

Efficient lapping

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I've given you advice about efficient computing before—and I do so because I love you, dear reader, and want you to be happy—but I haven't made much mention of the thing that has most helped me live a comfortable and happy life in front of a machine: I keep the keyboard in my lap.

The first figure shows the typical laptop user. The laptop's screen needs to be placed in a comfortable position relative to the user's eyes, and the keyboard needs to be in a comfortable position relative to his hands. But the keyboard and screen are connected—what is our hero to do? He compromises by putting the laptop on the table, at about the right level for his eyes, and then rests his hands on the keyboard on the table. Three things result: his eyes are close to the screen, his arms (especially his wrists) are a mess, and he's probably slouching forward in his chair so he doesn't have to hold his arms in front of himself, zombie-like.

Desktop users have the freedom to put the keyboard wherever they please, and yet they often wind up with the same keyboard-right-under-screen setup. There's just no position that is comfortable for both hands and eyes simultaneously—the input and output have to be separated in space.

In the second figure, our hero has blown ten bucks on an external keyboard. [If your laptop has only one PS/2 port in back, you'll need to buy a Y adapter; that's another seven or eight bucks. Or go with a USB keyboard.] His posture is better, since he's sitting in the chair the way chairs are supposed to be sat in; his hands are as easily placed as otherwise folding his hands in his lap; his vision is gradually improving since he no longer needs to focus on a screen half an arm's length away.

Our eyes do adapt: if they look at something a meter and a half away for eight hours, then they will be able to easily focus on things a meter and a half away. Instead, we often look at things much closer, and train our eyes into nearsightedness. I'm not looking up citations today, but I believe that one's long-term vision can improve or at least not deteriorate if one just keeps the monitor a little further away than usual. Blow up the fonts some if you have to.

The other side effect of this is that you'll spend less time staring at the keyboard. It's not really going anywhere, and deep down inside, you know exactly where all the keys are; it's just a question of having the confidence in yourself to not peek. Also, since the types of pointing devices attached to keyboards aren't so hot, you'll be less inclined to use the mouse. Using `<alt>+F`

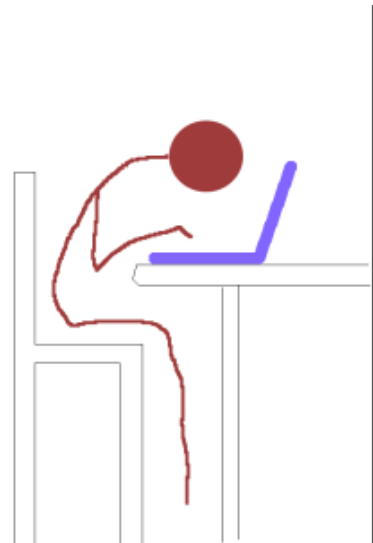


Figure 1: Our work is sorrow.

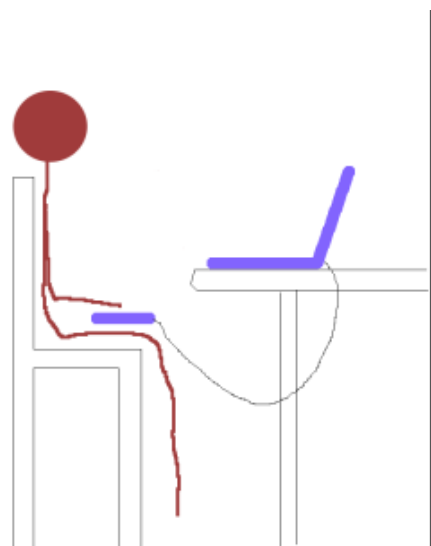


Figure 2: Such ease!

instead of clicking the file menu and <shift>+<arrow key> instead of clicking and dragging takes getting used to for some people, but also quickly leads to more efficient computing.

So there you have it: the joys of keeping the keyboard in your lap. It takes some getting used to, but it is so worth it that I've devoted an entire column to the subject. It'll certainly make a more noticeable difference on your life than a few hundred dollars on a zippier processor or more memory.