

A Windows Clean Install Checklist

Having to do a clean install of Windows can be a good thing – it gets rid of amazing amounts of accumulated junk on your system. But if you're not careful, you can lose all of your important work.

A fresh install of your operating system, whether due to upgrading equipment, a major technical problem, or just to clean house, involves more than just reinstalling Windows. You have to reinstall *every program on your computer*, as well as all of your data you want to save. You can't simply back up programs – most have to be completely reinstalled. And this can be a daunting task when you realize what you've put on your computer over the years.

Just recently I installed XP Pro on a new system and to prepare myself, I wrote up a checklist of things to find, save and print before getting started. (My husband thought I overdid my prep work, but it saved me a *lot* of time once the new operating system was up and running). I hope this helps you as much as it helped me!

- Open up Windows Explorer, navigate to C:/Program Files and take a screenshot of all your currently installed software. This was critical to making sure I reinstalled what I really needed, and also let me know what I could afford to lose (approximately 3/5 of what was in that folder). Print a copy or two so you can mark it up, and save it to CD-ROM.
- Take a screenshot of your desktop – this will help you remember what icons you had and where they were placed (if you don't care, don't bother. But if you've arranged your icons to your liking, take a screenshot). Print it and save it to CD-ROM.
- Get a free program like drivercontroller.exe, which will help you find and save all of the drivers on your machine to CD-ROM.
- Pull out the CD-ROM's for all the boxed software you want to install (including your Windows OS disk). Note – if you purchased Windows with a computer from Dell or other manufacturers and are installing to a non-Dell computer, go buy a new copy of Windows. Yours won't work and it will only frustrate you further.
- Pull out the CD-ROM's that came with your printer, graphics card, sound card, speakers, monitor, wireless networking card and any other hardware you've installed.
- Put registration keys, licenses and serial numbers for downloaded software into a text file, print it, and save it to CD-ROM.
- Obviously, save all of your documents – spreadsheets, word processing files, photos, music files, etc., either in a backup set or copy them to an external drive that you can access later. Or both, preferably.
- Export favorites from your web browser(s) – Internet Explorer, Firefox, etc. – save them to CD-ROM.
- If you've downloaded any fonts, zip them up and save to CD-ROM.

- I recommend you save the following to CD-ROM one program per folder, and put a little text file in each program's folder reminding you where to reinstall this information on the newly-formatted hard drive. You may have to visit the software manufacturer's site or hunt around a bit on the Web for information on how to save profiles and make backups for each program, but the time it takes to do that is *nothing* compared to having to recreate your information from scratch:
 - Export mail and contact information from your mail software (your *profile* if using Thunderbird).
 - Backup financial information from Quicken/Quickbooks or Money.
 - If you use planning software (like PlanPlus), make a backup.
 - If you use project management or time tracking software, make a backup.
 - If you use FTP software, save the profile if you can.
 - For any specialty software you use (in my case it's HTML, server and Adobe Creative Suite), save your settings if possible. You will probably need to check out the manufacturer's site to find out how to do that, but it's worth the time if you spent time getting your software configured just right. Sometimes this will involve saving a registry key but full, easy instructions are usually available.
 - Any other databases, like a client management system – make a backup.
- If you've made a number of Exceptions in your firewall software, save them by taking screenshots. Print and save to CD-ROM.
- If you have a complicated home network, consider taking screenshots of the settings screens. Print and save to CD-ROM.
- Anything you're not sure of, if you can back it up or print it, better safe than sorry!

Here's an excellent guide I found online for making a clean install of Windows XP:

http://www.winsupersite.com/showcase/windowsxp_sg_clean.asp

Note especially the need to defragment your hard drive after getting XP up and running. It's good advice; I checked my new hard drive *before* starting to reinstall software and it was 27% fragmented just from all the XP updates.... My new hard drive came with the home version of Diskeeper, a great little program that will let you schedule defragmenting automatically – which will increase your computer's performance.

Good luck! Reinstalling your operating system can become overwhelming because of all you have to remember, but hopefully this checklist will save you some time and worry.

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