

Policing your language for computer lingo

If you know how to work the software that you're teaching, you know the lingo that goes with it. This knowledge will benefit your teaching abilities as well as your students, but not if they are true beginners, or not good at deducing things and learning quickly.

Another potential teaching difficulty is that you may find it difficult to explain how to do something if it's second nature to you but not to your students. Desktop is an example of a very basic term that some new computer users find hard to grasp. Dialog box is another. Some people seem perplexed by the terms that have developed around computer hardware and software, while the terms seem perfectly logical to others who are familiar with them.

TechRepublic writer Marsha Glick has created a list of common terms and explained them in plain English. This list should help with both introductory classes as well as ongoing training. You can pass out this list to new computer users, or use it for reference with more experienced users if there are terms they are still unsure about. Best of all, you can add terms to this list to customize it for your own company's use or special needs.

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Common terms and easy-to-understand definitions

Active window	The window currently being used, the window that's open and "on top" on the desktop.
Application	A program such as a spreadsheet, a database, a word processor; anything that reads code and follows the instructions to accomplish a given task.
Arrow keys	The keys usually found at the right side of the keyboard that point right, left, up, and down on the keyboard, and are used to navigate around the desktop or within a document or application.
Background application	A program that is running while another is being used.
Bitmap	A computer image stored as collections of bits in memory locations corresponding to pixels on the screen that form pictures. File format is .bmp.
Bits	Binary digits, the smallest unit of storage for a computer, with a value of 1 or 0.
Boot	To turn the computer on and have it go through the instructions it needs to start working.
Browse	To view the contents of files, folders, and/or pages.
Browser	An application used to view graphics, e-mail, sound, and multimedia files on the Web, such as Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer.
CD-ROM	Compact Disk Read-Only Memory: A data storage disk that holds about 640 megabytes of digital information.
Click	To press the left mouse button to select an icon or command.
Clipboard	An area of computer memory used to store cut or copied text or graphics temporarily so that the data can be moved to other locations. The clipboard normally does not appear on the screen.
Close button	The small button on the right end of a Windows title bar marked with an "X." When clicked, this button will close the application window it was in.
CPU	Central Processing Unit: The computer brain, where all information is sent to be processed.
Default printer	The printer to which print jobs will be sent automatically.
Desktop	The main screen that appears after the computer boots.
Destination folder	The folder that files are being moved to.
Dial-up networking	A program that allows a computer user to connect to a remote network using a modem.
Dialog box	A window that pops up to get or give information about a file or folder that the computer user is working on.
Diskette	A portable storage disk used to store and retrieve data files. Also called a floppy.
Document	A file that includes information you can type, edit, view, or save, such as reports, spreadsheets, or articles.
Double-click	To press the left mouse button twice in succession without moving the mouse to execute an action, such as opening an application.
Drag	An action used to move an item from one place to another by selecting it, holding down the left mouse button, and moving the object to the new location, and then releasing the mouse button when the file is in the destination folder.
File	Information that has been named and is being stored, usually in a folder. Usually interchangeable with document.
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language: A programming language that tells browsers how to display Web pages.

HTTP	Hypertext Transfer Protocol: A method of transporting information from one computer to another through a browser.
Hypertext or hyperlink	Text or graphics that allow a part of a document to be linked to any other document, including documents on other Web sites, that, when selected or clicked, transport you to the other document or Web site.
GIF	Graphics Interchange Format: A file type that most Web browsers and graphics programs can read. Usually contains a picture or animation, but also may contain text.
Graphical user interface	Also known as GUI and pronounced gooey. These were designed to make it easier for people to use computers. Instead of using a command line and typing in commands, a GUI interface uses icons (little pictures) and graphics to move files and accomplish tasks. The Windows desktop is a GUI.
Icon	A picture that represents an application, a file, or a device such as a disk drive or printer.
ISP	Internet Service Provider: This kind of company provides Internet access. You use your hardware, such as a modem and some type of phone line, to access an ISP's network which is connected to the Internet. Typically you pay this company for access to the Web and to e-mail.
Maximize	To make a window as large as it can be. Normally you do this by clicking on the square between the Minimize and Close buttons in the top right corner of the Windows title bar.
Memory	A computer's workspace where it processes information; also determines how many programs can be run at a given time, as well as how much data can be processed.
Minimize	To make a window as small as possible, usually done by clicking on the Minimize button, which is the first in the list of three buttons in the upper right corner of a window. Minimizing a document creates a listing for it in the taskbar. The document or application can be reopened at any time by clicking on the title in the taskbar.
Modem	Modulator-demodulator: converts digital signals from a computer to analog signals for the phone line, then reconverts it back to digital again for the computer to receive from the phone line.
Multi-Tasking	Running several applications at the same time.
Operating Systems	Windows NT, 95, 98, Linux, Macintosh, etc.; manages a computer's internal functions and provides the means of communication between the user and the computer.
PC	Personal computer
Reboot	Restarting a computer while it is on; usually done to fix a program, or register changes with the OS.
Recycle Bin	A trash can that holds files a user wants to delete. Files placed in the Recycle Bin are held there until the user empties the bin.
Search engine	A Web site that allows the user to search the World Wide Web for sites that relate to a specific subject or category that the user has specified.
Spam	The electronic equivalent of junk mail.
Task manager	Computer program that allows the user to monitor and manage the applications that are currently running on the computer.
Title bar	The horizontal bar at the top of a window that contains the name of the window or dialog box, and the Minimize, Maximize and Close buttons.
URL	Uniform Resource Locator: code used to specify the address of a Web site, i.e., http://www.techrepublic.com
Virus	Computer code that can damage or destroy computer files; often distributed via e-mail.