

The Trouble with Computers

By Nick Hubbard - the act formerly known as The Forces of Darkness

The good news about computers is that they do what you tell them; the bad news is that they do what you tell them (Ted Nelson)

This is the first of a series of articles for those that have trouble with their computers.

My plan is to write a couple more on very common issues, and by then I hope that I will have some more questions. By all means write to me - by e-mail? At narpo@hubbards.me.uk

Top Troubles

One of the great fears is "I'll only break it." In fact, this is inordinately unlikely, because machines are now robustly built and the machine, the configuration, and the software have invariably been thoroughly tested. There may be a residual fear of being unable to get the machine to do as the user wants, but again - this is like the motor car.

Young people succeed because they are unafraid and try anything. If I had a gift to give, it would be access to a computer, and the space to explore, and someone to offer support and encouragement.

Most IT technical problems that users encounter can be resolved by "rebooting" the machine - which means switching it off and switching it back on (which is a bit like retracing your steps). This may well imply that all of the work is lost since the last time that the user carried out a Save - so Save your work regularly.

Passwords are another major source of difficulty. Users forget them or become confused. Then they become frustrated. Users often feel that there is no need to have passwords - which is like arguing that we don't need car door locks and ignition keys.

The third main cause of frustration is that the user **forgets where he/she has stored his/her work** so is unable to retrieve it.

Where is it?

As a user works on a document, and chooses to Save it so that he/she can leave the computer and return to it another time, he/she chooses where to Save it. The short answer is that he/she needs to remember where it is.

But as he/she builds up a significant library of saved material, that obviously becomes more difficult.

The tech people decide where is the main ("Default") location for storage as they prepare the computer for use. The Default is often a Folder called "Documents". This may be on the computer at hand; or possibly "on the Cloud" - which is storage that is accessed on the Internet; maybe even on a flash driven (or "USB stick") that is plugged into a port on the computer. The best time for a user to clarify this is at the time of saving.

Difficulties can crop up when we assume that a computer used at home is organised in the same way as the one in the office.

Many computers have useful ways of searching for a document. All you need is to remember its name). And there is usually a Recent area in the software for finding documents - and these are helpful.

Modern operating systems provide powerful Search capabilities - so, again, when you name a document you should have in mind how you will look for it when it is time to retrieve it.

The wise user is systematic and has a structure of "Folders" or "Directories" (means essentially the same thing). For example, within the Documents folder, he/she may choose to have another called "Work" and another called "Family" and to store documents according to those categories - maybe a different folder for each of your offspring, and one for the Garden.

The user can invariably choose his/her own names and rules for folders - which can cause confusion, alarm and despondency. This is in the end a personal choice. And the key is to remember the name of the document.

Music may well be stored by Default in a folder called - you guessed it - "Music." The important point is that it is not in Documents.

Photographs may well be stored by Default in a folder called - and this is a trick one - "Pictures."

An obvious structure for documents is for the user to create a named folder for a purpose that he/she understands (like a paper filing system). A folder called "Car" might be expected to hold all the correspondence - on Insurance, MOT Tests, and servicing. The problem is illustrated with correspondence about the repayments: is that filed under "Car" or "Money" or "Banking." A modern solution is to store several copies of the correspondence - one under each of the filenames that might apply.

Valuable advice is - when you are storing something, put yourself in the position of the time when you need to recover it - where would you look first?