

# A Basic Computer Terms Glossary

Adapted from <http://www.saugus.net/Computer/Terms/>

## application & app

An application (often called "app" for short) is simply a program with a GUI. Note that it is different from an applet.

## boot

Starting up an OS is booting it. If the computer is already running, it is more often called rebooting.

## browser

A browser is a program used to browse the web. Some common browsers include [Netscape](#), [MSIE](#) (Microsoft Internet Explorer), [Safari](#), [Lynx](#), Mosaic, [Amaya](#), [Arena](#), Chimera, Opera, Cyberdog, [HotJava](#), etc.

## 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](#). One step beyond chatting is called [MUDding](#).

## click

To press a [mouse](#) button. When done twice in rapid succession, it is referred to as a double-click.

## 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. Some common database programs include Oracle, Sybase, [Postgres](#), Informix, Filemaker, Adabas, etc.

## 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. Calling a system a desktop implies nothing about its platform. The fastest desktop system at any given time is typically either an [Alpha](#) or [PowerPC](#) based system, but the [SPARC](#) and [PA-RISC](#) based systems are also often in the running. Industrial strength desktops are typically called [workstations](#).

## 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. It differs in this way from a [partition](#).

## 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.

## 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. Some drives have [random access](#) (like disk drives, zip drives, CD-ROMs, and DVD-ROMs), while others only have [sequential access](#) (like tape drives).

## 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. The actual term e-book is somewhat confusingly used to refer to a variety of things: custom [software](#) to play e-book titles,

dedicated [hardware](#) to play e-book titles, and the e-book titles themselves. Individual e-book titles can be free or commercial (but will always be less expensive than their printed counterparts) and have to be loaded into a player to be read. Players vary wildly in capability level. Basic ones allow simple reading and bookmarking; better ones include various features like [hypertext](#), illustrations, audio, and even limited video. Other optional features allow the user to mark-up sections of text, leave notes, circle or diagram things, highlight passages, program or customize settings, and even use [interactive fiction](#). There are many types of e-book; a couple popular ones include the [Newton book](#) and [Palm DOC](#).

#### **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. E-mail is only seven-[bit](#) clean, meaning that you should not expect anything other than [ASCII](#) data to go through uncorrupted without prior conversion via something like [uucode](#) or [bcode](#). Some mailers will do some conversion automatically, but unless you know your mailer is one of them, you may want to do the encoding manually.

#### **file**

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

#### **firmware**

Sort of in-between [hardware](#) and [software](#), firmware consists of modifiable [programs embedded](#) in hardware. Firmware updates should be treated with care since they can literally destroy the underlying hardware if done improperly. There are also cases where neglecting to apply a firmware update can destroy the underlying hardware, so [user](#) beware.

#### **floppy**

An extremely common type of removable [disk](#). Floppies do not hold too much data, but most computers are capable of reading them. Note though that there are different competing [format](#) used for floppies, so that a floppy written by one type of computer might not directly work on another. Also sometimes called "diskette".

#### **format**

The manner in which data is stored; its organization. For example, VHS, SVHS, and Beta are three different formats of video tape. They are not 100% compatible with each other, but information can be transferred from one to the other with the proper equipment (but not always without loss; SVHS contains more information than either of the other two). 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 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.

#### **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](#). Some people classify languages into two categories, higher-level and lower-level. These people would consider [assembly language](#) and [machine language](#) lower-level languages and all other languages higher-level. In general, higher-level languages can be either [interpreted](#) or [compiled](#); many languages allow both, but some are restricted to one or the other. Many people do not consider machine language and assembly language at all when talking about programming languages.

#### **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. In reality, computer memory is only capable of remembering sequences of zeros and ones, but by utilizing the [binary](#) number system it is possible to produce arbitrary rational numbers and through clever [formatting](#) all manner of representations of pictures, sounds, and animations. 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 **modulate** / **demodulate**, 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 originally indicated a capability to work with and integrate various types of things including audio, still [graphics](#), and especially video. Now it is more of a marketing term and has little real meaning. Historically the [Amiga](#) was the first multimedia machine. Today in addition to [AmigaOS](#), [IRIX](#) and [Solaris](#) are popular choices for high-end multimedia work.

#### **NC**

The term **network computer** 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.

#### **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 operating system is the [program](#) that manages a computer's resources. Common OSes include [Windows '95](#), [MacOS](#), [Linux](#), [Solaris](#), [AmigaOS](#), [AIX](#), [Windows NT](#), etc.

**PC**

The term personal computer properly refers to any [desktop](#), [laptop](#), or [notebook](#) computer system. Its use is inconsistent, though, and some use it to specifically refer to [x86](#) based systems running [MS-DOS](#), [MS-Windows](#), [GEOS](#), or [OS/2](#). This latter use is similar to what is meant by a [WinTel](#) system.

**PDA**

A personal digital assistant 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 [OS](#) ought to be optimized for hand-held use. PDAs 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. [Feneric's PDA / Handheld Comparison Page](#) is perhaps the most detailed comparison of PDAs and handheld computers to be found anywhere on the web.

**platform**

Roughly speaking, a platform represents a computer's family. It is defined by both the [processor](#) type on the [hardware](#) side and the [OS](#) type on the [software](#) side. Computers belonging to different platforms cannot typically [run](#) each other's [programs](#) (unless the programs are written in a [language](#) like [Java](#)).

**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](#). There are two main processor types in common usage today: [CISC](#) and [RISC](#). Some computers have more than one processor and are thus called "multiprocessor". This is distinct from [multitasking](#). Advertisers often use [megahertz](#) numbers as a means of showing a processor's speed. This is often extremely misleading; megahertz numbers are more or less meaningless when compared across different types of processors.

**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 (albeit applications generally have [GUIs](#)). It is however different from an [applet](#). Program is also the verb that means to create a program, and a programmer is one who programs.

**run**

Running a [program](#) is how it is made to do something. The term "execute" means the same thing.

**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".

**spreadsheet**

An [program](#) used to perform various calculations. It is especially popular for financial applications. Some common spreadsheets include Lotus 123, Excel, [OpenOffice Spreadsheet](#), Octave, [Gnumeric](#), AppleWorks Spreadsheet, [Oleo](#), and GeoCalc.

**user**

The operator of a computer.

**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, [OpenOffice Write](#), WordPerfect, [AbiWord](#), AppleWorks Write, and GeoWrite.

**www**

The **World-Wide-Web** refers more or less to all the publically accessible documents on the [Internet](#). It is used quite loosely, and sometimes indicates only [HTML files](#) and sometimes [FTP](#) and [Gopher](#) files, too. It is also sometimes just referred to as "the web".