
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Tech that refuses to die



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Phil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Phil.

Georgie

And I'm Georgie.

Phil

The exciting thing about technology is that it's always changing. Can you remember when computer floppy disks, hand-held Game Boys, and fax machines were in fashion? Do you still have a Walkman cassette player from the 1980s?

Georgie

Today technology progresses so quickly that old tech soon becomes **obsolete**, no longer in use having been replaced by something better or more fashionable.

Phil

So, you might be surprised to hear that until recently the government of Japan still used three and-a-half inch floppy disks to store official documents; that around the world, music cassettes and Walkmans are making a comeback; and that even the world-famous Swiss CERN physics laboratory uses old-fashioned magnetic tape reels to record its data.

Georgie

Yes, it seems that some old technology just refuses to die - maybe because people still love it, or maybe because of the old English proverb, **if it ain't broke, don't fix it**, meaning that things should only be changed if they don't work. So, in this

programme, we'll be hearing about old tech which continues to be used today. And, as usual, we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary as well.

Phil

But first I have a question for you, Georgie. Computers have seen some of the biggest advances in technology. But what was the name of the first computer developed for home use in the UK? Was it:

- a) the Commodore 64?
- b) the Sinclair ZX80? or,
- c) the BBC Micro?

Georgie

Hmm, I'll guess it was the Commodore 64.

Phil

OK, Georgie, we'll find out if that's the correct answer later in the programme. One reason for not updating tech is if the original design still works well. NASA engineer, Jonathan Sauder, designed HAR-V, a mechanical rover able to survive the inhospitable conditions on Venus where temperatures reach 460Celsius. Here's Jonathan talking to BBC World Service programme, Tech Life:

Jonathan Sauder

...Venus has a very long night. It's actually about 60 days long that you're in total darkness. So that's where we came up with the concept for HAR-V: a mechanical **clockwork** rover that could be powered by Venus's winds in order to allow it to survive Venus's long hot nights.

Georgie

Conditions on Venus mean that ordinary electronics simply won't work. That's why Jonathan built a **clockwork** rover, a machine with springs and wheels inside which works when it's wound up with a key. Clockwork technology from the 1st century being used in 2024 by NASA!

Phil

Other tech which refuses to die is just too much trouble to change. For example, countries around the world use different electrical plugs which would be better to standardise – but imagine the work involved! Here, Chris Vallance, presenter of BBC World Service's, Tech Life, discusses a similar example with Dr Tacye Phillipson, science curator at the National Museum of Scotland:

Chris Vallance

Another piece of tech that people say has sort of refused to die is the **QWERTY keyboard**, the layout of keyboards that we all have, and is perhaps not the most efficient layout in terms of the speed of typing.

Dr Tacye Phillipson

It's the layout we're all really, really used to though, and if you see court reporters, stenographers, they have special keyboards and can type so fast to takedown **verbatim**, but they also look very complicated, I don't actually want to learn to use one of those so I'll **stick with** QWERTY for the moment.

Georgie

Chris and Tacye discussed **QWERTY**, the traditional typewriter arrangement of keys on a computer keyboard in which the top line begins with the letters *q, w, e, r, t* and *y*. In terms of being able to type quickly, QWERTY isn't the best - in fact, court reporters type much faster with alternative keyboards. Court reporters need to type fast to record cases **verbatim**, using exactly the same words that were originally spoken.

Phil

But because everyone is used to QWERTY keyboards, the tech lives on. That's why Tacye says she'll **stick with** QWERTY, she'll continue using it and not change to something else. And speaking of QWERTY keyboards has reminded me of my question, Georgie.

Georgie

Yes, you asked me the name of the first home computer released in the UK, and I guessed it was the Commodore 64...

Phil

Which was... the wrong answer, I'm afraid. In fact, the UK's first home computer was the Sinclair ZX80 which was released in 1980 and used a whopping 4 kilobyte memory, that's about half an email! OK, it's time to recap the vocabulary we've learned in this programme starting with **obsolete**, meaning no longer in use, having been replaced by something newer or better.

Georgie

The idiom, **if it ain't (or isn't) broke, don't fix it**, is used to say that if something is working, there is no reason to try to change it.

Phil

Clockwork machinery uses metal springs and wheels which move when they are wound up with a key.

Georgie

QWERTY refers to the traditional typewriter arrangement of keys in which the top line begins with the letters *q,w,e,r, t* and *y*

Phil

If you say something **verbatim**, you use exactly the same words that were originally used.

Georgie

And finally, to **stick with** something means to continue using or doing it. Once again our six minutes are up, but remember to join us again next time for more trending topics and useful vocabulary, here at 6 Minute English. Goodbye for now!

Phil

Bye!

VOCABULARY

obsolete

no longer in use, having been replaced by something newer, better or more fashionable

if it ain't broke, don't fix it

(idiom) used to say that if something is working satisfactorily, there is no reason to try to change it

clockwork

machinery using metal springs and wheels which move when wound up with a key

QWERTY

the traditional typewriter arrangement of keys in which the top line begins with the letters *q, w, e, r, t* and *y*

verbatim

using exactly the same words as were originally used

stick with

continue using or doing something