

The real reason your keyboard has F1 through F12

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October 5, 2026



Of all the keys on your keyboard, the F1 through F12 keys at the top are likely not your most-used. While they aren't as useless or frustrating as other keys like **Scroll Lock** or **Insert**, their long-standing presence poses a mystery in plain sight.

Like many standards in computing, there's a lot of history involved here. And while the limitations that resulted in creating the F keys aren't an issue today, these keys still have use if you know how to apply them.

The reason function keys were created

No GUI, no party

Back in the the 1960s and 1970s, computers didn't have graphical user interfaces (GUIs) like now. Instead, people had to [interact with the computer through terminal interface commands](#), entirely with the keyboard.

Nowadays, [keyboard shortcuts make working on the keyboard faster](#) than clicking around. But keyboard shortcuts as we know them now (like **Ctrl + C** for copying) didn't exist until staff at Xerox came up with them in the 1970s.

Without the option to hide dozens of functions within clickable menus like today, the remaining option was requiring the user to remember the various commands. Since there

was little consistency between programs back then, this was a difficult ask.

Thus, the F (function) keys arose as a way for users to quickly send instructions to a program. The function keys didn't have a consistent purpose, meaning each program could make those keys do what was useful for its context. Between people memorizing the ones they used most, and on-screen text telling you which did what, it made command line programs a lot easier to use.

[Reddit user Kufat pointed out](#) a deeper reason function keys were valuable: they reduced the number of inputs required to send commands to a computer. These old systems would often interrupt the mainframe every time you pressed a key, meaning that accomplishing tasks with the fewest key presses was important for efficiency.

But why 12?

As to why there are 12 function keys: this was one of many de facto standards created by the popular IBM PC, which was released in 1981. The machine initially came with the Model F keyboard, which had 10 function keys along the left side. IBM later replaced this with the cheaper, legendary Model M keyboard.

Its popularity spawned so many copycats that nearly everything about its layout became the standard for keyboards today, including the 12 function keys along the top.

What do the function keys do today?

A surprisingly large amount still

While the function keys were once freely programmable for each program, today's function keys have loosely defined purposes. Like many keyboard shortcuts, various programs use them differently, but you'll find a few consistent purposes in most apps.

The following focuses on Windows. On Mac keyboards, the functions for the F keys (such as adjusting the brightness, controlling media, and opening Spotlight) are printed on them. Holding the **Fn** or **Globe** key will make F1-F12 act as standard function keys, with their uses differing by software.

Full-sized Mac keyboards also have F13 through F19 keys; you can [remap your Mac's function keys](#) to do anything you want.

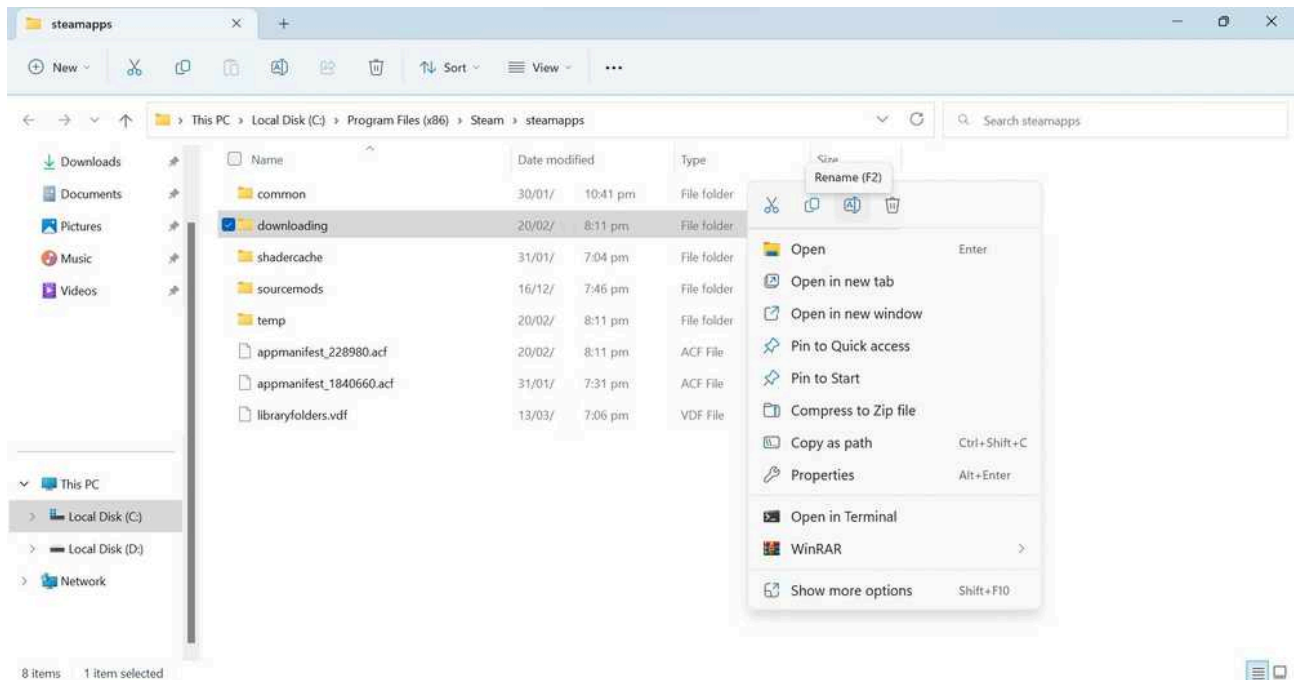
F1

The most common use for F1 is opening the **Help** menu for your current program. If you can't find your way around, it's a good initial port of call.

Notably, **Win + F1** will open Edge with a Bing search for “how to get help in windows 11”, which is a clumsy way to provide assistance. This makes it a [keyboard shortcut you don't want to hit by mistake](#).

F2

F2 has a handy use you might not know about: renaming files. Press it with a file selected in File Explorer, and you can immediately start typing a new name. This saves the multiple clicks required to do this through the menu.



It works the same in Excel and Google Sheets; press F2 to edit the current cell. This one, alongside F12, is also a common [key you must press upon booting to enter your BIOS](#).

F3

F3's most prevalent purpose is opening the search feature for your current program. This works in File Explorer, and opens the same **Ctrl + F** panel in many other programs (including Chrome and Firefox). Once you have a search running, F3 then advances to the next result in many apps.

In the Command Prompt (but not PowerShell), F3 will repeat the last command you entered.

F4

This key is most useful when combined with modifier keys. In File Explorer, F4 will put the cursor in the address bar so you can navigate to another location quickly.

Otherwise, **Alt + F4** to close the current window and **Ctrl + F4** to close the current tab are the main uses of this function key.

F5

Here's one you've likely used a lot before. F5 will refresh the page in browsers and File Explorer, allowing you to fetch the latest changes. **Ctrl + F5** does a hard refresh, which ignores browser cache and retrieves data from the website anew.

Otherwise, F5 is the shortcut to start a slideshow in PowerPoint from the start (or **Shift + F5** to begin from the current slide).

F6

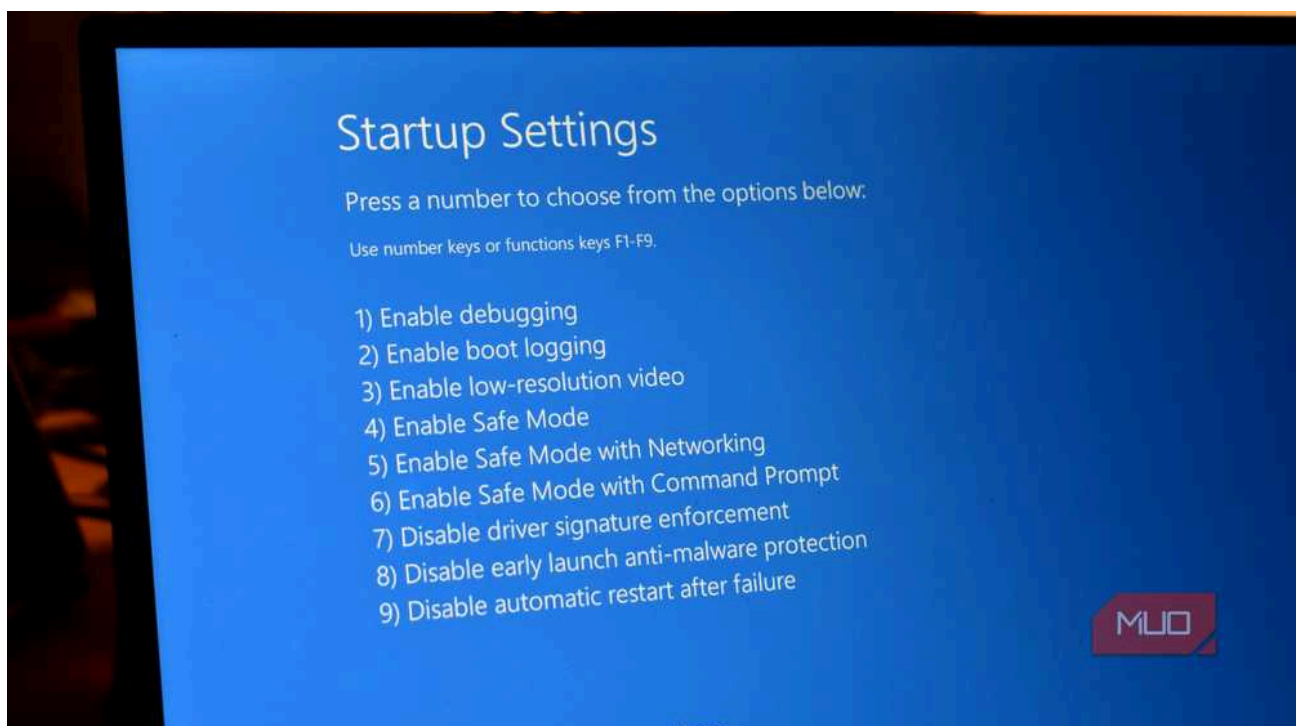
Pressing F6 while using your browser puts your cursor in the address bar, similar to F4's behavior in File Explorer. This makes it easy to perform a quick search or open a page from your history.

F7

F7 provides a quick way to run the spell checker tool in Microsoft Office apps, while **Shift + F7** opens the thesaurus for a highlighted word in Office.

In browsers, this key [enables Caret browsing, an accessibility feature](#) that allows you to navigate with only the keyboard. And in the Command Prompt (but again, not in PowerShell), F7 shows the history of commands you've entered during that session.

F8



This is one of the least-utilized function keys. It doesn't have global usage; the only relevant input I could find is using **Alt + F8** to open the macro window in Microsoft Office apps. Excel also uses F8 to extend your selection.

On older versions of Windows, F8 was well-known for being the key you pressed during boot [to enter Safe Mode](#). However, due to today's faster boot times, this is no longer the main method.

F9

F9 has a few quirky uses across Office apps. In Word, it refreshes a document. In Outlook, it runs a manual action to send and receive, which isn't usually necessary since this happens automatically. And in Excel, it recalculates all formulas.

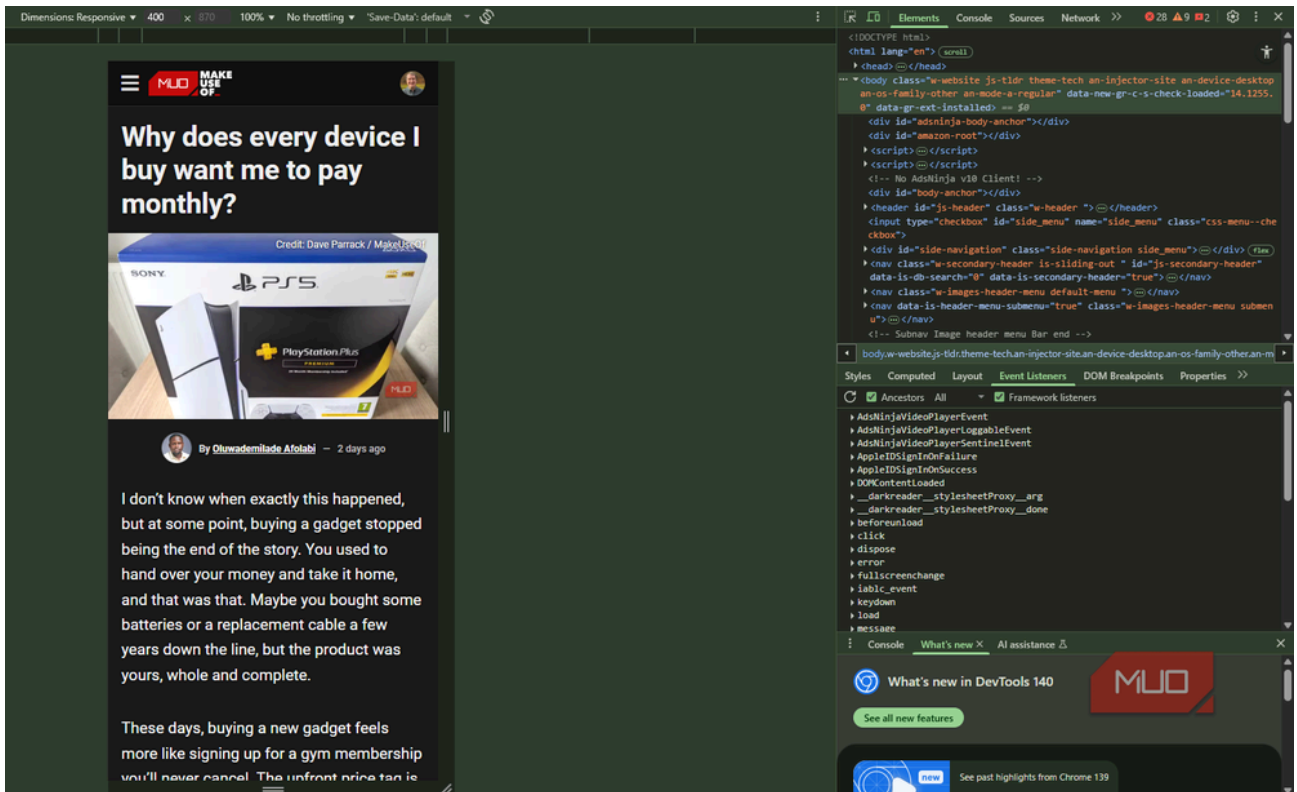
F10

F10 is useful for activating the menu bar of an app—that's the strip of **File**, **Edit**, and other toolbar items. In Chrome, it puts your cursor focus on the three-dot menu, so you can then navigate it with your keyboard.

Another important use of this one is **Shift + F10**, which inputs a right-click. That's useful if your mouse stops working or you don't want to take your hands off the keyboard for a single right-click.

F11

You likely know F11 as the shortcut for putting apps in full-screen mode. Use this to focus on one app and avoid getting distracted by others. This is its most common use, and while it can be a pain to hit by accident, it's otherwise handy.



In browsers, F12 activates the Developer Tools panel, which lets you analyze what's happening on the page and on the network.

F12 will also open the **Save As** dialog panel in many apps, saving two fingers compared to **Ctrl + Shift + S**.

Form and function

The function keys at the top of your keyboard are rooted in historical need, and have varying usefulness, but can still be helpful today. They fill gaps where keyboard shortcuts can be clumsy or inconsistent.

And if you don't find them useful, you can always remap those keys to anything else you want. The Keyboard Manager utility, which is [part of the underrated PowerToys suite](#), is a great way to do this.