

Silver Threads

A column created especially for people spending their golden years in Falmouth, written by these same senior citizens.

“Rambling Wreck ...”

By Kay Paine

It sometimes seems we need to be “a heck of an engineer” to do almost anything these days—even turning on the TV can be complicated, if you happen to have a DVD player or, even more challenging, use DVR, and also watch movies streaming in from Netflix. And making a phone call—we’ve come a long way from friendly Tillie asking “Number, please?” So much to choose from, so little knowledge to even comprehend the options!

This Thread introduces some of the technologies we can use in our own homes, to contact each other, to watch TV, to read a book. It’s not an exhaustive list—that’s too exhausting to even contemplate! This is the result of one person’s curiosity about some of the terms she hears being used, mostly from kids, but more and more from some of her more adventurous friends.

Think of this as an introduction only, an abbreviated “idiot’s guide” to an ever-expanding world of gadgets. We provide a list of the terms that seem most prevalent, with definitions and descriptions. The primary source is Wikipedia, amplified by friends who are actively using the technology. We hope you can use this as a basis for your own research. But do it quickly, since it will all be different before you can say “cloud computing” (accessing software and storage from a network outside your own computer or other device).

Laptop computers, notebooks. These are pretty easy to define, since they are merging into the same thing. Laptops are personal, portable computers, with the notebook originally a smaller and less powerful version of the laptop. But the laptop is getting slimmer and the notebook more powerful, so the terms are blending. A laptop can do everything your larger PC can do, but has a smaller screen and is portable. Just to make it a bit more confusing, the term “PC” is often used to designate that the computer is using a Microsoft operating system on one of many brands of hardware (IBM, Toshiba, Sony, Dell, etc.), as opposed to a “Mac,” where the computer’s hardware and operating system both come from Apple. But both PCs and Macs are personal computers.

Tablet computers, such as Apple’s iPad or Amazon’s Kindle Fire. If you are around small children, you’ve likely seen a tablet. With their colorful animated games, tablets are today’s version of what the Saturday morning Bullwinkle cartoon and Cheerios used to be, entertaining the kids while mom and dad get a few more winks. Tablets appear as all screen, covering a lightweight box of computing power. You swipe away and touch to open and pinch to shut the brightly colored icons that stand for the many functions available, or “apps” as they are called (short for “application”). There’s no mouse or keyboard, just the touch screen with icons to represent the apps. (There is an icon you can touch that brings up a virtual keyboard app so you can type). With your tablet, you can access the Internet to read and send email, use GPS to find directions, download a book to read or a movie to watch, read the daily

newspaper, and do many other things. Doctors use them now in their practices from sites remote from their offices to check medications and call up x-rays and other data.

Smartphones, such as Apple's iPhone or the Samsung Galaxy. Much smaller than a tablet but offering a larger screen than a traditional cell phone, a smartphone has more computing power and connectivity than a cell phone. Smartphones are used like the PDAs (Personal Data Assistants, such as the Blackberry) of recent times to keep calendars, check email, send text messages, access the internet, use GPS, take photos and videos, and yes, make a phone call. A smartphone uses an operating system, like a PC does. They have many of the same computing features as a tablet, such as GPS to find directions; however, with the much smaller screen that allows the smart phone to fit in your pocket, some of these apps aren't as easy to use as on the larger tablet. Smartphones can take great photographs, and you can easily send them off to friends and family. (How many promised photos taken by digital cameras ever get sent?) Smartphones with optional features can use satellite technology, so you can reach the Internet from most places, without being near cell phone towers or wireless (Wi Fi) capability.

E-book Readers, such as Amazon's Kindle or the Barnes & Noble Nook. You can read e-books (books set up to be sent to and stored on computers) on a tablet, but e-book readers are specialized for this purpose. The software allows you to keep your place, underline, take notes, and view in small or large fonts for easy reading. There are many options for buying and renting books on these readers, as well as "checking them out" from the Falmouth Public Library, but all require a network connection of some kind for downloading.

What to choose? This article hopefully introduced much of the technology you hear about today. Each device has so much it can do, and choosing one (or more) is complicated because there are so many overlapping features and so many companies advertising that their product is the best. The costs, both to buy and to operate, can be high, compared with simpler technology. As always, there's no sure way to decide what you need. Probably the best idea is to talk with friends who are using a product and find out which options they actually use and why. You could ask your kids, but they are so far ahead that you might not understand them!

Just as "a picture is worth a thousand words", we offer an excerpt from an email to me, explaining how the emailer uses his tablet and smart phone:

***iPad and iPhone:** email, Internet, social media (FaceBook), commerce (Amazon), games—mostly daughter's, educational programs—also mostly daughter's, but chess for me*

***iPad only:** work PDF files, though generally easier to do commerce on bigger screen iPad than iPhone; sometimes read books on iPad if my Kindle is not around; also have an attached keyboard that allows me to have more work/personal email capability*

***iPhone only:** phone calls, camera, navigation (both car and walking in a metro area—iPad has this but it's but too big to carry comfortably), FaceTime (this is big for me, can see wife who lives in Boston and daughter who lives with her mom), my "to do" type lists (notes application), calendar, weather, stock/market information/quotes, my Starbucks credit card, a free calorie and exercise counter application, music (Rhapsody, Pandora, iTunes), guitar tuner, calculator, alarm*

clock, sports scores, subway information (even when I'm in the subway with no internet, application works), restaurant reservations (Open Table app), news, YouTube (which has tutorials on everything: cooking, workouts, languages, a new song for guitar), and I even use the Compass when I come out of the subway and don't know which way to walk

Neighborhood Falmouth is a nonprofit, membership organization, operating since 2009 to help Falmouth seniors live safely and comfortably in their own homes. For more information on joining, volunteering, and donating, call 508-564-7543; or visit www.neighborhoodfalmouth.org.