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The Sometimes Confusing Realm of Tech Terms

Do you know what HTML means?

An astounding 11% of Americans think it's a sexually transmitted disease, according to study conducted by Vouchercloud.net (www.vouchercloud.net). Little is more central to the Web than Hypertext Markup Language, the principle language for designating how text, photos, and other elements appear when creating web pages.

HTML isn't the only tech term that isn't universally known. Fully 77% of the survey's respondents didn't know what SEO means. Search engine optimization is a crucial tool that website creators and marketers use for helping to ensure that search engines such as Google, Yahoo, and Bing return a particular website early in their results when people type in particular search terms.

You know the USB connections on your computer? In the survey, 12% of respondents thought USB was the acronym for a European country rather than for universal serial bus.

The humor of these kinds of misunderstandings was no doubt one of the purposes of the study. But the fact that these misunderstandings exist points to reality that not everyone gets tech talk.

"It's unsurprising that a large percentage of the public doesn't know, doesn't use, and doesn't care about computer jargon," says Mac McCarthy, a freelance tech writer, in an email interview.

Jargon often gets overused or used incorrectly, in writing as in talking. It can be a way not of communicating but of showing off how much you know. Conversely, it can be a way to try to hide what you don't know. Finally, it can separate insiders from outsiders.

Buzzwords, acronyms, and abbreviations can helpfully condense complicated concepts into shorthand

words and phrases, saving time.

It's easier and faster to write or say HTML (usually pronounced with the individual letters sounded out, sometimes as "hit-mil") than it is to write or say Hypertext Markup Language every time.

Here's a handful of other terms that you and your students will find worth knowing:

CPU—This is an acronym for central processing unit. A CPU, also called simply a processor, is the brains of the computer, its most important component, where most of the calculations take place that convert your keystrokes and mouse movements into results.

Domain name—This is the name that identifies a website, the part of a website's address expressed in an individual and memorable way, such as "yourname.com." Anyone can obtain a domain name by purchasing it from a domain name registrar.

RAM—This acronym for random access memory is pronounced "ram," and next to the CPU it's generally the second most important component of a computer. Computers load programs and data from the hard drive, where they're stored, into RAM when you work with them. The more RAM a computer has, up to a point, the faster it will run.

URL—A uniform resource locator is the unique address of any web page. It's what the user types into a web browser or clicks on as a shortcut or bookmark to surf the Web. A related term is "link," which is a URL imbedded in a web page, email, or other element that opens your web browser to that page.

WiFi—This is an abbreviation for wireless fidelity and is the name of a popular wireless networking technology that uses radio waves. WiFi (sometimes written Wi-Fi or Wifi) networks and WiFi-enabled devices have

made it possible to connect to the Internet in selected airports, hotels, coffee shops, restaurants, supermarkets, libraries, and school campuses as well as to connect multiple PCs to the Internet without cables from anywhere at home.

There are lots of places on the Web that you can use to further explore tech and other jargon. (Some can help you decipher terms your students commonly use.) Table 1 gives a sampling of the many sites available.

If you're just looking for the meaning of a particular term, one quick trick is to use Google by typing in the term you're unfamiliar with followed by the word "definition" (without the quotation marks). ☺

Table 1—Tech Terms Websites

Abbreviations.com

www.abbreviations.com

Abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms

Acronym Finder

www.acronymfinder.com

Acronyms and abbreviations about computers, technology, telecommunications, and the military

Geek Dictionary

geekdictionary.computing.net

User-generated definitions of geek terms

Internet Slang Dictionary

www.noslang.com

Internet slang and acronyms

NetLingo

www.netlingo.com

Internet and computer definitions

Teen Chat Decoder

www.teenchatdecoder.com

Acronyms and abbreviations used in text messages

Webopedia

www.webopedia.com

Tech dictionary

Reid Goldsborough is a syndicated columnist and author of the book Straight Talk About the Information Superhighway.

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