Demystify a few computer terms and get on with your life

Crabby Office Lady

As Olde Grammy Crabbye used to say, "Just because no one understands you doesn't mean you're an artist." This week, let's explore some of the most common software words and phrases that threaten all that's lovely about our language.

It's come to my attention that some of you (who shall remain nameless thanks to my own sense of restraint and corporate responsibility) have been left behind in the world of computing. Let's just assume — for the time it takes to read this column — that it's not your fault. In fact, I think I know why so many of you have been reticent to jump in there and start mail merging and frolicking in the task pane: You have no clue what these things are or how they can give you a better life — or at least free up some of your time.

As the song says, let's "Begin the Beguine." (What's a "beguine"? Exactly my point: Who knows?) When you're trying to get help, one unknown term or phrase can give you that deer-in-the-headlights feeling, stymieing you in your jump across the highway of knowledge. Here are just a few of the ones you've asked me about in your letters. I'll give the term and then the quick and dirty definition. And please, don't speed read; I want you to retain this.

Working-in-the-application terms

Shortcut menu

When you right-click anywhere, the little menu that pops up is the shortcut menu. It has a list of actions to choose from and it's...short.

Keyboard shortcut (also shortcut key)

A special combination of keys (the buttons on the keyboard) that causes something to happen. For example, if you hold the CTRL key down and then hit the A key, everything in your document, Web page, spreadsheet, or whatever, will be selected. (**Hint:** To find a list of all keyboard shortcuts in a program, press F1 to open Help and then search for "keyboard shortcuts".)

ScreenTip

You know that little question mark that's sometimes hiding in the top right of a dialog box: [?] Well, if you click it and then point to something in the dialog box that you don't understand, a little message will pop up and tell you what it's all about. That little message is your ScreenTip. Little, white, different...handy.

Task pane

Located on the right side of your screen and present when you first start an Office XP program, the task pane frees you from those repeated trips to the menu bar and from having to scroll through lists of actions (that is just **SO** last century). Different programs

offer different types of task panes (such as the Insert Clip Art, Styles and Formatting, and Clipboard task panes). You can switch from one to the other using the arrow at the top.
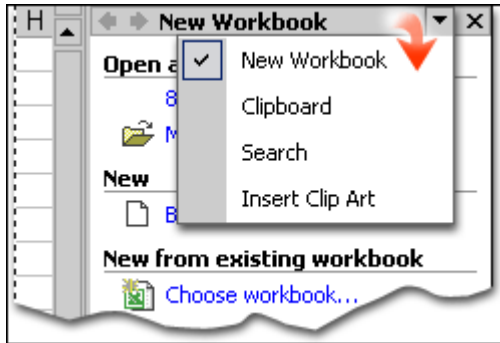

Menu and toolbar terms

Menu

A list of options on the **menu bar** from which a user can choose an action to perform. (The action is called the **menu command**). Think of a menu at a restaurant: The lunch menu lets you choose from those things having to do with lunch; the kiddie menu is for the kids (and the cheapskates) and so on.

Menu bar

The rectangular bar displayed in a program's window, usually at the top, from which menus can be selected. It's like that box of menus at the restaurant, stationed just underneath the host's podium, that you browse through while you're waiting to be seated.

Toolbar

A bar with **buttons** and options you can use to carry out your deepest computing wishes.
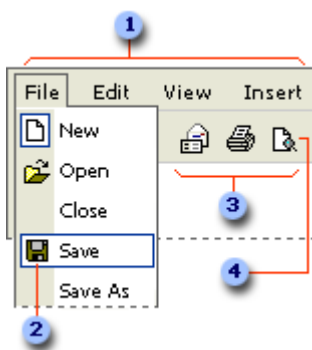
1 The restaurant (Menu bar)
2 Where you order an hors d'oeuvre, salad, or main course (Menu command on the menu)
3 Serve-yourself-dessert bar (Toolbar)
4 As many pieces of cheesecake as you want (Button)

General terms that drive us mad

Macro

A series of clicks and actions you do that you record and save for use later. Like a teeny, tiny, little program unto itself, a macro can save you time by wrapping up a long set of keystrokes, clicks, trips to the menu bar, curses, and heavy sighs into a quick key combination or click. For example, if you know that you need to enter your name and e-mail address at the bottom of every page in a 32-page document, you can record that information in a macro, and then pop it in to every page with a single keystroke or two. This is particularly helpful if your name is **Crabby Office Lady** and your e-mail address is *CallMeTheCrabbyOfficeLady@TheCrabbyOfficeLady.com*.

Mail merge

When you do a mail merge you can put your lists of important things (names, addresses, etc.) into a form for a letter or envelope. For this feature, think holiday cards: written, addressed, and sent in one fell swoop. More time for doctoring up the eggnog, I say.

Dialog box

A special window (yes, today everything is "special") displayed by the application to get a response from you. Hence the word "dialog." Usually you have to click, select, or type something in that box to make something show up, change, or go away.

Drag-and-drop

This is exactly what it sounds like: picking up something with your mouse (by clicking it) and then moving it somewhere else by moving your mouse. For example, pick up the icon of that Microsoft Word document on your desktop — you know, that fantasy resignation letter to your boss — and drop it in the trash. Go on; do it now. You'll thank me later.

File properties

Information about a file that includes type, size, creation date, and so on. Kind of like a bio and 8x10 headshot for your document.

BIOS

Speaking of bio, you may have heard this term being bandied about when your computer stops working (or never worked in the first place). It's an acronym for **basic input/output system**. In simple terms, it's a set of routines that tests your hardware and gets your operating system going when you start your computer. I think of it as the alarm clock and cup of coffee for your computer: When they don't run, you don't run.

Read-only file

This is a file (a Word document, Web page, spreadsheet, and so on) that can only be retrieved (read) and not changed (written).

Plug-and-play

A set of specifications that allows your computer to set itself up automatically to work with hardware such as monitors, modems, and printers. It's just like it sounds: Plug it in and go...usually without having to turn your computer on and off.

Pointer

That thing you point with. You know — the arrow you move around with your mouse.

The difference between...

Server and client

Server A computer or program that responds to commands from the client. The server is like the generous-but-judicious, big ole granddaddy of the computer family. All wisdom flows from him to various children, grandchildren, and bocce ball buddies.

Client The grandchild of the granddaddy server: a computer that accesses files, software downloads, dusty old records, birthday checks, and other shared items provided by another computer (the server).

Themes, style sheets, and cascading style sheets

Theme A set of design elements and color schemes that you can apply to your documents or presentations (and other things) to give them a professional, playful, or personal look. Most Office programs come with several pre-installed themes, and you can download more as well. You can change parts of existing themes to create a new theme. And as we've all witnessed, good taste is not a requirement for applying themes to PowerPoint presentations.

Style sheet A file that's associated with and defines the layout of a document or Web page. To create a style sheet, you specify such things as fonts, page numbering, margins, and so on. A style sheet is very similar to a theme; it's really a set of rules that follows the page around — the fashion police of the Web page world. A style sheet is also a **template**.

CSS A cascading style sheet gives you more control over how the Web pages you create are displayed in the various viewers' browsers. You create style sheets that define how different elements —such as the various types of text, headers, hyperlinks, and background colors —appear in your Web pages. The term "cascading" is used because you can apply more than one style sheet to a page. "Cascading" also sounds better than dripping, spilling, or falling over.

Rumba and Beguine

Rumba A ballroom dance in 4/4 time. Its origins are Cuban.

Beguine A ballroom dance similar to the rumba, but the accent is on the second eighth note. Make sure you can count before attempting it.

Now you know a bit more than you did when you fell headlong into this column. If it makes you feel any better, I had to look up several of these in the computer dictionary myself. So stop giving me that blank Botox® stare and get on with your life, and for heaven's sake, it's spring; get outside and get some sun, will you?

"I personally think we developed language because of our deep need to complain." — Lily Tomlin

About the author

Annik Stahl, the Crabby Office Lady columnist, takes all of your complaints, compliments, and knee-jerk reactions to heart. Therefore, she graciously asks that you let her know whether this column was useful to you — or not — by entering your feedback using the **Was this information helpful?** tool below. And remember: If you don't vote, you can't complain.

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