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Need Help Getting Help?

"It won't let me _____ "

Whether it's code I have written or someone else's software, I am often called upon to troubleshoot when a client or friend runs into a computer error. I can predict the first four words out of their mouth: "It won't let me ____ ," followed by a very precise but unattained goal. After years of assisting otherwise brilliantly intelligent people, I am continually amazed at how common is this promulgation which yields so little information.

As the old Paul Ehrlich saying goes, **"To err is human, but to really foul things up, you need a computer."** No doubt, computers seem to have a way of messing things up, usually at just the wrong time. And though we would like to blame the "gremlin," usually it is alas we programmers who have failed to implement a catch for potentially bad input, or test for all situations. So it falls upon us to help you out of this debacle. In response to this obligation, I offer some **help on how to get help:**

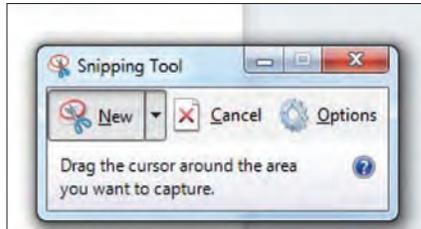|	
How	Describe how you came to the error.
Error	Copy /Paste error messages.
Link	Copy /Paste the URL of the page with the error.
Picture	Take a screenshot or screencast.

How?

Specifically, describe how you came to the point before the error. Often users might guess where the error is occurring when in fact, the previous step in the system or process is usually more suspicious. Answer questions like the following: How did you get this error? What were you doing right before this? What were you working on and how did you

A screencast is actually a video screenshot of the user working on the screen. In some cases, it can be more helpful to a troubleshooter by showing how the user came to the error instead of just the error itself.
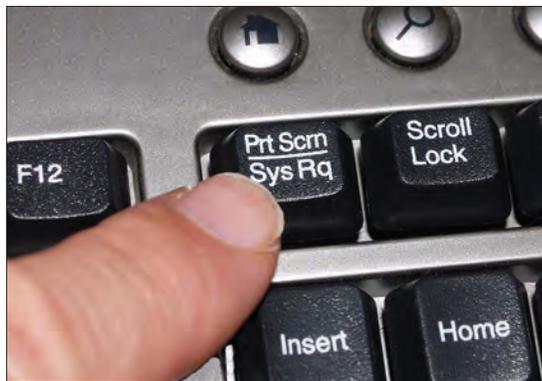
come to that particular page? What inputs did you make just before the error? What were you trying to accomplish? What did you expect to see? What did you see instead?

Error?

"Keyboard not detected. Press F1 to continue." Error messages may look like coded messages from Little Orphan Annie days, but in reality, they are packed full of helpful information for programmers. It is important that someone helping you receives all the feedback the system gives in these situations. The easiest way to relay this information is to copy and paste the error message. However, sometimes messages are not selectable as text. In those cases, you can open a text editor like NotePad and type in the message manually. It is important especially to get codes or lines correct so the programmer can narrow focus in a correct area.

Link?

Sometimes, an error is generic in order to protect the server from attack by providing too much information. Other times an error code will give a page name where the error occurred, but this may not be enough information. You should also include the exact webpage URL where you found the message. The link will be at the top of your browser window in the navigation bar and usually starts with http:// or www. Copy and paste the entire link into any correspondence with your techie.

Picture?

Have you ever tried to direct a loved one remotely by phone on some seemingly menial task, only to find words only are insufficient? If you do none of the above, the most

Windows 7 and above OS have a built-in easy to use way to take a screenshot call the Snipping Tool.

The tried and true method of taking a screenshot from your computer is with the "print screen" button on your keyboard.

important information you can give an assisting techie is a screenshot or screencast of what you see. A screenshot is simply an image of what is on your screen, which can be easily taken using the snipping tool found in Windows 7 and above, or by hitting the print screen button then pasting the image into any application that accepts images, such as a Word Processor, Paint, Photoshop, or even some email clients. Even better is a screencast, which is a video of you using your computer. A screencast can be saved in the form of a video file or uploaded to a video server. www.Screencast-o-matic.com is a free and easy to use website where with the push of a button, you can record your actions on the screen and save them to your computer. Then you can easily attach the file to an email or upload to a tech support site. [Did I mention it was free?]

End the frustration!

Asking for help when encountering errors, whether it be submitting a support ticket to a large online tech company or calling a geek-friend on the phone, can be as frustrating if not more frustrating than the error itself! Since you likely do not speak tech-geek and your counterpart may likely have difficulty with the layman's vernacular, hopefully you can utilize this simple strategy to bridge that communication gap.

Since 1997, Jen Sharp (JenSharp.com) has served business and government across Kansas and the US and even internationally, specializing in Web development, design & programming including e-Learning, ecommerce, content management systems, and other small business solutions.