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*What you should
know about your*
PC Keyboard



Tim Wakeling

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Introduction

It might seem a bit odd, having a whole booklet just about the keyboard. And I'll grant you that a lot of how you use a keyboard is pretty obvious – to type “hello” you press H then E then L then... well, you get the idea.

But most people I talk to are a bit nervous of some of the less obvious keys... or want to understand the difference between a normal PC keyboard or a laptop keyboard... or would find some of the less obvious tricks handy...

And that's why I've written this booklet. Don't feel you have to learn it all. Have a read through it so you know what's covered. Then if you need to check something you'll know where to look.

The plug on the end of the cable

Most keyboards have a USB plug on the end – this plugs into the USB socket, which you'll have on pretty much all computers (usually more than one). And some are wireless – handy if you want to be able to move about or lean back in your chair.

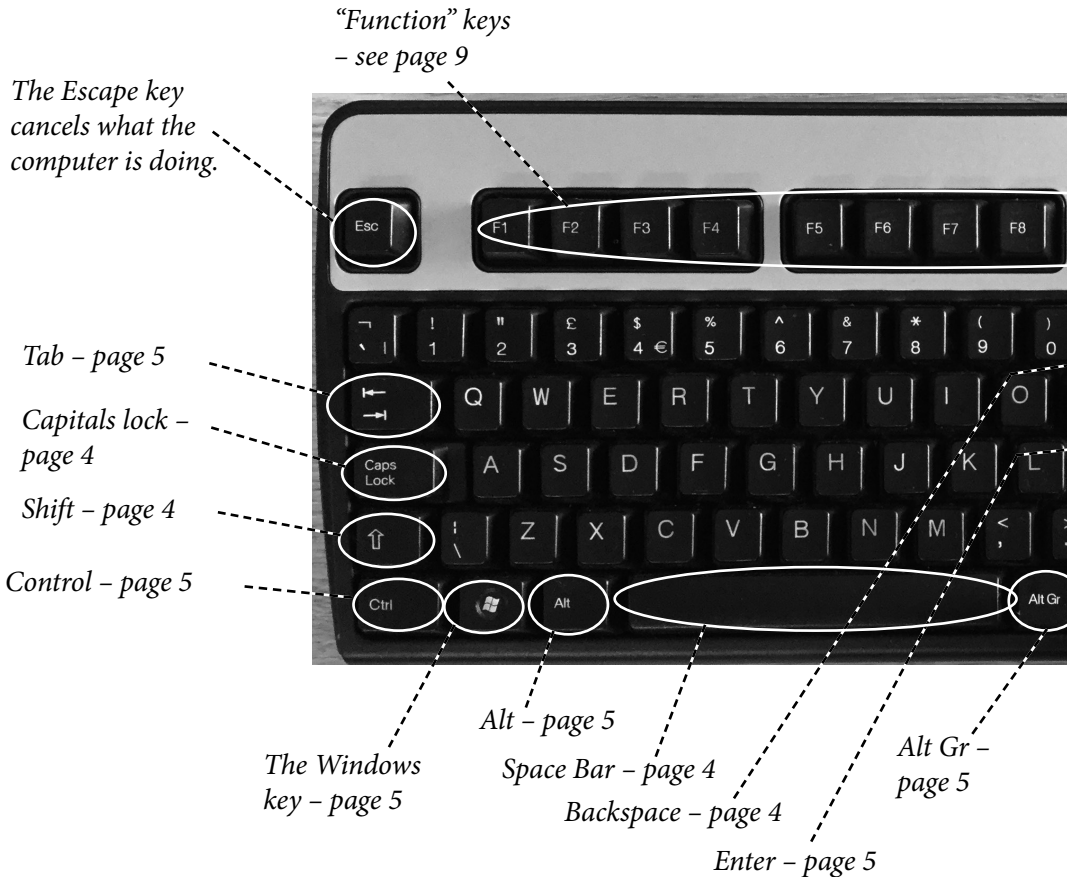


**A USB plug
(on most keyboards)**

If you have a wireless keyboard, you'll get a little gadget with it, which again plugs into the USB socket on the computer. That receives the signals sent from the wireless keyboard.

The keyboard

Right, hopefully you recognise that thing below. Yep, it's a pretty standard keyboard. But do you know what ALL the keys are for? Not many people do. Have a look at the labels below. The different keys will be covered in detail in the pages coming up. This is a kind of handy reference page for you.

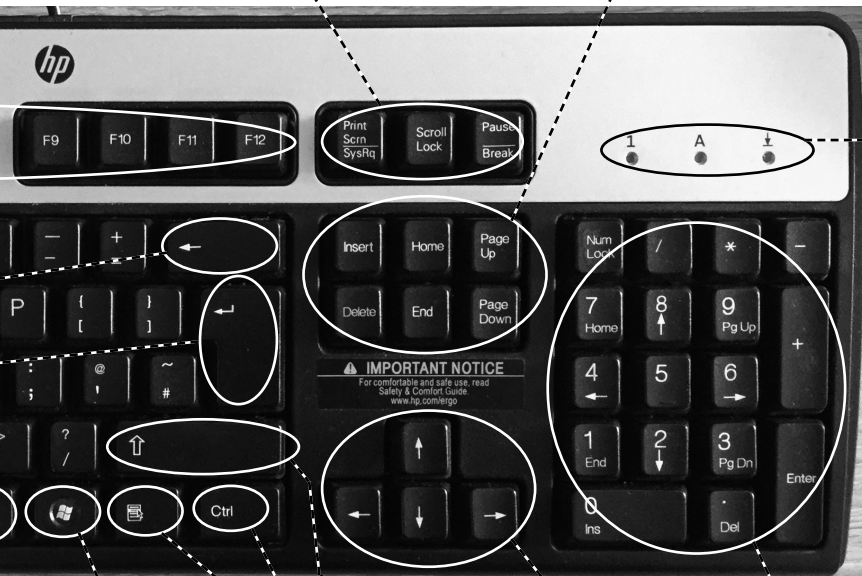


A lot of keyboards also have extra keys, called “hotkeys”. They’re usually along the top, or tucked in here next to the numeric keypad. Not all keyboards will have these and even if you have, it varies which ones. See page 14.



3 fairly un-useful buttons – page 6

6 very handy buttons – page 7



*Indicator lights – page 8
(not for turning right or left...)*

The Windows key – page 5

Shift – page 4

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“The right click menu key” (snappy name, eh?) – page 5

The reasonably obvious keys

Let's start with the easy ones. The letters are where you type and the numbers up above them are where you type numbers. With me so far? Here are all keys you type with:

The least useful key on the entire keyboard. I don't think I have ever used this key in all my work with computers.

The numbers and plus and minus signs



Back slash – not used very much

The letters

Space Bar – to put spaces between words

Other symbols for ordinary typing. Comma, full-stop and a few other punctuation marks. Also the slash used in web addresses like www.helpfulbooks.co.uk/newsletterarchive.htm

3 more fairly easy keys



Shift – hold this down while you type a letter to get a capital instead of lower case. With a number or symbol key you get the symbol on top of the key instead of the one at the bottom. For example Shift and 3 gives you the £ sign.



Caps Lock – press this once and all the letters you type will be capitals until you press it again.



Backspace – this deletes whatever is just to the left of the flashing text cursor – usually the letter you just typed. (If you're on a web page, this sometimes also can act as a "Back" button, to take you back to the previous web page you were on.)

The not so obvious keys



Tab – some keyboards don't have 'tab' written on this key, they just have the symbol. This key moves text across the page a set amount of space – a bit like pressing the space bar say six times. The difference is it moves the text to a particular place so you can use it to line up columns, in a table, for example.



Enter – occasionally called "return". This is the key you press at the end of a line of text to move to the next line. It also tells the computer when you've finished putting information into a window that popped up. You can use it with the cursor keys (see the next page) to choose between options on the window.

Some keys that you use with other keys

These are bit like the Shift key. On their own they aren't much use but along with other keys they become handy. They're all on the bottom row of the keyboard, around the space bar.

Ctrl is short for Control. You use it along with other keys to get "shortcuts". For example Ctrl and P prints the current document.

Windows key (see below)



Alt (ie Alternative) is used in shortcuts and also "activates" the menu at the top of most programs so you can use the cursor keys and Enter to select from the menu.

This one opens up the menu you'd get if you right clicked with the mouse. Goodness knows why it's a key on the keyboard. You can ignore this one if you like – most people do!

This funny looking key is the Windows key. On its own it opens the Start menu (or Start screen in Windows 8). You can also use it in several shortcuts.

Alt Gr (Gr for grey – it used to be grey on old keyboards) usually works as Ctrl and Alt together – but it's rare to meet anyone who ever uses it.

10 very useful and 3 not-really-that-useful-at-all keys

Right, on to that group of keys between the main bit of keyboard and the numbers on the right.

These ones at the bottom are the cursor keys -- (also called the arrow keys... you can see why).



They have two main uses:

First, when you're typing a document you can use them to move the text cursor (and now you see why they got their first name). The cursor shows where text you type will be added. So, for example, if you typed "We bought some lovely yellow paint," you could then use the left cursor key to move back and add "Day-Glo" before yellow. Then use the right cursor key to move back to the end again.

The other use is when you have a window that's popped up with various options to choose between. You can often use the cursor keys to move between the different buttons (and then use Enter to select the one that's now highlighted).

The 3 not-really-that-useful-at-all keys

These are really only there because they used to be handy back in the early days of PCs.

Print Screen used to, well, print the screen. But someone must have decided that was too easy and obvious, so now it copies the screen into memory so you can paste it into a graphics program. Very occasionally, that's useful (e.g. if you happen to write books about computers and use lots of pictures of the screen to show what's happening...).

Scroll Lock. In Excel, this changes what the cursor keys do so that they move the spreadsheet about the screen instead of just moving the cursor.

Pause/Break used to pause whatever was happening or (with Ctrl) stop the program running (i.e. break the routine). Nowadays with the Windows key it brings up a screen telling you the specification of your PC.

Oh, and **SysRq**? It's short for "system request" and the idea was you used it to ask the system to change to another program or to stop what it was doing. You can ignore it now.

6 handy keys

These six are all to do with entering text. You could happily use a computer perfectly well without them but knowing what they do will make it quicker and easier.

Insert changes the way new text is entered.

Normally if you move the text cursor to the beginning of the word "top" and type "lap" it'll budge up the word "top" so you get "laptop".

But if you press Insert it'll change so what you type replaces what's there and you end up with "lap". (I'd suggest you try it out – that way it's easier to remember).

This is the most frustrating key on the keyboard, if you accidentally knock it and don't realise what you've done! To turn it off, just press it again.



Delete works a bit like backspace but removes a character from the right instead of to the left.

Page Up and **Page Down** move the text up and down by a page (or a screen) at a time.

Home moves the text cursor to the start of the line, screen or page. **End** moves it straight to the end.

The Numeric Keypad

This is the separate block of number keys on the right. (If you have a laptop, there might not be one of these. Page 11 will tell you more).

The keypad works differently depending on whether Num Lock is on or off. It's normally on – and this light is on to show you. (Sometimes it'll helpfully be labelled “NumLock”.) This key switches it on and off.



With Num Lock on, the number keys are just that, number keys. With it turned off, they act like the cursor keys and Home, Page Up/Down Delete, Insert and End keys.

The enter and =, -, * (times) and / (divide) keys act as those keys all the time.

The secret clever thing about the numeric keypad

Try this: start up your usual text program (eg Microsoft Word or Wordpad). Check that the Num Lock light is on (press Num Lock if it's off). Then hold down the Alt key on the left of the keyboard and type 0176 on the numeric keypad. You should get a ° sign. This is how you get all the symbols that aren't on the keyboard. You have to use the numbers on the numeric keypad, the main numbers won't work. And it has to be the Alt on the left of the keyboard, not Alt Gr on the right.

Here are some of the characters you can get:

° - 0176	² - 0178	½ - 0189	ç - 0231	ê - 0234
© - 0169	³ - 0179	¾ - 0190	è - 0232	ë - 0235
± - 0177	¼ - 0188	÷ - 0247	é - 0233	ü - 0252

You can see the full list by going to the [Character map](#). The easiest way to open it is to search for it – in Windows 10 use the search box on the taskbar, in Windows 8 just start typing when on the Start screen and in Windows 7 click the Start button and use the search box at the bottom of the Start menu.

The Function Keys

The function keys are the F number keys along the top of the keyboard.



They're called function keys because they have different functions depending on what program you're in. The idea is that different programs need keys that do different things... and you can hardly have (say) the K key do something different... that needs to always type K! So they added these function keys.

Having said that, nowadays some of the things they do are fairly standard between programs... here are a few:

F1 – Calls up the Help screen, which is like a kind of computerised manual for the program you're using at the time. If you hold shift while you press it, the cursor goes into “What's this?” mode where you can click on something and it'll tell you what it is.

F2 – In File Explorer (called Windows Explorer in some versions of Windows) it lets you rename a file.

F3 – In File Explorer (called Windows Explorer in some versions of Windows) this brings up the search feature so you can find a file or folder.

F5 – Refreshes (reloads) the current screen. Especially useful on the web, either to check for more recent news or to get it to reload a page that didn't load properly.

F7 – Spellcheck in programs like Word. Hold Shift while you press it to get a list of other words with the same meaning instead.

F10 – activates the menu bar in some programs, like Alt (see page 5).

Laptop keyboards

Laptop keyboards are different because they need to be built in and they need to be small. They also tend to be quite shallow so the keys don't move as far when you press them.



This Fn key is NOT like the function keys at the top. It's a special key for laptops to make up for them not having all the keys a normal keyboard has. See the next page.

These keys are the same as for a "normal" keyboard... they're just in different places.

You can always plug a normal, full sized keyboard into a laptop if you want to.

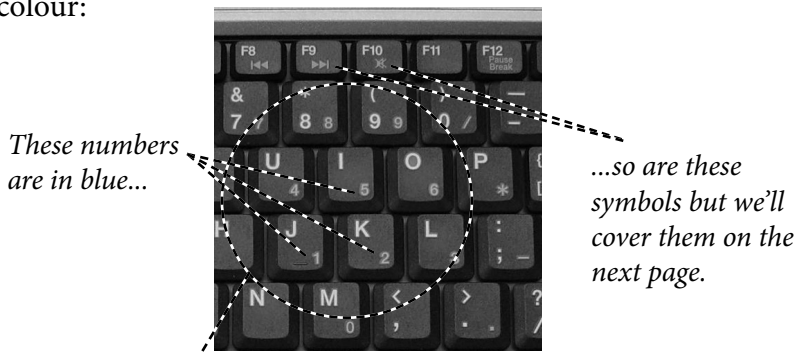
Here's a different kind of laptop keyboard. It's laid out slightly differently but the same buttons are there.

Some laptops have this little rubber thing, which you can use instead of a mouse.



I mentioned there's a special Fn key on a laptop keyboard and here's why. On a laptop you don't have space for all the keys you have on a normal, desktop keyboard. You normally won't have the numeric keypad (or the +, -, *, / keys that go with it). You probably won't have Num Lock on its own key. You may not have Scroll Lock, though as I said on page 7, you're not missing out on much there!

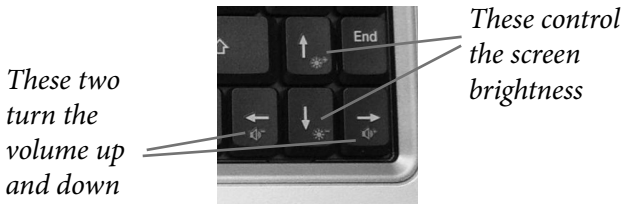
But you can use the Fn key to get at these "missing" keys. On some laptops the Fn key is surrounded by a white box, on others it's printed in a different colour (often blue, green or orange). And (on most laptops) on several of the other keys there are extra symbols in white boxes, or a different colour:



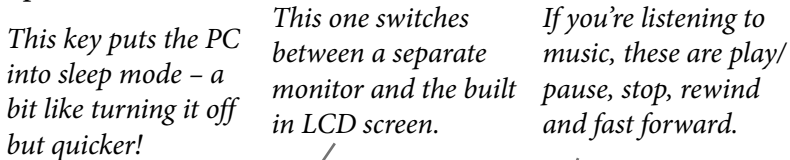
You can use these keys as a numeric keypad by holding the Fn key down while you use them. So you could just type in numbers by holding down the Fn key and using these keys. Now to be honest that's not all that useful – you could just use the "normal" numbers and save the effort of holding down the Fn key. But remember the special characters from page 8? You could only get them using the numeric keypad, not the numbers at the top of the keyboard. So on a laptop, to get the © symbol hold down Fn and Alt and type 0169 using the blue numbers. That means hold Fn and Alt and type MJO9 (where O is the letter, not the number).

One or two extra things on laptops

That Fn key I mentioned has other uses as well. On some laptops, to save space they don't give you a separate volume control or brightness control. There's also usually a setting to turn off the screen when you connect a separate full-size screen or a projector. To use these, you hold the Fn key and press the relevant key:



By the way, unlike a physical dial you turn, these only work when the computer is turned on, once it's finished starting up.



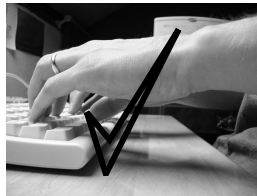
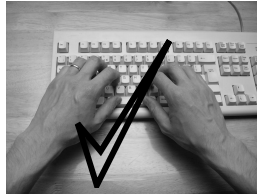
This one allows you to access a wireless network or the Internet if you have a wireless connection.

This one mutes the sound completely.

By the way, where these are on the keyboard can vary depending on what make of laptop you have. They should have the same symbols, though.

Using your keyboard comfortably

If you only use the keyboard now and again for ten minutes or so you might be fine to just use it any-old-how. But if you're going to use it to any extent, it's worth knowing how to use it comfortably and without straining your wrists. The single most important thing is to hold your wrists straight while you type – don't bend them.



Some people like to use a plastic or foam wrist rest on their keyboard. That's OK. But it's only for resting your wrists while you're not typing. While you type, your wrists should be free to move – not plonked on the rest.



This bit is the wrist rest. You can also get ones that aren't attached to the keyboard.

A lot of people like to have the computer keyboard up at an angle. I wouldn't recommend it because it makes you bend your wrists upwards. But if you really, really want to, there are usually little legs that fold out of the bottom of the back of the keyboard.



Extra buttons

A few years ago, the bosses of the companies who make keyboards all got together in a top secret meeting. “What can we do to make keyboards more exciting?” asked one. “Never mind that, people are getting used to them. How can we make them more confusing?” asked another. Adding more buttons was the obvious answer. And to top it off, they agreed to have them do different things on different keyboards, just to keep everyone on their toes. At least that’s how I think it happened.

Most keyboards nowadays have some extra buttons. Here are typical ones and what they do:



Sleep – a bit like turning it off but the PC remembers what you were in the middle of. Sometimes the button has three Zs instead – like a snore.



Mute – turns the sound off completely until you press it again.



Brings up the help screen, like pressing F1 (see page 9).



Opens a search/find window. On some PCs this will be one that searches on your PC, on others it’ll be an Internet search engine.



Connect to the Internet. This one sometimes looks like an italic ‘e’ instead.



Access your email.



Visit a shopping website. You can change which site it’s set up to visit.

Curved and split keyboards

If you use a keyboard a lot and you find you get sore wrists, first try the suggestions on page 13 – they may be enough to help. But you might also want to try a split or curved keyboard. They're specifically designed to make sure you hold your wrists in a good position and some people I know say they make a huge difference.

Here's a split keyboard:



The point is that each half is at an angle that matches how your wrists should be. They work best if you can touch type as they're not so good for moving your hands around lots. One disadvantage is that you can't do some key combination shortcuts so easily with just one hand. But then, if they're that much of a stretch you probably should be using both hands anyway!

A curved keyboard is a kind of halfway house between a normal one and a split one. They're also a bit easier to get used to when you first start using them.

They're not as common as split ones, but you can get them at any reasonably-sized PC shop – you might have to ask for “ergonomic” keyboards. If they don't have them, they should be able to order one.

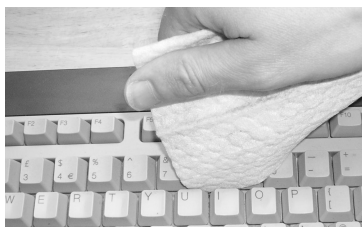
Keeping it clean

Keyboards don't need much cleaning but if you don't keep the dust out or clean them, eventually they'll stop working.

The simplest way is to use a keyboard cover so it doesn't get dusty in the first place. You could buy one or just use a newspaper, a piece of cloth or anything you like. Or some computer desks have keyboard trays that slide under the desk, which would work fine.

If you do get dirt in your keyboard, you can just turn it upside-down and give it a good shake. That'll get any biscuit crumbs out but fluff can be harder to shake loose. There are two ways I'd recommend:

First, you can use a static duster – the ones you can get for dusting the house or hard floors. Simply use the edge of it to clean between the keys and it attracts the dust to it.

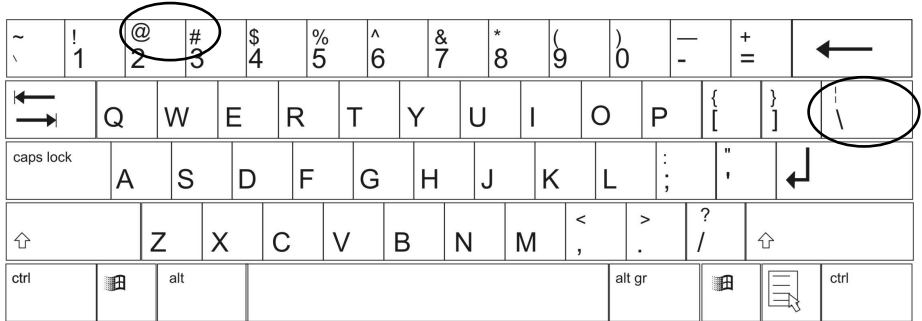


Secondly you can use a can of compressed air, which you can get from PC or hobby shops. Get one with a “straw” that you plug into the nozzle so you can direct the air neatly between the keys, like this:

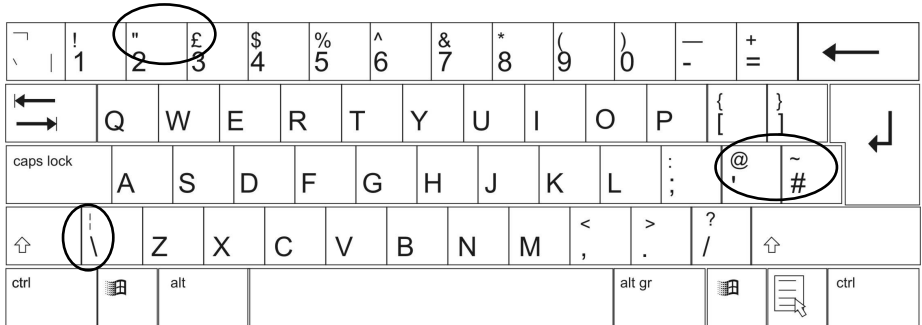


UK vs US keyboards

In America they use a slightly different layout of keys. The main part of the keyboard looks like this:



Instead of like a UK keyboard, like this:



It's fairly unlikely you'll have an American keyboard as most PC manufacturers know to include a British one when selling in the UK.

But it is possible that Windows will think you have a US one. Since it's an American program, it assumes it's in America unless it's told otherwise. That's really confusing, because when you go to type a " for example, you get @ instead. Being sharp, you think "Oh, I'll try the @ key to see if that does a £ sign." And it prints a '...

Here's how to put it right again...

In Windows 10:

This shouldn't be a problem in Windows 10 as you usually set up one language at the start. But if you do have this problem, open the Settings app by clicking the Start button then on "Settings". When the app opens go to the "Time and Language" section to change it to UK English.

In Windows 8:

This shouldn't be a problem in Windows 8 as you usually set up one language at the start. But if you do have this problem, try holding down the Windows key and tapping the Space Bar. Each time you do, it cycles through all languages set up on the PC (usually 1 or 2).

In Windows 7:

- 1) Start up Control Panel by going to the Start menu.
- 2) Select "View by: Category" if it isn't picked already.
- 3) Click "Change keyboards or other input methods" (it's under the clock and language heading), then click on "Change keyboards"
- 4) This screen shows the different language and keyboard choices on your PC. Make sure the UK one is selected (if not, choose it from the drop down list).



- 5) Then click on "OK" at the bottom of the window and it should be fixed.

The euro sign

One thing I haven't mentioned is how you get the euro sign – €. It's printed on the 4 key but if you use Shift and the 4 key you get the \$ sign. All you do is hold Ctrl and Alt together and press 4. Simple as that.

Tidying the cable

Most keyboards have the cable coming out of the middle of the back. That can be a bit of a pain as you usually have the monitor in the middle, behind the keyboard.

If you turn the keyboard upside-down, most will have a channel or clips that you can put the cable in to make it come out of the left or right, depending on where you have your PC.

The clip type – as it comes:



The clip type - with it clipped to come from the left (*remember, it's upside-down so you put it in the opposite side*):



The channel type:



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