

Customizing Windows: A Crash Course

Let's start with adjusting screen and font sizes. Most of these settings are in the Display Properties menu, which you can get to through the Control Panel. A shortcut is to right-click on an open area of the desktop, then click Properties. From here, go to the Settings tab. This window allows you to control your Screen Resolution.

Screen resolution is measured in pixels. All images on the screen are displayed as hundreds or thousands of little teeny squares (each one is a pixel), which, to the human eye, appear to be a smooth image.

Most people use the 1024x768 resolution setting, meaning the screen is 1024 pixels wide by 768 pixels tall, for a total of 786432 pixels. Using a lower resolution would mean that there would be less "area" on the screen, however, everything would appear larger. And with a higher screen resolution, there would be even more area on the screen to work with, but everything would be smaller.

Common Windows screen resolutions are as follows:

- 640x480
- 800x600
- 1024x768
- 1154x864
- 1280x1024
- 1280x800 (widescreen format)

If you have trouble reading small text, considering lowering your screen resolution. If you have good eyesight and would like to have more area on your screen, consider going up a notch. To change your screen resolution, click-and-drag the slider bar to the left (for smaller) or right (for larger), then click Apply. You can always switch back, so feel free to try a smaller or larger resolution.

Rarely but occasionally, you'll switch to a resolution that your monitor can't display. If this is the case, the screen will go black. Leave the computer alone for 15 seconds and Windows will automatically revert back to the old screen resolution.

Also in the Display Settings window, you can adjust the default Windows font size (at the bottom of the Appearance tab), change the desktop background, screen saver settings, power settings, and more.

On the Desktop tab, you can select from a list of desktop images provided by Microsoft, or click Browse to select one of your own images. Other options include if Windows should Stretch, Center, or Tile the image. If the image isn't big enough to fill up the whole screen, you can have Windows stretch the image to span the whole screen (but it could look skewed), or center the image in the middle of the screen. Or, Windows can tile the image to fill out the screen. Try all three options and you'll see how they work.

On the Screen Saver tab, you can select from a dozen or so built-in screen savers. Each one has its own settings, click the Settings button and play around.

Also on the Screen Saver tab, you can click Power Settings to adjust your computer's energy conservation options. On the Power Schemes tab of this window, you can set how long your computer is idle (unused) before going turning off the monitor, turning off the hard drives, going into sleep mode, or shutting down/hibernating (if enabled). Here are my recommended settings:

Desktops:

Turn off monitor after: 15 minutes
Turn off hard disks after: 15 minutes
Sleep mode after: 30-45 minutes

Laptops:

(On wall outlet power, use same settings as for a desktop. For battery power, use the following settings).

Turn off monitor after: 3 minutes
Turn off hard drives after: 3 minutes
Sleep mode after: 5-10 minutes

Having the computer hibernate or shut down after a set amount of time is optional. It's recommended for laptops, however, to help conserve battery.

Start Menu

The Start Menu has quite a few options. To access them, right-click an open area of the taskbar, click Properties > Start Menu tab. The two main options are "Start Menu" (meaning the new Windows XP style) or "Classic Start Menu" (Win ME, 2k, 98 style). Some users still prefer the Classic Start Menu, but in my opinion the new Start Menu is more efficient and user-friendly. We'll focus on the new style Start Menu.

Check the button for "Start Menu" and then click Customize. From here, you can tinker with almost every aspect of the Start Menu. I'll go down the options in order:

- Icon Size – Reasonably self explanatory. Smaller icon size lets you fit more icons into the Start Menu, which is preferable for users with good eyesight.
- Number of icons in frequently used programs list – I recommend 6 for Large Icons or 10 for Small Icons. If you use more than that, it will stretch the Start Menu vertically. Less than that, and there will be wasted space. Feel free to tinker, as always.
- Show on Start Menu: Internet and Email – This option "pins" shortcuts to your default Web browser and Email handler onto the top of the Start Menu at all times. I recommend both. However, if you use AOL or MSN, only enable Internet, because your Web browser and Email client are the same program.

On the Advanced tab there are many more options to customize the Start menu – feel free to play around here.

Folder Display Options

Go to your My Documents folder and click Tools > Folder Options. From here, you can tinker with the way folders and files are viewed by default.

General tab

- Tasks > Show Common Tasks in Folders – This enables the menu on the left side of every folder that has shortcuts to My Computer, My Documents, Control Panel, Search, etc... I recommend leaving it on.
- Browse Folders > Open in New or Same window – When you open a folder, do you prefer it to open in the same window you're in, or open itself in a new window? Using the same window saves system resources, and is easier to use in my opinion.
- Click Items – This sets windows to Double-click to open mode (default) or Single-click to open mode. For users that have trouble doing precise mouse work, or don't like double-clicking, try Single Click mode. I prefer the default, double-click mode. Play with the options.

View tab

- Folder views > Apply to All Folders. Clicking this makes your settings effective to all folders, not just the current one. After you have the My Documents folder looking the way you want it, consider applying that scheme to all folders. I usually do.
- I'm not going to cover all of the Advanced options here; there's really not a need to tinker with most of them. Here are the few worth paying attention to:
- Hidden Files and Folders > Show hidden files/don't show hidden files. For novice users, don't show hidden files. This will help to prevent any accidental modification of system files. For intermediate and advanced users, I recommend to show hidden files. However, don't tinker with Windows system files unless you know how.
- Hide file extensions – This hides the “.” file extension at the end of every file (for instance, picture.jpg or program.exe). If you have a reason to view the file extensions, enable it.

Creating & Renaming Shortcuts - You can easily place shortcuts to programs or folders onto the desktop. To put a program on the desktop, go to the Start Menu and find the program you want to make a shortcut to. Right-click on the program and then click Send To > Desktop (Create Shortcut). Now exit the start menu and go back to the desktop. The new icon will appear, however, the name will start with “Shortcut To”. To rename the icon anything you please, simply right-click it and hit Rename. Now type the new name for the shortcut and press enter.

Visual Options & Performance Settings

Go to System Properties (There are two easy ways to get there: from the desktop, right-click My Computer and click Properties, or go to Control Panel > System) and click the Advanced tab. Under Performance, click Settings.

This window allows you to enable and disable visual options. Disabling certain visual options helps to save memory and system resources, because your computer won't have to work as hard with these options disabled. Here are my recommended settings:

- Animate windows when minimizing and maximizing OFF
- Fade or slide menus into view OFF
- Fade or slide ToolTips into view OFF
- Fade out menu items after clicking OFF
- Show shadows under menus ON
- Show shadows under mouse pointer ON
- Show translucent selection rectangle ON
- Show window contents while dragging ON
- Slide open combo boxes OFF
- Slide taskbar buttons ON
- Smooth edges of screen fonts ON
- Smooth-scroll list boxes ON
- Use a background image for each folder type ON
- Use common tasks in folders ON
- Use drop shadows for icons on desktop ON
- Use visual styles on windows and buttons* OFF

*Disabling this last option uses the Classic (Pre-XP) gray style on most windows and the taskbar. If you prefer the Blue theme, leave it on. However, using the Classic theme (disabling the option) saves quite a bit of system resources. Try both options and see which you prefer.

Virtual Memory is where your computer stores data it's currently working with when the RAM is full. The default Virtual Memory settings usually aren't quite optimal, so here's how to tweak them: Go to the "Advanced" tab, and click Change under Virtual Memory Settings. Click on Drive C: and then click System Managed Size, then Set. Click OK. Click OK again. Click Apply. Also in the System Properties window are settings for Automatic Updates, System Restore, and more. We've covered all of these previously, and can be found in our earlier handouts. Feel free to explore these options.