

Technical Troubleshooting Tips

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NOTE: Website URLs and descriptions are based on availability and design in May 2005. Technical vendors tend to change their website navigation and design frequently, so if you don't see what is described, look around for what it morphed into.

General Tips

1. Know the version number of software involved (**Help | About**).
2. Know the product or model number of hardware involved.
3. Know your operating system (Windows, Mac, Linux) and version. To find out your exact Windows version, build and service pack, open **Windows Explorer** and choose **Help | About Windows**.
4. Write down or copy and paste any error messages or numbers.
5. Start with product help, then vendor support, then groups and general websites.
6. Search effectively:
 - Be as specific as possible first, then broaden if necessary.
 - Search first on error numbers or unique phrases in an error message.
 - Look for terminology, abbreviations and commonly used phrases in your results, and adjust your search to include them.
 - To narrow too many results, add one additional criteria at a time and analyze what you get.
7. Bookmark the most helpful sites and start your own list of favorites.

Product Help

Start with the online help that comes with the software program (click **Help** from the menu options) or operating system (**Start | Help** for Windows 2000).

- Most programs have a variety of **Help** options that may include troubleshooting, tutorials, how-to's, support on the web, etc. Use them all!
- For software with standard Windows-based Help sections, look in the Help **Contents** or **Index** for "troubleshooting" or your topic, or enter "troubleshooting" or your topic in the Help **Search** box.
- Use the contents and index of PDF-based guides, which tend to return too many hits in a free text search.

For example, Microsoft Office 2003 has a variety of Help options and preferences:

- **Help | Microsoft Office Help (F1)** is best for how-to's and explanations of basic features.
- **Help | Customer Feedback Options** allows you to choose not to search online content when connected for faster searching (choose the **Online Content** category), especially useful if you have a slow connection.
- **Help | Microsoft Office Online** opens in a browser window.
 - Click **Assistance** and then choose the appropriate Office product.
 - **Search** all Office Online or limit to **Assistance** or **Templates** or **Training** (avoid searching all of Microsoft.com).

Vendor Support

Software and hardware vendors usually have extensive customer support sections on their websites. Get there through the **Help** options, guess at the vendor's URL (e.g., www.hp.com or www.lexmark.com), or look for the address on the print documentation that came with the product.

Three basic vendor support sites that will cover most of your needs are:

Adobe

<http://www.adobe.com/support/>

- **Select a product** (e.g., Acrobat Reader) for top issues, forums, product specific tutorials and troubleshooting information.
- **Search** all tutorials and troubleshooting (e.g., print Internet Explorer).
- Search or browse the Adobe **User to User Forums** on any Adobe product (registration required to post).

Apple

<http://www.apple.com/support/>

- Choose **Product Support** for any Macintosh hardware or operating system, iPods, QuickTime, or other Apple products.
- Search or browse all product **Manuals** or **Discussions**.
- Use **Advanced Search** to limit results to the "Do-It-Yourself Repair" category.

Microsoft

<http://support.microsoft.com/>

- **Select a Product** to access the Solution Centers for product issues, how-to's, links, tips, and downloads.
- **Search the Knowledge Base (KB)** using the **Advanced Search** where you can choose the specific product (it defaults to the most common or most recent, scroll to the end to select "More Products" and see the complete list) and limit to results from **How To Articles** and **Troubleshooting** (MSDN and TechNet articles are for real techies).
 - Search on all words, any words, a phrase or use Boolean operators.
 - Enter error numbers or messages as a "phrase" search.
 - Results 1-20 will display; it won't tell you the total hits and there are often more than 20, so look for "Next" at end.
 - Note the **Article ID** number for future reference (you can choose Article ID as the "Search Type" and just enter the number to find the article later).
 - Read the Symptoms, Cause, Resolution, Applies To sections carefully to be sure the article applies to your problem.
- **Self-Support Options** include access to **Microsoft Newsgroups** using their web-based newsreader
 - Choose **English**, drill down to a category and then to a specific group.
 - Once you choose a group, you can search within the group.
 - You can search the same newsgroups with a bit more ease in Google Groups.

Google Groups

Google provides access to over 50,000 groups – online communities for sharing messages about a particular topic or interest. Most of them were started as part of the original pre-web Usenet electronic bulletin boards and include archives going back over 20 years. You can browse or search messages of a single group, or search all groups. It's very likely that someone else has encountered and asked about the same problem you are having in one of the many groups related to technical topics.

Group names are based on a hierarchy that starts with a top-level heading and drills down, with each level separated by periods. For example, comp.sys.laptops is one of over 6,500 groups that begin with the top level **comp.*** for computer-related topics. Group names can also start with vendors or services, such as adobe, aol, macromedia, mindspring, netscape, and Microsoft. There are over 2,700 groups that begin with **microsoft.public.***. Some group names include a country designator such as **fr** for French to indicate that messages are in a language other than English.

To access Google Groups, go to <http://google.com> and click **Groups**. There are several ways to find relevant groups and/or messages. You can freely search and browse all public groups, but you may not post or respond to group messages without joining the group.

Search All Groups

The **Search** box at the top of the Google Groups pages looks for messages in all 50,000+ groups that include the terms you enter. For example, searching for "Outlook locks up" results in 27,000 messages and searching for "zip disk stuck" results in 11,300 messages. Use this option only if you have a very unusual error message or number.

Find Groups

From **Groups Home**, click **Computers**.

- Drill down by **Topic**.
- Look for groups with "High" **Activity** and multiple **Members**.
- Read the **Group Description** to be sure it is relevant.

From **Groups Home**, click **Browse all of Usenet**.

- Use the dropdown arrow to find the part of the alphabet with the top level you want.
- Drill down the hierarchy to find a relevant group.

Use **Directory Search** to search all groups for a term anywhere in the group name (e.g., email, printers, scanners, cameras, VCR, etc.).

Search Within a Group

Once you have identified a relevant group, you can enter terms to **Search this group** or browse the messages. Note the following when searching in a group:

- You can view the messages with or without the message text. **View titles only** allows you to get a feel for the current group topics.
- Groups with a high activity level may have a list of **Active older topics**, helpful if your problem happens to be one that lots of people are having.
- Search results can be sorted by relevance or by date. If you get a lot of results, **Sort by date** is better.
- Note the number of messages and authors in a thread. If there is only one message that describes your problem, it won't help because there is no answer.
- Narrow your search as needed. For example, searching for "locks up" in microsoft.public.outlook results in over 1,000 hits.
- To bookmark a group for future reference, add the group's main page to your favorites or bookmarks.

Advanced Groups Search

Use this to limit results by date (e.g., messages posted within the past 6 months) or to a particular group name string (e.g., comp.*), or to use any of the regular Google advanced search options. For example, searching for all the words "zip disk stuck" limited to comp.* groups in the past year results in 111 messages.

Selected Web Sites

The following web sites provide technical tips and troubleshooting advice about a variety of topics. Some require free member registration in order to post to a forum or access certain content. These are only a few of those available, so make your own list.

5 Star Support

<http://www.5starsupport.com/>

- Search the site or complete a form for **Free Technical Support**.
- Get tips on various hardware and software topics from **Technical Information**.
- Learn about hardware in **Computer Tutorials**.
- Get tips for various problems from the **Troubleshooting FAQ**.
- Check the list of **Supported Items** to be sure your issue is covered.

CNET Forums

http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-7600_7-5565323-1.html

- Browse forums on topics such as operating systems, wireless, hardware, graphics, browsers, printers, digital cameras and more.
- Use **Advanced Forum Search** to limit results to a particular category.

fixyourownprinter.com

<http://www.fixyourownprinter.com/>

- Enter your printer maker and model in the search box.
- Look up **Error Codes** and find out what to do about them (under the **Reference** tab).
- Look for **Manuals** and **Drivers** for most printers (under the **Reference** tab).
- Find **Links** to printer newsgroups and manufacturer home pages (under the **Reference** tab).
- Search or browse **Forums** on laser and inkjet printer repair.

InformIT Network

<http://www.informit.com/index.asp>

- Read, save or print **Articles** and **Reference Guides** on a variety of technical topics (e.g., hardware, Photoshop, Microsoft Office, Windows, Macintosh, Linux, games, networking). Use **Advanced Search** to limit results.
- A free member account allows you to post comments, save favorites and receive discounts from the InformIT bookstore.
- Access to Safari Tech Books Online and to other online books from partnering publishers (Addison-Wesley Professional, Adobe Press, Cisco Press, New Riders, Peachpit Press, Prentice Hall Professional Technical Reference, Que, and Sams) requires a paid membership subscription.

MacFixIt

<http://www.macfixit.com/>

- Find the "latest workarounds and solutions to technical roadblocks and frustrating barriers" from long-time Mac experts.
- **Reports** have troubleshooting tips for Mac operating systems, iPods, iTunes, and other Apple products.
- **Forums** cover a variety of troubleshooting topics.
- Search the **Archives** of the entire MacFixIt database.
- **Tutorials** provide beginning to intermediate instruction on a variety of Mac operating system troubleshooting issues.

Microsoft Most Valuable Professionals (MVPs)

<http://www.mvps.org/>

- This site is not directly affiliated with Microsoft, but all MVPs meet Microsoft's requirements for the designation. MVPs are very active in microsoft.public.* groups; look for MVP credentials in group postings.
- **Search** the entire MVPs.org site.
- Choose a product category in **MVPs.org Big Links** to get to personal websites of individual MVPs, many of whom provide lots of good, free advice.
- Find your product in **MVP FAQ Links** to get to compilations of common user questions and answers drawn from microsoft.public.* groups.

PC World How To & Tips

<http://www.pcworld.com/howto/>

- **Info Centers** provide reviews, how-to guides and tips on basic computer hardware.

Practically Networked

<http://www.practicallynetworked.com/>

- Find troubleshooting guides, how-to's, and basic information on hardware and connection issues, including proxies, wireless, gaming, routers, and DSL, in **Troubleshooting & Tutorials**.

Scantips

<http://www.scantips.com/>

- **Scanning 101** provides an introduction to scanning and digital imaging.
- Find scanner-specific details on **Some Popular Software**.
- Read advanced scanning tips in **Scanning 201**.

TechRepublic

<http://techrepublic.com.com/>

- Search **Discussions** on a variety of technical topics.
- Browse or search **Technical Q & A**.
- Browse or search **White Papers**, including webcasts and case studies from a variety of sources (requires free membership).
- Provided by CNET Networks.

Web Developer's Virtual Library

<http://www.wdvl.com/>

- Read **WebDeveloper Articles** from publications affiliated with JupiterWeb.
- Search or browse **Discussion Forums**.
- Access **Tutorials**, **Software Reviews** and other resources.

Woody's Office Portal

<http://www.wopr.com/>

- Search for tips and instructions on installing Office updates and patches in Woody Leonhard's user-centered e-zines about Microsoft Office.
- **Woody's Lounge** has discussion forums on various topics. Choose a forum to view recent or active posts, or click **Search** at the top above the flags to search all or one forum.

Virus Security Information

Vendors of anti-virus software have customer support sections that provide alerts on current virus threats, searchable virus encyclopedias, removal tools and more. If you don't find what you need from the vendor of your anti-virus software, try another one.

Computer Associates Virus Information Center

<http://www3.ca.com/securityadvisor/virusinfo/default.aspx>

F-Secure Security Information Center

<http://www.datafellows.com/virus-info/>

Network Associates (McAfee) Security Headquarters

<http://www.networkassociates.com/us/security/home.asp>

Symantec (Norton) Security Response

<http://securityresponse.symantec.com/>

Trend Micro Security Information

<http://www.trendmicro.com/vinfo/>

Internet Connection Checkup Tools

It may not be your computer that's causing the problem. Here are two ways to see if your internet connection may be contributing.

Broadband Reports

<http://www.dslreports.com/>

- Reviews and information on all kinds of DSL and broadband services.
- **Tests+ Tools** has web-based tests to monitor your connection speed.
- **FAQs+ Info** has tips on modems, DSL, routers, wireless, VPN and other networking topics.
- **Forums** cover providers, hardware, operating systems, games and general connectivity issues.

Internet Traffic Report

<http://www.internettrafficreport.com/main.htm>

- Click a location to see if traffic and response time is high or low in your area.