

Where Are You @ in the Digital Age?

A CT Blog by Paul S. Wang

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The digital age revolutionized many parts of our lives. The Internet transformed the world into a global village where communications are efficient and instant. In this village, our frequent and abundant interactions naturally created a shared culture. One notable feature of that culture is the usage of special symbols such as @, /, \, #, and so on.

Online communication, smartphone apps, and computer interfaces rely heavily on small icons and character combinations that carry big meaning. Understanding and effective use of these symbols is an important part of digital literacy as well as fluency.

The phenomenon is not unique. Throughout history, new symbols and new meanings for them have been introduced into our languages and expressions. For example, mathematics introduced the signs +, -, ×, ÷, and so on. Other symbols in our daily lives include traffic signals as well as signs for roads, highways, restrooms, entrance/exit, etc.

There are many wonderful and useful digital symbols. We shall introduce the most important categories, showing what they mean, where they're used, and how understanding them helps you look and feel more confident and savvy online.

This article is part of our ongoing Computational Thinking (CT) blog

published in *aroundKent* (aroundkent.net), an online magazine. Other enjoyable and engaging CT articles can also be found in the author's book *Becoming A Computational Thinker: Success in the Digital Age*. Please see the website computize.org/CTer for more information.



Let's begin by taking a closer look at the lovely @ sign.

Evolution of the @ Sign

The humble @ sign, now a symbol of Internet culture, has had a fascinating evolution from obscure accounting shorthand to a global symbol of digital identity and interaction. Here are the key phases:

1. Origins Before the Internet

- Medieval Use: The @ symbol appeared as early as the 14th century. It was a shorthand for the Latin word *ad*, meaning "at" or "toward."
- Commercial Use: In the 19th and 20th centuries, @ was used in commerce to mean "at the rate of" (e.g., 7 items @ \$2 each).

2. Email Revolution: The Birth of Online Identity

- Ray Tomlinson (1971): The @ sign became iconic when computer engineer Ray Tomlinson used it to separate the *username* from the *host machine* (a computer connected to the Internet) name, `user@host`, in the first email system.

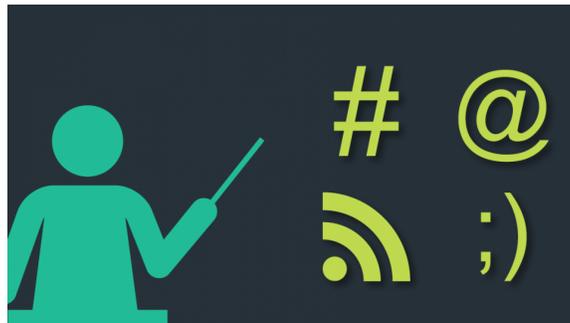
- Why @? It was rare in names, available on US keyboards, and naturally read as "at."
 - This choice made @ the symbol of a new form of address, a **digital address** (e.g. jsmith@kent.edu).
 - One's email address is an important form of online identity. You almost always need your email address to register for an online account at a business or organization.
3. Social Media Era: A Tool for Tagging and Directing @username
- This turned @ into a social handle marker, and it spread rapidly to platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube.
 - It enabled a new form of public communication--open yet directed.
4. Online Culture and Beyond
- "At-ing" someone: A verb emerged--to "@ someone" means to call them out, tag them, or involve them in a conversation.
 - Identity marker: "What's your @?" became a shorthand for asking someone's username.
 - Cultural signals: The symbol now conveys presence, agency, and digital existence.
 - Memes & Slang: "@ me next time" or "don't @ me" entered Internet lingo--playful, sarcastic, confrontational, or defensive. By the way, a meme is a cute expression of various kind that can potentially be imitated widely online.
5. Global Variations and Nicknames
- In China, @ is called "小老鼠" (little mouse).
 - In Italy, it's sometimes called chiocciola (snail).
 - In Israel, it's called a strudel--yes, like the pastry.
 - These nicknames reflect how people interpret the symbol visually, not just functionally.
6. Today: A Symbol of the Internet Itself
- Online identity: We all have @ handles--they define us on platforms.

- Cross-platform reach: Many services use your @name as a kind of unified identity.
- Aesthetic use: Artists and typographers play with it in visual design, logos, and ASCII art (forming images with letters).
- Semantic shift: It's more than a symbol--it means connectedness, presence, contact.

Thus, the @ sign went from clerical shorthand to digital cornerstone, reshaped by email, expanded by social media, and embedded into online language, culture, and identity. Its rise mirrors the evolution of the Internet itself--from technical system to a social ecosystem.

Ways to Use the @ Sign

Now we can take a look at how the @ sign is used in various situations.



- Digital Identity: "What's your @?"---For example, you meet someone online and you ask: "What's your @?" This means: "What's your email address or handle on Instagram, TikTok, or X/ Twitter?" It shows that you're up-to-date with how people connect now and that you recognize @name means online identity.
- Public Conversations with Private Targets---For example: On X/ Twitter you may vent your frustration: "I can't believe @Delta canceled my flight again 😡" This shows that you understand how to direct complaints publicly and that companies monitor mentions of their @handles for customer service. Using @ makes sure they see it--it's a digital nudge.

- Online Debate or Callout Culture---For example, "If you've got something to say, @ me next time." Or "Don't @ me--pineapple does belong on pizza." This shows that you're fluent in internet slang and tone. You know how @ is part of performative interaction--blending drama, humor, and confrontation. "@ me" is a modern invitation to argument.
- Tagging for Visibility and Reach---For example, on Instagram "Big thanks to @chefana for the amazing food!" The chef now sees it, and followers can tap to follow. It shows an understanding of tagging etiquette and social credit. You can boost others and share networks using @.
- Mastering Multi-Platform Lingo---For example, on Discord "@everyone, the meeting starts in 10 minutes." (This sends a notification to the entire group.) It shows that you know context-sensitive use of @. Using @everyone or @here reflects role-based communication in work/gaming spaces.
- Crafting a Net-Savvy Persona---For example, your bio says "Writer @Medium | Building @MyStartup | Tweets @YourHandle." This way you presented yourself professionally and concisely. The @ gives people links, presence, and associations at a glance.
- Playful and Creative Use---For example, you use a Meme caption "@God, explain this weather." It shows that you understand ironic or hyperbolic internet humor. The @ is used as a figurative target, even if that account doesn't exist.

So much for the @ sign. Let's move on to other useful symbols. There are many--including the common and the not so common--and we will organize them into groups.

Addressing & Structuring Symbols



- **@ (at)**: Used in email (user@host) and social media handles (@username). Also means “mention” someone, especially on X/ Twitter.
- **# (hashtag)**: Tags topics or keywords, e.g. #news , #ThrowbackThursday.
- **% (percent)**: Common in math and also URL encoding.
- **/ and **: Indicate file paths or command structures. Also seen in URLs.
- *** (asterisk)**: Emphasis (e.g. *important*) or wildcard (e.g. name=* .com).
- **_ (underscore)**: Replaces spaces in file names or handles.
- **^ (caret)**: Marks exponentiation or references messages above.
- **~ (tilde)**: Approximation or home directory symbol in UNIX.
- **& (ampersand)**: Means “and”; used in HTML as & ; .

Graphical User Interface (GUI) Symbols

- **☰ (hamburger menu)**: Opens app or site navigation.
- **⋮ or ...**: Reveals more options.
- **⚙️**: Opens settings menu for viewing or modifying.
- **⬅️ / ➡️ / 🔄**: Navigate back, forward, or refresh.
- **↶ (undo)**: Undoes the previous operation(s).
- **🔴 badge**: Indicates unread notifications or alerts.
- **📱 / 🔕**: Phone is on vibrate or silent mode.
- **😊 / 123 / 🎤**: Switch between emoji, numeric, or voice input.

Device Interface & Connectivity Symbols

-  (**USB symbol**): Wired connection or power charging.
- : Ethernet or general Internet access.
-  / : Wi-Fi and wireless signal strength.
-  (**Bluetooth**): Device-to-device wireless connection.
-  / : Battery status and charging symbol.
- : Universal power button symbol.
-  : Download and upload icons.
- : Connectivity, often seen in network or satellite contexts.
-  /  / : Sound on, mute, and volume up indicators.

Emotional Communication Symbols

- :-) , :- (, :P: Classic emoticons for smiling, frowning, or joking.
- <3: Represents a heart or “love.”
- Emojis (  ): Visual icons that convey mood and tone.
- Animated images: Usually GIFs, used to express reactions and emotions.

Social Feedback & Engagement Symbols

-  / : Like or dislike.
- : Strong like or love.
-  / : Turn notifications on or off.
- : Save or mark as favorite.
- : Comment or begin chat.
- : Share or refresh content.
-  / : Block, hide, or remove.

Unicode for Characters

It is important to note that many of these symbols are included in **Unicode**, a universal character encoding standard that assigns a unique number (code point) to every symbol, letter, or emoji--across all platforms, devices, and languages. For example:

W = U+0057 7 = U+0037 × = U+00D7
@ = U+0040 ♥ = U+2764 ☹ = U+23FB

As of June 2025, Unicode contained 65,536 different code points. Thanks to Unicode, these symbols work on computers, smartphones, and websites around the world. It makes our shared digital language possible. Many of the symbols you see in this article are encoded with their specific Unicode values.

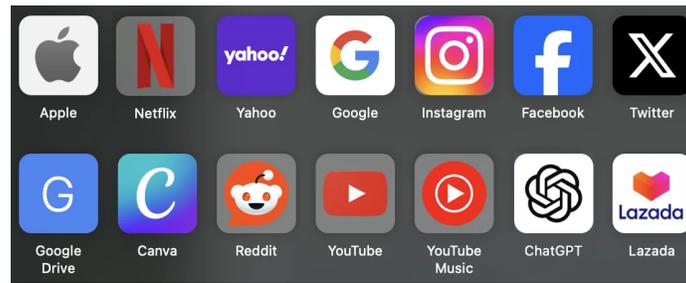
Favicons

Favicons (favorite icons) are small icons that represent websites and apps. They appear in browser tabs, bookmarks, and on your workstation or phone's home screen, when saved as shortcuts. These icons, often a version of company logos, offer visual branding and quick access for apps and websites. Clicking/tapping a favicon usually start/restart a specific app or visit a website.

See if you recognize the following six favicons.



Here are some more.



Finally @ the End

As time goes on, the digital culture will no doubt evolve and mature, so will these symbols and the ways you use them.

These symbols are designed to satisfy specific needs and endured the test of time. Learning the language of symbols is like learning to read a new kind of visual shorthand. From the technical to the emotional, these small marks carry powerful meaning. No matter where you are @, being fluent helps you not only understand what's going on but also participate more confidently in modern digital life. Such abilities will take time to develop and perfect, especially for people who aren't #DigitalNatives. In due time they will become second nature for you. And many parts of your #ComputationalThinking (CT) will also be reinforced.

Finally, remember if you ever feel lost, just ask, click, or tap--every symbol is an invitation to move ahead. Soon you'll feel more at ease in the digital land.