The 10 Principles for Working with New Computer Users
A list of 10 things computer tutors should know

1. The learner is in control: The learner should control the mouse and keyboard. Many people have a difficult time learning to use the mouse: they may not know how to use the right and left buttons or to hold the mouse correctly. It might seem easier to "help" the learner by moving the mouse for him or her, but he learner needs to practice in order to master use of the mouse and keyboard.

2. Be patient with the learner: It may take time for learners to understand some concepts, and you may need to repeat yourself several times. Allow learners enough time to solve problems and answer questions on their own. If you become frustrated or disappointed, remember a time when you had to learn something completely new, and try to treat the learner how you would have liked to be treated.

3. Get to know the learner: Ask about the learner's interests and personality before you begin, so that you can use examples that are relevant to each learner and his or her goals rather than imposing your own interests on the learner. Some learners may react differently than others when they encounter a challenge or overcome an obstacle, so be sensitive to and observant of these reactions.

4. Do not assume knowledge: Words like "window," "folder," "file," or "desktop" may seem obvious, but new computer users are not all familiar with these terms. Check in with new users frequently to ensure that you are communicating effectively. Some users may have several years of experience using the computer, but may not be familiar with the terminology you are using. Ask questions like, "Where is the taskbar?" rather than, "Do you know what a taskbar is?" This invites the learner to demonstrate the knowledge rather than simply answer yes or no, and will elicit a more honest response.

5. Admit your own limits: Some learners may ask questions that you do not know the answer to. It is acceptable to tell learners that you do not know the answer to a question, and to search for the answer together or consult an expert. Giving learners false or misleading information is unacceptable, and may harm the progress of some learners.

6. Be respectful of differences: Many volunteers work with vulnerable populations, and many individuals who use the services of CTN's partners may face learning disabilities, low literacy skills, or physical limitations. Volunteers should be especially patient and sensitive when working with such individuals.

7. Be selective and focused: There are hundreds of things you could teach a new computer user, but a new user will not be able to learn everything at once. Most new users will be able to learn and practice 2 -3 new skills each lesson.

8. Be flexible and creative: Many computer centers have limited resources, and you may encounter technical difficulties at site. If the Internet is down, there are ways to use your time with the learner effectively. For example, you may decide to teach a new user how to navigate windows or use a program that does not require the Internet. Even with no computer available, you can review key concepts with new users. Be creative when you encounter obstacles in your environment.

9. Internet Safety: CTN Volunteers have an obligation to explain the ground rules of Internet safety to new users before assisting them with activities that could put them at risk. What may seem obvious to you, may not be obvious to every learner. Many people who would never give their personal information to somebody they met on the street are more willing to do so when they are overwhelmed by trying to learn a new skill in an unfamiliar environment. See CTN's Internet Safety Guidelines for more suggestions.

10. Be open to new experiences: Most tutors learn something new almost every time they interact with a learner. Be open to learning and patient as you face challenges. Helping others discover technology should be fascinating and fun!