Tech sheets

Quick definitions

Print driver

The print driver is the software that allows the computer to communicate with the printer. It comes on a CD-ROM or floppy disc, it may already be installed in your computer, or is available for free as a download.

Printers

Printers are a computer peripheral designed to produce text and/or graphics on to paper. As you probably know, the printer outputs text much more quickly than graphics. Home printers are now mostly likely the ink jet or laser variety.

A printer consists not only of the obvious hardware, but also the software in your system that manages the printer.

The printer hardware includes:

- The printer itself
- The printer power cord
- The printer-to-computer connection cable
- The ink/toner cartridge

If you're having problems with your printer, first check all the hardware connections.

Unplug and firmly plug in the power cord from the wall. Unplug and plug in the connection cord. Remove and firmly re-insert the ink cartridge.

Printer software

Printers don't sit directly inside the computer; they're connected by a cable of some kind, and they need a way to communicate with the computer.

A small piece of software called a "print driver" is what's used for this communication. The print driver comes on the CD-ROM or floppy discs that come with your printer in the box. As you may know, before you use the new printer, you have to install this software.

Newer computers don't require a print driver installation. The software is pre-installed. If you plug your printer into a new computer and it recognizes the printer, you don't need to install the print driver

If not, the software is fairly easy to install. Insert the CD-ROM or floppy discs that come with the printer, the installation process should appear immediately. Follow the instructions to complete the procedure.

If your printer produces poorly printed pages, unusual characters, or some other problem, and you've checked out other hardware problems, reinstalling the print drivers from the original software may help.

If you've lost that original CD-ROM or the floppy discs that came with your printer and you want to reinstall the print driver or move the printer to a new computer, don't panic. The same software is available (for free) as a download from the printer company's website.

Troubleshooting printer problems in 10 steps

Read, copy on to paper, and follow the error message

If you get an error message, read the message carefully, and copy it down on a piece of paper to follow once you clear the error message. If the error message gives you directions on how to solve the problem, follow them all carefully.

★★★Clear all your print jobs and restart the computer

You can do this by finding the printer icon in the lower right-hand side of your computer. Highlight and delete all the print jobs you've created, then restart your computer.

Consult the manual

Check the owner's manual for explanations of the funny lights and other warnings your printer may provide. The manual may have diagnostics tips or procedures for you to follow that are not so obvious.

Check the hardware— ALL those plugs & wires!

Refer back to "Printers: hardware" on the front of this sheet. Turn the printer off, then on. Unplug and replug all the cables.

Clean the print heads

If your page appears with unsightly lines, smudges, broken lines, etc., try cleaning the print head. When you have the print dialogue box open, right click and try to find a maintenance option. This differs from printer to printer, and your printer may not have this function. The maintenance function will attempt to remove clogged ink and clean the ink cartridge head. Some printers allow you to clean the print heads manually—follow the directions given in your manual. Print head cleaning solution is available, but it's probably not worth the money.

Remove the paper/paper tray

If you can pull out the paper tray, remove it. Remove all the paper and look inside: is there paper still jammed inside the printer? Restack the paper that you're using. Is it crumpled up or damaged? Replace it with some fresh paper.

Type of paper

Printers like printing easy things. That means standard 8.5x11 sheets of office papers. Cards, envelopes, and labels all present mechanical challenges.

Replace the ink cartridge

If the page is still blank after the maintenance is performed, you probably need to purchase a new ink cartridge, even if it "feels" like there's still ink in the cartridge.

Clean out the printer

Printing is dirty work. The paper and ink create a lot of dust and fragments, and these can cause the printer to function poorly. Unplug the printer. Remove visible bits of paper debris. Open the printer top and remove the ink cartridges. Search for more debris. Use a pair of tweezers or pliers to remove jammed paper. Use a can of compressed air to blow out dust and debris. Turn the printer upside-down and shake it if nothing else really works — there may be something lodged in it.

The last step

Throw the printer out and buy a new one

Seriously. Sometimes printer problems just can't be fixed, and if the warranty has expired, it's rarely worth repairing a printer. Count your losses, get a recommendation from a friend who owns a functioning one, and go buy a new printer.

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