The Parts of a Computer

Computers are great multipurpose devices that allow us to accomplish a lot of complicated tasks with just a little know-how and not much effort. To get a basic understanding of how to use a computer, you need to understand a few key elements including the parts of a computer and how to store the files they create.

The Computer

What we call generically "the computer" is the box (sometimes called a tower) containing all the necessary parts and chips that make your computer operate, including the Central Processing Unit (or CPU), which is the 'brain' of the computer. In laptop computers and newer Apple computers, the CPU and the monitor may be encased in the same device.

The Monitor

The monitor is a screen which gives us the visual indication of what the computer is doing inside. Again, in laptops and new Apple computers, the CPU and monitor will be in a shared case.

The Mouse

The mouse is one of the most common devices used to communicate with the computer. Moving the mouse around on your desk causes a cursor to move around on the computer. On a laptop, you might use a touch pad, also called a trackpad, instead of a mouse. If you haven't used a mouse very often, you might want to step through this great tutorial to get used to the different functions of a mouse. Callout: If you're new to computers and are still feeling uncomfortable with a mouse, check out this great tutorial.

The Keyboard

Keyboards come in various shapes and sizes and are another way we can communicate with the computer. They resemble typewriter keys and work in much the same way. The letters and numbers on the keyboard are arranged like a typewriter with a few new keys.

- One of the new keys is the Enter key. After you type something, pushing the Enter key send that information to the Central Processing Unit (CPU).
- Another new key is the Backspace key. This key is used when you make a mistake while typing. When you push the Backspace key, it will go back and delete the letter you just typed.

A Computer System

Usually when you purchase all of these computer components together at a store, it is referred to cumulatively as a system. All of these computer parts may also be called hardware, which just refers to the physical components of the computer. This image shows a monitor, keyboard, mouse, and a set of speakers.

A Laptop

You can also buy a laptop, which is a small, light, compact computer which can easily be carried from place to place. Laptops combine the computer, monitor, and keyboard into a single unit, and they usually have a trackpad instead of a regular mouse. In this image, the trackpad is the grey square just below the keyboard. Using a trackpad, you manipulate the cursor on the computer screen by moving your finger over the trackpad.

The Operating System

The purpose of an operating system, or OS, is to allow hardware (CPU, keyboard, mouse, etc) and software to work together. It controls the memory needed for computer processes, manages disk space, controls external devices, and allows you to communicate with the computer without knowing exactly how a computer works. Without an operating system, a computer is useless. The most common operating system is Windows. Most PCs purchased today include a current version of the Windows OS. Other popular operating systems include Macintosh OS used by Apple computers, and Linux.

Applications/Software

The term software refers to programs used by a computer for a specific purpose. When you buy a system, chances are it will have some basic software already installed. You can buy many different kinds of software to suit your needs, and many great pieces of software are available for free. Different programs include: Web browsers: Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome (all free!) Word processing programs: Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, Works Desktop publishing programs: Publisher, Print Shop, InDesign Spreadsheet/accounting programs: Microsoft Excel, Quicken Pretty much every time you work on a file or document on a computer or use the web, you'll be using some sort of software to do it.

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