

# Computer Keyboards

Believe it or not, computers and keyboards were not invented together. Computer keyboards were created only when the traditional way to input data into a computer — punch cards and paper tape — became obsolete. While they use the keys from a typewriter, computer keyboards evolved from teleprinters.

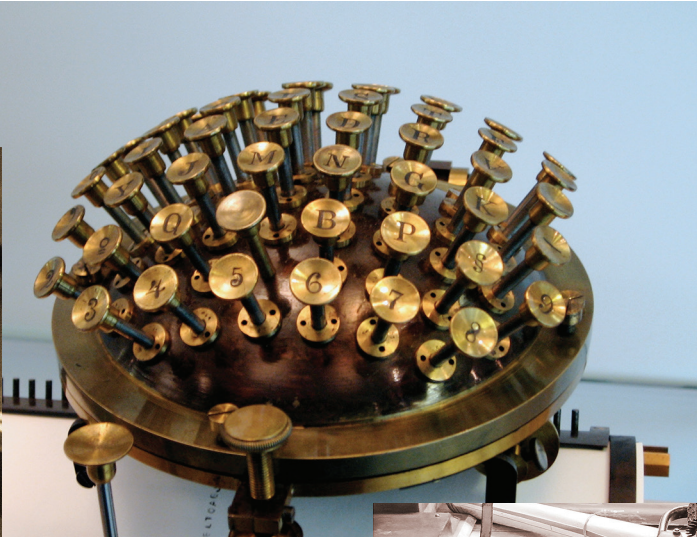
If you think about it, typewriters are a natural extension of the printing press. In 1575, an Italian print-maker Francesco Rampazzetto created a machine to impress individual letters on paper. In 1714, Henry Mill in Britain patented a machine to type letters on paper. In the early 1800s, several Italian inventors created versions of a typewriter. One inventor, Agostino Fantoni, built his typewriter to enable his blind sister to write. Modern typewriters were invented and mass produced from the 1860s onwards.

Computer keyboards descend directly from teletypes or teleprinters, devices that could send and receive messages from one teleprinter to another or to many teleprinters. These devices used dedicated telephone circuits, switched networks like the phone company, radio waves, and microwaves. Teleprinters also used modems to connect to computers through telephone lines. And they were used to generate punch cards and paper tape for computers to process.

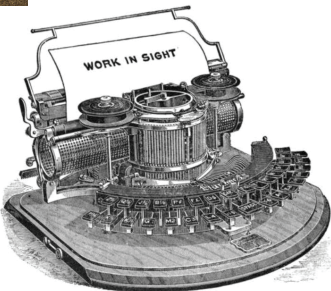
Teleprinters did much more than typewriters. They also could produce computer codes and be controlled by computer codes.

Today teleprinters have been replaced by computers and keyboards which do many things. In software specifications, you still might see TTY which is shorthand for teletypewriter, another name for teleprinters.

Typewriter and computer keyboard layouts also have their own history. Most keyboards use QWERTY layout. But there are other layouts, for example, Dvorak and Colemak. And keyboards found in non-English speaking countries use QWERTY as their start point, changing keys and key combinations to print letters and characters unique to their language.



Hansen Writing Ball 1873



Hammond 1880s



Blickensderfer 1892

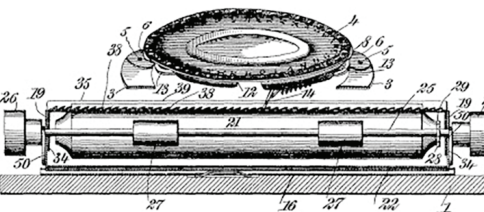
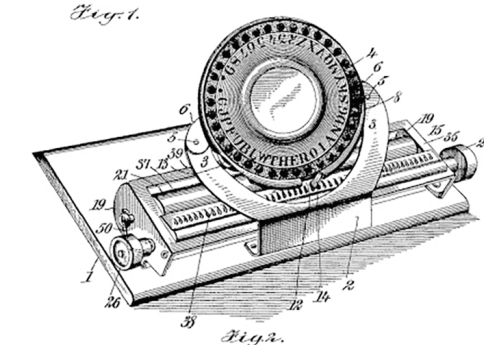
The idea of typewriters — press a letter to print the letter on paper — has been around since the 1500s in different forms, as ideas and one-off inventions. Mass produced typewriters anyone could buy first appeared in the 1860s.



SHOLES' TYPE WRITER.

We think of typewriter keyboards as boring rectangular shapes. However, there were round typewriters you can hold in your hand and circular typewriters you turn a wheel then press to type a letter. The typewriter below is a portable from 1905. The Simplex typewriter on the right sold for decades in the 1900s.

No. 781,473. PATENTED JAN. 31, 1905.  
S. A. THOMPSON.  
TYPE WRITING MACHINE.  
APPLICATION FILED MAR. 21, 1901.  
2 SHEETS—SHEET 1.



Simplex Typewriter Patent 1905

Today QWERTY is everywhere:



Computer keyboards evolved directly from teleprinters, also called teletypes and teletypewriters. Unlike typewriters, however, printing letters and characters on paper was only one of many things teleprinters did. They sent messages to and from other teleprinters. They used different ways to connect to other teleprinters and computers. They also used special computer codes — the ESC key, for example, to interrupt a process — and were controlled by computer codes.

Find links to explore keyboard history in the online version of this article:

<https://www.KidsCodeCS.com/computer-keyboard-history>