

How do I Keep my PC running Fast? Tips from Russ Pitts



Russ Pitts

Very first PC: Packard Bell 486DX2

The last computer you fixed (besides yours): My wife's.

Favorite game of all time: Fwoar. Tough one. Probably *TIE Fighter*. Or *Half-Life*.

Favorite pastime when not gaming or writing: Hiking.

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Q. How do I keep my PC running fast?

A. Today's PCs are more powerful than ever, but we're using them, increasingly, for more and more. If you're serious about gaming, everyday wear and tear on your PC could be wreaking havoc on your rig. What might have been a top-of-the-line gaming powerhouse a year ago could be sucking wind like a plumber running up the stairs today, if you're not taking care of it properly.

Web browsing, productivity software, smart device syncing, video, messaging and even some games can make a mess of your system, even when you're not using them, clogging your OS with baggage from hardware and software you haven't used in months. Stuff that pops up and makes your life miserable when you least expect it, like pictures from "that night" peeking out from under the sofa.

So to help you keep your machine in peak condition all season long, here are some basic steps you can take to put some spring back in your PC's step, without buying a single piece of new hardware or spending a single dollar.

1. **Windows**Tweaking is part of the fun of PC gaming, but operating systems have become so complex that it's sometimes hard to figure out just where they're hiding the stuff you want to tweak. And some programs, like Microsoft Office, can leave traces of themselves behind in places

you'll never find. The best way to instantly speed up your PC's gaming performance is to run with a fresh install of Windows. Newer versions of Windows have a neat feature that will allow you to transfer your programs and settings to a new computer (or a fresh install on the old one), but that would defeat the purpose since most of the baggage slowing down your machine would come along for the ride. So don't do that.

Instead, you're going to want to store all of your irreplaceable data (files, bookmarks, saved images, etc.) onto an external hard drive (or your secondary drive if you have one) and completely wipe the slate clean by doing a quick format on your C: drive, and reinstalling your copy of Windows from the disk it came on. Just be sure to set aside a full day for the process and install all of the updates available, and then keep checking for updates until you don't see any more available. Sometimes it will take eight or nine passes to get your OS completely up to date, depending on which flavor of Windows you're using.

Like I said: a whole day.

If you only want to periodically rejuvenate Windows or don't want to bother with the hassle of re-installing, [Registry Reviver](#) on this very website is a nice tool that will tune up your Windows registry to clean up broken registry data and help make your PC faster and more stable. It's not as thorough as reformatting and reinstalling Windows, but for occasional tune-ups, it will get the job done.

2. Pre-installed Crap

Illustration: [Gordon McAlpin](#)

As much as I love assembling PCs, I have to admit that I have also purchased a few computers off-the-shelf. It's easy, takes less time to get up and running and if it breaks, I can send it to someone else to fix it. Unfortunately, when most PC-makers pre-install Windows, they also pre-install a lot of other crap with it. Some of it isn't so friendly, and all of it can slow down your PC.

You can solve this problem in one of two ways: either buy your own copy of Windows and perform the clean install mentioned above, or run a program that will identify and eliminate all the pre-

installed crap foisted on you by the manufacturer. I like [PC Decrapifier](#). It's free, easy to use and allows you to selectively uninstall or disable all of the stuff that is set to run automatically when you start up windows. If your OS comes on a disc with anyone else's logo other than Microsoft's, then you should run PC Decrapifier at least once. You may be surprised at what you find.

- 3. Malware & Spyware** Malware and spyware are programs that are designed to live quietly and invisibly on your PC and collect data about how you're using it. Sometimes they are also designed to steal your private information to help people steal your money or identity. It's bad stuff and it's everywhere, and in addition to potentially causing you serious life headaches, it can really slow down your machine. The newer versions of Windows come pre-installed with a firewall and some limited malware protection, but you're going to want to run a dedicated firewall program for resident protection, and at least one other anti-malware program for spot detection and cleaning. For firewalls, you can't beat [Zone Alarm](#). I've used it for a decade and swear by it. While the company is now under new management, the product is still super effective and very easy to use. It also has a "gaming mode" which will get it out of your way when you want the best speed, but still want to be protected.

For detecting and removing malware and spyware, I use a few different programs to try and ensure that whatever new bug is out there isn't getting through to my machine, or that if I do happen to be a lucky one who gets it first, I'll get rid of it as quickly as possible. [Malwarebytes Anti-Malware](#), [Super Anti-Spyware](#) and [Spybot S&D](#) are my go-to dream team. If one doesn't find the malware, the other two usually will. Each program comes with some measure of "always on" resident protection, but if you're running ZoneAlarm, you don't need it, and it will slow things down. Just be sure you keep the programs updated and run each at least once per month.

Best part: All of these programs have free versions or offer free trials, so you can get the protection you need without spending a fortune on an annual license for Norton.

- 4. Update Drivers** This one is so simple, most of us forget about it, but it's important to update your drivers regularly, not just when you buy a new piece of hardware. Older drivers could be keeping your PC from running efficiently, or forcing your programs and games to do a little extra work. Hardware makers are constantly refining their driver software to ensure your machine will be compatible with the latest software and games. Since they're doing the work, all you have to do is check for updates and install them.

One way to make sure you're keeping track of your drivers is to keep a bookmark file of the support pages for all of the manufacturers of the hardware in your PC and check those pages regularly. If you bought a pre-assembled PC, sometimes your manufacturer will have an online tool that will do the work for you.

But if you're looking for the easy way to get it done, ReviverSoft's [Driver Reviver](#) is phenomenal at scoping out what's in your box and finding out if your drivers are up to date. The program will even install them for you.

I have to admit, the first time I ran Driver Reviver, I was a little upset that I didn't have to do any work to update the 18 or 20 drivers on my system that were out of date. Then I got over it and spent the time I would have spent updating the drivers myself playing games instead.

- 5. Syncing & Updating Software** Another thing to look out for are the programs associated with your smartphone or other connected devices. These programs maintain a constant presence in your system memory, so that they can detect when you've connected your device. That memory footprint is a constant drain on your PC's resources and is just that much more memory you won't have free for your gaming. If you enjoy the convenience of being able to plug in your smartphone

and have it automatically sync or open your files, then this is a slowdown you'll have to live with, but if speed is your priority, disable the always-on functionality. Some programs allow you to do this in their settings, but for others you might have to go nuclear and delete the sync programs entirely. This is another area where PC Decrapifier can help you. Use it wisely.

6. **Temp Files and Other Garbage** Even if you're running a clean, bug-free and fully up-to-date machine, simple day-to-day use can bog it down with temp files, cached data and a variety of other trash that make your web browsing and productivity software use incrementally faster, but slow down your gaming considerably. You can set most web browsers to not store data or to purge it after you close the program, and if you're serious about gaming speed I encourage you to do so. You lose the luxury of being able to type two letters into a browser search window and have it immediately know where you want to go, but the tradeoff in speed is worth it.

Cache files, histories, cookies and saved images all accumulate faster than you think, and take up a LOT of space on your hard drive in the exact same places where your other programs and games want to be storing data. Even you're careful and diligent, stuff will still accumulate. [Crap Cleaner](#) is the best at cleaning it up. And it's free.

Bonus: Clean Boot

No matter what version of Windows you use, you can "clean boot." While it's not as efficient as programming a .BAT file in the old days of DOS, it will still give you the option of starting up with a minimum of unnecessary "helper programs" slowing things down.

For Windows Vista and Windows 7, simply click **Start** and type **msconfig** into the box. In the **General** tab, select **Selective Startup**, then click the **Services** tab. Here, you'll want to select **Hide all Microsoft services**, then click **Disable All**. Click **OK**, reboot and you should end up with a faster PC that will do almost everything you want it to do – but faster.