



Make the Most of Your New PC

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Did you receive a pristine, mint Windows Vista computer this holiday season? Great, but right out of the box it's far from perfect. Unlike most [electronic devices](#), which you can plug in and use instantly, PCs—particularly those with Windows—need some adjustment before they're ready for everyday use. You need to make your new system safe, and also personalize it with your own preferences. There are things on the hard drive you should get rid of, and other things you should add immediately. If you haven't yet been introduced to Vista, or it's been a while since you've set up a new machine, we'll walk you through it all in these 12 simple steps. And if your new baby is a Mac, you've got a much shorter to-do list.

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1. First Start

After you've devised clever ways to use your new collection of Styrofoam, and made the basic initial connections (power, monitor, Ethernet, keyboard and mouse), Vista will ask you to do various things, like set your language, time zone, clock and calendar, and perhaps most important, create a user account and password. Forgo this only if you're 110 percent sure no one else will want to gain access, ever, or if you're so dull-as-dishwater that it wouldn't matter.

2. De-bloat the System

Big-name system vendors typically install software on their consumer PCs at the factory. These "extras" go by many names: bundleware, begware, bloatware, and my favorite, crapware. That's because a lot of it is just that: useless crap. The vendors install it under the guise of helping you out, but mostly they do it to get money from the software makers. A few vendors, like Sony and Dell, offer some options to avoid crapware, but usually just for small businesses. Boutique manufacturers, like Velocity Micro, do a better job of providing a clean system.

What can you do to decrapify your new PC? Download and run the free PC Decrapifier (www.pcdecrapifier.com). It will hit the flotsam you might not want, from AOL installers to Yahoo! Toolbar, but it won't get them all. If you can identify more crapplications it missed, try Revo Uninstaller (www.revouninstaller.com), a free utility that does more to fully eradicate errant software than the built-in Windows control panel.

This is a good time to kill anything you don't want that's part of Vista itself. Load up the control panel called *Programs and Features*. Click "*Turn Windows Features on or off*" at left. You'll get a *User Account Control* warning; click *Ok*. Uncheck anything in the list you definitely don't want, such as games, Tablet PC Optional Components, and so forth. If you don't know what an item does, hover the mouse over the name for a description. If you still don't know what it does, best to leave it.

Don't confuse crapware with trialware—a trial version of software you might actually want that is active for a limited time. It might be worth keeping, especially if it's a free trial of a solid security product, which leads us to . . .

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3. Activate Shields

If you're willing to pay to protect your system from malware, and get some extra firewall protection to boot, we recommend you install our Editors' Choice security package, Norton Internet Security 2009. Its defense against spyware and viruses is extremely effective, and impact on system performance is minimal.

If you don't want to pay, you can set up a pretty good one-two punch with AVG Anti-Virus Free 8.0 (free.avg.com) and another Editors' Choice, ThreatFire 3.5 (www.threatfire.com). The former uses virus signatures to detect problems; the latter uses behavior analysis. Thus they don't conflict, as two anti-malware programs running on one machine usually do. (Keep in mind that ThreatFire can be almost too effective, and should probably be turned off when you're installing new software. Otherwise it may see the new program as a threat.)

Everyone on a broadband connection needs a software firewall to control which applications on your PC can access the Internet. The firewall in your network router is not enough. When it comes to free firewall software, Comodo Firewall Pro (www.odo.com) remains our top pick.

4. Download Updates

At some point your PC will tell you there are Windows Vista updates available. If you haven't already, feel

free to grab them. You may have an icon in the system tray at the lower right, or you can select Windows Update from the main Vista menu at the lower left (choose All Programs to find it).

Depending on which version of Vista has been installed on your computer and when, you could have quite a few updates—big updates—to download. Let this process run its course. Walk away. Eat some leftovers, go out for a mocha latte, watch an Adam Sandler movie. It's going to take a while, and the Sandler movie will seem to last forever.

When the downloads are done, run *Windows Update* again. Updates tend to beget updates. Three times should be sufficient. By now you've got a truly pristine system.

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5. Ghost the Machine

After something catastrophic happens, some techies would just as soon reinstall from the original CDs to get a fresh start, but that means going through all those updates again. Instead, back up your pristine system completely right now with the full, updated OS, so you can restore everything quickly after a disaster.

Make a complete drive image (aka a ghost) of the **C:** drive. You can make images with Norton Ghost 14, Acronis True Image 11, or a freebie like DriveImage XML (www.runtime.org). If you've got Vista Business or Ultimate, use the built-in tool called Complete PC Backup to do the job. Store the image on an external drive, if you've got one, and burn it to a DVD.

6. Transfer Files

Vista makes this relatively simple with the Windows Easy Transfer utility. It works with the methods we'll discuss (disc, network, and transfer cable) to move not only data files and folders but also settings from your old Windows system to the new. It even re-creates your user accounts, if you want that. It does not move your old applications. To take advantage of Easy Transfer, your old PC must be running Windows 2000, XP, or Vista.

You can always use old-school sneaker-net—putting files from the old PC on a CD, DVD, or thumb drive, then copying them over to your new machine—but if you've got a lot of files, this could take minutes or days. That really big external hard drive with a USB connector you bought for backup is an option. A better solution might be to reuse the old hard drive. A USB 2.0 to SATA/IDE Adapter (about \$20) can turn an old drive into an external drive for use on your new PC.

But as you know, the home network is your slickest alternative—once you have it set up right. Go into the System control panel, click *Advanced* system settings, and then go to the *Computer Name* tab under *System Properties*. Click the *Change* button. Make sure the new computer has a name that's unique among the computers in the house, and that the Workgroup name is exactly the same for all the computers in the house. Otherwise, they can't see each other to share. Go into your software firewall and check that it's open to other PCs on your network (and that the firewalls on the other computers are open to the new PC, as well). Find the folder containing the files you want to share, right-click on it to get *Properties*, and tell Windows to share the folder. On Vista systems, the folder should now show up in the Network and Sharing Center when you click View computers and devices.

You might be tempted to buy a migration utility to move your old stuff. Or you might succumb to Microsoft's pitch for a special USB cable (from Belkin) to use with its Easy Transfer utility. Neither option is worth the money, especially for an action you'll likely take only once. An option that might be a good buy is a cable with software that lets it do much more, like IOGear's USB Laptop KVM Switch (www.iogear.com). It not only handles file transfers between computers but lets you switch instantly from PC to PC, using a single monitor and keyboard/mouse. At \$129 it's not cheap, but it is one way to ensure that both your old and your new computers remain useful.

7. Prep for Data Backup

No doubt you've heard this a zillion times, but in case this advice hasn't taken, I'll repeat: A simple backup regime is great for peace of mind. Online backup services like MozyHome (www.mozy.com/home) make it painless. You can start with a free account that stores up to 2GB of data. Perfect for your unfinished novel or other small projects. (You can get unlimited online storage with Mozy for \$4.95 per month.)

If you've got multiple machines, consider one of the many new services that synchronize files between computers and add online backup in the middle, so you can get to files when you're at someone else's PC. Dropbox (www.getdropbox.com) is an up-and-comer that supports sync between multiple Windows, Mac, and even Linux PCs. Basic service is free and gives you 2 gigs of online storage; it costs \$9.99 a month to get 50 gigs.

Local backup of your data gives you more control. One option is to partition your hard drive into multiple drives—**C:** for the system and programs, **D:** for data, **E:** for items you don't need to back up. That way, you can tell Vista's built-in Backup and Restore Center control panel to look at one drive only. Buy an external hard drive that's at least 1.5 times larger than the data partition (a 500GB external drive to back up your 300GB partition, for example) as a target drive. Now even huge video and photo files are no big deal to back up. Simply put them in the same spot every time—always "*D: for data*" (for example)—and let the software do its job.

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8. Geek Out Firefox

Firefox is our *PC Magazine* Editors' Choice Web browser for good reason. It's fast, friendly, and infinitely configurable. Sure, you could go your whole life using Firefox and never change a thing, but once you install a few key extensions, you'll wonder how you ever lived with Internet Explorer or how Google's Chrome will ever measure up.

Here are some key add-ons worth trying (in the Firefox menu bar, go to *Tools*, then *Add-ons*, and search for them in the *Get Add-ons* tab):

- Cooliris: Turns browsing into a full-screen 3D experience.
- DownThemAll!: Download manager handles multiple downloads at once.
- FireFTP: If you need an FTP client, get one that stays within Firefox.
- Foxmarks: If you use multiple PCs, you can synchronize the bookmarks on each one.
- Greasemonkey: Using scripts from UserScripts.org, it can change the look and feel of almost any site.
- IE Tab: If you absolutely must view a site in Internet Explorer, do it within a Firefox tab.
- ScribeFire: If you blog, ScribeFire makes it easier.
- Tab Mix Plus: Take complete control of the tabs in Firefox.
- Update Notifier: Never let your Firefox extensions go un-updated again.

If you used Firefox on your old computer, you probably want the same settings, bookmarks, and extensions. Back up the old Firefox using freeware MozBackup (mozbackup.jasnapaka.com), save the file to your new PC, and use MozBackup to restore. It also works with Thunderbird to back up e-mail.

You have your own list of favorite utilities, but we recommend installing these programs no matter what browser you use: QuickTime, Adobe Flash, Microsoft Silverlight, Windows Media Player, and a PDF reader (try the free Foxit Reader from www.foxitsoftware.com; it's faster and smaller than Adobe Reader).

9. Place Your Programs

This is one area where you're on your own: We can't decide what software you want or need. But if you're configuring this new machine for someone else, remember that no PC is complete without at least an office suite, a photo-editing tool, a media manager, and something for e-mail. And there are free alternatives for almost any program you might need; see our no-cost favorites in *The Best Free Software*.

If you want the same setup as your previous machine, check the *Program Files* folder on the **C:** drive of your old PC. Make a listing of the programs there using an online word processor like Google Docs so you can access the list from any computer. Keep in mind that you'll also want to carry over the settings and log-in info for software like e-mail and IM clients.

Gather those monstrosities known as registration codes for your software. Record them somewhere permanent and accessible. Write them on the discs themselves or keep them in a notebook, or whatever method you have for preserving data you know you will need again.

Some software is limited to a certain number of machines. For example, iTunes will play only songs you've bought online on up to five PCs. So check that the software is de-authorized on the old PC if you won't be using it there. Uninstalling might be all it takes.

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10. Tune-Up Time

Windows Vista on the right system is very fast, but first you have to decide: Do you want a system that's fast—or good-looking? Here are a few steps to tweak your new PC's performance in favor of speed, not appearance:

- Set the desktop to a plain, one-color background. Big photographic wallpaper can slow load time.
- If you're not into desktop widgets along the screen's edge, or maybe prefer those from another source (like Google), turn off *Windows Sidebar*. It takes up space on your desktop. Go to the *Windows Sidebar Properties* control panel and deselect *Start Sidebar when Windows starts*.
- Aero is the name for the fancy graphics interface in Vista that delivers things like transparency in windows. Cool as it looks, Aero can slow down your system. In the *Personalization* control panel, select *Windows Color and Appearance*. In the next window, click *Open classic appearance properties*. Change the color scheme to something else, such as *Windows Standard*, and click *Effects* to turn off menu shadows and the ability to see windows as you drag them.

- Go to the *System* control panel, click *System Protection*, and on the *Advanced* tab, click the button in the Performance box. If you turn off every option under *Visual Effects* (like animated controls, fading menus, and shadows under your mouse cursor), it should speed things up.
- The network icon in the system tray shows a subtle animation to indicate you're online; right-click and select "*Turn off activity animation*" to stop it—unless you like incessant reminders that you're online.
- If you've got a very fast USB thumb drive, insert it and activate *Windows ReadyBoost*. This cache can help a bit with performance while the drive is inserted.
- Adjust the power settings, especially if you've got a laptop that is unplugged while in use. The "*high performance*" pre-sets will drain juice faster.

Visit [PCMag.com](http://www.pcmag.com) and [ExtremeTech.com](http://www.extremetech.com) for many more tips on speeding up Vista and your PC.

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11. Review Hardware

Starting out with a new PC is the perfect opportunity to reassess the hardware attached to the old PC. Before you start plugging things in, consider carefully how much you need them. Do you really need that old flatbed scanner now that the pictures you take are digital? For some, the answer will be no. Same with items like ancient USB hubs (you probably have more ports on your new box, and you don't want a hub that doesn't support USB 2.0) and low-capacity portable hard drives.

Old hardware moved to a new PC means you need the latest drivers. Hit the manufacturer's Web site for your scanner, printer, camera, media player, and so on, and download what you need. DriverMax (www.innovative-sol.com) can back up drivers for when you need them later.

That mouse and keyboard that came with your new system should be considered suspect. PC vendors aren't known for including highly ergonomic input devices with their commodity systems. Consider instead the Microsoft Wireless Laser Desktop 7000, which comes with a rechargeable wireless mouse and ergonomic keyboard. Consider them even if your new PC is a laptop, especially one you don't move around much. Your wrists will thank you later.

12. Register Everything

It's no guarantee of great technical support, but if you register your PC with the manufacturer, as well as the software and peripherals with their respective creators, you stand a better chance of being recognized when the time does come to call for help—and you know that time will come. Getting a vendor to honor a warranty might depend on knowing when you bought or received the product.

Registering online is relatively painless; you're on the Web anyway, so you might as well. One downside is that registration can also put your name on endless mailing lists, so if that bothers you, deselect that option when signing up. Keep in mind that it's smart to be registered in case there's a recall—you don't want to be the only person walking around with a laptop battery that might catch on fire, do you?

[Next: Easy, Mac >](#)

Easy, Mac

One thing you don't have to worry about with a Macintosh computer is crapware. Companies like Dell or HP can justify lame extras by claiming they provide functions that are unavailable (or insufficient) in Windows. The MacOS and hardware is a closed system controlled by Apple, a company that prides itself on user experience. The Apple folks are not about to sully that rep with a bunch of third-party junk; they'd have no one to blame but themselves. Of course, Apple will gladly sell you some extras, like the iWork and iLife suites.

MacOS 10.5 (aka Leopard) comes with an application firewall to control any connections made by your software to the Internet. You can find it in the System Preferences folder to make adjustments. As for antivirus software, you can buy it (both Symantec and McAfee sell such packages), but Apple's market share is still small enough that the Mac is seldom a target of malware.

Migrating files from old Mac to new is a breeze. In the *Applications/Utilities* folder, find the *Migration Assistant*. Hook two Macs together with a Firewire cable and run the Assistant. The settings from the older Mac (with Mac OS 10.4.10 or later) will transfer to the new system with Leopard. That includes data like browser bookmarks and user profiles. It doesn't include apps that come with the Mac OS; Apple assumes the new Mac will have the latest Safari, for example. If you've got a modern MacBook, including the Firewire-free MacBook Air, you can migrate files over the wireless network.

If you're going from Mac to Windows, or vice versa, you can always fall back on a USB drive to move files, but you're on your own finding the data you want to transfer. And it's slow. A faster method might be the Media Sharing Cable for PC and Mac from Kensington. This \$60 cable allows you to drag and drop files between systems—very handy for really big media. If your file sizes are modest, Microsoft Live Foldershare (www.foldershare.com) does real-time synchronization between folders on multiple Windows and Mac OS systems.

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What to Do with Your Old PC

You can probably put your old PC to some kind of good use. But sometimes, you want that old dinosaur out of the house. Here are some options to consider:

- 1. Revitalize it.** You may think that ancient laptop is too slow for use, but try installing the tiny, consumer-friendly, Linux-based operating system gOS 3 Gadgets (www.thinkgos.com). It may turn that geezer into the perfect Web-surfing speed demon for your least PC-literate family member.
- 2. Give it away.** Whether you hand it down to family or to a local charity, there's got to be someone clamoring for your old, working PC. If you can't find anyone, check www.freecycle.org for a mailing list of people in a city near you who love free stuff. Your junk is their gold.
- 3. Pick a dump spot.** Find a PC Donation center in your area that will make sure PC toxins don't end up in a landfill. Search Earth 911 (earth911.org) or MyGreenElectronics.org for places that will dispose of electronics responsibly.

No matter what, sanitize that hard drive before you pass it on. At the very least, format the drive and reinstall the operating system before recycling the old PC. If you're very paranoid, keep in mind that formatting isn't enough to be 100 percent certain data is completely unrecoverable. Specialty software DBAN (sourceforge.net/projects/dban) will do the job free, running from a bootable CD-ROM, but it can take hours and hours to kill the data. And then there's the Swiss cheese option: Take the drive out to the workshop and drill holes through it.

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Recycling Old Hardware

Some manufacturers will ship you a recycle kit for your old PC when they send you a new one. Some retailers have trade-in programs that will take any product with any brand name. Here's a quick guide, but be sure to consult with the manufacturer or retailer when you buy your new machine.

Dell recycles any older product—PCs, displays, [scanners](#), and printers—with the Dell brand (and a unique Dell identifier) free. You can also recycle printers, toner cartridges, and inkjet cartridges when you buy new ones. The recycle kit is a free option with any new purchase at Dell.com.

HP offers free recycling of inkjet and toner cartridges. The printer giant will charge you for other items, providing a quote (see <https://warp1.external.hp.com/recycle>) when you describe the hardware. Cost is usually from \$10 to \$35.

Apple recycles iPods and [cellular phones](#) for free. Anyone in the U.S. buying a new Mac or Apple display can recycle an old one through the company; just opt in while making your online purchase.

Gateway's Trade-in or Recycle Program offers cash for your "old technology," or will recycle it if it's deemed worthless. Trade-ins require a special account with Gateway; you get a check in the mail after you send the PC. You can also trade in iPods, GPS systems, camcorders, game consoles, and handhelds. Recycling is handled via Dealtree.

Lenovo provides free recycling for anything with a Lenovo logo (and some other logos) through the Eco Take Back partnership (visit lenovo.ecotakeback.com).

[Staples](#) will accept any kind of technology item, purchased at its stores or not, and charges a \$10 fee for each. Occasionally (during Earth Week, for example), Staples offers totally free electronics recycling.

[Circuit City](#) works with EZtradein.com to determine how much old computers and iPods are worth. Create an account at cc.eztradein.com, send in the device, and get a Circuit City gift card in return.

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