MSIE have silent cookie reception enabled by default. Sites that maintain shopping carts or remember a reader's last position have legitimate uses for cookies. Sites without such functionality that still spew cookies with distant (or worse, non-existent) expiration dates should perhaps be treated with a little caution.

crash
> If a bug in a program is severe enough, it can cause that program to crash, or to become inoperable

cursor
> A point of attention on the computer screen, often marked with a flashing line or block. Text typed into the computer will usually appear at the cursor.

database
> A database is a collection of data, typically organized to make common retrievals easy and efficient.

desktop
> A desktop system is a computer designed to sit in one position on a desk somewhere and not move around. Most general purpose computers are desktop systems. Industrial strength desktops are typically called workstations.

digital camera

A digital camera looks and behaves like a regular camera, except instead of using film, it stores the image it sees in memory as a file for later transfer to a computer. Many digital cameras offer additional storage besides their own internal memory; a few sport some sort of disk but the majority utilize some sort of flash card. Digital cameras currently lack the resolution and color palette of real cameras, but are usually much more convenient for computer applications.

directory

Also called "folder", a directory is a collection of files typically created for organizational purposes. Note that a directory is itself a file, so a directory can generally contain other directories.

disk

A disk is a physical object used for storing data. It will not forget its data when it loses power. It is always used in conjunction with a disk drive. Some disks can be removed from their drives, some cannot. Generally it is possible to write new information to a disk in addition to reading data from it, but this is not always the case.

download

To download a file is to copy it from a remote computer to your own. The opposite is upload.

drive

A device for storing and/or retrieving data. Some drives (such as disk drives, zip drives, and tape drives) are typically capable of having new data written to them, but some others (like CD-ROMs or DVD-ROMs) are not.

driver

A driver is a piece of software that works with the Operating System to control a particular piece of hardware, like a printer or a scanner or a mouse or whatever.

e-book

The concept behind an e-book is that it should provide all the functionality of an ordinary book but in a manner that is (overall) less expensive and more environmentally friendly.

e-mail

E-mail is short for electronic mail. It allows for the transfer of information from one computer to another, provided that they are hooked up via some sort of network (often the Internet. E-mail works similarly to FAXing, but its contents typically get printed out on the other end only on demand, not immediately and automatically as with FAX. A machine receiving e-mail will also not reject other incoming mail messages as a busy FAX machine will; rather they will instead be queued up to be received after the current batch has been completed.

FAQ

A **f**requently **a**sked **q**uestions file attempts to provide answers for all commonly asked questions related to a given topic.

file

A file is a unit of (usually named) information stored on a computer.

floppy

An extremely common type of removable disk. Floppies do not hold too much data, but most computers are capable of reading them. Also sometimes called "diskette". Many of the newer computers do not have a floppy drive.

font

In a simplistic sense, a font can be thought of as the physical description of what letters, numbers, and other symbols look like.

format

The manner in which data is stored; its organization. Computer information can be stored in literally hundreds of different formats, and can represent text, sounds, graphics, animations, etc. Computer information can be exchanged via different computer types provided both computers can interpret the format used.

function keys

On a computer keyboard, the keys that start with an "F" that are usually (but not always) found on the top row. They are meant to perform user-defined tasks.

graphics

Anything visually displayed on a computer that is not text.

hardware

The physical portion of the computer.

hypertext

A hypertext document is like a text document with the ability to contain pointers (links) to other regions of (possibly other) hypertext documents.

Internet

The Internet is the world-wide network of computers. There is only one Internet, and thus it is typically capitalized (although it is sometimes referred to as "the 'net"). It is different from an intranet.

intranet

An intranet is a private network.

keyboard

A keyboard on a computer is almost identical to a keyboard on a typewriter. Computer keyboards will typically have extra keys, however. Some of these keys (common examples include Control, Alt, and Meta) are meant to be used in conjunction with other keys just like shift on a regular typewriter. Other keys (common examples include Insert, Delete, Home, End, Help, function keys, etc.) are meant to be used independently and often perform editing tasks. Keyboards on different platforms will often look slightly different and have somewhat different collections of keys. Some keyboards even have independent shift lock and caps lock keys. Smaller keyboards with only math-related keys are typically called "keypads".

language

Computer programs can be written in a variety of different languages. Different languages are optimized for different tasks. Common languages include Java, C, C++, ForTran, Pascal, Lisp, and BASIC.

laptop

A laptop is any computer designed to do pretty much anything a desktop system can do but run for a short time (usually two to five hours) on batteries. They are designed to be carried around but are not particularly convenient to carry around. They are significantly more expensive than desktop systems and have far worse battery life than PDAs. Calling a system a laptop implies nothing about its platform.

memory

Computer memory is used to temporarily store data. The most common types of memory are RAM, ROM, and flash.

modem

A modem allows two computers to communicate over ordinary phone lines. It derives its name from **mod**ulate / **dem**odulate, the process by which it converts digital computer data back and forth for use with an analog phone line.

monitor

The screen for viewing computer information is called a monitor.

mouse

In computer parlance a mouse can be both the physical object moved around to control a pointer on the screen, and the pointer itself. Unlike the animal, the proper plural of computer mouse is "mouses".

multimedia

This indicates a capability to work with and integrate various types of things including audio, still graphics, and especially video.

NC

The term **n**etwork **c**omputer refers to any (usually desktop) computer system that is designed to work as part of a network rather than as a stand-alone machine. This saves money on hardware, software, and maintenance by taking advantage of facilities already available on the network. The term "Internet appliance" is often used interchangeably with NC.

network

A network (as applied to computers) typically means a group of computers working together. It can also refer to the physical wire etc. connecting the computers.

newbie

A newbie is a novice to the online world or computers in general.

notebook

A notebook is a small laptop with similar price, performance, and battery life.

organizer

An organizer is a tiny computer used primarily to store names, addresses, phone numbers, and date book information. They usually have some ability to exchange information with desktop systems. They boast even better battery life than PDAs but are far less capable. They are extremely inexpensive but are typically incapable of running any special purpose applications and are thus of limited use.

OS

The **o**perating **s**ystem is the program that manages a computer's resources. Common OSes include Windows '98, Windows XP, MacOS, Linux, Windows NT, Windows Vista, etc.

PC

The term **p**ersonal **c**omputer properly refers to any desktop, laptop, or notebook computer system. It usually refers to those computers running Windows OS.

PDA

A **p**ersonal **d**igital **a**ssistant is a small battery-powered computer intended to be carried around by the user rather than left on a desk. This means that the processor used ought to be power-efficient as well as fast, and the Operating Syestem ought to be optimized for hand-held use. PDA typically have an instant-on feature (they would be useless without it) and most are grayscale rather than color because of battery life issues. Most have a pen interface and come with a detachable stylus. None use mouses. All have some ability to exchange data with desktop systems. In terms of raw capabilities, a PDA is more capable than an organizer and less capable than a laptop (although some high-end PDAs beat out some low-end laptops). By far the most popular PDA is the Pilot, but other common types include Newtons, Psions, Zauri, Zoomers, and Windows CE hand-helds. By far the fastest current PDA is the Newton (based around a StrongARM RISC processor). Other PDAs are optimized for other tasks; few computers are as personal as PDAs and care must be taken in their purchase.

platform

Roughly speaking, a platform represents a computer's family. It is defined by both the processor type on the hardware side and the Operating System type on the software side. Computers belonging to different platforms cannot typically run each other's programs.

portable

If something is portable it can be easily moved from one type of computer to another. The verb "to port" indicates the moving itself.

printer

A printer is a piece of hardware that will print computer information onto paper.

processor

The processor (also called central processing unit, or CPU) is the part of the computer that actually works with the data and runs the programs.

program

A program is a series of instructions for a computer, telling it what to do or how to behave. The terms "application" and "app" mean almost the same thing. Program is also the verb that means to create a program, and a programmer is one who programs.

queue

A queue is a waiting list of things to be processed. Many computers provide printing queues, for example. If something is being printed and the user requests that another item be printed, the second item will sit in the printer queue until the first item finishes printing at which point it will be removed from the queue and get printed itself.

RAM

Random **a**ccess **m**emory is the short-term memory of a computer. Any information stored in RAM will be lost if power goes out, but the computer can read from RAM far more quickly than from a drive.

run

Running a program is how it is made to do something. The term "execute" means the same thing.

scanner

A scanner is a piece of hardware that will examine a picture and produce a computer file that represents what it sees.

software

The non-physical portion of the computer; the part that exists only as data; **the programs.** Another term meaning much the same is "code".

spam

Generally spam is unwanted, unrequested e-mail . It is typically sent out in bulk to huge address lists that were automatically generated by various robots endlessly searching the Internet and newsgroups for things that resemble e-mail addresses. The legality of spam is a topic of much debate; it is at best only borderline legal, and spammers have been successfully persecuted in some states.

spreadsheet

A program used to perform various calculations. It is especially popular for financial applications. Some common spreadsheets include Lotus 123, Excel.

upload

To upload a file is to copy it from your computer to a remote computer. The opposite is download.

URL

A **U**niform **R**esource **L**ocator is basically just an address for a website. Also **U**niversal **R**emote **L**ocation.

user

The operator of a computer.

virus

A virus is a program that will seek to duplicate itself in memory and on disks, but in a subtle way that will not immediately be noticed. A computer on the same network as an infected computer or that uses an infected disk (even a floppy) or that downloads and runs an infected program can itself become infected. A virus can only spread to computers of the same platform.

word processor

A program designed to help with the production of textual documents, like letters and memos. Heavier duty work can be done with a desktop publisher. Some common word processors include MS-Word & WordPerfect.

www

The **W**orld-**W**ide-**W**eb refers more or less to all the publically accessable documents on the Internet. It is also sometimes just referred to as "the web".