

Cleaning Up Your Hard Drive

By Bill Armstrong

As hard drives get bigger and bigger, we have a tendency to let programs and data accumulate on them. After all, who needs to do housekeeping when the drive has so much room that we're not likely to ever use it all?

I'm a believer in good housekeeping for hard drives. I've been asked what files are safe to delete. I'll try to provide some direction.

Many of us use a folder (directory) for temporary file storage. I use C:\TEMP, which I created, and use it for unzipping files into, for saving files I download from the Internet, for putting files into for easy attachment to e-mails, etc. Many people use the "My Documents" folder for this purpose. If you use such a folder, remember to clean it out regularly.

Most Windows operating systems have a folder that the operating system uses for its own temporary files. This is usually C:\WINDOWS\TEMP. Also delete files in this folder. If the file is being used by Windows, it will not let you delete it.

Your web browser also puts temporary files on your hard drive. It is best to let the web browser delete those files. In Internet Explorer, I find this function under Tools - Internet Options - Temporary Internet Files. In Netscape, I find it under Edit - Preferences - Advanced - Cache. If you use a dial-up connection, you may notice that sites you visit regularly will load a little slower the next time you go to them, because the files are no longer in cache to assist. After the first time, the speed will be back to normal. If you use a high-speed connection to the Internet (such as a cable modem, DSL, T1 line, etc.), you really don't need these files at all, and could safely set your web browser to not use this function.

When a program crashes, or your computer locks up and you have to restart it, some temporary files are left on your hard drive. Windows will usually run Scan Disk when you restart the computer, and will detect those files. They may be saved in the root directory (C:\) with a file extension of .CHK. If you are sure that critical data is not missing, they can safely be deleted.

The tilde character (~) is commonly used to indicate temporary files. It can be the first character of a file name, or can appear in the file name extension. Use Start - Find - Files or Folders, be sure you are in the root folder (C:\) and that Include Subfolders is checked. Then start a search for file name of ~*.* (finds all file names that begin with a tilde), and *.~?? (finds all files whose extension begins with a tilde), and *.??~ (finds all files whose extension ends with a tilde). I suggest these files not be deleted immediately, but rather move them to a temporary folder (C:\TEMP for example) until you have used your computer long enough to be sure these files are not needed.

Another option is to select My Computer, and right click on the Drive C icon. Choose Properties, and see if you have an option called Disk Cleanup. This also lets you delete temporary files.

Finally, when all temporary files have been deleted or moved to a temporary location, empty the Recycle Bin on your Windows Desktop.

Regular hard disk maintenance will keep the performance of your computer right up there where it should be, especially when combined with regular running of Scandisk and Defrag.