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UNDERSTANDING MICROSOFT WINDOWS XP

As you learned back in Chapter 1, “Understanding Your Computer Hardware,” it’s the software and operating system that make your hardware work. The operating system for most personal computers is Microsoft Windows, and you need to know how to use Windows to use your PC system. This is because Windows pretty much runs your computer for you; if you don’t know your way around Windows, you won’t be able to do much of anything on your new PC.
What Windows Is—and What It Does

Windows is a piece of software called an operating system. An operating system does what its name implies—it operates your computer system, working in the background every time you turn on your PC.

Equally important, Windows is what you see when you first turn on your computer, after everything turns on and boots up. The “desktop” that fills your screen is part of Windows, as is the taskbar at the bottom of the screen and the big menu that pops up when you click the Start button.

Different Versions of Windows

The version of Windows installed on your new PC is probably Windows XP. Microsoft has released different versions of Windows over the years, and XP is the latest—which is why it comes preinstalled on most new PCs.

If you’ve used a previous version of Windows—such as Windows 95, Windows 98, or Windows Me—on another PC, Windows XP probably looks and acts a little differently to you. (It’s even different from the version of Windows found in most large corporations—Windows 2000.) Don’t worry; everything that was in the old Windows is still in the new Windows—it’s probably just in a slightly different place.

There are actually two different retail versions of Windows XP. Windows XP Home Edition, which comes with most lower-priced PCs, is the version of XP for home and small-business users. Windows XP Professional Edition, which comes with some higher-priced PCs, is designed for larger businesses and corporate users. They both share the same basic functionality; XP Professional just has a few more features specifically designed for large corporate networks.

Some new “media center” PCs come with a slightly different version of Windows XP called Windows XP Media Center Edition. The Media Center is an optional interface that sits on the top of the normal Windows XP desktop and allows one-button access to key multimedia functions, including My TV, My Music, My Pictures, and My Videos. In fact, PCs equipped with Media Center come with a handheld remote control for quick switching from across the room! If you have Windows XP Media Center, don’t panic; underneath the Media Center is the same Windows XP we all know and love, and that is described in this chapter.

Working Your Way Around the Desktop

As you can see in Figure 3.1, the Windows XP desktop includes a number of elements. Get to know the desktop; you’re going to be seeing a lot of it from now on.
The major parts of the Windows desktop include

- **Start button**—Opens the Start menu, which is what you can use to open all your programs and documents.
- **Taskbar**—Displays buttons for your open applications and windows, as well as different toolbars for different tasks.
- **System Tray**—The part of the taskbar that holds the clock, volume control, and icons for other utilities that run in the background of your system.
- **Shortcut icons**—These are links to software programs you can place on your desktop; a “clean” desktop includes just one icon, for the Windows Recycle Bin.
- **Recycle Bin**—This is where you dump any files you want to delete.

**Important Windows Operations**

To use Windows efficiently, you must master a few simple operations, such as pointing and clicking, dragging and dropping, and right-clicking. You perform all these operations with your mouse.
Pointing and Clicking

The most common mouse operation is *pointing and clicking*. Simply move the mouse so that the cursor is pointing to the object you want to select, and then click the left mouse button once. Pointing and clicking is an effective way to select menu items, directories, and files.

Double-Clicking

If you’re using Windows XP’s default operating mode, you’ll need to *double-click* an item to activate an operation. This involves pointing at something onscreen with the cursor and then clicking the left mouse button twice in rapid succession. For example, to open program groups or launch individual programs, simply double-click a specific icon.

Right-Clicking

When you select an item and then click the *right* mouse button, you’ll often see a pop-up menu. This menu, when available, contains commands that directly relate to the selected object. Refer to your individual programs to see whether and how they use the right mouse button.

Dragging and Dropping

*Dragging* is a variation of clicking. To drag an object, point at it with the cursor and then press and hold down the left mouse button. Move the mouse without releasing the mouse button, and drag the object to a new location. When you’re done moving the object, release the mouse button to drop it onto the new location.

You can use dragging and dropping to move files from one folder to another or to delete files by dragging them onto the Recycle Bin icon.

Hovering

When you position the cursor over an item without clicking your mouse, you’re *hovering* over that item. Many operations require you to hover your cursor and then perform some other action.
Moving and Resizing Windows

Every software program you launch is displayed in a separate onscreen window. When you open more than one program, you get more than one window—and your desktop can quickly get cluttered.

There are many ways to deal with desktop clutter. One way to do this is to move a window to a new position. You do this by positioning your cursor over the window’s title bar (shown in Figure 3.2) and then clicking and holding down the left button on your mouse. As long as this button is depressed, you can use your mouse to drag the window around the screen. When you release the mouse button, the window stays where you put it.

You also can change the size of most windows. You do this by positioning the cursor over the very edge of the window—any edge. If you position the cursor on either side of the window, you can resize the width. If you position the cursor on the top or bottom edge, you can resize the height. Finally, if you position the cursor on a corner, you can resize the width and height at the same time.

After the cursor is positioned over the window’s edge, press and hold the left mouse button; then drag the window border to its new size. Release the mouse button to lock in the newly sized window.

**tip**  
The cursor changes shape—to a double-ended arrow—when it’s positioned over the edge of a window.
Maximizing, Minimizing, and Closing Windows

Another way to manage a window in Windows is to make it display full-screen. You do this by maximizing the window. All you have to do is click the Maximize button at the upper-right corner of the window, as shown in Figure 3.3.

If the window is already maximized, the Maximize button changes to a Restore Down button. When you click the Restore Down button, the window resumes its previous (pre-maximized) dimensions.

If you’d rather hide the window so that it doesn’t clutter your desktop, click the Minimize button. This shoves the window off the desktop, onto the Taskbar. The program in the window is still running, however—it’s just not on the desktop. To restore a minimized window, all you have to do is click the window’s button on the Windows Taskbar (at the bottom of the screen).

If what you really want to do is close the window (and close any program running within the window), just click the window’s Close button.

Scrolling Through a Window

Many windows contain more information than can be displayed at once. When you have a long document or Web page, only the first part of the document or page is displayed in the window. To view the rest of the document or page, you have to scroll down through the window, using the various parts of the scroll bar (shown in Figure 3.4).
There are several ways to scroll through a window. To scroll up or down a line at a time, click the up or down arrow on the window’s scrollbar. To move to a specific place in a long document, use your mouse to grab the scroll box (between the up and down arrows) and drag it to a new position. You can also click on the scroll bar between the scroll box and the end arrow, which scrolls you one screen at a time.

If your mouse has a scroll wheel, you can use it to scroll through a long document. Just roll the wheel back or forward to scroll down or up through a window.

Using Menus

Most windows in Windows use a set of pull-down menus to store all the commands and operations you can perform. The menus are aligned across the top of the window, just below the title bar, in what is called a menu bar.

You open (or pull down) a menu by clicking the menu’s name. The full menu then appears just below the menu bar, as shown in Figure 3.5. You activate a command or select a menu item by clicking it with your mouse.
Some menu items have a little black arrow to the right of the label. This indicates that additional choices are available, displayed on a submenu. Click the menu item or the arrow to display the submenu.

Other menu items have three little dots (called an *ellipsis*) to the right of the label. This indicates that additional choices are available, displayed in a dialog box. Click the menu item to display the dialog box.

The nice thing is, after you get the hang of this menu thing in one program, the menus should be very similar in all the other programs you use. For example, almost all programs have a File menu that lets you open, save, and close documents, as well as an Edit menu that lets you cut, copy, and paste. While each program has menus and menu items specific to its own needs, these common menus make it easy to get up and running when you install new software programs on your system.

### Using Toolbars

Some Windows programs put the most frequently used operations on one or more toolbars, typically located just below the menu bar. (Figure 3.6 shows a typical Windows toolbar.) A toolbar looks like a row of buttons, each with a small picture (called an *icon*) and maybe a bit of text. You activate the associated command or operation by clicking the button with your mouse.

If the toolbar is too long to display fully on your screen, you’ll see a right arrow at the far-right side of the toolbar. Click this arrow to display the buttons that aren’t currently visible.
Using Dialog Boxes, Tabs, and Buttons

When Windows or an application requires a complex set of inputs, you are often presented with a dialog box. A dialog box is similar to a form in which you can input various parameters and make various choices—and then register those inputs and choices when you click the OK button. (Figure 3.7 shows the Print dialog box, found in most Windows applications.)

There are several different types of dialog boxes, each one customized to the task at hand. However, most dialog boxes share a set of common features, which include the following:

**Figure 3.6**
A typical Windows toolbar—this one’s the Standard toolbar from Microsoft Word.

**Figure 3.7**
Use dialog boxes to control various aspects of your Windows applications.

**TIP**
If you’re not sure which button does what, you can hover the cursor over the button to display a tool tip. A tool tip is a small text box that displays the button’s label or other useful information.
Buttons—Most buttons either register your inputs or open an auxiliary dialog box. The most common buttons are OK (to register your inputs and close the dialog box), Cancel (to close the dialog box without registering your inputs), and Apply (to register your inputs without closing the dialog box). Click a button once to activate it.

Tabs—These allow a single dialog box to display multiple “pages” of information. Think of each tab, arranged across the top of the dialog box, as a “thumbtab” to the individual page in the dialog box below it. Click the top of a tab to change to that particular page of information.

Text boxes—These are empty boxes where you type in a response. Position your cursor over the empty input box, click your left mouse button, and begin typing.

Lists—These are lists of available choices; lists can either scroll or drop down from what looks like an input box. Select an item from the list with your mouse; you can select multiple items in some lists by holding down the Ctrl key while clicking with your mouse.

Check boxes—These are boxes that let you select (or deselect) various standalone options.

Sliders—These are sliding bars that let you select increments between two extremes, similar to a sliding volume control on an audio system.

Using the Start Menu

All the software programs and utilities on your computer are accessed via Windows’ Start menu. You display the Start menu by using your mouse to click the Start button, located in the lower-left corner of your screen.

As you can see in Figure 3.8, the Windows XP Start menu consists of two columns of icons. Your most frequently used programs are listed in the left column; basic Windows utilities and folders are listed in the right column. To open a specific program or folder, just click the icon.

To view the rest of your programs, click the All Programs arrow. This displays a new menu called the Programs menu. From here you can access various programs, sorted by type or manufacturer. (When more programs are contained within a master folder, you’ll see an arrow to the right of the title; click this arrow to display additional choices.)
Launching a Program

Now that you know how to work the Start menu, it's easy to start any particular software program. All you have to do is follow these steps:

1. Click the Start button to display the Start menu.
2. If the program is displayed on the Start menu, click the program's icon.
3. If the program isn't visible on the main Start menu, click the All Programs button, find the program's icon, and then click it.

Switching Between Programs

After you've launched a few programs, it's easy to switch between one program and another. To switch to another program (and send all other open programs to the background), you can do one of the following:

- Click the application's button in the taskbar, as shown in Figure 3.9.
Click any visible part of the application’s window—including its title bar.

Hold down the Alt key and then press the Tab key repeatedly until the application window you want is selected. (This cycles through all open windows.) When you’re at the window you want, release the Alt key.

If you have multiple windows open at the same time, you can determine which is currently the active window by its title bar. The title bar for the active program is brighter, and the title bar text is bright white. An inactive title bar is more dull, with off-white text. If you have overlapping windows on your desktop, the window on top is always the active one. The active application’s Taskbar button looks like it’s pressed in.

**Shutting Down Windows—and Your Computer**

Windows starts automatically every time you turn on your computer. Although you will see lines of text flashing onscreen during the initial startup, Windows loads automatically and goes on to display the Windows desktop.

When you want to turn off your computer, you do it through Windows. In fact, you don’t want to turn off your computer any other way—you *always* want to turn off things through the official Windows procedure.

To shut down Windows and turn off your PC, follow these steps:

1. Click the Start button to display the Start menu.
2. Click the Turn Off Computer button.
3. When the Turn Off Computer dialog box appears, click the Turn Off button.

**caution**

Do not turn off your computer without shutting down Windows. You could lose data and settings that are temporarily stored in your system’s memory.

**Understanding Files and Folders**

All the information on your computer is stored in files. A file is nothing more than a collection of data of some sort. Everything on your computer’s hard drive is a separate file, with its own name, location, and properties. The contents of a file can be a document from an application (such as a Works worksheet or a Word document), or they can be the executable code for the application itself.
Every file has its own unique name. A defined structure exists for naming files, and its conventions must be followed for Windows to understand exactly what file you want when you try to access one. Each filename must consist of two parts, separated by a period—the **name** (to the left of the period) and the **extension** (to the right of the period). A filename can consist of letters, numbers, spaces, and characters and looks something like this: *this.is.a.filename.ext*.

Windows stores files in **folders**. A folder is like a master file; each folder can contain both files and additional folders. The exact location of a file is called its **path** and contains all the folders leading to the file. For example, a file named *filename.doc* that exists in the *system* folder, that is itself contained in the *windows* folder on your c:\ drive, has a path that looks like this:

```
c:\windows\system\filename.doc
```

Learning how to use files and folders is a necessary skill for all computer users. You might need to copy files from one folder to another or from your hard disk to a floppy disk. You certainly need to delete files every now and then. To do this, you use either My Computer or My Documents—two important utilities, discussed next.

### Managing PC Resources with My Computer

The **My Computer** utility lets you access each major component of your system and perform basic maintenance functions. For example, you can use My Computer to “open” the contents of your hard disk, and then copy, move, and delete individual files.

To open **My Computer**, follow these steps:

1. Click the Start button to display the Start menu.
2. Select **My Computer**.

As you can see in Figure 3.10, the **My Computer** folder contains icons for each of the major components of your system—your hard disk drive, floppy disk drive, CD-ROM or DVD drive, and so on.
Each folder in Windows XP contains an activity pane (sometimes called a task pane) on the left side of the window. This pane lets you view relevant information about and perform key operations on the selected item.

You can also use My Computer to view the contents of a specific drive. When you double-click the icon for that drive, you’ll see a list of folders and files located on that drive. To view the contents of any folder, just double-click the icon for that folder.

**Managing Files with My Documents**

The documents you create with Microsoft Word and other software programs are actually separate computer files. By default, all your documents are stored somewhere in the My Documents folder.

Windows lets you access the contents of your My Documents folder with a few clicks of your mouse. Just follow these steps:

1. Click the Start button to display the Start menu.
2. Click My Documents.

As you can see in Figure 3.11, the My Documents folder not only contains individual files, it also contains a number of other folders (sometimes called subfolders), such as My Pictures and My Music. Double-click a subfolder to view its contents, or use the
options in the Files and Folders Tasks panel to perform specific operations—including moving, copying, and deleting.

FIGURE 3.11
Access your important document files from the My Documents folder.

Managing Windows with the Control Panel

There's one more Windows utility, similar to My Computer and My Documents, that you need to know about. This utility, the Control Panel, is used to manage most (but not all) of Windows' configuration settings. The Control Panel is actually a system folder (like My Computer and My Documents) that contains a number of individual utilities that let you adjust and configure various system properties.

To open the Control Panel, follow these steps:

1. Click the Start button to display the Start menu.
2. Click Control Panel.

When the Control Panel opens, as shown in Figure 3.12, you can select a particular category you want to configure. When the Pick a Task page appears, either click a task or click an icon to open a specific configuration utility. (When you click a task, the appropriate configuration utility is launched.)
When you open a configuration utility, you’ll see a dialog box for that particular item. You can then change the individual settings within that dialog box; click the OK button to register your new settings.

**All the Other Things in Windows**

Windows is more than just a pretty desktop and some configuration utilities. Windows also includes a large number of accessory programs and system tools you can use to perform other basic system operations.

**Accessories**

Windows includes a number of single-function accessory programs, all accessible from the Start menu. These programs include a calculator, some games, two basic word processors (Notepad and WordPad), a drawing program (Paint), a player for audio and video files (Windows Media Player), and a digital video editing program (Windows Movie Maker). You access most of these accessories by clicking the Start button and selecting All Programs, Accessories.
Internet Utilities

In addition to the aforementioned Windows accessories, Windows XP also gives you three important Internet utilities. These include a Web browser (Internet Explorer), an email program (Outlook Express), and an instant messaging program (Windows Messenger). You access these three utilities by clicking the Start button and selecting All Programs.

System Tools

Windows XP includes a handful of technical tools you can use to keep your system running smoothly. You can access all these tools by clicking the Start button and selecting All Programs, Accessories, System Tools.

Getting Help in Windows

When you can’t figure out how to perform a particular task, it’s time to ask for help. In Windows XP, this is done through the Help and Support Center. To launch the Help and Support Center, follow these steps:

1. Click the Start button to display the Start menu.
2. Click Help and Support.

The Help and Support Center lets you search for specific answers to your problems, browse the Help contents by topic, connect to another computer for remote assistance, go online for additional help, and access Windows’s key system tools. Click the type of help you want, and follow the onscreen instructions from there.

To learn about the practical uses of these and other system tools, turn to Chapter 9, “Performing Routine Maintenance.”
The Absolute Minimum

This chapter gave you a lot of background about Windows and the other software programs installed on your PC system. Here are the key points to remember:

■ You use Windows to manage your computer system and run your software programs.
■ Most functions in Windows are activated by clicking or double-clicking an icon or a button.
■ All the programs and accessories on your system are accessed via the Start menu, which you display by clicking the Start button.
■ Use My Computer to manage the main components of your system.
■ Use My Documents to manage your document files and folders.
■ Use the Control Panel to manage Windows' configuration settings.
■ When you can't figure out how to do something, click the Start button and select Help and Support.