

YOUR COMPUTER: Basic Care & Maintenance

by Karl-Peter Gottschalk

As I've been getting out and about lately, talking with people from all walks of life about how they are using computers, I have noticed almost everyone is forgetting to practice basic care and maintenance.

Five Simple Procedures.

Like motor cars, computers are just dumb machines that need regular servicing to keep them healthy. They develop small problems that grow larger with time. And they can't speak up and tell you when trouble is brewing deep beneath the surface.



By routinely following 5 simple procedures you can prevent small problems from turning into big ones. Think of these things as your computer's equivalent to topping up your car's oil and water, and checking the tyre pressure. If you forget to do them, the disasters this neglect might cause—lost data, hard drive failures, corrupted operating systems—may be painfully expensive to fix. It can even threaten the survival of your business, if computers play an important role within it.

- Save your documents regularly.
- Practice simple version control.
- Use virus protection.
- Run repair utilities once a month.
- Back-up on to external media.

Save Your Documents Regularly.

Ever had your workday reveries shattered by a colleague's screams as their computer crashes just before they had a chance to save that big document they've been working on all day? It's a chilling sound.

The habit of saving constantly will prevent this from happening to you. Make saving into a habit by memorizing the key combination that saves documents in the applications you most commonly use. Then hit those keys after typing every sentence. It will soon become automatic.

On the Macintosh the key combination to Save is Command-S:  . On Windows it varies from program to program, and sometimes you can only do it with a mouse movement. But however you Save in your favourite program, burn that procedure into your brain.

Practice Simple Version Control.

If you rely on a database on a daily basis, or are working on a big written project over a long period of time, practice a simple form of version control. This ensures you have many copies of that file, and if the latest copy becomes corrupted you can revert to an earlier version of it.

At the beginning of each working day, before you even open the file, make a copy of it. Give the copy a version control name by adding an underscore and the date in numbers to the end of its name.

I use a six-digit date numbering system, where the first two digits are the last two numbers of the year, the middle two digits are the month, and the last two digits are the day.

Thus, a version of a text file named customers that I save on April the 1st becomes `customers_020401.txt`. When I begin work the following day, I make a copy of `customers_020401.txt`, rename it `customers_020402.txt`, and

get to work confident that if today's version becomes corrupted then I can go back to yesterday's.

If you are really cautious, or need to save many versions of the same file each day, just add another underscore and a sequential number to the end of the name. The third version of `customers_020401.txt` that I saved that day will therefore be `customers_020401_03.txt`.

Use Virus Protection.

If you are not aware by now of the threat that viruses pose then you've been on another planet for the last decade. Or you're one of those people who shrug their shoulders and deny that it'll ever happen to them.

Windows computers are vulnerable to thousands of different kinds of viruses, worms and trojan horses. They arrive in the form of attachments to emails, and as scripts embedded into Word and Excel documents. They turn up on floppy discs loaned to us by a friend. They can even appear on those CDs that are stuck to the cover of your favourite computer magazine.

Apple Macintosh computers on the other hand are far less prone to virus infections, and I can't even remember the last virus, worm or trojan horse that affected Macs.

But, whether you use a Mac or a Windows machine, install an antivirus program on it and make sure you keep its virus definitions file right up to date.

The most commonly available virus protection programs are Virex or Norton Anti-Virus for Mac, and Norton Anti-Virus or McAfee Anti-Virus for Windows. Norton Anti-Virus is included in the Norton SystemWorks package, for Mac or Windows.

Run Repair Utilities Once a Month.

Most problems of the kind that develop small and grow large can be intercepted early by running a diagnostic and repair utility.

Once a month will do fine, and if your computer shows signs of misbehaving before its monthly routine is due then take a break and run your diagnostics ahead of time.

If using a Macintosh you should always use Alsoft DiskWarrior first, and then run your choice of either Norton Disk Doctor from the Norton SystemWorks package, or Micromat's TechTool Pro. Boot off the CD by holding down the C key, choose automatic repairs in the Preferences dialog, then it's just a mouse click to tell the application to begin its work.

The Windows alternatives are harder to use, and demand more knowledge than most home users generally possess. Norton SystemWorks and McAfee Office for Windows are readily available at most computer stores, but do please spend plenty of time reading the manuals before you begin. Ask a techie friend to assist you if you feel the need.

Also, defragment your hard drive once every three or six months, to ensure your machine does not have to go hunting for chunks of the same file spread out all over the disk.

Defragging helps speed up your computer's operations, and often mysteriously solves problems not fixed in any other way. Base the frequency you defragment on the amount of work you do and the size of the files you create—the more and the bigger, the more frequently you should do it.

Back-up on to External Media.

This is the big one, the insurance policy we all know we should take out, but we seldom do.

The ideal back-up solution is to own an external hard drive that is much bigger than the one you have inside your computer. Then all you have to do is copy essential folders and files over to your external drive over previous versions, or save new versions and rename them with today's date.

Or, if you want to spend some extra dollars, buy a copy of a sophisticated back-up program like Dantz Retrospect Backup and let it take care of things at the end of each working day.

If extra hardware and software is beyond your current budget, and you have a newer computer with CD-RW drive built-in, then

buy yourself a CD marker pen and a stack of blank CDs , and use them as your back-up medium. Blank CDs are cheap now, and most CD burning software allows you to create multi-session CDs as well as single session disks.

Above all else, avoid backing up onto floppy disks or Zip disks. Both media are great for sending files to a friend, provided they're small enough to fit, but floppies have an unacceptably high rate of failure and users of Zip disks, including me, have experienced too many problems with them in the past. Click of death, anyone?

Repeat After Me.

With a little practice all the basic care and maintenance procedures I have recommended here become second nature.

Make them a mantra, and repeat after me until it all comes automatically: *Save, versions, virus, repair, back-up.* 🖱️

**This free advice on keeping your computer healthy was brought to you by Karl Gottschalk.
I publish more of this kind of material on my daily weblog, URL below.**

© Copyright Karl-Peter Gottschalk 2002. All rights reserved.
Email: karlpeter3@mac.com; mobile: 0411 275 061.
Weblog: <http://radio.weblogs.com/0100271/>.