Computer lingo frustrating?
Here's some geek-free help!

by RAY SAITZ, April 3, 2010

Using a computer isn't rocket science, but it often sounds as if it is.

Technicians, and Internet columnists, often throw around terms and acronyms that confound anyone new to the Internet or computing and leave many people with a sense that their computers are complicated, mysterious machines.

That unease might lead to a sense of helplessness in the face of technology, and ultimately could be one of the reasons criminals can often subvert security measures and turn the Internet into a hotbed of fraud and identity theft.

Any discussion of computers and the Internet inevitably drifts into the area of RAM, hits, megs, gigs, and other strange abbreviations and coinages which computer types use with great abandon. Using these terms may impart an aura of expertise to the user, but assuming that the other person is conversant with a mass of technical terms can be one of the quickest ways to plunge a conversation into a maze of misunderstanding.

This was made clear to me recently during a discussion with a reader about memory problems in his computer. To appreciate the cause of the confusion you have to know that computers have two types of. One type is the storage capacity of the computer's hard drive, which is measured in millions or billions of bytes, referred to respectively as megs or gigs. Most hard drives will store more information, pictures and music than you are likely to produce in years. The other type is random access memory, or RAM, which is measured in the same units but is contained in memory chips inside the computer. Programs load into and use RAM, and increasing the computer's RAM is the quickest and usually cheapest way of boosting performance. I was referring to RAM and the reader thought I meant hard drive capacity. You can imagine how dysfunctional the conversation became because of my assumption that he knew the difference.

This type of confusion can cause security problems. At a recent EastWest Institute security meeting in Brussels (http://tinyurl.com/ylmnj2j)

the message was clear. Computer jargon is impenetrable to many ordinary people who become overwhelmed and think that computer security is beyond them and best left to the experts. Actually, one of the best security measures is to make sure that computer instructions are delivered in simple terms.

You could give up and wait for the help desk people to simplify their lingo, or use a ready source of information that explains things quickly in ordinary terms. Per Christensson created Sharpened (www.sharpened.net)

as a guide for every beginning computer user, although I found a great deal of very helpful information that was new to me. When you get to the site, click on the Glossary tab and you will be taken to a gigantic set of definitions for anything you want to know about the computer or Internet world. You don't have to scroll or type complicated terms. Merely clicking on letters and words will take you to definitions and explanations that are always clearly written for the ordinary person, and occasionally touched with a wry sense of humour.

The Help Centre at the site has answers to questions about everything from email to hardware. Much of it might seem pretty obvious to some people, such as how can you tell if your computer can read or burn DVDs, but these are the types of things that bedevil anyone who is new to computers. Do you know the difference between "hibernate" and "standby" in Windows, or how many pages of text are in a megabyte? You can find out at Sharpened.

Do you have trouble figuring out what makes a download different from an upload? What ".com" means in an address? For anything to do with the Internet, bookmark the NetLingo site (www.netlingo.com)! The information is simply stated and you point and click on terms arranged alphabetically.

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