

5 steps to clean up your computer files

When we started the At Home and At Work Web sites, we thought that most of the reader questions we'd get would be about complex Excel formulas, editing digital photographs, or how to build a PC from spare parts. In fact, your questions tend to be a bit more practical.

One of the most common requests we get is for help cleaning up the files on your computer. As many people get new computers around this time of the year, and this often entails a move from an older computer, the topic of cleaning up and moving files seems particularly timely.

In this article, I'll go over the basics for sorting through and organizing your computer files, making a backup of them, and deleting those you don't need. I'm only addressing those files that you actively have a hand in creating. If you want to remove software from your computer, read [Do a clean sweep of your computer: How to safely remove software and files from your PC](#).

If you're moving from one computer to another, be sure to review the [New PC? Start here](#) page before you start, as it can help save you some time and effort.

To understand how to go about cleaning up your computer you first need to understand how your computer deals with information. When you use software applications, everything you do on your computer ends up creating or using files. Some files contain text, some contain images, and some contain music. But no matter what they contain, the Windows file system treats them all as files.

Note: If you are a novice user, there are files on your system you might not normally see. A good rule of thumb is not to delete anything if you're not sure what it is. For example, Windows and its components and your software applications are also made up of files. Lastly, when you work with your computer, it sometimes creates temporary files that it uses to keep track of what it's doing. These are often automatically deleted when they're no longer needed, but in some cases the operating system or your software keeps them around for possible future use.

Step 1: Find your files

In Windows XP, My Documents is your personal folder. It contains two specialized personal folders, My Pictures and My Music. You can make your personal folders available to everyone, or you can make them private so that only you can access the files within them.

Windows creates personal folders for every user on the computer. When there is more than one person using the computer, each personal folder is identified by the user's name. For example, if John and Jane use the same computer, there will be two sets of personal folders: John's Documents, Music, and Pictures, and Jane's Documents, Music, and Pictures. When John is logged on to the computer, his personal folders appear as My Documents, My Pictures, and My Music, and Jane's appear as Jane's Documents, Jane's Pictures, and Jane's Music.

Windows also provides a Shared Documents folder for files you want to share with other users. Like My Documents, the Shared Documents folder contains a Shared Pictures and Shared Music

folder. These folders are for pictures and music you want to share with other people who use your computer.

You can use Windows Explorer to access your personal folders or the Shared Documents, Music, and Pictures folders. To open Windows Explorer, click **Start**, point to **All Programs**, point to **Accessories**, and then click **Windows Explorer**.

When you do, you'll find all the files you've created on your computer provided you store your files within your "My Documents" folder. (If you store your files in other locations, you can use Windows Explorer to go through the different file locations on your system until you find your files.)

If you're new to using Windows Explorer, I encourage you to take time now to get comfortable using this essential tool. Learning how to manage the files on your computer may not sound exciting, but being able to quickly find the file you need (and making sure you don't accidentally lose an important file) is a skill that will make all of the other things you do with your computer that much more productive and enjoyable. Before you start working with your own files, why not do some practice exercises? Create some files and folders you don't care about then move them around. (You can easily create new files by copying old ones and renaming them. Use the Help provided with Windows Explorer if you're not familiar with how to copy and rename files and folders.)

Step 2: Organize your files

Depending on how long you've been using your computer, you may have quite a few files stored in My Documents. And, depending on how you handle saving files from your applications, they may all be dropped into the My Documents folder, or in different folders you've set up along the way.

Let's assume that you've stored your files in a virtual heap under the My Documents folder. Once you've got them sorted into categories, either by date, type, or some other system that makes sense to you; it should be a lot easier to tell which files you need and which you don't. I wrote an earlier TipTalk item called [Super simple sorting: Organize your files](#) that describes how to sort your files using some of the features built into Windows Explorer.

How you organize your files is a personal choice based a lot on what you use your computer to do. There are several common methods for sorting your files. One method is to have different file folders for time periods: everything you create during a month, for example, would go into a single folder. For each new month, you'd create a new folder. This approach might work well if you create a number of documents of just one or two types.

If, on the other hand, you create lots of different types of documents, perhaps addressing many topics, then a more complex system of filing them by type and or topic might work. For example, I've got a file folder of all the PowerPoint presentations I've ever done for executives. On the other hand, I've got my site reports stored in separate folders by year. These articles can help you get other ideas for ways to set up your filing system: [Filing frenzy: Organize your documents on your PC](#) and [7 tips to manage your files better](#).

Whatever method of setting up your folders makes the most sense to you is the one you'll likely be able to stick with and use consistently. And it's getting in the habit of always storing your files in their designated spot that makes finding them again so much easier. (I know, I know, it's just like our mom's always told us: Put things back where you found them.)

Step 3: Back up your files

Simply put, backing up your files means copying them onto a disk or other device that you can remove from your computer. For permanent backups, say of your financial records, you'll probably want to [burn a CD](#) and store it someplace safe. In my case, I'm generally just working on documents and spreadsheets that don't take much room, so I'll often just [use a USB drive](#) and use it to transfer files from one computer to another. Be sure to test your backup to make sure it works before you go on to the next step. In other words, try to use one of the files you've saved to the CD, ideally on a different computer. You don't want to start deleting your original files until you're sure you have a good backup copy.

Step 4: Delete what you don't need

Once you have all your files safely copied to a disk, you can start deleting those you don't think you'll need again. You can use Windows Explorer to select the files you don't want, right-click on them and then press **Delete**. Unless a file is very large, this will move the files you delete into your Recycle Bin (which is a safeguard Windows provides in case you accidentally delete a file). Files you've deleted will show up in the Recycle Bin (and continue to take space on your hard drive) until you empty the Recycle Bin. I generally leave deleted files in the Recycle Bin for a while just in case I change my mind.

Step 5: Back up your files (again)

After you've got your file system organized and have removed all the files you don't need, it is the ideal time to create another backup. That way, if you should need to restore files or move them to another computer you'll have a nice orderly set of only the files you need.

—Robbin Young

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