Slow Computer? Your Web Browser May Be the Culprit

Your Web browser could be slowing down your entire system.
CREDIT: zazzle.com
View full size image

It's frustrating when your computer slows down. Oftentimes this happens when a program utilizes too many resources, like memory or the CPU.

Increasingly, Web browsers like Internet Explorer, Safari, Firefox and Chrome are to blame. Determining what resources your browser is using can help you eliminate the resource hogs and return your computer to the performance you once had.

Why do they do it?

Web browsers can display many pages in separate tabs. And Web pages have increased in complexity to run powerful sites such as Gmail or YouTube. Most browsers also support "extensions" or "plugins" that add features like password management, ad blocking and social network notifications.

Increasing the load even more, each tab and every extension uses its own portion of computer memory, often called a "sandbox." This prevents malware on a Web page from accessing other resources in your browser. And if one process crashes, it's less likely to affect the others.

Finding the Culprits

If your computer is running slowly, first check if the Web browser is using more memory or CPU than it should. In Windows, access the Task Manager by holding down the CTRL and SHIFT keys, and then press the ESC key. In the popup window that appears, click the "Processes" tab. On a Mac, open the Applications folder and then the Utilities folder and click on the Activity Monitor program.

Task Manager and Activity Monitor show running processes, called "Image Name" in Windows and "Process Name" on a Mac. Next to each is the percentage of the total CPU and memory resources it is consuming. Click the header of a column, say, "Memory," to sort by that info and find the biggest users. You'll probably see multiple entries — one for each open tab or running extension.

A single Web page with video may use 20 to 30 percent of your CPU. A few of those, or any one over 50 percent, will clearly affect performance. If the memory used by all of your browser processes combined exceeds one-half of your computer's memory, your browser is likely affecting performance, too.

Often the easiest fix is to simply close the browser window or tab and reopen it again. If the problem continues to occur, you'll need to determine if a particular page or extension is causing the problem.

Digging Deeper

The list of processes shows if your browser is consuming too many resources, but it won't show which Web page or extension is guilty. Unfortunately, Internet Explorer and Safari don't show this information, but Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox do.

Chrome

Chrome provides the most detail. On a Mac or PC, click the wrench icon in the upper right of your toolbar, select "Tools" and choose "Task Manager" to get a list of processes. For example, a tab containing the TechNewsDaily home page would appear as "Tab: Home|TechNewsDaily.com," or the AdBlock extension would show up as "Extension: AdBlock." This can make it far easier to pinpoint the problem.

Firefox

In Firefox on a Mac or PC, type "about:memory" in the address bar and press Enter. You'll see the amount of memory processes are using, though not the CPU usage. The information is more detailed than you'll need but can still be useful in tracking down a memory-hogging extension or Web page.

What to Do

As recommended above, closing your browser and reopening it is often the easiest fix. If the browser is frozen, the Windows Task Manager and Mac Activity Monitor allow you to "end" or "quit" a process. This could cause instability, so it's good to follow up by closing and reopening the whole browser app.

If you've narrowed down the problem to an extension, disable or uninstall it and look for a different one that does the job. If a specific Web site causes the problem, try a different browser and see if it handles the site better. [Rethinking Browsers: Add-ons Make the Difference]

Follow Joseph Fieber on Google+ or contact him through his Website, JosephFieber.com.