

What is a computer?

Introduction

What is a Computer?



Watch the video (1:54). [Need help?](#)

A **computer** is an electronic device that manipulates information or "data." It has the ability to **store**, **retrieve**, and **process** data. You can use a computer to type documents, send email, and surf the Internet. You can also use it to handle spreadsheets, accounting, database management, presentations, games, and more.

Whether you realize it or not, **computers** play an important role in our lives. When you withdraw cash from an ATM, scan groceries at the store, or use a calculator, you're using a type of computer.

Computers Simplified



Inside a Computer -- Part of the Computer

Motherboard For beginning computer users, the computer aisles at an electronics store

can be quite a mystery, not to mention overwhelming. However, computers really aren't that mysterious. All types of computers consist of two basic parts – **hardware** and **software**.

Hardware is any part of your computer that has a **physical structure**, such as the computer monitor or keyboard. If you can touch it, it is hardware. **Software** is any **set of instructions** that tells the hardware what to do. It is what guides the hardware and tells it how to accomplish each task.

Anything you buy for your computer can be classified as either hardware or software. Once you learn more about these items, computers are actually very straightforward.

The first electronic computer, the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC), was developed in 1946. It measured 18 feet by 80 feet and weighed 30 tons.

What are the Different Types of Computers?

There are many types of computers, but **personal computers** such as **desktop** and **laptop** computers are probably the two type of computers that you think of first.

Desktop Computers



Example Desktop Computer

Many people use **desktop computers**, or desktops as they are often referred to, at work, home, school, or the library. They can be small, medium, or large in style, and usually sit on a desk. The term desktop actually refers to the **casing**, or the **tower**. Once you add a monitor, mouse, and a keyboard, you have what is typically known as a desktop computer.

Most desktop computers are **easy to upgrade and expand**, or add new parts. In addition to expandability, another benefit of desktop computers is the **cost**. If you compare a desktop computer with 128 MB of RAM and a 2 GB hard drive to a laptop with the same features, you will most likely find that the desktop computer is priced lower.

The term **desktop computer** originated when the computer case was wide and flat, and was designed specifically to **fit on your desktop** with the monitor on top.

Laptop Computers



Example Laptop Computer

The second type of computer that you may be familiar with is a **laptop computer**, or laptops as they are often referred to. Laptops are battery or AC-powered personal computers that can be **easily carried** and used in a variety of locations.

A quick glance at the size of a laptop and you might guess that it would be **difficult to expand or upgrade**. While the desktop computer case is relatively easy to open and access internal components, the small laptop case makes this more difficult in comparison; however, the **primary benefit** of a laptop computer is its small size and **easy portability**.

A **laptop** computer is sometimes called a **notebook computer** because of its size

Types of Personal Computers



iMac all-in-one computer Two popular

types of personal computers are the **IBM compatible** and **Macintosh** computers. The first personal computer was produced by IBM in 1981 and was called the **IBM PC**. In 1984, Apple Computer introduced the Macintosh, or **Mac**, and it became the first widely sold personal computer with a graphical user interface or GUI (pronounced gooey). Although both IBM and Apple computers are personal computers, the term PC came to refer to IBM or IBM-compatible personal computers.

Apple now produces a Macintosh computer called the **iMac**, which is a desktop computer that features an **all-in-one design**. This means all the internal components are located behind the monitor, rather than in a tower case, which is customary in desktop computers.

While our training is intended for people who use PCs and the Windows operating system, some of our information also applies to Macintosh computers.

Other Types of Computers

You may hear someone refer to a computer as a **workstation** or a **server**, especially at work. You may wonder how these two items are different from desktop computers.

Workstations are similar to desktop computers, but are more powerful and are usually connected to a network. **Servers** are specialized computers that store and deliver, or “serve up,” information to other computers on a network.

There are many different types of servers such as **file servers**, **database servers**, and **web servers**. For example, employees at a company might store all the business documents on a **file server** so that they can share files and access them from any computer on the network. When you use your browser to click a link, a **web server** delivers the page you requested on the Internet, the biggest network in the world.