

How Software Became More Friendly

Be a Power Reader

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Introduction

Personal computers first became widely used in the 1980s. These computers were a big step up from trying to create documents with a typewriter.

However, the **application software** for these computers was not easy to use. You often couldn't change the size of the **font** you were using. If you wanted to place something in bold type, you might have to key a special code, such as <BOLD>. Or perhaps you would have to hold down the Control key while pressing the letter "B". All of these different commands had to be memorized. There were no menus from which to choose. And to make matters worse, the commands varied from one application to another.

Computer users got fed up with all the hard work involved in learning and using these applications. So, software developers began making applications that were more **user-friendly**.

You may wonder, "How can software be friendly?" It can't hang out with you at the mall or joke around at a basketball game. When the term "user-friendly" is used to refer to applications, it has a different meaning. *User-friendly* refers to applications that are designed to be easy to use and understand by people who do not have a lot of technical training. Nobody wants to have to be a computer scientist to use a spreadsheet application.

So, let's take a look at some of the features that make applications user-friendly.

Switching Around

Let's say you're the treasurer of the Booster Club. You're in the process of updating the spreadsheet that contains this year's financial report. As you're working, you realize you need some information contained in another document. So, you simply open that document in another window and look at it. If you need to, you can probably even paste the information from that document into the spreadsheet. You can switch back and forth between these two documents as many times as you wish. This is referred to as **multitasking**.

Multitasking lets people use their time efficiently. Early computer applications did not allow multitasking. Users were slowed down because they had to close one application before they could start another one. Once computers allowed users to multitask, they became much more user-friendly.

Point, Click, Drag



As you work at your computer, you probably use your mouse without even thinking about it. Even small children are experts at pointing, clicking, and dragging. However, the mouse is a fairly recent invention. The Apple Macintosh, which came out in 1984, was the first widely-used computer to have a mouse.

The mouse makes using applications more visual. Rather than memorizing commands, we click buttons and pull down menus. We can rearrange documents by dragging a paragraph to a different location. Positioning graphics is a breeze. The mouse makes all these jobs quick and easy.

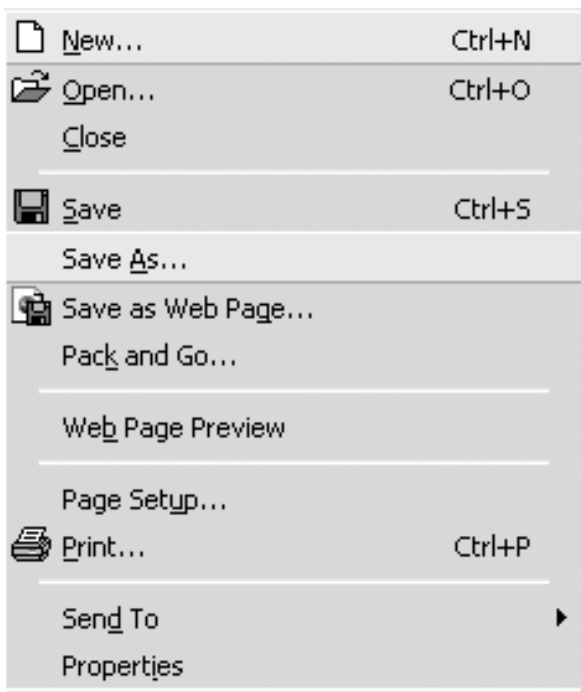
Selecting Commands

Virtually every application we use today has a **graphical user interface**, or **GUI** (say *goo-ee*). GUIs contain **dialog boxes**, **buttons**, **toolbars**, and **menus**. While some of these items (such as menus) contain words, many of them use graphics called **icons**. An icon is a graphic or picture that represents something. Here's an example of an icon that represents the Cut command:



Menus

One way of selecting a command is to use an application's **drop-down menu**. You click the menu and a list of commands appears. Here is an example of a File menu. All of the commands in this menu let you manipulate a file in some way or another.



This menu comes from the Microsoft® PowerPoint® application. You are probably familiar with many of these commands, such as New, Open, and Save.

Buttons

Another easy way to carry out a command is to use a **button**. Most buttons have an icon on them. Buttons are usually on **toolbars**. Buttons are mainly used for the most common commands. They are a quick way to give instructions to your application.

Cover up the right column in the following table. Then see if you can identify each button. These are buttons that are used on many different applications.

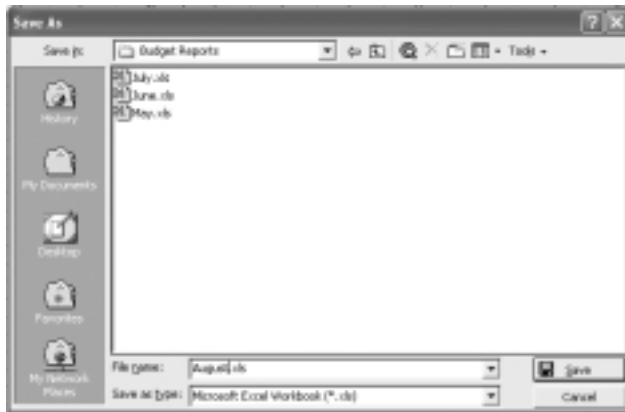
Buttons	Name
	Print
	Bold
	Save
	Open
	Center
	Spelling and Grammar
	Copy

How did you do? There are probably many other buttons you can recognize. What makes using buttons so easy is that they are often identical, or very similar, from one application to another. So, if you know what button is used to save a document in one application, you probably will know what button to use in a different application. This is an important feature of user-friendly software.

Let's Dialog

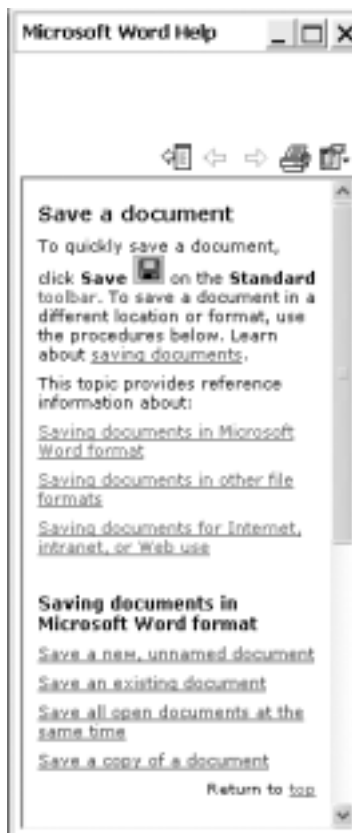
The word *dialog* means to carry on a conversation. So, a dialog box carries on

a conversation with us. It lets an application give us instructions and also lets us give instructions to the application. Here's an example of a Save As dialog box:



Online 911

We all need help on occasion. Today's applications come with help built right into them. Virtually all applications have a Help menu. Many applications let you ask a question and will then display several topics related to your question. For example, if you ask how to save a document in Microsoft® Word®, the following window appears:



If you are interested in basic instructions on how to save a document, you might click on the first topic, "Saving documents in Microsoft Word format."

Many applications allow you to go to the application developer's Web site to get additional help on topics. Of course, you must have access to the Internet to use this option.

One Task, Many Options

Another feature of a well-designed application is that it often lets you perform the same task in several different ways. Here are some of the ways you can save a worksheet in Microsoft® Excel®:

- Choose Save from the File menu.
- Click the Save button.
- Press [Ctrl] + [S].

Different people like to work with applications in different ways. Which way would you choose?

Usability Testing

When software developers are creating new applications, they work hard to make them easy for people to use. To help them create user-friendly applications, developers do **usability testing**. Usability testing is a fancy term for determining if people find the software easy to learn and use. Experts watch the users as they work to see what kinds of problems they are having. Special software keeps track of what the user is doing while learning a new application. In addition, the user is asked to fill out a questionnaire. All this information is then used to make the application more user-friendly. Before an application is ready to be sold, the developer will go through usability testing many times. Good software developers want to make certain the application is as easy as possible for us to use.



Review Questions

1. What does the term *graphical user interface* mean?
2. List three features of a user-friendly application.
3. How is using a drop-down menu different from using a button? Which method do you prefer?
4. What is multitasking? How does it make using a computer easier?
5. Why do software developers conduct usability testing?



What Do You Think?

1. Think about two different applications you use. Which one do you think is easier to use? Why?
2. Some people say that using today's applications should be intuitive. What do you think they mean by the word *intuitive*? (You may want to look up the word in a dictionary.)
3. What things do you think could be done to make applications more user-friendly? You may want to get together with several of your classmates and brainstorm some ideas.

Glossary

application software Software that helps us perform a task, such as creating a presentation or performing mathematical operations. Examples include word processors and spreadsheets. Also called *applications*.

button An icon (graphic) that you click to carry out a specific task, such as to save or print a document.

dialog box An on-screen box that asks you a question and then waits for you to give an answer.

drop-down menu A menu whose commands are hidden until you click it. Then a list of commands appears. If you want to execute one of the commands, you click it.

execute To carry out an instruction.

font A group of letters, numbers, characters, symbols, and punctuation marks that share the same design.

graphical user interface (GUI) A program interface in which actions are carried out when you select an icon, a toolbar button, or an option from a pull-down menu with the mouse; GUI is pronounced *goo-ee*.

icon An on-screen graphic that represents an object (such as a document) or a task (such as Save).

menu A list of commands or functions displayed on-screen from which you can select.

multitasking Running two or more applications on a computer at once.

software A list of instructions that a computer can use to perform a task.

toolbar A screen element that contains tools, usually represented by buttons, available to users.

user-friendly A term applied to applications that are easy to use and understand by people who do not have a lot of technical training. User-friendly applications typically have drop-down menus, buttons, toolbars, and dialog boxes.

usability testing Conducting experiments to determine whether applications meet user needs and are easy to learn and use.