# Twenty Tips for Becoming More Computer Savvy: Or, How to Think Like a Systems Librarian

DORALYN ROSSMAN

**T**wo of the most common questions I get from my colleagues are "How did you get so good with computers" and "How did you become a systems librarian?" The following twenty (plus one) tips reflect many of the steps I and other systems folks use when working with computers and the problems they create. While some of these tips may be obvious, it is easy to forget the many resources available to us.

1. **Use the help features that came with software.**

   Practically all software packages come with a help feature. For example, try a search in Microsoft Word's help for "hyperlink" to see how to remove underlines from URLs in a document.

2. **Consult the manual and documentation.**

   Either print manuals and/or electronic versions should be included with software. Check the vendor's Web site for online versions of manuals if you cannot find a copy in-house.

3. **Use the software/computer vendor's Web site.**

   Many frequently asked questions, tips, and troubleshooting techniques can be found on a vendor's Web site. See www.usefulutilities.com for a good example.

4. **Use email discussion lists.**

   Many email discussion lists are offered by individuals, groups, and vendors for discussing various computing issues. Lists sponsored by vendors are sometimes less open about issues; the vendors may be reluctant to admit a problem or want to discourage criticism of their products. Conversely, non-vendor maintained lists may be more open, but may not have as much helpful feedback and answers from the vendor who produces the software.

5. **Contact your vendor's helpdesk/customer support.**

   You or someone else in your workplace is the main contact with your computer vendor. If somebody else is the designated contact person with a specific vendor, go through that person to contact the vendor: nothing is more frustrating to a software helpdesk than to have five different people from the same institution all report the same problem. Before calling the vendor, try to do some troubleshooting of the problem and be ready with specifics about the issue so you can provide this information to customer support.

6. **Check with colleagues at your own institution as to how they do things.**

   Find other people in your workplace who are using the same software about which you have a question. Maybe they have figured out how to do what you want to do with the system.

7. **Find others who have done what you want to do and view their source code or ask them to share it with you.**

   Other people's web pages are a good example of something you may see that you want to emulate for yourself. View their html source code to perhaps learn how they did that trick you find so cool. Or, you may find someone else on an email list or at a conference who has created what you want to create. Usually, people are glad to share their successes, so do not be afraid to ask.

8. **Go to conferences: attend presentations, talk with your colleagues, talk with vendors.**

   Conferences can be a great place to talk about computers with the people who use them or make software for them. Developing connections with other people can provide additional people who you can contact when back at work.

Doralyn Rossmann is Library Systems Analyst at Montana State University-Bozeman Libraries. She holds an MSLS from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has held positions in library systems, reference, government documents and geographic information systems (GIS) in Chicago, Houston, and Wyoming prior to her arrival in Montana. She can be reached at doralyn@montana.edu.

9. **See if a users' group exists. If it does, use it. If it doesn't, start one.**

   Just like the sewing and jogging clubs we see in our communities, there are groups who form around use of the same software. Such groups exist for virtually every type of software or hardware is available. ILLiad and the Sirsi Unicorn User Group International are two such examples of groups who hold regular meetings, have a web page, and provide the vendors of the software with feedback on their products.

10. **Tinker on your own; be willing to break things, but remember what you did to break them!**

    Think about the worst possible outcome of what will happen if you tinker. If it means recreating a word-processed document from scratch, then you might want to tinker. If it means reinstalling your operating system on your computer from scratch, then you probably do not want to tinker. Either way, keep a record of the changes you made in case you need to undo them. And where possible, back up important files to portable storage media disks like floppies, CDs, or ZIPs before tinkering.

11. **Communicate with your system administrator if you encounter problems that you don't understand.**

    While it is good to feel comfortable tinkering on your own, if you see problems that seem extreme or are happening repeatedly, communicate what you are experiencing to your system administrator. Remember, your system administrator is a person, too, so positive feedback and praise when your system administrator communicates with you and helps you can forge better relations.

12. **Document circumstances surrounding a problem: what software you used, what function you were performing, any patterns (time of day, in use with another program).**

    If you are experiencing a problem on a regular basis, start writing down details of what happened to help diagnose the problem. You may realize something like your Sirsi Workflows software crashes only happen when you have Adobe Acrobat Reader open on your computer at the same time.

13. **Document how you do things so if you have to do them again, you don't have to start from scratch trying to remember how; keep a log/diary.**

    You may perform a routine task such as uploading your patron fines file to a billing system each month, but not perform this task often enough to remember how you did it last time. As you do this function, write down each step in the process. Next time you do the task, you will be able to refer to this document and ensure that you are consistent in what you are doing.

14. **Plan ahead. Make copies of your files to another place besides your computer. Be prepared if you got a new computer or if your old computer died.**

    Planning for the worst seems to be low-priority for many folks. Consider making a regular item on your calendar/agenda to back-up your computer files on the 1st of each month. A little effort now can prevent a big headache down the road.

15. **Search the web (Google, etc.) when stumped; also check published resources (books, journals).**

    A frequently overlooked source for computer help is general web sites. For example, a search for a computer error message in quotation marks in www.google.com may yield web sites from a University Information Technology page or a computer chat web site telling you exactly how to fix that problem. Journals and books may be of help, too.

16. **If someone else fixes a problem for you, watch and learn what they did so that you might know how to fix it yourself next time. Or, ask them to walk you through fixing it while you "drive."**

    Many people remember how they got to their destination better if they were the driver rather than the passenger. Similarly, a person who "drives" or operates the computer rather than watching someone else do it may be more likely to remember and understand what was done.

17. **If you are going to try something new, try to avoid doing it on a Friday.**

    While it may be tempting to finish out that last hour of the workweek with a little computer exploration, it could lead to spending an additional hour trying to undo what you did. Even worse, you could leave the problem to be remedied on Monday morning when much of what was done will be forgotten. Save any big changes for the middle of the workweek.

18. **Save copies of your originals...if you are making big changes to any documents, keep a copy of what you started with in case you mess up. Consider printing a hardcopy.**

    A good example of this tip is web page modification. Rather than making big changes to the live version of your library's web site, make a copy of the page and modify that. Put the new page in place once you are sure it works properly.

19. **Try a little. Learn. Try a little more.**

    Most computing skills and confidence are not built on big leaps. Try making baby steps until you are comfortable with the new computer skill and then proceed to your next step. Many baby steps will add up to a lot of progress.

20. **Think: what was the last thing I did or changed before a problem occurred?**

    Frequently the cause of a problem was the result of the last change you made. If your computer is crashing all of the sudden, did you just install a new web browser right before that started happening?

21. **Bonus Tip! Is there a better way to do this than on a computer?**

    Sometimes using a computer to accomplish a task is not the best way to do something. If you are trying to plot out the arrangement of your garden, do you need a complex CAD software program to do that, or would a pencil and a sheet of graph paper suffice for your planning? ▩