

## Providing Computer Help: Things to Remember

- **Let them do all the typing**, even if it's slower that way, and even if you have to point to every key they need to type. That's the only way they're going to learn from the session.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Try not to ask yes-or-no questions; nobody wants to look foolish, so their answer is likely to be a guess. "What did you do after you turned the computer on?" will get you more information than "Did you attach to the file server?"
- **Attend to your body language.** Try to squat down so your eyes are just below the level of theirs. When they're looking at the computer, look at the computer. When they're looking at you, look back at them.
- **Be aware of how abstract your language is.** Don't say anything unless you intend for them to understand it. "Press this key" is concrete and easy to understand. "Get into the editor" is abstract and will only make sense if they know what the editor is and how to get into it. Keep adjusting your language downward towards concrete units until they start to get it, and then slowly adjust back up towards greater abstraction so long as they're following you. When formulating a take-home lesson ("when it does this and that, you should try such-and-such"), check once again that you're using language of the right degree of abstraction for this user right now.
- **Tell them to read any messages**, such as errors, that the computer generates.
- **Find out their goal**; what they're really trying to do. Is there another way to go about it?
- **Stay positive.** When they do something wrong, tell them gently what to do and why. Don't say "no" or "that's wrong". They'll often respond by doing something else that's wrong.
- **Blame the computer.** Whenever they start to blame themselves, respond by blaming the computer. Then keep on blaming the computer, no matter how many times it takes, in a calm, authoritative tone of voice.
- **Ask them to show you.** Maybe they can't tell you what they've done or what happened. In this case you can ask them what they are trying to do and say, "Show me how you do that".
- **Explain your thinking.** Don't make it mysterious. If something is true, show them how they can see it's true. When you don't know, say "I don't know". When you're guessing, say "let's try ... because ..." Resist the temptation to appear all-knowing. Help them learn to think the problem through.