



Glossary of terms

APPEND

To add something to the end of something else. For example, when data is added to the end of an existing file, the file is said to have been appended.

ASCII

American Standard Code for Information Interchange, in which binary numbers represent alphanumeric symbols.

BIT

Sort for "binary digit". Bits are represented in computers by two-state devices, such as flip-flops or magnetic cores. A bit is the smallest unit of information that can be held on a computer.

BUFFER

A device for the temporary storage of data that is located between two other devices of differing speeds, for example, output from a computer (faster) will be held in a buffer before it is sent to a printer (slower).

BYTE

The smallest group of bits which can be addressed individually. A byte usually consists of eight bits. Each byte corresponds to one data character which could be a single letter, digit or symbol. The byte is the most common unit for measuring computer storage capacity.

CAPACITY

The amount of information that all or part of a computer can store. For example, a 48K computer will have a main memory capacity of 48 kilobytes of data.

CARRIAGE RETURN

In a character-by-character printing mechanism, the operation that causes the next character to be printed at the left-hand margin.

CATHODE RAY TUBE (CRT)

The device used to display characters or graphics on a television type screen.

CD-ROM

A storage device that uses digital technology to record data onto a compact disc. One CD-ROM disc can contain every post code in the UK!

CHARACTER

Any symbol that can be stored and processed by a computer.

CHIP

A small integrated circuit package containing many logic elements; a small piece of silicon impregnated with impurities in a pattern to form transistors, diodes and resistors.

COMMAND

An instruction to a program or software system telling it to perform some action or to cause the execution of a certain program. For example, a print command causes the contents of a file to be printed.

COMPATIBLE

Two devices are compatible if they can work together without special hardware or software having to be used to make this possible.

COMPUTER

Any device capable of accepting information, applying prescribed processes to the information and supplying the results of these processes.

CONFIGURATION

Refers to the way in which a computer and peripheral equipment are connected and programmed to operate as a system.

COPY

The process of transferring information from one location to another.

CPU

Central Processing Unit: The main part of a computer system where arithmetic and logical operations are carried out. It also contains the main memory and carries out system control functions.

CRASH

To become inoperable. Computer systems crash when there is a malfunction in the equipment. Programs crash when they contain an error.

CURSOR

The small "blip" of light that traverses the video screen indicating where the next character typed will appear. Usually a cursor is a square or rectangle the size of the character, or a dash the width of a character. In many cases it flashes on and off to draw the operator's attention to it.

DIGITAL

A form of representation by which something which is continually varying, such as a musical note, is sampled at regular intervals and the sample is converted into a number.

DISK

A computer memory device which looks something like an audio record. It is either hard (aluminium based) or floppy (plastic based).

DISK DRIVE

An electromechanical device into which a disk is inserted to read or write information.

DISK OPERATING SYSTEM (DOS)

An operating system on disk backing storage.

EDIT

To rearrange data or information. Editing may involve the deletion of unwanted data, the selection of pertinent data, the

application of formatting techniques, the insertion of symbols and testing of data for reasonableness and proper range.

ERROR MESSAGE

A brief message displayed to the user when the program in execution encounters an abnormal situation or an error in the data. The error message contains a brief explanation about the nature of the error.

EXECUTE

To execute an instruction is to do what the instruction says to do.

FATAL ERROR

Any error during the execution of a program that causes the program's execution to halt.

FILE

A file is a collection of information stored as records. Files are stored on peripheral memory devices, such as magnetic disks or magnetic tape.

FORMAT

Format is a term used to refer to the specific arrangement and location of information within a larger unit of storage.

GRAPHICS

The field in which computers are used to manipulate data in the form of pictures.

HARD COPY

A printout on paper of computer output.

HARD DISK

A storage device made of ceramic or aluminium using a single disk or a stack of several disks.

HARDWARE

The physical components of a computer system - "the bits you can kick"!

HARDWARE CONFIGURATION

The arrangements, relationships and general architecture of the various devices (disk drives, printers, modems and so on) that make up a computer system. Hardware configuration also includes all physical and electrical paths which connect these devices.

HEXADECIMAL

A hexadecimal number is a number expressed in base 16 (a decimal number is expressed in base 10); these numbers are understood by the computer to represent a character.

INTERMITTENT ERROR

An error which occurs at random. This type of error is usually caused by an external condition, such as dust on the surface of a recording medium, and may disappear when the recording medium (disk or tape) is moved.

LAP TOP COMPUTER

A portable microcomputer with a flat screen that folds up into a small package for carrying. Can run off internal batteries or the mains supply. A conventional Visual Display Unit can be plugged into a lap top computer if required.

LASER PRINTER

A non-impact printer which uses laser beams to form dot matrix characters on a photoconductor. The characters are then transferred to paper, one page at a time.

MEMORY

The part of the computer where data and instructions are stored.

MENU

A list of options which is displayed on a monitor by a computer program and from which the user of that program must make a choice. The result of an initial choice is often, but not always, another menu of options.

MENU-DRIVEN

A computer program is menu-driven if its various parts are accessed through choices made from menus which are arranged in a definite hierarchy.

MERGE

A merge describes combining two or more sets of records with similarly ordered sets into one set that is arranged in the same order.

MODEM

A device which alters data in digital form into wave form suitable for transmission over telephone lines and which carries out the reverse process when receiving data. Stands for MOdulator/DEModulator.

MOUSE

A hand-held object with rollers on its base used to control the cursor position on the screen. The mouse is rolled over a flat surface and this produces movement in the cursor on the screen.

MOVE

To copy data from one storage location in memory to another.

NETWORK

A system in which terminals and computers are linked together according to such factors as the distance between them, the amount of message traffic expected between them and the existence of appropriate communications facilities needed to connect them. In some networks there are paths (communications links) from every computer or terminal to every other.

OPERATING SYSTEM

A collection of routines, usually software or firmware, used in overseeing the input, and output, processing of a computer program. The tasks of an operating system include: compilation, interpretation, debugging, input/output, garbage collection, memory allotment and file management.

PERIPHERALS

The mechanical and electrical devices, other than the computer itself, found in a computer system. Peripherals include terminals, tape units, disk drives and printers.

RAM

Random Access Memory. The working memory of a computer that will store the current program and data.

ROM

Read Only Memory. A solid state device that has had instructions permanently stored in it.

SILICON CHIP

A small piece of silicon on which very complex miniaturised circuits are made by photographic and chemical processes. Silicon chips are semiconductors.

SOFTWARE

All the programs, computer languages and operations used to make computer systems perform a useful function. Software contrasts with hardware which constitutes all the tangible, physical elements of a computer system. Both printers and CPUs constitute hardware.

SOFTWARE CONFIGURATION

The types of, and relationships between, the system control programs installed in a computer system. These control programs include operating systems, assemblers and compilers.

STORAGE

A device to which data can be transferred and from which it can be obtained at a later time.

STORAGE CAPACITY

Storage capacity, or "capacity", refers to the amount of information a computer system or storage device (tape, disk and so on) is capable of storing at any one time. A personal computer with a capacity of 64K will be able to store 65,536 bytes of information in its in-built memory.

UPDATE

To change the data in a file or record to incorporate new or more current information.

USER-FRIENDLY

Implies a computing system that provides for the capabilities and limitations of the operator. A user-friendly system is easy to use and understand for a wide variety of people, rather than forcing computing.

VIRUS

A program that has been deliberately placed into a memory device in order to corrupt the programs that run on a computer system.

VISUAL DISPLAY UNIT (VDU)

A peripheral device that displays information on a television-like screen. An example of a visual display unit is a CRT (Cathode Ray Tube). Visual display units usually have an attached keyboard used for entering data.

WINDOW

A screen display that "peeks" into a document and allows you to examine a particular section of it. By using the Windows program it is possible to open several windows at the same time.



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