

Carl's Computer Column

Monitor, Keyboard, & Mouse

by Carl Kass, Cragsmoor

In this month's column, I will discuss the most important output device and the two most important input devices. Why is the monitor (also called the video display) the most important output device? Because without it you would not be able to use the computer! Similarly, the keyboard and mouse are absolutely required so that you can tell the computer what to do.

There are two current technologies vying for your monitor dollar: the traditional CRT (cathode ray tube) and the LCD (liquid crystal display). The size of a monitor is measured in inches, measured diagonally from (past the viewable) corner to corner. Popular CRT's used to be 13 or 14 inches, then 15 inches; now 17 or 19 inch monitors are very common with some people opting for monitors that are 21 inches or even larger. LCD's are typically 15 or 17 inch, some can be found that are as large as 19 or, if you really want to spend a lot of money, 23 inches.

The main benefit of CRT's over LCD's is price; the main benefit of LCD's over CRT's is footprint (the amount of desk space used). A quality 17-inch CRT costs about \$150. A cheap 17-inch CRT monitor costs about \$125. The quality unit is definitely the better buy. (Fancier 17-inch CRTs can cost up to about \$200, but the extra cost will not buy much of a difference.) A quality 19-inch CRT costs about \$225. I always recommend to my clients that they do not bundle the monitor purchase with the purchase of a computer, but rather buy the CRT separately – for about \$35 more they get a much better monitor. You can expect to get at least five years (and closer to 10) out of a quality CRT monitor.

At the time this is being written, a quality 15-inch LCD monitor costs about \$340; 17-inches cost about \$500-\$650 (depending on extra features); 18-inch LCD's are \$750; and a 23-inch LCD will set you back about \$2300! The prices of LCD's have been dropping quickly; in a year I would expect them to be significantly lower. It may even be the case that purchasing a CRT monitor now and putting off the LCD monitor for a year or two will result in less total money spent because the future price of the LCD will have dropped by more than the current cost of the

CRT!

[Editor's note: The quoted hardware prices seem to reflect "suggested retail" range. Various online and discount sources, particularly those with sale, discontinued, recertified, refurbished, and rebated items, may run significantly lower.]

When you purchase a computer, you can expect it to come with a standard (cheap) keyboard and mouse. And a cheap keyboard and mouse are quite satisfactory. However, if you are a touch-typist (using all fingers) and do a lot of typing, and if you want to help prevent carpal tunnel syndrome (a repetitive-stress wrist injury) I would strongly urge you to look at a Microsoft Natural Keyboard (about \$40). It has a split-key design that keeps your wrists straight and in a more neutral (natural) position. It takes about three days of hard typing to get used to; however, once you are used to it, the keyboard is wonderful. (Natural Keyboards do nothing for hunt-and-peck typists.)

A mouse is a mouse until one looks more carefully. There are track balls (which is really a mouse substitute), two-button mice, three-button mice, wheel mice, five-button wheel mice, cordless mice, and optical mice (and mixtures of all those options). I, personally, prefer a two-button optical wheel mouse (about \$30). The least expensive mice cost only about \$8 each, the fancier ones have too many buttons that I press when I do not want to press them. I would always recommend an optical mouse over a wheel mouse - the optical ones do not pick up lint and stay smooth in extended use.

One final note about keyboards and mice – they currently come with either PS/2 or USB connectors, or adapters that let them work either way. With recent computers (those that are less than about two-years-old) it does not matter which you get. With older computers a PS/2 connector is better since the computer's hardware may not recognize the device until the USB drivers are loaded, after the operating system starts running.

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