

If you think all keyboards are the same, think again; the look, feel and features on offer can vary dramatically. We give our opinion on 12 popular models

The personal touch



Microsoft Natural Keyboard

The Microsoft Natural Keyboard, isn't, as its name implies, hewn from timber felled from sustainable forests. Instead, it's of a shape that



is more suited to the 'natural' positions of our wrists and hands. When you use a normal keyboard, the straight rows of keys force your hands to sit at an angle to your wrists. This is uncomfortable for some people, painful for others and can accelerate the onset of RSI (repetitive strain injury).

The Microsoft Natural Keyboard splits the keys into two groups and places them at an angle. With one hand resting over each group, the hands are kept in line with the wrists, which is much more comfortable. The arrangement does mean, however, that 'hunt and peck' typists will find typing trickier than on a normal keyboard and the Natural Keyboard is more suited to touch typists.

This keyboard is extremely well made and has a large wrist rest along its bottom edge. The keys have some tactile feedback but they're a little too springy for our taste. The action isn't linear – there is a point in the keys' travel where they almost click, before popping back up. Some people in the office liked this, others found it jarred their finger joints.

Although undeniably well-made, typing on the Microsoft Natural Keyboard is quite different from a normal keyboard and it takes some getting used to. Be prepared to retrain your hands (and your typing technique) if you buy one.

○ £69.99 (inc VAT)
○ Microsoft: 0345 002000

Microsoft Natural Keyboard	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Everyone who uses a PC uses a keyboard but few people actually stop and think about what they're tapping their fingers on. Most keyboards look the same but they can feel dramatically different. Key switches (the mechanism that sits under each key and detects when it is pressed) vary – some offer a near-silent feel or *action*, whereas others click away like Lionel Blair on a parquet floor.

If you don't like the feel of your keyboard or if it's broken, then you need to buy a new one and there's certainly no shortage of choice. Keyboards are, however, intensely personal devices and one person's idea of keyboard heaven can be another's typing hell. This month we've taken a look at 12 keyboards of different shapes and sizes.



Cherry G83-6105LAM GB

If you buy a new PC, then there's a strong possibility that it will come with a keyboard made by Cherry. Cherry makes keyboards of almost every conceivable type and has dozens of models suitable for general-purpose use. The not-so-catchily-titled G83-6105LAM GB sits near the bottom of its range.

Cheap keyboards tend to be flimsy but this isn't the case with the 6105LAM. The case is sturdy and extra weight is gained by a metal plate inside the case. Speaking of insides, the 6105LAM's is a marvel of technology. Apart from the two halves of the case, there are just four main components – a tiny circuit board, two plastic sheets of electrical contacts and a rubber membrane with small pads that support the individual keys.

The 6105LAM's action is rather stiff and unresponsive, with little in the way of tactile feedback – something that can be put down to its key switches. That said, although some members of the *What PC?* team didn't like it, others found the 6105LAM quite acceptable.

Cheap and cheerful, the G83-6105LAM GB is well-made and certainly a step up from the keyboards supplied as standard with some systems.

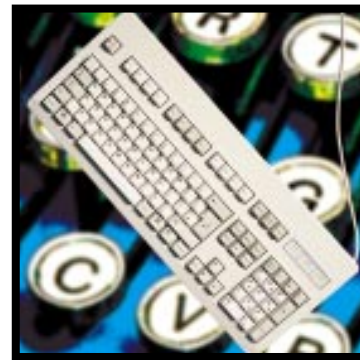
○ £29.36 (inc VAT)
○ Cherry: 01582 763100

Cherry G83-6105LAM GB

Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Cherry G80-3000HFM GB

The G80-3000HFM GB uses mechanical key switches, giving rise to what's commonly known as a 'clicky' keyboard. Each key sits on its own switch which results in a highly tactile and audible click when pressed. The keys also have a pleasantly light action, which makes touch-typing a pleasure.



The 3000HFM's mechanism may be sophisticated but the same can't be said of its case.

The keyboard is heavy enough not to need the internal metal plate found in many other models but it lacks rigidity and, as a consequence, it flexes unconvincingly if the ends of the case are twisted. Not that you would do this in normal use, of course, but it's just a pity that Cherry couldn't make an expensive keyboard at least feel expensive.

If you like clicks, you'll love the G80-3000HFM – although it's probably not a keyboard for quiet offices.

○ £79.28 (inc VAT)
○ Cherry: 01582 763100

Cherry G80-3000HFM GB

Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★



Cherry G84-4100PAG

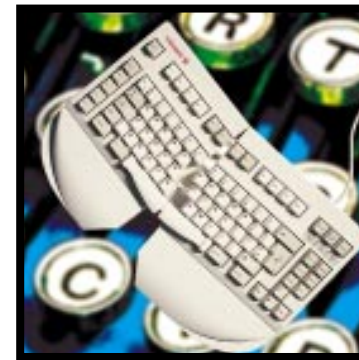
The Cherry G84-4100PAG is about the size of a typical notebook keyboard. Although it doesn't have a separate numeric keypad and the cursor keys are squashed in with the rest, the keyboard isn't cramped. The keys are well-spaced, with a reasonable amount of travel, and have a quiet, slightly clicky action.

The G84-4100PAG is an ideal replacement keyboard for a notebook.

○ £65.80 (inc VAT)
○ Cherry: 01582 763100

Cherry G84-4100PAG

Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★



Cherry ErgoPlus

The Cherry ErgoPlus is split down the middle, allowing the keys to be folded out at an angle similar to that of the Microsoft Natural Keyboard.

The advantage of this flexible arrangement is that you can gradually increase the angle of the split as you become accustomed to the new ergonomic way of typing. At full split, the space bar is in two halves but the top of each can be slid out so that it falls naturally under the thumbs.

The ErgoPlus also has a variety of height and tilt settings that enable the device to fit the lie of your wrists and hands perfectly. Add to this its light, tactile action and you have a highly versatile and comfortable keyboard.

If you want to type ergonomically but don't fancy jumping in at the deep end, then the ErgoPlus offers a way to gradually (if somewhat expensively) acclimatise yourself.

○ £211.50 (inc VAT)
○ Cherry: 01582 763100

Cherry ErgoPlus

Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

What is RSI?

RSI stands for Repetitive Strain Injury and it is caused by performing a repetitive physical activity, such as typing. Symptoms may vary and they may not just be limited to the hands and fingers – the arms, neck and shoulders can be affected too.

There isn't room for a full description of the condition here and needless to say, if you're worried about it, consult your doctor. There are, however, some basic points to keep in mind when you're using a computer.

1. Always sit in a relaxed position, with your thighs and wrists parallel to the floor.
2. Try not to rest your wrists on the desktop – use your forearms to move your hands around rather than your wrists. Keyboard wrist rests are for resting your wrists when you're NOT typing.
3. Don't hammer the keys – use a light touch.
4. Take frequent breaks to stretch and relax.



Alps Humedia Keyboard

Keyboard design hasn't changed very much since the first typewriter appeared and tradition is the only reason a computer keyboard looks like it does. The Alps Humedia keyboard is one attempt at doing something different.

Although the Humedia keyboard's case is pretty much a regular size and shape, the keys aren't. The main keypad is slightly curved, although nowhere near enough to keep the hands in line with the wrist (like the Microsoft Natural Keyboard), so it seems a little pointless. They're also rather widely spaced and have a somewhat soggy action.

The other keys aren't keys at all but instead calculator-style buttons. The cursor keys and numeric keypad on the right of the main keypad are like this, as are the function keys on the left.

However, they're not particularly pleasant to use because their action is stiff and unresponsive, and the numeric keypad is all but useless for prolonged use.

The Humedia keyboard does have some curious features, though. The function key group doubles as three sets of keys, switchable with the press of a colour coded button.

This group is able to work as a set of standard function keys; the 'Insert', 'Delete', 'Home', 'End' key group which, on normal keyboards, is found above the cursor keys; and a set of programmable application keys. The latter is used in conjunction with the supplied keyboard driver and enables applications to be started by pressing one of the buttons.

A neat variation on the traditional keyboard, Alps Humedia keyboard is only let down by its soggy keys and duff buttons.

- £69 (inc VAT)
- Alps: 01344 873853

Alps Humedia Keyboard	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★



Trust Windows 95 Keyboard

Our first impression of the Trust Windows 95 keyboard was that it looked cheap. After picking it up our second impression was that it felt cheap. It's something of a relief, therefore, that it really is cheap at just under £20.

The Trust Windows 95 Keyboard is finished in a lighter shade of grey than usual but otherwise looks just like a normal keyboard. The key action wasn't quite to our liking – the keys were vague and had a hollow feel. The keyboard is also rather light and the ineffective rubber feet underneath it allow it to slide all over the desktop in a highly unsatisfactory fashion.

Cheap – and it feels it. The Trust Windows 95 Keyboard is really only for those people who can't, or won't, spend more than £20.

- £19.99 (inc VAT)
- Aashima Distribution: 01376 502050

Trust Windows 95 Keyboard	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★



MicroSpeed Windows 95 Ready Keyboard Deluxe

The MicroSpeed Windows 95 Ready Keyboard Deluxe comes complete with the three extra Windows 95 keys. Quite what's deluxe about it, however, is anyone's guess. The keyboard itself is smart enough, though, and has a solid look and feel.

The Keyboard Deluxe's mechanism is similar to the rubber membrane system used by the Cherry G83-6105LAM GB but it feels much more pleasant in use. The action is lighter and gives a better tactile feedback, although there isn't an audible click.

Cheap but well made and comfortable to use, the MicroSpeed Keyboard Deluxe is quiet and offers plenty of feedback.

- £35.19 (inc VAT)
- MicroSpeed: 01254 692783

MicroSpeed Keyboard Deluxe	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Hide and seek with Qwertyuiop

Anyone using a Qwerty keyboard (so named because of the first five letters on the top row) for the very first time can't help but be dumbfounded by the awkward arrangement of the keys. Not only are they in an apparently random order (making 'hunt and peck' a popular system with many new typists) but the most commonly used letters – d, h, e, n, s, and so on – are dotted all over the keyboard. The reason?

When E Remington and Sons sold the first typewriter in 1873, its design and the limits of mechanical technology gave it one problem – the keys (and the levers they were attached to) jammed with irritating regularity. Since there was no way to improve the mechanism, the solution to this problem came from an odd angle – if the keys can't go faster, make the typist type slower. The result is a keyboard layout designed to impede, rather than assist, typists.



The Maltron keyboard



Given the global domination of Qwerty, you'd be forgiven for thinking that it's the only system available. It isn't and the Maltron keyboard is one alternative.

It may look like a keyboard that has been left too close to a radiator but the Maltron is actually designed to fit the shape of your hands, rather than force the opposite. The model we looked at is also switchable between a Qwerty

layout and one that puts the most-used letters in logical places, giving a marked improvement in typing speed for proficient users.

The Maltron keyboard is perfect for RSI (repetitive strain injury) sufferers but the downside is that it's nothing like using a normal keyboard and learning to use it is like learning to type all over again. The other drawback is cost.

Although the Maltron looks and feels like something someone has built as a pet project, it doesn't have a price to match. If you get a pain from typing, however, then its probably a small price to pay for relief at the keyboard.

- £440.63 (inc VAT)
- PCD Maltron: 0181 398 3265



Key Tronic Classic



If the keyboard supplied with your PC isn't made by Cherry, then it's probably made by Key Tronic. The Classic is its cheapest model.

Although not particularly heavy, the Classic feels sufficiently sturdy and its rubber feet stop it from slipping around on smooth surfaces. The key action is light, but the spring from the rubber membrane was a little too lively for us.

Although its price is identical to Cherry's low-end model, the Classic feels a little cheaper. It works just as well, though, and is good value for money.

- £29.36 (inc VAT)
- Key Tronic: 01420 85470

Key Tronic Classic	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★

Key Tronic Designer

Keyboards, like PCs, are usually pretty dull affairs that come in any colour as long as it's beige. This isn't true of the Key Tronic Designer, however, because it's a keyboard with a difference – it's black.

The Designer's keys are a little taller than Key Tronic's other keyboards, which results in a smaller surface area. Some of the *What PC?* team liked this, others didn't. The action also has more of a click to it, which, again, is something of a personal preference.

If you don't like your keyboard to stand out, then the Key Tronic Designer is perfectly camouflaged for use on your black-ash effect computer desk.

- £41.11 (inc VAT)
- Key Tronic: 01420 85470

Key Tronic Designer	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★



Key Tronic Wireless Trackball

Some desks are too small, some PC cases too big but whatever the reason, not everyone wants to stand their computer on their desk. Stick it under your desk, however, and your keyboard cable may not be long enough to stretch. If your keyboard cable is stretched tighter than necessary then you need a wireless keyboard.

Key Tronic has three types – a wireless version of the Classic; one with built-in trackball (the one we looked at); and a third with a built-in touchpad. Despite the extra bits on the last two, they all work in the same way. An infra-red receiver plugs into the PC's keyboard port and this can then be tucked away on the desktop. The keyboard has a transmitter on the back (powered by four supplied AA-size batteries) and so long as the receiver has a line of sight to the transmitter, everything works as normal.

Sort of. We did notice the occasional failure to register a key-stroke, even when the keyboard was well within the requisite 4ft range of the receiver. Switching the keyboard to 'high' mode resolved this, but although this increases the transmission range and removes the need for a line of sight, it drains the batteries more quickly.

The key switch on Key Tronic's wireless keyboards is the same as that on its Classic and it was one of our favourites. The trackball worked well too, although it gets in the way a little when typing. JP

The Key Tronic Wireless Classic is probably the best value wireless keyboard of the bunch but all three are a neat, cable-free solution for distant PCs or messy desktops.

- Wireless Classic: £104.58
- Wireless Trackball: £146.88
- Wireless Touchpad: £164.50
- (All prices inc VAT)
- Key Tronic: 01420 85470

Key Tronic Wireless Trackball	
Build quality	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★★