

Technology IQ: When it just won't print...

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One of the most common questions I receive from my clients is what to do when their printer simply refuses to print. While there can sometimes be major problems, such as a dead printer, in most cases, it is something small. The next time your printer is giving you trouble, try these simple steps to see if you can bring it back to life.

1. Check the power

Yes, I know this sounds like such a commonsense issue, but many of my support calls have ended abruptly when someone checks the power cord of the printer. While you may not have unplugged the printer, perhaps a family member or house cleaner did. Perhaps, as happened in one case, the family dog had chewed through the cable. Even more likely, though, is a power strip that has been accidentally turned off. Is anything else plugged into the strip? Does it have power? If not, flip the switch in the other direction? Does this help? Try plugging the printer directly into the wall.

2. Check for errors

If the printer appears to have power i.e. you see lights or hear the printer go through its startup ritual, then you need to check the lights, or front panel display, for errors. Printers without a display will usually signal an error with blinking red lights. If the light is next to the icon which looks like a sheet of paper, the printer could be out of paper or a sheet of paper could be jammed in the printer. A blinking light next to the icon which looks like a raindrop could mean that the printer is out of ink, or perhaps just one color. If the printer software is well designed, you might see an error message on your computer screen indicating what is wrong or perhaps which printer cartridge is empty. There is no sense checking other items if an error is indicated, you simply have to find what is causing the error. If it has

one, open the main door of the printer and look for anything out of place. Is there a torn sheet in the paper feed? Is the door holding the print cartridges not completely closed? If nothing appears wrong, close the cover and turn the printer off and on. This might clear the error message. Printers which have a display will often give you clearer error messages and instructions. Follow the directions on the screen to assist in troubleshooting the problem.

3. The printer tries to print, but the page is blank

If the printer goes through the motions of printing, but the page is blank, this usually means that the ink-jet heads are blocked with solidified ink. This can often happen when an ink-jet printer sits unused for a period of time. In fact, if you can, print a page or two to your printer each week, so you don't get hit with this problem. If the ink-jets are plugged you will need to "Clean the Heads." Each printer will have some way of accomplishing this, usually as part of the printing software, but you may need to check your manual to find the procedure. You may have to clean the heads a number of times before printing is restored. In the worst cases, you might not be able to revive the printer and your only option will be to replace it. Finding a repair shop for a printer is difficult, if you can find one at all. In most cases the repair person will simply tell you to replace the printer since so many inexpensive ones are now available.

4. Printing never starts

If you don't see any error conditions indicated, but the printer still refuses to print, you need to check the connections between your computer and your printer. Check the Parallel or USB cable running from your computer to the printer. Has it become unplugged? Is it damaged in some way? If the connections look sound, try restarting your computer and trying again. In some cases, there could be a software error that is preventing printing, which may be cleared by a restart.

5. Re-install the printer software

Finally, if the printer is still not working, you can attempt to re-install the printer. If nothing else, re-installing the printer may turn up additional error

messages that could lead you to the final problem. One typical problem is that the installer will tell you it cannot see the printer. This means you need to go back and check the power and data connections again. Hopefully, one of these steps will get your printer working again, but if not, you can be assured that you have checked the typical causes and know, for sure, that there is a larger problem. At this point you can set up an appointment and I will come and do some more sleuthing. In the worst cases, you might end up replacing the printer.

I hope this checklist will help you to solve your printing problems, next time they occur. You will be surprised how often checking these basics can get you back to work.

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