Essential tricks every computer user needs to know

By several Kim Komando staff writers, October 2015

Thanks to newer computer hardware and operating systems, you don't need to know everything about computers anymore. However, there are still some things that every computer user should know. These tips keep your computer running fast, make you more productive and save you a ton of frustration. The best part is that they won't cost a cent. They might even save you money by helping you avoid a call to tech support.

Speaking of which, if you're the tech support person for your family and friends, be sure to share this Tip with them.

1. How to work faster

Unless you have a really old computer, it should be much faster than you are. In other words, when you're saving files or selecting text, the longest part of the process should be you telling the computer what you want it to do.

That means if you can speed up how quickly you can tell the computer to do something, it should improve your productivity. One way to speed things up is keyboard shortcuts.

Print: Windows: CTRL + P Mac: CMD + P

Say you're ready to print a document. Instead of using the mouse to move a cursor around the screen and selecting "Print" from a drop-down menu, just hit CTRL+P on your keyboard. There are dozens of keyboard shortcuts like this.

Save: Windows: CTRL + S Mac: CMD + S

When writing, I generally press CTRL + S after every few sentences I type or whenever I pause for a new thought.

Undo: Windows: CTRL + Z Mac: CMD + Z

Using the CTRL + Z shortcut, you can undo a mistake very quickly. Hitting CTRL + Z several times will often undo the last several changes. If you go too far back, hit CTRL + Y to Redo.

Copy and Paste: Windows: CTRL + C and CTRL + V Mac: CMD + C and CMD + V

Just use the mouse to select what you want to copy, hit CTRL + C, click the mouse where you want to paste, and hit CTRL + V. You're done!

Bonus tip: In cases where you want to move something instead of copy it, use CTRL + X to Cut instead of CTRL + C to Copy.

Lock your screen: Windows: Windows Key + L Mac: CTRL + Shift + Power Button

Whether you're using a public computer or stepping away from your work desk for a moment, you're taking a risk. If your browser has saved passwords or important files, anyone could easily steal them with only a few keystrokes.

Shut down problem programs: Windows: CTRL + ALT + DEL   Mac: CMD + OPT + ESC

CTRL + ALT + DEL either brings up Task Manager, or a list of options including Task Manager. Task Manager is useful for killing programs that are acting up or unresponsive. Plus, you can see what is slowing down your system.

Windows 10 keyboard shortcuts

Create virtual desktops: Windows Key + Ctrl + D

Windows 10 added the ability to create virtual desktops, which act like separate computers. You can create a virtual desktop for email, one for writing, another for media, and another one for Facebook. Whatever you do on that desktop stays on that desktop.

To get a quick view of all the desktops you have open, hit Alt + Tab. It'll show you small versions of everything. You can easily click on one to get a full view of it. Or type Windows Key + Tab to open Task View, which lets you see and access your desktops.

To move between virtual desktops, use Windows + Ctrl + Arrow (left or right). Type Windows + "," to get a quick peek at your other open desktops.

Toggle between open desktops: Ctrl + Alt + Tab

There's a very cool way to see everything you've got open. Type Ctrl + Alt + Tab, to see a miniature version of all your open pages. Use the left and right arrow keys to toggle through them.
Bonus: To quickly flip through your open apps, type Ctrl + Tab.

On-screen Search: F3
Hit the F3 button at the top of the keyboard. You'll see, "Find on page" at the top of the screen in a Tool Bar; type in whatever words you're looking for and it will jump right to them.

Search your files and the Web: Windows Key + S
If you need to find a file or program on your computer, or you want to do a quick Web search without opening your browser, type Windows Key + S. It will bring up a sidebar that says, "Search the Web and Windows." Then start typing what you're after and the information will appear.

Open share sidebar: Windows Key + H
If you really want to give your hands a workout, try sending a website or document to a friend or coworker via email. You know the routine; you reach over for your mouse, and highlight the website, then cut and paste. Then, you open your email, type in an address and reach over for your mouse, to hit "paste." It's a serious waste of time.
Thankfully, you don't have to do that on Windows 10. Instead, type Windows Key + H, to bring up a Share sidebar. It has a link to your email right there.

Open Cortana: Windows Key + C
Apple has Siri, Microsoft has Cortana. She is a voice-activated personal assistant, who you can ask questions of, on your laptop, tablet or smartphone.
Of course, Cortana does come with a downside of sending information about you to Microsoft

Magnify what you're reading: Windows Key + "+" or "-"
This is one of the best, most useful, and easiest keyboard shortcuts and is probably one you've never heard about. It's called Magnifier, and it does just what you'd guess it would do; it works like a magnifying glass.
Every browser and some programs include this feature (usually using Ctrl + "+" or "-"), but this one works on any screen in Windows to make it 200% or higher. Suddenly, tiny fonts turn into giant fonts for easier reading.
You can use Magnifier in another way; exactly like you're holding a magnifying glass over a website. Here's how: When you press Windows + "+" or "-", you'll see a small magnifying glass, usually upper left-hand corner. Put your cursor over it, and select "Views" and choose "Lens." Now, wherever you move the cursor you'll see a magnified image.
Note: For Magnifier, and many other keyboard shortcuts that take over your screen, hit Windows + Esc, to go back to normal.

2. How to stay safer
There are millions of viruses online with new ones appearing daily. Even worse, hackers keep making them craftier. Some, such as ransomware, lock your files and hold them for ransom. Others silently sneak on to your computer, steal your bank account info and drain your accounts without any human help.
That doesn't even include phishing scams that arrive by email or circulate on Facebook and try to trick you out of information or slip viruses on to your system. You don't want to mess with any of them, which is why security software is a must.
A good set of security programs can filter out most viruses and even warn you about phishing scams. True, you still need to be on your guard, but it's much easier to manage.
Every computer you own should have an anti-virus program, a firewall and an anti-spyware program. If you're missing one or more of these, head over to the Security Center to download excellent free security programs. Or check out our sponsor Webroot, which protects every type of gadget you own, and is cloud-based so it's always up to date to protect you against the latest threats. Click here to get it today for 50% off.
Security software is good, but you need to make sure you don't have holes in other places. Your browser is a prime target for hackers, so make sure it's hacker-proof. You should also make sure Windows is up to date.

3. How to share large files

Have you ever tried to share a bunch of photos or a video through email? You know that it's a mess. While some email providers allow attachments over 20 megabytes, some still don't. That really isn't very many photos or videos.

Even if the email arrives in your friend's inbox OK, large files are going to fill it up quickly. Plus, if your friend is security-conscious, they'll worry that it might be a malicious email attachment. Fortunately, there's a better way.

Take a look at cloud storage and sharing services like Dropbox, Microsoft OneDrive, Apple iCloud or Google Drive. These give you a few gigabytes of space for free, which should be enough to share just about anything you need. Learn more about the available cloud storage services.

Just upload your files and use the service to create a share link: right click on a file (or set of files) and select "Share Dropbox Link". Send your friend the link through email or social media. They can download them no problem. Trust us; they'll appreciate it.

CAUTION: The default option is to MOVE your file to the cloud storage. Hold the CTRL key down while moving the file to COPY it.

4. How to fix Wi-Fi problems

A spotty and sluggish Wi-Fi network is enough to drive most people up a wall. Videos keep stopping to buffer or stutter, websites load slowly and online games lag or cut out. Maybe a part of your house loses connection entirely.

This link to an earlier Kim Komando column will give you some ideas: http://tinyurl.com/ptug-wifi or http://www.komando.com/tips/12274/easily-boost-your-wi-fi-network-for-faster-downloads-and-smoother-videos

a. Location, location, location

It's important to remember that your Wi-Fi antenna is omnidirectional - the signal goes every direction equally. In other words, if you put your router along an outside wall, you're sending half your signal outside.

For the best all-around signal, place your router as close as possible to the middle of the house, or the middle of the area where you need it. If you live in a two-story house, you want it either on the first floor near the ceiling, or on the second floor near the ground.

You should also pay attention to what's around the router. I know you're tempted to hide the nest of cables, but it's better to have it out in the open.

Putting it next to a wall or inside a bookcase can partially block the signal. And definitely keep it away from metal, a microwave or a cordless telephone - they all work on the same frequencies.

b. Direct the signal

If you need to send a strong Wi-Fi signal in just one direction, you can add a reflector to your antenna. If your router has an internal antenna, a sheet of curved aluminum foil set behind the router can work as well.

c. Check your internet speed;

The problem could be with your Internet connection. Go to http://www.speedtest.net to test your speed.

d. Setup security

If you have an unencrypted Wi-Fi network, or use weak encryption, it's possibly a criminal or neighbor could be hogging your connection. Be sure to set up security on your wifi system. No matter what, you should make sure that your Wi-Fi network has strong encryption to keep snoops and criminals away.

5. How to maintain your computer

Getting your computer working well is great, but keeping it working long term is another story. You need to practice regular maintenance or it will just fall apart again. For instance, as we said earlier, be sure to keep your operating system, browser and security software updated. You may also want to regularly clean your system inside and out.