

No. 264: Windows 10 Licenses

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Licenses for Windows can be confusing and hard to understand. This may help clarify it for you; I know it helped clarify it for me as I was researching this article. My sources are Win10 Forums and even some source documents that I had lying around with unknown origins. Poor documentation, Stan, when you don't write down your sources! Anyway, there are 3 types:

1. VOLUME: Whoever placed Windows 10 on the computer purchased a Volume Licensing Agreement from Microsoft. The license key (which was used to initially activate the copy) is not for resale, and may not be transferred with the computer if it is sold or otherwise changes ownership. This type of licensing typically is used with business, educational and governmental institutions. If you are the boss and got a Volume License Key (VLK) with the software, it typically allows that single product key to be used for multiple installations (bulk installation).

Just as an interesting side bit, I routinely used an XP disk some years ago that would install and activate on any Dell computer, because of a volume licensing agreement between Dell and Microsoft. However, it would not activate with any other brand of computer, just those manufactured by Dell.

2. OEM: This product key is issued by the Original Equipment Manufacturer. These keys are not for resale and can't be transferred to another computer. However, the key may be transferred with the computer if the computer is sold. Often this key is embedded in the UEFI firmware chip by the manufacturer, so it comes right with your computer when you buy it.

An (important) side issue: What the heck is UEFI? Well, do you remember the BIOS (Basic Input/Output System)? As of 2020, newly built computers no longer have a BIOS chip. The BIOS chip has been replaced and (expanded) by the new Unified Extended Firmware Interface chip. Just a couple of examples of the benefits of these new chips: they allow faster booting than the old BIOS, and they use new schemes that permit the use of larger hard drives. This is a topic for expansion in a future article.

3. RETAIL: Probably the most desirable of the three types, this is what you get when you buy a boxed copy of Win10 from a retail or online store. In the current world, you can even buy a copy of the license key and download it, then download a copy of the software. No box needed. The product key may be transferred to another computer. So, for example, you buy a boxed copy of Win10 from your local bookstore and install it on your older Dell laptop. If the laptop later dies and you purchase a Win 7 desktop from a friend to replace the laptop, you can use your Win10 DVD to install Win10 on the desktop computer. Most important, you can use the product key to activate that copy of Win10.

Why did I research this topic? I was tasked with setting up a Windows 10 Professional laptop for the ORC, to use during meetings to interface with our display projector. Therefore, I had to get a copy of Windows 10 Professional 64-bit, which I did at a cost of \$36 (after a 10% off coupon), after deciding which of the three types we should pay for. I selected RETAIL, so that if the laptop dies, we can replace it and use the DVD I created to install and register Win10 on a new machine without paying another fee.

Want to see what kind of license your copy of Windows is? At a Command Prompt, type "slmgr -dli" (without the quotes). Give it a few seconds to respond. Happy Computing!