

Flying Solo: Do-It-Yourself Troubleshooting

Learning to diagnose and fix computer problems can minimize your dependence on costly technical support.

Most designers rely on a computer to do their jobs—if not in the design process, then in a supporting role. But what happens when your computer starts spitting out incomprehensible error messages, and the extent of your troubleshooting abilities involves little more than a ball-peen hammer and a roll of duct tape?

Designers working in larger firms most likely can call upon on-staff IT personnel (or the employer may farm out its technical-support needs). Unfortunately, freelance designers and designers working in smaller settings don't have the luxury of the former or the money for the latter. Calling a professional computer technician every time you encounter a technical hiccup can be pricey in the long run.

Solving your own computer woes isn't as difficult as many make it out to be. It can even be liberating and empowering. But you have to know what you are doing or you will risk compounding your problems.

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Like the old proverb states, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." But many users don't troubleshoot their own computer problems because of an inherent fear of the unknown. By learning the fundamentals of computer hardware and software, you take the fear factor out of the equation.

Even if you have no desire or intention of ever doing your own troubleshooting, you must have enough knowledge of the basics to speak intelligibly to technicians you hire and to know you're being scammed when told, "I'm going to have to remodulate the full spectrum flux matrix generator in the doohickius-maximus." The less you know, the more likely you'll be taken advantage of by unscrupulous computer technicians.

THE ABCs OF TROUBLESHOOTING

Computer problems come in different shapes, sizes and severity. Regardless of the problem, all troubleshooting must include these basic steps:

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Recommended resources

CNET forums: <http://forums.cnet.com>

Experts Exchange: www.experts-exchange.com

HowToFixComputers.com: www.howtofixcomputers.com/forums

MacFixIt: www.macfixitforums.com

Tech Support Guy: <http://forums.techguy.org>

1. Answer the key questions

Whether you're attempting to solve your own computer problem or seeking the services of a professional computer technician, your (or the technician's) ability to resolve a problem is only as good as the information you have on hand:

- What is the nature of the problem?
- What, if any, error messages are you receiving?
- Is the problem intermittent or constant?
- What were you doing on your computer when the problem occurred?
- What, if anything, was changed on your computer since the last time it was working normally? This can include, but is not limited to: installed new hardware or software; uninstalled existing software; changed the configuration of a particular software or the operating system; unplugged and/or moved hardware; experienced an improper system shutdown; experienced a virus or spyware infection.

2. Identify the causative factor

If you don't know what's causing the problem, you can't formulate a solution—you'll basically be taking shots in the dark. Try to identify a causative factor by linking particular actions or patterns to your problem. For example, if your computer fails to respond, determine what you did or what you were doing prior to the moment the computer froze up. If the problem occurs regularly, does it happen when you perform a specific action?

3. Consult troubleshooting forums for advice

If you're not sure about something, ask for help. Even if you decide not to hire a professional computer technician, there are other avenues of support. A large pool of knowledge exists on the internet. Odds are, there's someone out there who has experienced the exact same problem you're having—and more importantly, will have a solution.

Search through online troubleshooting communities, or post your own question if the topic hasn't

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already been covered. Computer experts who are more than willing to give you their technical advice frequent many of these tech-support forums.

4. Keep track of what you do

Once you have a course of action, make sure you keep track of the troubleshooting procedures you perform, their outcomes and the order in which they're executed. If you run through a series of troubleshooting procedures without keeping track of them, you'll have no idea which actions led to which results.

But before you begin, create backups in case a certain procedure gives you an undesired result and you need to revert your computer to a previous state.

This is doubly important if you're forced to go the trial-and-error troubleshooting route.

RELAX, RELAX AND RELAX

Troubleshooting procedures are only as good as your ability to carry them out. This is why it's important to remain calm while troubleshooting. Agitation and stress diminish your cognitive and reasoning abilities—then an instinctual survival mode kicks in. When this happens, you forgo logic and end up doing things haphazardly. So when you're tackling any technical problem, don't forget the single most important procedure: Step one, breathe in; step two, breathe out; step three, repeat steps one and two as required. ☺

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