

12 tips to get more out of Windows 10



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12 tips to get more out of Windows 10

By Ed Bott

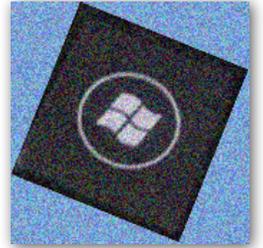
1: Master 10 essential keyboard shortcuts

Every Windows user knows a handful of keyboard shortcuts to power through everyday tasks: Ctrl+X, Ctrl+C, and Ctrl+V, for example, are the universal Cut, Copy, and Paste shortcuts, with Ctrl+Z (Undo) also essential.

But true Windows experts know how to really save time by memorizing a handful of less well-known shortcuts. Two of my favorites work on any Windows version: Ctrl+Shift+Esc opens Task Manager in an instant, while Windows key + E opens File Explorer.

If you're running Windows 10, you have a whole batch of new shortcuts, like these:

- **Windows key + L** locks the PC immediately (think of it as the ultimate Boss key)
- **Windows key + X** opens the Quick Link menu more quickly than right-clicking on Start
- **Windows key + I** opens the Windows Settings app, where you can begin typing to search for any setting
- **Windows key + PrtScr** takes a screenshot and saves it in a subfolder of Pictures



2: Spare your eyes with these mouse pointer settings

Playing “find the mouse pointer” is no fun for anyone with less than 20/20 vision, especially on the latest super-high-resolution laptops. Luckily, there are solutions built into every modern version of Windows. You'll find the necessary settings in the classic Control Panel, under Mouse Options:

1. On the Pointers tab, choose one of the **Large** or **Extra Large** schemes to make the pointer bigger. The Windows Black (large) option is the one I prefer.
2. On the Pointer Options tab, select the **Display Pointer Trails** check box to make the pointer easier to see as it moves.
3. At the bottom of that same tab, select the **Show Location Of Pointer When I Press The CTRL Key** option.
4. Click OK to save your changes and close the dialog box.

3: Get rid of old Windows upgrade files with Disk Cleanup

Now that Microsoft is offering Windows 10 as a free upgrade to anyone currently running Windows 7 or Windows 8.1, the Disk Cleanup utility is an essential tool. Much of what it does is mundane, like emptying the Recycle Bin and removing old files from the Temp folder. But its superpower is the ability to remove the big chunks of data that are created during Windows upgrades—like the Windows.old folder, which contains a saved copy of your previous Windows version.

To get started, type **Cleanmgr** in the search box. Then right-click the Disk Cleanup entry in search results and choose Run As Administrator. (If you see the Clean Up System Files button, click it to switch to Administrator mode.) Each entry in the list shows how much space it takes. Select a check box and click OK to remove those files for good.

4: Sign in more quickly with a Windows 10 PIN

Strong, hard-to-guess passwords are a necessary evil, and a downright nuisance on a PC that's physically secure from intruders. For PCs running Windows 10 that are connected with a Microsoft account or Azure Active Directory, you can set a PIN as an alternative to your password. That way, you can sign in quickly but still keep your system safe from prying eyes.

The PIN option is on the Accounts page in Settings, filed under Sign-in Options. The default is four digits, but you can make the pin longer to reduce the risk that someone will successfully break in by trying easy-to-guess combinations like your birthday or anniversary. You can always switch between PIN and password by clicking or tapping the Sign-In Options link on the screen where you enter your credentials.

5: Encrypt your removable storage devices

USB flash drives are tremendously useful... and dangerous... all at the same time. It's easy to fill up a flash drive with data files, either to back them up or to move them to another device. In either case, if the drive is lost or stolen, whoever finds it can access your files—including potentially sensitive information. Unless you had the foresight to encrypt the drive first, that is.



Image: [iStockphoto.com/charnsitr](https://www.iStockphoto.com/charnsitr)

Business versions of Windows (Windows 10 Pro, Enterprise, and Education) allow you to encrypt portable storage devices, including USB flash drives and SD cards, using a feature called BitLocker To Go. Just open File Explorer, right-click the icon for your USB flash drive, choose Turn On BitLocker, and set a password. The encrypted drive can be read on any Windows system, including Home editions, as long as you have the password.

6: Customize the Send To menu

The Send To menu is a particularly useful feature in File Explorer. You can right-click any file or folder, choose Send To, and copy or move those objects to a folder of your choosing. You can also open compatible files by sending them to an application shortcut.

Unfortunately, the default list of Send To destinations is sketchy to say the least. But if you create a shortcut, you can customize that list to your heart's content. The secret is to open the Run box (Windows key + R), type

the command **shell:sendto**, and then press Enter. That opens the folder filled with everything you see on the Send To list.

I typically delete the Fax Recipient entry and add shortcuts to Notepad, WordPad, and some of my most-used document folders. You're limited only by your imagination.

7: Save time with environment variables

If I tell you to open your user profile in File Explorer, you'll probably type its full path: C, colon, backslash, Users, backslash, followed by your user name. But there's a much faster way:

Type **%userprofile%** and press Enter.

Congratulations, you just saved a half-dozen keystrokes or so by using one of many useful *environment variables* in Windows. These are reserved names, enclosed between percent signs, that represent the current location of a specific system folder.

Here are a few other useful ones to know:

%localappdata% The hidden folder in your user profile where Windows apps store your data

%windir% The folder containing Windows system files; usually C:\Windows

%public% A special user profile that contains folders for Documents, Downloads, Music, Pictures, and Videos, intended for sharing on a home network

%temp% or **%tmp%** The normally hidden folder where Windows and apps can store files necessary for one-time tasks

Some people write these variables using mixed case (%ProgramFiles%, for example) to make them easier to read. But they're not case sensitive, so skip the Shift key if you want.

8: Organize your cloud files the easy way

You probably have two, three, or maybe even more folders that sync files from the cloud to your PC right now: Dropbox, Google Drive, OneDrive, and so on. How do you keep track of all that cloud content? Set up a Cloud Files library in File Explorer. Here's how:

- Right-click any empty space in the navigation pane on the left and make sure Show Libraries is selected.
- Right-click the Libraries heading and then click New > Library. Change the default name to something descriptive, like *Cloud Files*.
- Right-click the first locally synced cloud folder and select Include In Library, choosing the name of your newly created library.
- Repeat that step for each additional local folder.

That's it. You can now get a unified view of all your cloud files by selecting that library in File Explorer. Use the search box to quickly find any file, regardless of where it's stored.

9: Open your favorite programs instantly with this shortcut trick

We all have our favorite programs, and of course the easiest way to get to any of them is to pin its shortcut to the taskbar. In Windows 10, you can assign a keyboard shortcut to your 10 favorite programs just by dragging them to one of the first 10 positions on the taskbar.

Pressing the keyboard shortcut Windows key + # (where # is a single digit 0-9) opens the program associated with the corresponding taskbar button (or switches to it, if it's already open). By default, Internet Explorer is in the first spot and File Explorer is in the second spot, so you can always open File Explorer with Windows key + 2. Drag a pinned shortcut to one of those first 10 spots and then memorize its position to open it quickly. (Windows key + 0 opens the 10th pinned shortcut.)



Image: iStockphoto.com/daizuoxin

10: Tap into these software licensing secrets

Every version of Windows dating back to Windows Vista has included the Windows Software Licensing Management Tool, a script file found in the Windows\System32 folder as Slmgr.vbs. The script is designed for a local administrator to run in an elevated Command Prompt window.

Most people never need to use this tool, but it can come in handy when you're trying to resolve activation problems or upgrade a Windows PC. The secret is knowing which switches to add to the end of the command to achieve the desired result.

If you just type the command, with no switches, you get a series of five dialog boxes that list all those switches. Network administrators who manage a Key Management server for Volume Licensing will find a goldmine here. For the rest of us, the three most commonly used switches are the following:

- **Slmgr.vbs /dli** displays basic license information, including the last five characters of the product key
- **Slmgr.vbs /dlv** displays much more detailed license information
- **Slmgr.vbs /cpky** removes the product key from the registry so that it can't be copied and reused

11: Get the inside story on how your PC is managing power

One of the most powerful diagnostic tools in Windows doesn't have a graphical interface.

The Powercfg command, which is available only from a command line, allows you to manage, save, and export power settings. But its best trick is the ability to produce a detailed report of energy usage on your PC, including clues about devices or services that are preventing your system from going to sleep when it should.

To produce the energy report, open an administrative Command Prompt window by right-clicking Start and then clicking **Command Prompt (Admin)**.

At the command prompt, type **cd %temp%** and then press Enter to switch to the Temp folder, where your report will be saved.

Enter the command **powercfg /energy** to begin generating the report. The process monitors your system for 60 seconds and then analyzes the results, saving the report as a document called energy-report.html in the current folder. To open that report in your default browser, just enter the command **start energy-report.html**.

12: Take control of your saved passwords

Windows regularly offers to save passwords on your behalf. When you connect to a server on your network with a username and password other than the one you logged in with, for example, you're prompted to save the credentials for reuse. Likewise, Internet Explorer and Edge allow you to save passwords so you can enter them automatically when you return to that page.

Those passwords are saved in a secure location that only you can open, using a well-hidden tool called Credential Manager.

You'll find this option in Control Panel, under the User Accounts heading. In Windows 10, it's easiest to just type **credential** in the search box and click Credential Manager at the top of the search results.

Separate icons at the top of the Credential Manager list let you view and manage saved Web credentials and Windows credentials. The Web Passwords list can't be sorted and there's no search option, so you'll have to scroll through the list to find a specific entry. Click the down arrow to the right of any entry to see the saved username and password and click Remove if you don't want that password stored. (The only way to change a saved password is to remove it and then save it by entering the new password in your web browser.)

The Windows Credentials screen offers Edit and Remove buttons for every entry, along with a handy option to back up and restore saved credentials. That's a small timesaver when you're setting up a new PC.