

Computing and clarity can coexist

Webster's New World Dictionary of Computer Terms, third edition (Simon & Schuster, New York, \$6.95, 420 pp., paperback)

Galen Gruman, Soft News Editor

Do you know the probability anecdote about the roomful of monkeys at typewriters in which, if they are left to type forever, one will eventually type out Shakespeare's plays? I've always suspected the same scenario would apply to a truly useful dictionary for computing terms.

It has, but I doubt monkeys or combinatorial probabilities were involved. *Webster's New World Dictionary of Computer Terms* was obviously and thoroughly designed and planned. The cover claims to cover 4,500 terms with "clear, jargon-free definitions." It delivers all that it promises.

I have to admit that I am totally surprised by how well the terms are defined: As a professional editor, I had all but given up hope that someone could make sense of all the terms and idiosyncrasies among the various camps using them. Not only are the terms clearly covered without the typical gobbledygook that keeps hindering communication even across computing subdisciplines, but they cover a wide range of terms. It is truly comprehensive.

The paperback book is also well-designed typographically. It uses a legible

type size and a clear, easy-to-read typeface — important but often overlooked considerations.

I don't agree with some of the dictionary's capitalization style, but no one in this field does on such style matters. There's an unfortunate tendency to capitalize any word that has to do with computers or software — a holdover, I suspect, from the days when terminal keyboards had no lowercase letters.

The dictionary also includes some handy tables, including conversion tables among hexadecimal, decimal, octal, and binary; EBCDIC and ASCII tables; and powers-of-two and powers-of-16 tables. However, the EBCDIC and ASCII tables are not complete (they don't even list the lowercase letters' values!) and give the numeric equivalents only in hex and binary — the nontechnical reader will also want them in decimal to access the characters through the *Alt-nnn* system on MS-DOS PCs.

Still, this is an excellent dictionary and a must on the desk of anyone who is not a computer scientist or engineer or who must translate between the computing community and the rest of the world. But it is also a superb base for precision and clarity within the professional community — the truth today is that we *don't* use our technical terms precisely or even give them the same meanings across groups in the community. **RS 101**