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Flashing Question Mark on the Screen: Causes and Cures (11/95)

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TOPIC -----

This article tells you what to do when you see a blinking or flashing question mark on your screen when you startup a Macintosh or Macintosh Performa computer (assuming you are using System 7.x).

The flashing question mark indicates that the computer cannot locate the valid system software. Each of the possible causes has a specific solution.

DISCUSSION -----

Typically blinking question marks are caused by:

- Damaged or missing System Software
- SCSI configuration problems
- Third Party software conflict
- Corrupted PRAM
- Damaged Hardware

System Software Improperly Configured

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Sometimes a System Folder is on the hard drive, but its components are not configured properly, are damaged, or there may be two or more System Folders present. Use the steps in the following table to correct this problem:

Step 1

Restart your system using Disk Tools (if this fails, go to the next section "Attached Peripherals (SCSI Devices) Improperly Configured").

Step 2

Open the hard disk's icon.

Step 3

Open the System Folder. Ensure that the System and Finder are present and at the

root level of the System Folder.

Step 4

Double-click the System file to confirm that it can open. If there is an error, perform a clean install.

Step 5

Make sure that you have only one System Folder on your hard drive. The active System Folder icon should contain a little picture of a Macintosh. If you find an extra System Folder, move it to the Trash icon and choose Empty Trash from the Special menu.

Step 6

If you are a Performa user, and have a previous back up of your system, turn on the computer and insert the Utilities Disk, run Apple Restore, and restore your System Software. If you have not had a chance to back up your system, contact the Apple Assistance Center (1-800-SOS-APPL) for further assistance.

Attached Peripherals (SCSI Devices) Improperly Configured

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A chain of SCSI devices, called a SCSI bus, might include peripherals, such as external hard drives, CD-ROM drives, scanners, and printers, linked together with SCSI cables. To determine whether you have a SCSI configuration problem, complete the following steps:

Step 1

Turn off the computer.

Step 2

Turn off all attached devices.

Step 3

Completely disconnect the SCSI bus from your computer.

Step 4

Start up the computer.

If your computer starts up properly, you know the problem is with your SCSI chain. For more information on troubleshooting SCSI problems, search on "How to Connect Macintosh SCSI Devices."

Third Party Software Conflicts

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If you have recently added or modified your system by adding any additional software, you may be experiencing a software conflict. If starting from Disk Tools was successful, then try restarting without Disk Tools, and hold down the Shift key. If this is successful, then you most likely have an Extension or Control Panel problem, and you should remove any third party software from your System Folder. You can also use the Extension Manager or another third party utility to turn off Extensions or Control Panels. If you still cannot restart from the System Folder on your hard drive (but were successful when starting with Disk Tools), then a Clean Install is recommended.

Corrupted PRAM

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One of the factors that causes a flashing question mark is a corrupt PRAM or logic board setting. Steps to resolve this problem include zapping PRAM by holding down the Command-Option-p-r keys at system startup. If this does not resolve the problem, you can remove the logic board battery for 10 minutes. This should only be done by an authorized service provider, since damage to the logic board is possible if not done properly.

By pulling the battery, the PRAM is completely cleared and other logic board components are reset. Causes for this corruption could be a faulty ADB device, or AudioVision displays.

Hardware Problems

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If none of the preceding solves your problem, you may need to take your computer to an authorized Service Provider for repair.

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