



A typical UK QWERTY keyboard



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|  Character keys |  Enter and editing keys |  Navigation keys |  Numeric keypad |
|  Modifier keys |  System and GUI keys |  Function keys |  Lock keys |

(Image modified from Wikipedia Commons [Qwerty.svg](#))

Using the keyboard

Whenever you use your computer, you'll usually use both the mouse or pointing device and the keyboard. Laptops and desktops normally have a physical keyboard while tablets and smartphones have a virtual or onscreen keyboard with fewer keys and options.

A typical UK QWERTY keyboard is based around a typewriter layout combined with several other elements used to navigate and control both your computer and the program, app or file you are working on.

If you find that some of the keys are swapped (eg pressing £ key gives a # and vice versa), chances are your computer is set up to use a US keyboard. This is easily changed - if both UK and US layouts are available, you can swap between them by pressing Left Alt + Shift.

Character keys

The 'typewriter' part – letters, numbers (alphanumeric characters) and punctuation keys. Even if you're not typing a document or entering data into a spreadsheet, you'll need to use this to type in passwords, search phrases etc. Try to get used to using both hands – even if you only use one finger on each hand (plus thumbs for the spacebar) it will be quicker than one finger on one hand. You will also often have to hold down 2 – or sometimes 3 keys at once, and this is easier if both hands are already near the keyboard.

Modifier keys - Shift, Ctrl, Alt & AltGr

These are all used at the same time as another key to change the appearance of what is being typed, or to access a shortcut or menu.

Shift - usually a large outline of an arrow pointing up.

There are usually 2 Shift keys on the physical keyboard – one on each side so you can use with either your right or left hand depending on the character you are typing. They both do exactly the same. To use the Shift key, hold it down then press another key, then release both keys.

Unless your Caps Lock key is turned on, your computer types everything in lowercase. When the Shift key is pressed at the same time as a letter key, an uppercase version of that letter is produced.

Many keys on the alphanumeric part of the keyboard have 2 (or occasionally 3) characters printed on them – for instance most of the punctuation keys and the number keys at the top of the keyboard will access more than one character. To access the bottom character, just press the key without any modifiers. To access the top character, hold down Shift then press the key – eg to type a £ sign, hold down Shift then type 3, or to get a tilde ~, hold down Shift then press hash #.

To get the 3rd option (eg if you have the Euro € symbol bottom right on the number 4), you have to press Ctrl and Alt and hold them both down before pressing the 4 key. If your keyboard has AltGr, you can just press and hold down AltGr then press 4.

Ctrl (Control), Alt (Alternate) & AltGr (Alternate Graphic) - there are usually 2 Ctrl keys so they can also be used with either your left or right hand. Some keyboards have 2 Alt keys, other international keyboards have Alt (in this case known as Left Alt) and AltGr either side of the spacebar.

Ctrl – holding down the Ctrl key while selecting items allows you to select several items at once.

The Ctrl key is also used in many keyboard shortcuts. Keyboard shortcuts are combinations of keys on the keyboard that when pressed down at the same time quickly activate a specific function or task. The same function can usually also be activated using the mouse by selecting that function in a menu, but using the equivalent keyboard shortcut keys is much faster when you are working with text and the keyboard.


Alt – Pressing the Alt key alone activates the menu on the current program. You can then press Arrow keys to move between menus. Alternatively, while holding Alt, press the underlined letter on the menu item to open that menu item quickly. To close the menu without doing anything from that menu, press Escape. Otherwise Alt is used with other keys in many shortcuts.

The Left Alt key is also used to type special characters with an Alt Code. For example, Alt + 028 on the numeric keyboard will type an ä – note that these numbers have to be entered via the numeric keypad (not the numbers above the letters – these don't work for Alt Codes), and make sure Num Lock is on.

Alt Gr – used on international keyboards to access special characters on keys where there are more than two characters on the key. Press it down at the same time as the letter/character key to produce the special character shown on the bottom right side of the key eg € on 4 if your keyboard has this option.

See the separate lists of keyboard shortcuts and Alt Codes available.

Enter and editing keys – Enter, Insert, Backspace & Delete

Enter - also referred to as a Return or Carriage Return key, this is usually a large key on the right side of the punctuation keys and may have the word Enter printed on it or may have a solid arrow going down then to the left . Sometimes called an elbow arrow, the arrow on the Enter key is showing what will happen when you press the key, which is moving the cursor down to the next line and to the left.

When referring to a keyboard, the Enter key is used to send the cursor to the next line or execute a command or operation. Most full-sized PC keyboards have two Enter keys - one above the right Shift key and another on the bottom right of the numeric keypad. Both Enter keys perform the same function. Therefore you can press the key that is easiest for you to use. However, it's recommended that you press the Enter key closest to all the letters when typing text and use the Enter key on the numeric keypad when using the keypad to type numbers.

Insert – Pressing this key toggles between two modes when you're typing. With Insert on or selected, what you type is inserted before any existing text that comes after it. With Insert off or deselected, any text

that you type overwrites any text that is to the right of it. It is strongly recommended that you leave Insert on so you don't accidentally overwrite what you have already typed. If you do want to overwrite some text without deleting it first, keep Insert on or selected and simply highlight the text you don't want any more, then start typing the replacement text – when you type the first character, the unwanted text will be deleted and the rest of your typing will be inserted before the rest of the existing text.

Backspace and Delete (Del) - Backspace may have the word printed on the key, but more often has just the symbol of a straight arrow pointing to the left. It is almost always found one key or two keys above the main Enter key at the end of the row containing the numbers and before the numeric keypad.

It is very likely you're going to make a few errors - Backspace and Delete can both help you correct these. Backspace erases one character before the cursor and Delete erases one character after the cursor. To erase a whole word at a time, use Ctrl + Backspace or Ctrl + Delete. If text is highlighted and Backspace or Delete is used, it will erase all the highlighted text in one keystroke. If these keys are held down, they will carry on erasing at a pretty fast pace, so don't linger on these keys!

System and GUI keys

Escape (Esc), Print Screen (PrtSc) and the mostly redundant *System Request (SysRq)*, *Pause & Break*

On some keyboards there are also Fn (Function), Windows key and Context menu key, which are usually situated on the bottom row either side of the spacebar and Alt/AltGr keys.

Depending on your keyboard, you may also have special keys at the top of your keyboard above the numbers that control the volume of your speakers, adjust screen brightness, or fast forward/rewind when viewing a film etc. Refer to your individual user manual for a guide to these special keys.

Escape (Esc) - found at the top left of the keyboard. Press this key to cancel an operation or command, or to 'Escape' out of a dialog box, menu etc - one of the most useful keys for beginners and the curious (along with 'Undo' that is found in many apps and programs). Think of it as your Get Out Of Jail Free card!

Print Screen (PrtSc) - captures an image of the entire screen and copies it to the computer clipboard. Once in the clipboard, paste that screenshot into an image editor to save it, or paste directly into an email, document or file. Once the image is successfully pasted into a program, it can be saved or printed. Useful to record error messages or to show instructions for a task etc.

Press and hold the Alt key, and then press the Print Screen key to take a screenshot of only the active window instead of the full screen

Windows users can press the Windows key + Print Screen to take a screenshot and have the image automatically saved as screenshot.png in the My Pictures folder.

Windows users can also use the Snipping Tool to make a picture out of only a portion of the window.

Fn (Function) - a modifier key like Shift on many keyboards, especially on laptops, where it is used in a compact layout to combine keys which are usually kept separate.

Mainly used to change display or audio settings quickly, such as brightness, contrast, or volume, and is held down in conjunction with the appropriate key to change the settings. It may also be needed on some keyboards to access the standard F1-F12 function keys.

Windows key – pressed on its own, this will open or close the Start menu. But it can also be used with other keys as a shortcut to perform various tasks on your computer such as capture and save a screenshot, show the desktop, minimise maximise or restore all windows, change Users and lots more.

See the separate list for Windows logo key shortcuts.

Context menu key - works like right clicking. It will open the context menu if available. For example, if you press this key while a file is selected on File Explorer, the context menu will be opened so you can cut, copy or perform other actions on the file.

System Request (SysRq), Pause & Break - these keys are mainly redundant on modern computers (together with Scroll Lock).

While these keys have been removed from some computer keyboards today, they're still quite common - even on new keyboards.

Pause - located near the top right on most keyboards and used to temporarily halt the operations of the current program. Most modern programs don't recognise this key but on some games, Pause can be pressed to suspend the game. On booting up the computer, Pause stops the boot temporarily. You can then press any key to break out of that pause.

Break - usually found on the same key as Pause. Today it has no real purpose but in some older programs, it was used to terminate a program, interrupt a modem connection, etc. 'Break' refers to breaking a telegraph circuit.

System request – another redundant key that has no standard use. It was originally available as a special key to directly invoke low-level operating system functions with no possibility of conflicting with any existing software. These days, most operating systems and programs will simply ignore SysRq

Navigation keys – Tab, Home, End, Page Up, Page Down and the 4 arrows

Tab - (from tabulator as in a typewriter) has many uses such as advancing the cursor by five characters in a text program, moving between controls in a window or input boxes in a web browser, switching between web browser tabs. Tab can be also used in reverse direction using Shift + Tab.

Home and End – there are often 2 Home Keys and 2 End keys on the keyboard – one of each above and to the right of the Enter key, the others on the numeric keypad together with the numbers 1 and 7 – they both do exactly the same thing. If the Num Lock is off, these are activated to Home and End, if the Num Lock is on, they are activated to numbers.

In a text editor Home will take the cursor to the beginning of the line you are editing, and End will move the cursor to the end of the line.

They can also be used with modifiers:

Shift + Home highlights all text from the current position to the start of the line.

Shift + End highlights all text from the current position to the end of the line.

Ctrl + Home will go to the very beginning of the text or page.

Ctrl + End will go to the very end of the text or page.

Ctrl + Shift + Home highlights all text from the current position to the beginning of the text or page.

Ctrl + Shift + End highlights all text from the current position to the end of the text or page.

In a web browser, Home will take you to the top of the webpage you are viewing.

Page Up and Page Down - there are often 2 Page Up Keys and 2 Page Down keys on the keyboard – one of each above and to the right of the Enter key, the others on the numeric keypad together with the numbers 3 and 9 – they both do exactly the same thing. If the Num Lock is off, these are activated to Page Up and Page Down, if the Num Lock is on, they are activated to numbers.

These two keys do 'exactly what it says on the tin'! They will scroll up or down by one page or screen's worth at a time.

In a text editor, they can also be used with Shift to highlight text:

Shift + Page Up – highlights text one screen's worth at a time going back through the document. Keep holding shift and repeat Page Up to quickly highlight several screen's worth at once.

Shift + Page Down – highlights text one screen's worth at a time going forward through the document. Keep holding shift and repeat Page Down to quickly highlight several screen's worth at once.

The 4 arrows – also known as cursor keys or direction keys. There are often 2 sets of arrow keys - one of each below and to the right of the Enter key, the others on the numeric keypad together with the numbers 2,4,6 and 8 – they both do exactly the same thing. If the Num Lock is off, these are activated to navigation arrows, if the Num Lock is on, they are activated to numbers.

Left Arrow (back arrow) and Right Arrow (forward arrow) move the cursor one character at a time. Up Arrow and Down Arrow move the cursor one row at a time to a point the same number of characters along the next line to where it is when you start. Using these keys with Shift will highlight the text.

They are also used to move to another cell in a spreadsheet, and Left and Right Arrows used with Ctrl in a web browser will go back or forward through your browser history to another page.

Function keys (F Keys) – labelled F1 through to F12

These are usually found above the number keys on the main keyboard. They act as shortcuts, performing certain functions, like saving files, printing data, or refreshing a page. The function of these keys can differ by operating system and by software program, but several keys are fairly standard in most programs - F1 is often used as the default Help key. F5 is used in a web browser to refresh or reload a web page.

See separate list of some of the more common functions of the functions keys for Microsoft Windows and Microsoft applications

Numeric keypad – when the Num Lock key is on or selected, the numeric keypad is activated. It is like having a calculator at the far right of the keyboard, and makes it much easier and faster to type numbers and perform calculations than using the numbers at the top of the keyboard. Especially useful in spreadsheet and mathematical programs, it is also easier to do things like type a range of pages to print eg 27-34, and very useful filling in online forms. Together with the numbers 0-9 and an Enter key, there are keys for the 4 simple maths operators plus, minus, times and divide – while plus and minus look the same as they would on a calculator, on a computer the star symbol (asterisk) * is used for times, and the slash (forward slash) symbol / is used for divide – in any calculation program these 4 operators may be entered from the numeric keypad if Num Lock is on, or from the main keyboard – both will achieve the same thing.

Lock keys

Caps Lock (CapsLk), Number Lock (Num Lock) & Scroll Lock (ScrLk) are all toggle keys – press once to turn on and press once again to turn off. When a lock key is on an LED light will be lit – this may be at the top right of the keyboard in a bank of 2 or 3, or it may be on the key itself. When Caps Lock or Num Lock is turned on or off, you may also briefly see a semi-transparent image on the screen in case you hit this by mistake – especially useful when entering passwords that are case sensitive.

Caps Lock (CapsLk) - when Caps Lock is on all letters will be typed in uppercase until it is turned off. In emails, messaging etc, typing in all uppercase is considered rude as it looks like shouting. Caps Lock only affects letters, not numbers or punctuation characters, and you still need to use the Shift key to access these. You should use Caps Lock instead of Shift if you want to type more than one or two upper case letters in a row. Using Shift when Caps Lock is on will reverse the commands – who remembers DIRE STRAITS !!!

Number Lock (Num Lock) – used to activate and deactivate the numeric keypad – see the section above.

Scroll Lock (ScrLk) - in the past, when Scroll Lock was selected, pressing the arrow keys resulted in scrolling through a page of text rather than moving the cursor line by line. Nowadays this has been replaced by the on-screen scroll bar, so the Scroll Lock key is almost never used and most recent applications don't recognize it.

Laptop Keyboards

While very similar, a laptop keyboard is arranged slightly differently to a desktop keyboard to save space. Most laptop keyboards are made smaller by placing the keys closer together and by including an Fn key

(see above). Many laptop keyboards omit the numeric keypad to save space but may use a section towards the middle of the alphanumeric keys to provide a keypad activated by a function key or shortcut.

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