

THE COMPUTER CORNER

No. 117. How to Organize Your Data For Backup Purposes

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In the last article, I again briefly mentioned how to organize your data for quick, painless backing up. However, just the last month, I have had at least half a dozen queries that resulted in my discussing this topic. In each case, after I explained the process, the listener said, "gee, that makes a lot of sense – I will follow your suggestions". So here is the topic expanded a bit and presented as clear as I can make it.

With the focus we are taking here, you have essentially two kinds of files on your computer, no matter how you use your machine.

The first kind are program files, also known as application files. Let us consider a couple of examples. For purposes of this discussion, we'll consider Windows (whatever version) as a program. Also, Microsoft Word is one. Your graphics editor is another. Your browser is another. All of these are really suites of many files. They consist of at least one executable file (*.exe or *.com), and a whole raft of ancillary files – device drivers, program data files, setup files, settings files, dynamic link libraries, and so on. There are easily hundreds of such files for Windows itself, and many dozens of files for Word. Graphics editors almost always have one to two dozen, and browsers (Netscape, Internet Explorer) have even more.

The point is that you do not need to, nor should you, take the time or media space (floppy, CD-ROM, tape) to back them up. You should have the original CD-ROMs for your applications. If you bought a computer with all these programs installed and didn't get the CD-ROMs, you were cheated! You paid for the programs and are entitled to a copy on CDs. Contact the seller and get them. Assuming you were given the CDs (as is proper), you can always reinstall the application if something goes wrong, so you don't need to back them up. Actually, reinstallation is the preferred way to recover when things go wrong, because simple copying of the files from your own backup media does not modify the Registry (which is necessary for the programs to work correctly). You should always install or reinstall programs by using the Add/Remove Programs applet in the Control Panel, which copies the files from the installation media and records everything necessary in the Registry. Therefore, there is no need to back up programs during your backup sessions.

The second kinds of files are your data files. These are not just any data files. Rather, they are your creations. A letter to your friend, a photo of your granddaughter, a spreadsheet with your investments, a shopping list, birthdays of your family members, the file containing frequencies programmed into your HT, the layout file of your QSL card, data and notes for preparation of your taxes, and so on. These files are the ones you need to back up, because you cannot replace them if the hard drive crashes! Lump into this category every file that: 1. You create, or 2. That you modify from an original you obtained from some other source.

Well then, if that is the case, you need some method to separate all of the files that fall into the second category. In the past, I have recommended that you do this by making separate partitions on the hard drive: C:\ for Windows, D:\ for applications such as Word, and E:\ for your creations. This will work. However, I realize that there are quite a few of you who do not wish to repartition the hard drive. So, as an alternative, make a separate folder on your C:\ drive – call it

MYSTUFF or some other such name. You might want to create subfolders under MYSTUFF. LETTERS, FINANCES, PHOTOS, HAMSTUFF, and maybe you might want to make a subfolder of HAMSTUFF called HT, and another called ANTENNAS. Get the idea?

Now, once you have made the folder C:\MYSTUFF and its subfolders, tell Microsoft Word to save all your files to MYSTUFF, or if you want to be more specific, to C:\MYSTUFF\LETTERS. You could even make it C:\MYSTUFF\WORD. Every major application will let you choose where your saved files go. You can change the default (C:\MY DOCUMENTS) save folder in Microsoft Word by clicking Tools, Options, and the File Locations tab. Do the same with your spreadsheet program, perhaps EXCEL – tell it to save files in C:\MYSTUFF\FINANCES, or even C:\MYSTUFF\EXCEL. Your photo editor program should be pointed to C:\MYSTUFF\PHOTOS, and so on. If you create a file and it doesn't get put in the proper MYSTUFF location, move it there immediately! Put any creations made before your new reorganization in their proper places, too.

Now, you have segregated all of your creations in one place. The folder C:\MYSTUFF is that place. Yes, it has subfolders, but that doesn't matter. When you want to do a backup on CD-ROM, simply drag the MYSTUFF folder to the burn window and all the subfolders will be there, too. One stop shopping! Couldn't be easier.

Hey, don't forget to export your browser's address book, and favorites, too. Put them in a BACKUP subfolder under MYSTUFF. Now, if you ever loose them, you have backup copies that can easily be re-imported. You'll think of other things to put in the BACKUP subfolder, too.

Now you can do a backup in about 10 minutes, because you are saving only what is contained in MYSTUFF. And, since it is so easy and painless, you can do it once a month. Oh, you will find you waste a lot of unused space on that backup CD when you burn it. When I was really busy with the SEC and Chief Radio Officer jobs for the state, all my backups took less than 40% of a 650 MB CD-ROM. But the wasted space is OK. CDs are inexpensive these days, and using one a month serves the intended purpose. Don't be tempted to overwrite them. Make one for each month – 12 a year. That way, you will have historical data, too.

I should make one more suggestion. For those really important files, such as a newly modified spreadsheet file containing your investment data, don't wait until the end of the month when you make your CD-ROM backup. Back up that file right now, to a floppy. Floppies are still the best way to do a quick, temporary backup. Just right-click the filename and select Send To, then 3½ Floppy (A) from the menu. Be sure to have a clean, formatted floppy in the drive when you do this. Yes, it will fit! The entire RACES database, listing all 1,350 hams in Wisconsin ARES/RACES (call, name, address, city, state, zip, area code and phone number, class of license and date added to the database) took under one-third the space available on a standard floppy. So, your data will likely fit. Watch out for photos and other graphics files, though. They take a lot of space and may well not fit on a 1.44 MB floppy. Those will need to wait until you do a CD backup.

That quick backup will let you sleep better! Then, you can make the more permanent backup on CD at the regular monthly time, when you copy all of MYSTUFF. Happy computing!