

Common Computer Terms

- ALT** A special key which changes the function of other keys when it is held down. Its operation is similar to the *shift* and *control* keys.
- algorithm** A sequence of logical procedures through which a computer accomplishes a task or solves a problem.
- ampersand** The symbol &. Used to mean "and".
- analog** An electrical signal that is continuously variable. Contrasted with *digital*, which is generally only *on* or *off*.
- application software** or **applications** Software to do some specific function, such as a word processor, spreadsheet, etc.
- arrow keys** A set of four keys on most keyboards marked ↑, ↓, →, and ←, which are used to move the cursor on the CRT screen.
- ASCII** A standard binary code used to represent letters, numbers, symbols, etc used in computers. It is an acronym for American Standard Code for Information Interchange.
- asterisk** The symbol *.
- at symbol** The symbol @.
- backslash** The symbol \. Do not confuse with the *slash* /.
- backspace** or ← A special key which moves the cursor back one space and deletes the previous character. Do not confuse with the ← arrow key which moves the cursor without deleting.
- backup** The process of copying software, files, etc as a protection against loss or damage.
- baud** A term for the rate of data transmission in bits per second.
- binary** A number system based on 2. It uses 0 and 1 in various combinations to represent all numbers. For example, 1, 2, and 3 would be written 01, 10, and 11. It is ideally suited to computer use because the 1s and 0s can be represented by the *on* and *off* states in a digital computer.
- bit** The fundamental building block of computer communication. It represents either an *on* or *off* state. Eight bits are often grouped to form a *byte*.
- board** A circuit board is the structure on which the chips are mounted and connected together. The board containing the CPU is called the *mother board*.
- boot** The process of starting up a computer. After the power is turned on, the computer must read an initial set of instructions called the *operating system* before it can begin working.
- buffer** A temporary memory used during computation.
- byte** The basic unit of data. It is formed of eight *bits* and may represent a letter, number, or symbol. A *kilobyte* (Kb) is 1,024 bytes and a *megabyte* (Mb) is 1,048,576 bytes. Disks and memory are commonly rated by their byte capacity.
- CD-ROM** A disk which looks like an audio compact disc and is used to hold large quantities of data or programs. It requires a special drive.
- CAPS LOCK** A key which reverses the action of the shift key. CAPITAL letters become the default and lower case letters are obtained with the *shift* key. When this is enabled, an indicator light comes on.
- character** An individual number, letter, or symbol.
- chip** A silicon wafer containing miniaturized electronic circuits. A computer is composed of a number of chips having different functions connected together on one or more circuit boards.
- clone** An IBM-style computer made by some other manufacturer.
- column** A vertical group of characters. A horizontal group is a *row*.
- command** An instruction given to the computer.
- computer** An electronic computational machine which can execute programs for many purposes such as mathematics, data processing, word processing, etc.
- control** A special key which operates in a manner similar to the *ALT* and *shift* keys. Holding it down and striking another key will give a command in some software.
- CRT** Cathode Ray Tube--the display tube in the monitor. Similar to a TV picture tube.
- cursor** The point on the screen where the commands are executed. Usually a small flashing symbol such as _ or |. It can be moved by the mouse or arrow keys.
- data** Information in the form of numbers or other characters that are manipulated by the computers. It does not include *software* or *commands*.
- database** A large body of related data. Also it can refer to a type of software that manipulates large collections of data.
- decimal** The familiar number system based on 10. Computers work on the *binary* system based on 2, so they convert decimal input to binary, process it, and convert back to decimal for the output.
- default** In a program or in the operation of a computer, when several options are available, one--called the *default*--will be automatically chosen ("pre-set"). In most cases, the user can specify the default.
- delete** 1. In general, to erase something. 2. A key which will delete the character at the cursor position.
- digital** An electronic signal with a very limited range of possible values, usually two: *on* and *off*.
- disable** To turn off a function in a program or a computer. Opposite of *enable*.
- disk** A storage medium. A *hard disk* or *hard drive* holds a large amount of data and is permanently mounted in the computer. *Floppy disks* or *diskettes* are removable. Common sizes are 3.5" and 5.25".
- drive** or **disk drive** The mechanism that reads and writes disks.
- enable** To turn on. Opposite of *disable*.
- ESC** or **escape** A special key used in some programs to close menus or to exit.
- execute** To perform a command. To follow instructions.
- field** An element of a *record*.
- files** A collection of data or a program stored as a whole under a unique name.
- firmware** Computer instructions or programs permanently recorded on a ROM chip, which cannot be changed by the user.
- floppy disk** or **floppy** See *disk*.
- format, formatting** 1. The process of preparing a disk to accept data. *Preformatted* disks are formatted at the factory. Other disks must be formatted by the user using a special program. 2. The overall appearance of a document (includes orientation, typestyle, margins, etc.).
- function keys** A special row of keys at the top of a computer keyboard usually numbered F1, F2, etc. Depending on the software in use, these may perform specific commands.
- GIGO** Garbage In Garbage Out. A simple way of saying that the quality of a computer's output is determined by the quality of the input.
- hardware** The physical and mechanical portion of a computer, e.g. chips, wires, drives. See *software* and *firmware*.
- hard-wired** Things that are physically connected together. Also refers to those of the aspects of

- a computer that are determined by its physical design as opposed to its *software*.
- head** The part of a *drive* that actually reads and writes to a disk.
- I/O** input/output. *Input* is what goes into a computer, *output* is what comes out.
- keyboard** The keys similar to those on a typewriter that are used to input data.
- keypad** The numerical keys located on the right side of a keyboard used to enter numerical data. They are turned on ("enabled") by the *NUM LOCK* key.
- landscape** Term to describe printouts that are formatted so they are wider than they are tall.
- mainframe computer** The largest and most powerful category of computer.
- memory** The place in the computer where information is stored. It may be temporary or permanent.
- menu** A list of choices displayed on the screen by some types of software. Selection is made by using the mouse or the arrow keys.
- merge** Combining information from two or more sources.
- microprocessor** The chip that is the heart of the CPU.
- modem** A device that connects a computer to a telephone line. Modems are commonly rated by the number of bits-per-second they can transmit and receive. 28.8 Kilobits/second is a common example.
- monitor** The screen and related hardware and electronics. It resembles a small TV set.
- monochrome** A black-and-white monitor or printer. Opposite of *color*.
- mouse** A device for pointing to things on the screen. Pushing the proper button will execute a selected command.
- MSDOS** MicroSoft Disk Operating System. A common operating system.
- NUM LOCK** The key which turns on ("enables") the keypad. When it is enabled an indicator light comes on.
- number sign** The symbol #. Also called the *pound sign*.
- operating system** A program (or series of programs) that contains the basic instructions the computer needs in order to function. It is used with various *applications* to the desired tasks.
- orientation** The format of a printout. Generally referred to as either *portrait* or *landscape*.
- output** What comes out of a computer. Opposite of *input*.
- page up or page down** Keys which will scroll the display on the screen up or down.
- peripheral** A device, such as a printer, which is outside the computer.
- portrait** Term used to mean orienting the output on a printout so that is taller than it is wide. Opposite of *landscape*.
- pound sign** The symbol #. Also called the *number sign*.
- printer** A device for transferring computer data to paper. Common types are: laser, dot-matrix, and ink jet. Black and white and color versions are available.
- printout** The output of a printer.
- program** 1. (noun) A set of instructions that the CPU can follow to accomplish a task. 2. (verb) To prepare such a program. Also *programming*.
- prompt** The initial display on the screen when using some operating systems which tell the user that the system is ready to receive a command. E.g. C:\>
- RAM** Random Access Memory. The main memory of the CPU. It consists of special chips and only functions when the computer is turned on. Turning the computer off will erase it. Data can be retrieved from the memory in any order, i.e. randomly.
- read** To retrieve information from a storage device. Opposite of *write*.
- ROM** Read-Only Memory. Permanently recorded memory which cannot be changed by writing.
- record** A block of related data, for example, a name, address, and phone number. The individual items (first name, last name, etc.) are called *fields*.
- row** The horizontal orientation of characters on a screen. See *column*.
- screen** The face of the CRT where text, data, etc are displayed.
- scroll** The movement of text or data off the top or bottom of the screen.
- sector** A portion of a disk where data is stored. Sectors resemble slices of a pie. See *track*.
- shift key** Used to change from lower case to UPPER CASE. Hold the *shift* down and strike the desired key. *CAPS LOCK* reverses the action of the shift key.
- slash** The symbol /. Do not confuse with the *backslash* \.
- software** General term for computer programs. These are the sets of instructions which tell the computer what to do for a specific application. Contrasted with *hardware* and *firmware*.
- sort** To arrange items into a meaningful order.
- spacebar** Long key at bottom of keyboard used to insert blank spaces in text.
- TAB** A special key which moves the cursor over a predetermined number of spaces. Used to indent paragraphs and arrange data in columns. It also has other functions in some programs.
- track** One of the concentric rings on a disk in which data is stored. Tracks are divided into *sectors*.
- version** As software is improved or updated, new versions are issued. These are numbered. Major changes are indicated by whole numbers and smaller changes by decimals. V 3.3 would mean the third version with some minor changes.
- wetware** Humorous term for the human brain.
- Windows** An operating system. Used in conjunction with *MSDOS* in earlier versions and independently in later versions.
- write** To record data in a storage device. Opposite of *read*.