

Hardware Review: The Tactus Keyboard

Many manufacturers advertise the long-term benefits of their particular keyboard designs. The 'Tactus Keyboard' is another variation on the standard keyboard and is an innovative attempt at providing a straightforward way to learn the skill of touch-typing, or to further develop touch-typing skills. The keyboard was delivered in a robust shipping carton, information on the box describes the keyboard's suitability, and contends that one can 'increase typing speed by up to 400%'. Setup and installation of the keyboard is relatively straightforward, simply involving removing the current keyboard and plugging the Tactus keyboard into the computer's (PS2) keyboard socket. The keyboard appears to be a solid, well-manufactured piece.

Colour and tactile coding assisted the reviewer in locating keys. Tactile coding consists of three sets of ridges, in a combination of vertical and horizontal ridges and arranged in three separate box like formations. Each box is four keys wide (three keys for the numeric keypad), and has three rows, the inner middle key being the 'home key' for each hand, per standard touch typing practices (see figure 1). The first box surrounds lettered keys to be used by the left hand, the second box surrounds lettered keys to be used by the right hand, and the third box surrounds the numeric keypad. The system of ridges have been labelled the 'DigiGuide Key System' by the developer 'Tactus Keyboard Corporation'. These ridges are designed so as to avoid or reduce lateral overshoots by users by alerting them that the key is the last one in each set or box, and may assist users in remembering key locations, as they are an ever-present form of feedback. Additionally, they may assist users in relocating their hands to the home row.

The outer keys of each box formation are in a darker grey shade, supplementing the tactile feedback (see figure 2).

Alphanumeric keys are in the normal QWERTY arrangement. The only major difference from the standard layout is that nine keys ('print screen', 'scroll/lock', 'pause/break', 'insert', 'home', 'page up', 'page down', 'delete' and 'end') have been moved down the keyboard by one row. This proved troublesome for the reviewer as the 'home' and 'end' keys are used frequently, and the wrong key was almost invariably struck.

A separate insert within the shipping carton briefly explains finger positioning for those keen to touch type. A diagram also assists by illustrating the finger placement; this could be propped near a user's keyboard, thereby allowing an easy reference point. Three hot keys of 'standby' (denoted by a moon icon), 'wake up' (denoted by a sun icon), and an on/off button are located toward the top right side of the keyboard. With a Dell 8100 PC running Windows 2000, only the 'standby' key worked.

Keys have a solid rebound with appropriate key travel, and a 'spill and crumb resistant' design is a welcome addition for those in food and drink filled environments! A detachable non-adjustable palm rest provides adequate support. The angle of the keyboard is also adjustable, in line with current keyboard design. While the palm rest is of a good size, an adjustable palm rest would be a welcome addition.

A complementary web site exists, providing many useful resources, at this stage including:

- General information about the keyboard's advantages;
- Typing tests for user's to check their typing speed;
- History of the keyboard;
- A typing tuition programe accompanied by the promise, 'With practice, you will achieve a speed of 40-50 words per minute (wpm) in a few weeks';
- Advantages for visually impaired users; and
- Keyboard posture.

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A three-year warranty and unconditional guarantee are offered. Additionally, if users believe the keyboard has not met their expectations, a refund is available within 60 days. The Tactus keyboard is similar in size to a standard keyboard with keys of a standard size. Including its wrist rest, the keyboard is 470mm x 229mm x 37mm. The insert and information on the box are written in five different languages, serving as a reminder that the keyboard is available for the diverse international market.

Further independent field studies and typing tests to verify any claims are always welcome additions to products of this nature. Furthermore, a future development Tactus may wish to consider could be an optional, more ergonomically designed keyboard.

Overall, a particularly useful piece of hardware, relevant for many users including those in schools, higher education, home, office, or by the visual impaired, especially because of the tactile feedback. A claim of the keyboard's literature is, 'One day all keyboards will be like Tactus'. Maybe they will!

Designed to work with DOS, Windows 3.1, Windows 95/98/2000, Windows NT, 4.0 and above.

Tactus keyboard seems to be designed for PC use only, there is no evidence to suggest that it can be used with a Macintosh computer.

For enquiries see:
<http://www.tactuskeyboard.com/>

Cost of "The Tactus Keyboard" is \$99,

(including GST). Postage is included in Australia. The company advises that bulk discounts are available.

Send details and payment to:

The Tactus Keyboard.

Tactus Keyboard Corporation
 21 Clanalpine Street
 Mosman, NSW 2088
 Australia

or fax to 02 9960 2013, or order on-line at <http://www.tactuskeyboard.com/>

Figure 1 - Note a 'home key' is identified with a raised dot, and the use of vertical and horizontal ridges.

Figure 2 - Tactus keyboard, with use of QWERTY keyboard, colour coding and ridges on keys.



Figure 1

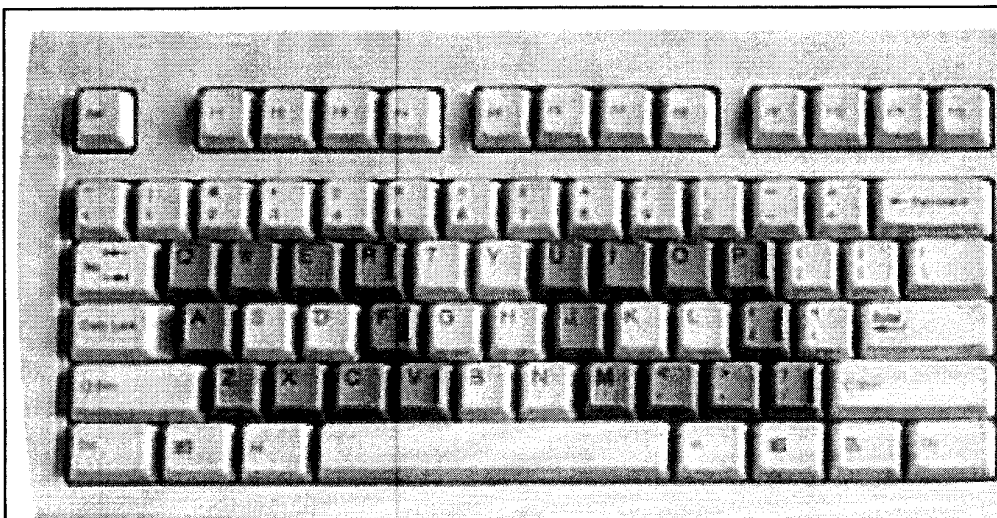


Figure 2