

The Lowly Floppy

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Aaah. The lowly floppy. Much maligned and often cursed. However, it is still the fastest, most efficient way to move files from one machine to another, so long as the files are small enough to fit. To move larger amounts of data, the Writable CD-ROM (CD-R) or Rewritable CD-ROM (CD-RW) are gaining a position in the computer world, but as you know if you ever used one, the writing process is slow and somewhat of a pain. You sometimes need to make an image copy of the data first, then a "practice run" at writing, then the actual write. All this can easily eat up 30 minutes to an hour of your precious time. The floppy is still the best for little files.

One way to insure the integrity of the files you are moving using floppies for transfer or storage is to work only with freshly formatted diskettes. After repeated use, a fresh format can prevent your newly added data from being garbled with junk left over from the erased file detritus remaining from past use. A complete format erases everything and rewrites the Boot Record, File Allocation Table and Root Directory as well as marking the boundaries of the tracks and sectors. Oh yes, if there were any viruses on the floppy, formatting it in an uninfected machine will erase the virus, too. Good stuff. Like cleaning out your closet by removing everything, so that you can proceed to neatly stack all your stuff back in when the closet is empty. Doing that to your closet can make more space. Moving files off a floppy, reformatting it, then putting the files back has an added benefit. Any fragmented files – those broken up into non-contiguous pieces – are put back together into continuous files when you copy them back to a newly formatted floppy.

So how do you format a floppy? Well, there are two basic ways, assuming you are using Windows 95 or 98, with a 1.44 MB A: drive. Let's do the Windows one first.

Double click My Computer, then single click the A: drive icon to highlight it. Then click File to get a drop down list, and choose Format. An option window will come up, usually with Quick format selected. Do not choose Quick Format (erase). If you do, all the old data will still be on the disk after the format is finished! The only thing a quick format does is to change the first character of the old file names to the Greek letter sigma. This permits overwriting of the old data by any new files you copy to the floppy. Until then, the old data is still there, and easily recoverable! Your aim is to really erase every bit of data on the floppy. For that, you must select Full from the format types. Select Full and then click the Start button. On the machine I am using now to type this article, it takes about 1 minute and 52 seconds to format a 1.44 Mb floppy, from the time I click Start to the time the process is finished.

Now, let's do it the easy way. Click Start, then Programs, then MS-DOS Prompt. That will put you into the old command-line DOS configuration; don't worry if all your little icons disappear. Then, at the C:\ prompt, type `FORMAT A:/U` and press the Enter button. When the formatting is done, you will be asked if you want to label the disk, and whether or not you want to format another. When you are finished, type `EXIT` and you will be returned to Windows. On my machine, formatting a disk in this way took only 1 minute and 9 seconds, or about 60% of the time it took to do it in Windows.

When you go to the MS-DOS prompt, you are using native DOS to format the floppy. When you do it through the Graphical User Interface we call Windows, Windows has to make repeated requests to DOS to have each part of the floppy formatted. Hence, the difference in speed, but

then we all know that speed is not a hallmark of Windows. The /U switch? Oh yes, the /U switch on the command line tells DOS to Unconditionally format the disk. This means completely rewriting every byte on the floppy, and erasing any garbage that is left over from previous disk use. It is always good practice to start with a clean slate. Happy computing!