

Accessibility Features Help Clear Up Windows

Letting Users See, Hear

Windows software deals with sight, hearing and movement impairments

BY RUSSELL SHAW

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For people with impaired vision, hearing or mobility, using a personal computer can be a daunting experience.

Fortunately, the Windows XP operating system comes with a host of tools and applications that can help those with physical challenges.

Known collectively as Accessibility, these tools can help you adjust the performance and appearance of your computer's keyboard, mouse and monitor display.

If you have Windows XP, you reach the Accessibility area by clicking Start, then the Help and Support link and then the Accessibility link. Doing so gets you to the main page for the Accessibility area of Windows XP Help.

Accessibility options come in three groups, each of which is described in the left frame of the main Accessibility page. They include features for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or vision-impaired, and with limited mobility.

In the left frame, each of these descriptions has a link. Click on those links and you'll see information about the features.

For those with hearing difficulties, Windows XP offers three features: Soundsentry, ShowSounds, and SoundSchemes.

Soundsentry shows a visual warning, such as a blinking program window, when your PC's built-in speaker makes a sound. Many PCs are pro-

grammed to play an off-key piano note when the user makes a mistake or the computer cannot find a requested file. Soundsentry will show a display that indicates that the PC is playing that discordant tone.

ShowSounds offers several types of visual prompts. For example, you can configure ShowSounds to cause the active window in the program you are using to flash.

To turn on Soundsentry, click Start, then Control Panel and then double-click Accessibility Options. In Accessibility Options, click the Sound tab. Under Soundsentry, click on the Use Soundsentry checkbox and then click the Apply icon.

ShowSounds works with several Windows-compatible software programs to provide visual cues for events that are normally marked by only a sound.

These events can be the familiar off-key piano note or the chime-like tones that play when a specific task has been successfully completed. ShowSounds will show text captions that describe these sounds when your PC makes them.

To turn on ShowSounds, go to Accessibility Options and click the ShowSounds tab. Then check the Use ShowSounds box and click the Apply icon.

Sound Schemes, on the other hand, lets you assign a specific sound for events that occur on your PC, such as errors or other events of note. For example, you can configure your PC to play a jungle sound every time your printer has finished printing a document.

To configure Sound Schemes in Windows XP, click Start and then Control Panel. In the Control Panel, click the Sounds tab. The Program events list appears. In the list, assign a sound for each event you want to

save in a new sound scheme.

Under Sound scheme, click Save As. In the Save Scheme As dialog box, type a name for the new sound scheme — such as "print complete." Then click Apply.

For the visually impaired, three of Windows XP's most useful Accessibility tools are High Contrast, Magnifier and Narrator.

High Contrast offers color schemes that use selected color combinations to make portions of text and images stand out more easily from surrounding words and pictures. In Accessibility Options, click the Display tab. Under High Contrast, select the Use High Contrast checkbox and then click Apply.

Magnifier does exactly that: enlarge a portion of the screen to make it more readable. It does so by creating a separate window that displays an magnified portion of what appears on the monitor.

Magnifier can be configured to certain levels, sizes and to blow up certain areas of an image. Click Start, Accessibility and then Magnifier. The Magnifier Settings box opens. Click the check box next to the func-

tions you wish to enable, and those features will automatically be added to your display.

Narrator will read aloud text that appears in Internet Explorer as well as in some older word processing utilities. You can instruct Narrator to read instructions that appear in some programs, announce letters as you type them, and adjust the speed, volume or pitch of Narrator's built-in voice.

To open Narrator, click Start, Accessibility and then click Narrator. The Narrator box will open. A series of check boxes will enable any of several functions. If you want to have typed characters read aloud, for example, click the check box next to that option and Narrator will start reading aloud.

For users with impaired mobility, Windows XP offers several Accessibility tools. FilterKeys instructs Windows to ignore repeated keystrokes — a common problem among those who lack dexterity.

For those users who have trouble manipulating a mouse, MouseKeys can enable mouse type cursors or movement by means of certain keys.