5 tips for teaching basic computer skills to beginners

When I started teaching computer skills to homeless folks, I thought I had little to learn since I was an IT professional and all connected.

Wrong.

I had the course knowledge but not the teaching knowledge.

Here are some tips I’ve picked up for teaching a first time computer user. This could be your friend, client, family member, or total newbie.

At this stage, on site training is the only option unless your friend has mastered the basics and you’re doing something fancy like remotely sharing screens. Training over the phone will not end well if you don’t have a shared vocabulary.

1. Pull it back and affirm

Some keywords are so ingrained in our culture like “keyboard” and “mouse” that this can be a good place to start. Your goal is to create a cycle of completing small tasks til mastery and then affirming. It’s exciting learning how to use a computer for the first time, especially for someone who hears about it all the time but can’t fully engage in the concept. Even small affirmation like “wow way to get that double click tempo down!” can be really encouraging and help create a desire to learn more.

2. Never take the mouse

Always talk and point and make your friend use the keyboard and mouse. You may have to demonstrate how to steady mouse or demonstrate right and left-click. After that, forget you know all the key combinations and learn how to explain verbally and slowly. You will need more time than you think. Bring dinner the first time. It’ll get better.
3. Create “list time”

This is especially helpful if you are helping someone you see fairly regularly. Have them keep a list of things that frustrate them or things they can’t figure out. This will cut back on frantic calls to you. It will also give your friend a sense of control knowing there is a next action and that they don’t need to continue struggling with something. I had this system in place with my grandmother. I loved our list time during my visits since we had something to concretely bond over.

4. Contextualize metaphors

With terminology, I wouldn’t shy away from words that may sounds foreign to your friend. Rather than just saying “browser,” tack on descriptive text. You could say open up your “Internet browser like Internet Explorer, the program you use to get to the Internet.” Eventually you can just drop the descriptive words once they gets more familiar with the tricky ones. That way as the friend picks up the terminology, their knowledge will be global when others jump in to help. It just takes a lot of iteration.

5. Give homework

If your friend is learning to type, get them setup with SpongeBob Squarepants Typingor something similarly awesome. It will build your friend’s confidence while they learn. Folks learn differently, but it’s worth trying those one hour DVD lessons. Some people swear by them and you could check to see what the library has. Speaking of libraries, even if your friend doesn’t have a computer, you can send them to the local library to practice. My grandmother loves getting her email tips from Kim Komando. She gets to learn something new every day. Homework will retain your friend’s new knowledge between your visits.