The operating system is the most important [program](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/P/program.htm) that [runs](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/R/run.htm) on computer. Every general-purpose computer must have an operating system to run other programs and [applications](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/A/application.html). Operating systems perform basic tasks, such as recognizing input from the [keyboard](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/K/keyboard.htm), sending [output](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/O/output.htm) to the [display screen](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/D/display_screen.htm), keeping track of [files](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/F/file.htm) and [directories](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/D/directory.htm) on the [disk](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/D/disk.htm), and controlling [peripheral devices](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/P/peripheral_device.htm) such as [disk drives](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/D/disk_drive.htm) and [printers](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/P/printer.htm).

For large systems, the operating system has even greater responsibilities and powers. It is like a traffic cop -- it makes sure that different program and [users](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/U/user.htm) running at the same time do not interfere with each other. The operating system is also responsible for [security](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/S/security.htm), ensuring that unauthorized users do not [access](http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/A/access.htm) the system.

