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More Than a Keychain: USB Flash Drives, By Debbie Ginsberg

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Like everyone else who went to AALL last year, I brought home plenty of tchotchkes. Most of the stuff I gave away, but one item was definitely a keeper – a 64M USB flash drive. How could I possibly part with something that could put the capacity of nearly 50 floppies on my keychain?

USB flash drives are solid-state memory sticks which can plug into nearly any USB port. The size of a pack of gum (or an iPod Shuffle), these drives can currently hold up to 8G. Smaller drives (around 64M or so) cost around \$10, while the largest can cost thousands, especially if they have extra features. Many users like the 1G size, which might run anywhere from \$75 - \$100.

Since almost every computer now has at least one USB port, flash drives are nearly universally compatible. Unlike a floppy, you can be sure you'll be able to load your files no matter where you take your work. Flash drives work with Windows, Mac, and UNIX, although older systems may require specialized drivers. In most cases, users simply need to plug in their keys and they are ready to go with little or no further effort.



Most of us, of course, use flash drives to transfer and store files. However, more programs are being written to work directly from flash drives, letting users run common software without having to install anything on computer hard drives. Programs which can be run directly from flash drives include Trillian, Firefox, and even Linux.

While many laud its portability and easy of use even the best flash drive will have limitations. Most problematic is the drive's limited life cycle – files can be written to a drive perhaps 100,000 times. While more than enough for most people, no one should depend on a flash drive for permanent storage.

Some drives require more power than others. In general, users will plug into the USB ports on their computers and won't run into this problem. However, ports on keyboards or monitors may produce insufficient power to run most flash drives.

Are flash drives just a passing fad? Some say they will soon be replaced with cheaper and higher-capacity microdrives. While microdrives may provide more storage for a bit less money, they are not as compact as flash drives. Current versions of microdrives can fit in a pocket, but not on a keychain.

Nor do microdrives seem as durable. The flash drive's solid-state design can take a great deal of wear and tear. Users have been known to drop, bash, and even wash their flash drives with no discernable damage (the author does not recommend you try these at home). How many other computer components can claim they are "wash and wear"?

Finally, microdrives aren't as fungible. When you look around at AALL this year, you'll likely see a few vendors handing out logo-enhanced USB flash drives. Microdrives, if they are present anywhere, might be prizes hidden behind some product display. The vendor market alone is likely to keep flash drives in business for some time.