

Passwords: Your First Line of Defense

Protecting your computer with a password is a common method of ensuring that only those with permission can access it. However, passwords are effective only as long as you use ones that are easy to remember and difficult to “break,” and that are changed on a regular basis. Did you know that anyone with a little bit of technical know-how can download a program off the Internet and use it to break weak passwords? These programs use “brute force” and “dictionary attacks” to try every possible combination of words and letters to break into your account. The best way to combat this very real threat is to write strong passwords. The following simple rules for writing and using strong passwords will keep your computer more secure, decreasing the chance of compromise.

Your Password: Strong or Weak?

Strong Passwords:

- Are 8 or more characters long
- Contain combination of upper and lowercase letters, numbers, and symbols (\$ch00LrU135 = school rules)
- Are passphrases: Choose a line or two from a song or poem and use the first letter of each word. For example, “It is the East, and Juliet is the Sun” becomes “IstE,@J1tS”
- Are changed on a regular basis
- Are easy to remember and are not written down
- Are not used over and over again for different programs and websites
- Are typed quickly, making it harder for someone to steal by eavesdropping

Weak Passwords:

- Contain your login, your name, your maiden name, your spouse's name, your children's names or your pets' names in any form as your password
- Contain publicly accessible information about yourself, such as social security number, license numbers, phone numbers, address, birthdays, etc.
- Contain a word found in a dictionary of any language
- Are made of all numbers or all the same letter
- Are saved in the “Remember Password” function on mail or website browsers
- Are written down
- Are shared with others

Summary

Passwords make it as difficult as possible for someone else to access your information. If you follow the strong password practices outlined above by writing strong passwords or passphrases, changing them frequently (every 3-6 months), and keeping them safe from others by not sharing them or writing them down, you will be able to keep your computer and your personal information—such as your banking and credit card information—safe.