

# Basics of Computers - Introduction

The literal meaning of computer is a device that can calculate. However, modern computers can do a lot more than calculate. **Computer** is an electronic device that receives input, stores or processes the input as per user instructions and provides output in desired format.

## Input-Process-Output Model

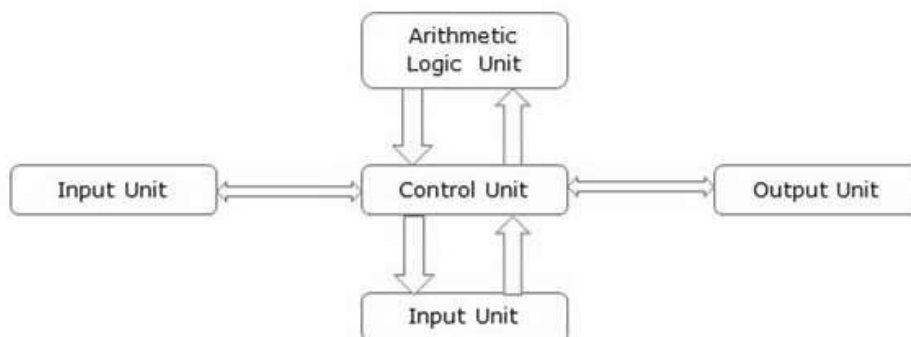
Computer input is called **data** and the output obtained after processing it, based on user's instructions is called **information**. Raw facts and figures which can be processed using arithmetic and logical operations to obtain information are called **data**.



The processes that can be applied to data are of two types –

- **Arithmetic operations** – Examples include calculations like addition, subtraction, differentials, square root, etc.
- **Logical operations** – Examples include comparison operations like greater than, less than, equal to, opposite, etc.

The corresponding figure for an actual computer looks something like this –



The basic parts of a computer are as follows –

- **Input Unit** – Devices like keyboard and mouse that are used to input data and instructions to the computer are called input unit.
- **Output Unit** – Devices like printer and visual display unit that are used to provide information to the user in desired format are called output unit.

- **Control Unit** – As the name suggests, this unit controls all the functions of the computer. All devices or parts of computer interact through the control unit. Functions of this unit are –
  - a. It is responsible for controlling the transfer of data and instructions among other units of a computer.
  - b. It manages and coordinates all the units of the computer.
  - c. It obtains the instructions from the memory, interprets them, and directs the operation of the computer.
  - d. It communicates with Input/Output devices for transfer of data or results from storage.
  - e. It does not process or store data.
- **Arithmetic Logic Unit** – This is the brain of the computer where all arithmetic operations and logical operations take place. This unit consists of two subsections namely,
  - Arithmetic Section
  - Logic Section

#### **Arithmetic Section**

Function of arithmetic section is to perform arithmetic operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. All complex operations are done by making repetitive use of the above operations.

#### **Logic Section**

Function of logic section is to perform logic operations such as comparing, selecting, matching, and merging of data.

- **Memory** – All input data, instructions and data interim to the processes are stored in the memory. Memory is of two types – **primary memory** and **secondary memory**. Primary memory resides within the CPU whereas secondary memory is external to it.

Control unit, arithmetic logic unit and memory are together called the **central processing unit** or **CPU**. Computer devices like keyboard, mouse, printer, etc. that we can see and touch are the **hardware** components of a computer. The set of instructions or programs that make the computer function using these hardware parts are called **software**. We cannot see or touch software. Both hardware and software are necessary for working of a computer.

## **Computer - Memory**

A memory is just like a human brain. It is used to store data and instructions. Computer memory is the storage space in the computer, where data is to be processed and instructions required for processing are stored. The memory is divided into large number of small parts called cells. Each location or cell has a unique address, which varies from zero to memory size minus one. For example, if the computer has 64k words, then this memory unit has  $64 * 1024 = 65536$  memory locations. The address of these locations varies from 0 to 65535.

Memory is primarily of three types –

- Cache Memory
- Primary Memory/Main Memory
- Secondary Memory

### **Cache Memory**

Cache memory is a very high speed semiconductor memory which can speed up the CPU. It acts as a buffer between the CPU and the main memory. It is used to hold those parts of data and program which are most frequently used by the CPU. The parts of data and programs are transferred from the disk to cache memory by the operating system, from where the CPU can access them.



### **Advantages**

The advantages of cache memory are as follows –

- Cache memory is faster than main memory.
- It consumes less access time as compared to main memory.
- It stores the program that can be executed within a short period of time.
- It stores data for temporary use.

### **Disadvantages**

The disadvantages of cache memory are as follows –

- Cache memory has limited capacity.
- It is very expensive.

### **Primary Memory (Main Memory)**

Primary memory holds only those data and instructions on which the computer is currently working. It has a limited capacity and data is lost when power is switched off. It is generally made up of semiconductor device. These memories are not as fast as registers. The data and instruction

required to be processed resides in the main memory. It is divided into two subcategories RAM and ROM.



### **Characteristics of Main Memory**

- These are semiconductor memories.
- It is known as the main memory.
- Usually volatile memory.
- Data is lost in case power is switched off.
- It is the working memory of the computer.
- Faster than secondary memories.
- A computer cannot run without the primary memory.

### **Secondary Memory**

This type of memory is also known as external memory or non-volatile. It is slower than the main memory. These are used for storing data/information permanently. CPU directly does not access these memories, instead they are accessed via input-output routines. The contents of secondary memories are first transferred to the main memory, and then the CPU can access it. For example, disk, CD-ROM, DVD, etc.



### **Characteristics of Secondary Memory**

- These are magnetic and optical memories.
- It is known as the backup memory.
- It is a non-volatile memory.

- Data is permanently stored even if power is switched off.
- It is used for storage of data in a computer.
- Computer may run without the secondary memory.
- Slower than primary memories.

## Random Access Memory

RAM (Random Access Memory) is the internal memory of the CPU for storing data, program, and program result. It is a read/write memory which stores data until the machine is working. As soon as the machine is switched off, data is erased.



Access time in RAM is independent of the address, that is, each storage location inside the memory is as easy to reach as other locations and takes the same amount of time. Data in the RAM can be accessed randomly but it is very expensive.

RAM is volatile, i.e. data stored in it is lost when we switch off the computer or if there is a power failure. Hence, a backup Uninterruptible Power System (UPS) is often used with computers. RAM is small, both in terms of its physical size and in the amount of data it can hold.

RAM is of two types –

- Static RAM (SRAM)
- Dynamic RAM (DRAM)

### Static RAM (SRAM)

The word **static** indicates that the memory retains its contents as long as power is being supplied. However, data is lost when the power gets down due to volatile nature. SRAM chips use a matrix of 6-transistors and no capacitors. Transistors do not require power to prevent leakage, so SRAM need not be refreshed on a regular basis.

There is extra space in the matrix, hence SRAM uses more chips than DRAM for the same amount of storage space, making the manufacturing costs higher. SRAM is thus used as cache memory and has very fast access.

### Characteristic of Static RAM

- Long life
- No need to refresh
- Faster
- Used as cache memory
- Large size
- Expensive
- High power consumption

### Dynamic RAM (DRAM)

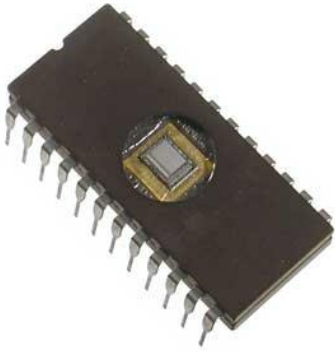
DRAM, unlike SRAM, must be continually **refreshed** in order to maintain the data. This is done by placing the memory on a refresh circuit that rewrites the data several hundred times per second. DRAM is used for most system memory as it is cheap and small. All DRAMs are made up of memory cells, which are composed of one capacitor and one transistor.

### Characteristics of Dynamic RAM

- Short data lifetime
- Needs to be refreshed continuously
- Slower as compared to SRAM
- Used as RAM
- Smaller in size
- Less expensive
- Less power consumption

## Read Only Memory

ROM stands for **Read Only Memory**. The memory from which we can only read but cannot write on it. This type of memory is non-volatile. The information is stored permanently in such memories during manufacture. A ROM stores such instructions that are required to start a computer. This operation is referred to as **bootstrap**. ROM chips are not only used in the computer but also in other electronic items like washing machine and microwave oven.



Let us now discuss the various types of ROMs and their characteristics.

### **MROM (Masked ROM)**

The very first ROMs were hard-wired devices that contained a pre-programmed set of data or instructions. These kind of ROMs are known as masked ROMs, which are inexpensive.

### **PROM (Programmable Read Only Memory)**

PROM is read-only memory that can be modified only once by a user. The user buys a blank PROM and enters the desired contents using a PROM program. Inside the PROM chip, there are small fuses which are burnt open during programming. It can be programmed only once and is not erasable.

### **EPROM (Erasable and Programmable Read Only Memory)**

EPROM can be erased by exposing it to ultra-violet light for a duration of up to 40 minutes. Usually, an EPROM eraser achieves this function. During programming, an electrical charge is trapped in an insulated gate region. The charge is retained for more than 10 years because the charge has no leakage path. For erasing this charge, ultra-violet light is passed through a quartz crystal window (lid). This exposure to ultra-violet light dissipates the charge. During normal use, the quartz lid is sealed with a sticker.

### **EEPROM (Electrically Erasable and Programmable Read Only Memory)**

EEPROM is programmed and erased electrically. It can be erased and reprogrammed about ten thousand times. Both erasing and programming take about 4 to 10 ms (millisecond). In EEPROM, any location can be selectively erased and programmed. EEPROMs can be erased one byte at a time, rather than erasing the entire chip. Hence, the process of reprogramming is flexible but slow.

### **Advantages of ROM**

The advantages of ROM are as follows –

- Non-volatile in nature

- Cannot be accidentally changed
- Cheaper than RAMs
- Easy to test
- More reliable than RAMs
- Static and do not require refreshing
- Contents are always known and can be verified

## Memory Units

Memory unit is the amount of data that can be stored in the storage unit. This storage capacity is expressed in terms of Bytes.

The following table explains the main memory storage units –

| S.No. | Unit & Description   |
|-------|--|
| 1     | <b>Bit (Binary Digit)</b><br>A binary digit is logical 0 and 1 representing a passive or an active state of a component in an electric circuit.  |
| 2     | <b>Nibble</b><br>A group of 4 bits is called nibble.   |
| 3     | <b>Byte</b><br>A group of 8 bits is called byte. A byte is the smallest unit, which can represent a data item or a character.  |
| 4     | <b>Word</b><br>A computer word, like a byte, is a group of fixed number of bits processed as a unit, which varies from computer to computer but is fixed for each computer.<br>The length of a computer word is called word-size or word length. It may be as small as 8 bits or may be as long as 96 bits. A computer stores the information in the form of computer words. |

The following table lists some higher storage units –

| S.No. | Unit & Description                        |
|-------|---|
| 1     | <b>Kilobyte (KB)</b><br>1 KB = 1024 Bytes |
| 2     | <b>Megabyte (MB)</b><br>1 MB = 1024 KB    |



|   |   |
|---|---|
| 3 | <b>GigaByte (GB)</b><br>1 GB = 1024 MB  |
| 4 | <b>TeraByte (TB)</b><br>1 TB = 1024 GB  |
| 5 | <b>PetaByte (PB)</b><br>1 PB = 1024 TB  |
| 6 | <b>ExaByte (EB)</b><br>1 EB = 1024 PB   |
| 7 | <b>ZettaByte (ZB)</b><br>1 ZB = 1024 EB |
| 8 | <b>YottaByte (YB)</b><br>1 YB = 1024 ZB |