

Basic Computer Terminology

Access time - The performance of a hard drive or other storage device - how long it takes to locate a file.

Active program or window - The application or window at the front (foreground) on the monitor.

Application - a program in which you do your work.

ASCII (pronounced ask-key) - American Standard Code for Information Interchange. a commonly used data format for exchanging information between computers or programs.

Background - part of the multitasking capability. A program can run and perform tasks in the background while another program is being used in the foreground.

Bit - the smallest piece of information used by the computer. Derived from "binary digit". In computer language, either a one (1) or a zero (0).

Backup - a copy of a file or disk you make for archiving purposes.

Boot - to start up a computer.

Bug - a programming error that causes a program to behave in an unexpected way.

Bus - an electronic pathway through which data is transmitted between components in a computer.

Byte - a piece of computer information made up of eight bits.

CD-ROM - an acronym for Compact Disc Read-Only Memory.

Client – Server - A common form of distributed system in which software is split between server tasks and client tasks. A client sends requests to a server, according to some protocol, asking for information or action, and the server responds.

Clipboard - A portion of memory where the Mac temporarily stores information. Called a Copy Buffer in many PC applications because it is used to hold information which is to be moved, as in word processing where text is "cut" and then "pasted".

Clock Rate (MHz) - The instruction processing speed of a computer measured in millions of cycles per second (i.e., 200 MHz).

Compiler - a program that converts programming code into a form that can be used by a computer.

Compression - a technique that reduces the size of a saved file by elimination or encoding redundancies (e.g. JPEG, MPEG, LZW, etc.)

Control panel - a program that allows you to change settings in a program or change the way a Mac looks and/or behaves.

CPU - the Central Processing Unit. The processing chip that is the "brains" of a computer.

Crash - a system malfunction in which the computer stops working and has to be restarted.

Cursor - The pointer, usually arrow or cross shaped, which is controlled by the mouse.

Daisy chaining - the act of stringing devices together in a series (such as SCSI).

Database - an electronic list of information that can be sorted and/or searched.

Data - (the plural of datum) information processed by a computer.

Defragment - (also - optimise) to concatenate fragments of data into contiguous blocks in memory or on a hard drive.

Dialog box - an on-screen message box that appears when the computer requires additional information before completing a command.

Digitise - to convert linear, or analogue, data into digital data that can be used by the computer.

Disk - a spinning platter made of magnetic or optically etched material on which data can be stored.

Disk drive - the machinery that writes the data from a disk and/or writes data to a disk.

Disk window - the window that displays the contents or directory of a disk.

Document - a file you create, as opposed to the application which created it.

DOS - acronym for Disk Operating System - used in IBM PCs.

DPI - acronym for Dots Per Inch - a gauge of visual clarity on the printed page or on the computer screen.

Download - to transfer data from one computer to another. (If you are on the receiving end, you are downloading. If you are on the sending end, you are uploading).

Drag - to move the mouse while its button is being depressed.

Driver - a file on a computer that tells it how to communicate with an add-on piece of equipment (like a printer).

Ethernet - a protocol for fast communication and file transfer across a network.

Expansion slot - a connector inside the computer that allows one to plug in a printed circuit board that provides new or enhanced features.

File - the generic word for an application, document, control panel or other computer data.

Floppy - a 3.5-inch square rigid disk which holds data. (so named for the earlier 5.25 and 8 inch disks that were flexible).

Folder - an electronic subdirectory that contains files.

Font - a typeface that contains the characters of an alphabet or some other letterforms.

Fragmentation - The breaking up of a file into many separate locations in memory or on a disk.

Freeze - a system error, which causes the cursor to lock in place.

Gig - a gigabyte = 1024 megabytes.

Hard drive - a large capacity storage device made of multiple disks housed in a rigid case.

Head crash - a hard disk crash caused by the heads coming in contact with the spinning disk(s).

High density disk - a 1.4 MB floppy disk.

Highlight - to select by clicking once on an icon or by highlighting text in a document.

Hit rate - The fraction of all memory reads which are satisfied from the cache.

Hz - Abbreviation for hertz, the number of cycles per second, used to measure clock speed

Icon - a graphic symbol for an application, file or folder.

Initialise - to format a disk for use in the computer; creates a new directory and arranges the tracks for the recording of data.

Insertion point - in word processing, the short flashing marker that indicates where your next typing will begin.

Installer - software used to install a program on your hard drive.

Interrupt button - a tool used by programmers to enter the debugging mode. The button is usually next to the reset button.

K - short for kilobyte.

Keyboard shortcut - a combination of keystrokes that performs some function otherwise found in a pull down menu.

Kilobyte - 1024 bytes.

Landscape - in printing from a computer, to print sideways on the page.

Launch - start an application.

Measurements (summary) -

*a bit = one binary digit (1 or 0) *"bit" is derived from the contraction b'it (binary digit) -> 8 bits = one byte

*1024 bytes = one kilobyte

*K = kilobyte

*Kb = kilobit

*MB = megabyte

*Mb = megabit

*MB/s = megabytes per second

*Mb/s = megabits per second

*bps = bits per second

i.e., 155 Mb/s = 19.38 MB/s

MB - short for megabyte.

Megabyte - 1024 kilobytes.

Memory - the temporary holding area where data is stored while it is being used or changed; the amount of RAM a computer has installed.

Menu - a list of program commands listed by topic.

Menu bar - the horizontal bar across the top of the screen that lists the menus.

MHz - Abbreviation for megahertz, or millions of cycles per second.

Multi tasking - running more than one application in memory at the same time.

Nanosecond - one billionth of a second.

Operating system - the system software that controls the computer.

Optical disk - a high-capacity storage medium that is read by a laser light.

Palette - a small floating window that contains tools used in a given application.

Partition - a subdivision of a hard drives surface that is defined and used as a separate drive.

Paste - to insert text, or other material, from the clipboard or copy buffer.

PC - acronym for personal computer, commonly used to refer to an IBM or IBM clone computer that uses DOS.

PCI - acronym for Peripheral Component Interchange - the newer, faster bus architecture.

Peripheral - an add-on component to your computer.

Point - (1/72") 12 points = one pica in printing.

Pop-up menu - any menu that does not appear at the top of the screen in the menu bar. (May pop up or down)

Port - a connection socket, or jack.

Power PC - a processing chip designed by Apple, IBM and Motorola (RISC based).

Power Mac - a family of Macs built around the PowerPC chip.

Print spooler - a program that stores documents to be printed on the hard drive, thereby freeing the memory up and allowing other functions to be performed while printing goes on in the background.

RAM - acronym for Random-Access Memory.

Resize box - the small square at the lower right corner of a window which, when dragged, resizes the window.

RISC - acronym for Reduced Instruction Set Computing; the smaller set of commands used by the PowerPC and Power Mac.

ROM - acronym for Read Only Memory; memory that can only be read from and not written to.

Root directory - the main hard drive window.

Save - to write a file onto a disk.

Save as - (a File menu item) to save a previously saved file in a new location and/or with a new name.

Scroll - to shift the contents of a window to bring hidden items into view.

Scroll bar - a bar at the bottom or right side of a window that contains the scroll box and allows scrolling.

Scroll box - the box in a scroll bar that is used to navigate through a window.

SCSI - acronym for Small Computer System Interface.

Serial port - a port that allows data to be transmitted in a series (one after the other), such as the printer and modem ports on a Mac.

Server - a central computer dedicated to sending and receiving data from other computers (on a network).

Shut down - the command from the Special menu that shuts down the computer safely.

Software - files on disk that contain instructions for a computer.

Spreadsheet - a program designed to look like an electronic ledger.

Start up disk - the disk containing system software and is designated to be used to start the computer.

Surge suppressor - a power strip that has circuits designed to reduce the effects of surge in electrical power. (Not the same as a UPS)

32 bit addressing - a feature that allows the computer to recognize and use more than 8MB of memory.

Thin client - A simple client program or hardware device that relies on most of the function of the system being in the server

Title bar - the horizontal bar at the top of a window that has the name of the file or folder it represents.

Upload - to send a file from one computer to another through a network.

Uninterruptible Power Source (UPS)- a constantly charging battery pack that powers the computer. A UPS should have enough charge to power your computer for several minutes in the event of a total power failure, giving you time to save your work and safely shut down.

UPS - acronym for Uninterruptible Power Source.

Vapourware - "software" advertised, and sometimes sold, that does not yet exist in a releasable form.

Virtual memory - using part of your hard drive as though it were "RAM".

WORM - acronym for Write Once-Read Many; an optical disk that can only be written to once (like a CD-ROM).

Zoom box - a small square in the upper right corner of a window which, when clicked, will expand the window to fill the whole screen.

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