HACKERS

Today, mainstream usage of "hacker" mostly refers to computer criminals, due to the mass media usage of the word since the 1980s. This includes what hacker slang calls "[script kiddies](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Script_kiddie)", people breaking into computers using programs written by others, with very little knowledge about the way they work. This usage has become so predominant that the general public is largely unaware that different meanings exist. While the self-designation of hobbyists as hackers is generally acknowledged and accepted by computer security hackers, people from the programming subculture consider the computer intrusion related usage incorrect, and emphasize the difference between the two by calling security breakers "crackers" (analogous to a safecracker).

The controversy is usually based on the assertion that the term originally meant someone messing about with something in a positive sense, that is, using playful cleverness to achieve a goal. But then, it is supposed, the meaning of the term shifted over the decades and came to refer to computer criminals.

As the security-related usage has spread more widely, the original meaning has become less known. In popular usage and in the media, "computer intruders" or "computer criminals" is the exclusive meaning of the word today. (For example, "An Internet 'hacker' broke through state government security systems in March.") In the computer enthusiast (Hacker Culture) community, the primary meaning is a complimentary description for a particularly brilliant programmer or technical expert. (For example, "[Linus Torvalds](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linus_Torvalds), the creator of [Linux](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Linux_kernel), is considered by some to be a hacker.") A large segment of the technical community insist the latter is the "correct" usage of the word (see the [Jargon File](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jargon_File) definition below).

### Representation in mainstream media

The [mainstream media](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainstream_media)'s current usage of the term may be traced back to the early 1980s. When the term was introduced to wider society by the mainstream media in 1983, even those in the computer community referred to computer intrusion as "hacking", although not as the exclusive definition of the word. In reaction to the increasing media use of the term exclusively with the criminal connotation, the computer community began to differentiate their terminology. Alternative terms such as "[cracker](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security_cracking)" were coined in an effort to maintain the distinction between "hackers" within the legitimate programmer community and those performing computer break-ins. Further terms such as "[black hat](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_hat_hacking)", "[white hat](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_hat_%28computer_security%29)" and "[gray hat](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gray_hat%22%20%5Co%20%22Gray%20hat)" developed when laws against breaking into computers came into effect, to distinguish criminal activities from those activities which were legal.

### Representation in network news

However, network news use of the term consistently pertained primarily to the criminal activities, despite the attempt by the technical community to preserve and distinguish the original meaning, so today the mainstream media and general public continue to describe computer criminals, with all levels of technical sophistication, as "hackers" and do not generally make use of the word in any of its non-criminal connotations. Members of the media sometimes seem unaware of the distinction, grouping legitimate "hackers" such as Linus Torvalds and [Steve Wozniak](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steve_Wozniak) along with criminal "crackers".

As a result, the definition is still the subject of heated controversy.