



BE KIND TO YOUR COMPUTER

Don Bridle gives advice about your computer when things go wrong.

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Back in the dark ages when computers first became accessible to Joe Public, care was the watchword. We were recommended dust-free conditions (well, nearly), we only carried hardware gingerly and handling inner parts of machines was a job for someone with an electronics degree.

Nowadays, I'm called in when things go wrong. However, it often seems that everyone and anyone known to the customer has "had a go". I have to deal with a traumatised computer as well as a frustrated owner.

So, what should you do if something starts to go wrong, and you want to solve it yourself?
Answer: Proceed with Caution.

Unless there are weird noises or smoke coming from the computer, leave it on. Get up and walk away from it. Make a hot drink. Give your mind time to work on the problem. Work smart instead of working fast.

Save any data you are working on. If your computer seems really skittish save data to an external hard disk or USB memory stick. Then reboot your computer (ReStart) and see if things are the same. It could be just "one of those things".

To trace the problem, it's a good idea to ask what change you last made to the computer. Changing one program or piece of hardware can affect another – it doesn't have to be a virus causing the erratic behaviour. If possible, undo the last change(s) you made. Reboot and see what happens. Then scan for viruses and spyware.

Too many people jump in with both feet and all guns blazing. I've seen the results of the Rambo approach and it isn't a pretty sight. Diagnose the illness before attempting a cure. Use old technology too – pen and paper to write down each thing you do. Do one thing at a time, test the difference, undo it and try another. If this involves software you'd be advised to reboot between each step.

Research is important to help your decision-making. Go online and search for the symptoms with a good search engine. I use WebFetch.co.uk as it combines the results from many search engines, including Google. However, remember that free advice is worth every penny you paid for it! If you put into action every piece of advice you find on help pages, you'd really mess up your computer. Read the previous paragraph again and follow the advice of Boots: change one thing. *www.microsoft.com* is a good place to search: they have their own search facility which can come up with a good fix.

Some changes affect software that you installed yourself, so you'll need the original disks. If you took a pirate copy from a friend, this is when you may get a broadside yourself. Uninstalling or attempting to repair software without the disks can leave your computer adrift on the high seas.

What about the technical help lines? Now here's another minefield, if ever I saw one. It's in the nature of a lot of techies I know to want to fix the machine but not to communicate in any known human language in the process. Ask lots of questions. Be a nuisance. You're probably paying through the nose for this service anyway, so ask why they're expecting you to do things before you make changes. Certainly don't let them have remote access to your computer unless they are prepared to talk you through their actions in detail. If their first response is something like: "It's the R-disk" or "Just need to re-install Windows and it'll be okay", stop them immediately and ask what else is possible. Instead, just get a more knowledgeable person to take a look. Treating the illness is one thing, but brain surgery isn't always the best thing to do early in the treatment regime.

Often the fix for a problem is a simple thing. But take your time and treat the computer gently. It's better to give your computer some careful therapy than to drop it from a great height.

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