

Microsoft®

WINDOWS

7

YOUR
WAY

*Speed Up and
Customize Windows*

que®

Michael Miller

Microsoft® Windows 7 Your Way: Speed Up and Customize Windows

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Introduction

You want your burger with just the right fixings. You want your new car in your favorite color and configuration. You want your web browser's home page to deliver the news and information you specify. You want your iPod to play your personalized playlists. So why shouldn't you want to have Windows your way, too?

I've been writing about Windows for fifteen or so years now, and I know the first thing that most users do when they get a new computer is personalize the desktop with their own background images. People want to make Windows their own—to create their own custom copy of the operating system. They want their copy of Windows to look and feel like it was designed just for them.

Changing the desktop background is just one small step in what can be a long and involved personalization process. The reality is that there's a lot about Windows you can customize, if you put your mind to it. In fact, there's much more you can configure than most users realize.

That's where this book comes in. *Windows 7 Your Way* is your guide to configuring the way Microsoft's new operating system looks and acts. I'll show you not only how to change the desktop background, but also how to create a desktop slideshow, change window colors and transparencies, and personalize the items on the taskbar and Start menu. And all that's in just the first five chapters!

You see, Windows 7 is the most customizable version of Windows yet. Not only can you change Windows' look and feel, you can also change the operating system's default programs, which applications are associated with which file types, and what different users are allowed to do when logged on. Then there's everything you can do with digital pictures and music, all sorts of network configuration settings, little tweaks for using a notebook PC on the road...well, as I said, there's a lot you can change.

And the changes aren't limited to superficial settings. There are also lots of things you can do to make Windows run faster—which is always desirable. Speeding up your system's performance is the ultimate example of running Windows *your way*.

What's in This Book

Windows 7 Your Way is all about customizing and optimizing Windows 7 on your computer system. Obviously, it covers all the new features of Windows 7; there's something here for everyone!

To present all the various ways you can configure Windows 7 your way, this book contains 28 chapters, divided into 6 major parts. Each part walks you through a different way to have Windows your way, from basic interface personalization to hard-core system tweaks:

- **Part I: Personalizing Windows—Your Way** presents all the things you can do to reconfigure Windows 7's basic settings. That includes personalizing the desktop, of course, but also working with the taskbar and Start menu, as well as setting Windows' default programs. This is easy stuff that makes a big difference in terms of how Windows looks and feels.
- **Part II: Managing Windows Data and Media—Your Way** is all about working with various types of files. You'll learn how to personalize Windows Explorer, as well as advanced methods of managing files and folders. There's also a lot here about working with digital media files (photos, music, and videos), including using Windows Media Center to play your media files in your living room—and throughout your house.
- **Part III: Managing Windows Users and the Network—Your Way** is where you learn all about configuring Windows' user accounts—and Windows' User Account Control feature. There's also a lot here about network configuration, including how to share files and devices over the network.
- **Part IV: Optimizing Windows Online—Your Way** connects you to the Internet—and helps you speed up your Internet connection. You'll learn how to customize the Internet Explorer web browser, how to change default web browsers, and how to use IE's new InPrivate Browsing mode to anonymously surf the Web. You'll also learn how to surf *safely*—and avoid all the pesky nuisances that plague the Internet.

- **Part V: Using Windows on the Road—Your Way** is the section to read if you have a notebook PC. Windows 7 offers a lot of configuration options for mobile users, as well as ways to extend your notebook's battery life.
- **Part VI: Optimizing Windows Performance—Your Way** presents many ways to speed up your Windows-based PC. You'll learn how to prepare for optimization (think: protecting your data), manage your system security, remove unwanted programs and files, work with hard drives and system memory, and even tweak the Windows Registry for some high-level performance improvements. There's also a section on running problem programs, including using the new Windows XP Mode with older applications. And we wrap things up with a section on troubleshooting Windows problems—those annoying crashes and freezes that keep you from using Windows any which way.

That's a lot of stuff—but then again, there's a lot you can configure in Windows 7. When you're done, your version of Windows will be unique; you'll truly have Windows 7 *your way*.

Who Can Use This Book

You don't have to be a technical expert to use this book; many of the procedures discussed here require nothing more than a few clicks of the mouse. It helps if you know your way around the Windows desktop, of course, and there are a few more advanced options that require either tweaking the Windows Registry or performing simple hardware upgrades. But in general, just about anybody can perform most of the customization and optimization presented here.

One thing, though: This book is written specifically for computers running Microsoft Windows 7. If you have an older version of Windows, not all the instructions here will apply. (Although some will; Win7 isn't *that* much different from Windows Vista and Windows XP.)

How to Use This Book

I hope that this book is easy enough to read that you don't need instructions. That said, a few elements bear explaining.

First, this book contains several special elements, presented in what we in the publishing business call "margin notes." There are different types of margin notes for different types of information, as you see here.

note

This is a note that presents information of interest, even if it isn't wholly relevant to the discussion in the main text.

tip

This is a tip that might prove useful for whatever it is you're in the process of doing.

caution

This is a caution that something you accidentally do might have undesirable results.

Because some of the solutions presented in this book involve third-party software utilities or new hardware devices, you'll find web page addresses in the text accompanying the mentions of these products. When you see one of these addresses (also known as a URL), you can go to that web page by entering the URL into the address box in your web browser. I've made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the web addresses presented here, but given the ever-changing nature of the Web, don't be surprised if you run across an address or two that's changed. For that matter, some of the products and prices presented here are likely to change by the time you read this text. I apologize in advance, but that's the way the world works.

There's More Online...

When you need a break from reading, feel free to go online and check out my personal website, located at www.molehillgroup.com. Here you'll find more information about this book and other books I've written. And if you have any questions or comments, feel free to email me directly at win7yourway@molehillgroup.com. I can't guarantee I'll respond to every email, but I do guarantee I'll read them all.

Do It *Your Way*

With all these preliminaries out of the way, it's now time to get started. Put on your reading glasses, fire up your mouse, and get ready to configure Windows 7 *your way!*

6

Customizing Windows Explorer

Working with Windows, more often than not, means working with files and folders. And working with files and folders in Windows means working with Windows Explorer.

As often as you use Windows Explorer, wouldn't it be nice to personalize it just a tad, make it a little easier to work with? Well, your wish is granted, as there are lots of ways to make Windows Explorer look and feel your way.

Read on to learn more.

Understanding Windows Explorer

Windows Explorer is an application that displays the contents of hard drives and folders. You use it to navigate all the folders and files on your computer.

This makes Windows Explorer a file manager application. In fact, Explorer replaced Windows' self-named File Manager application, which ruled the roost from Windows 3.0 (1990) to Windows 95. Since that 1995 introduction, Windows Explorer has gone through quite a few permutations. In fact, there was time when it really wasn't called Windows Explorer.

That time was 2001, and the release of Windows XP. With XP, Microsoft decided to make Explorer more "discoverable" and task based. So instead of launching Windows Explorer as a separate folder, you opened the My Documents or My Music or My Whatever folder. Each of these folders was really Windows Explorer, pointing to a distinct folder on your hard drive, even if it wasn't called that.

So when you opened the Start menu and clicked My Documents, you launched Windows Explorer pointing to the My Documents folder.

With Windows 7, the name Windows Explorer is back in vogue. Yes, you can still open the Documents folder, but you can also launch Windows Explorer in and of itself. In fact, Windows Explorer is one of the default icons in the new taskbar, as you can see in Figure 6.1; click the taskbar icon to open Windows Explorer. (You can also launch Explorer by opening the Start menu and selecting All Programs, Accessories, Windows Explorer.)



FIGURE 6.1

Open Windows Explorer from the Windows 7 taskbar.

tip

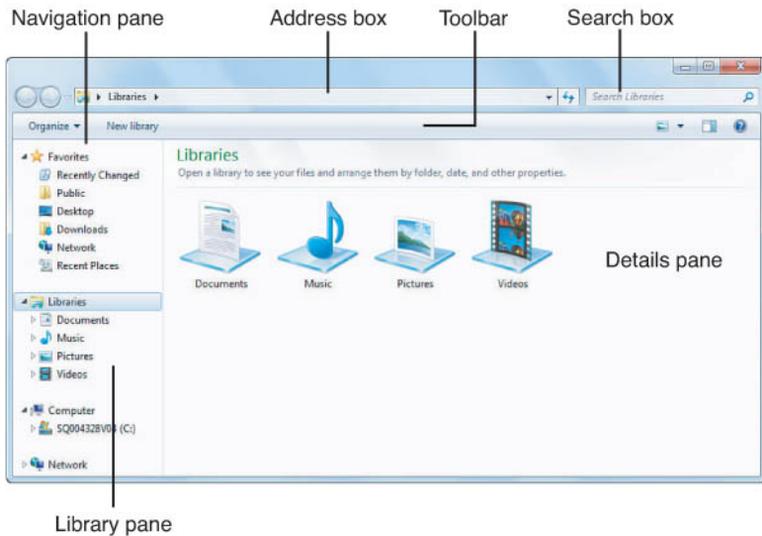
If you right-click Explorer's taskbar icon, you also see a list of the most recently visited folders; click a folder to return to that location.

When you launch Windows Explorer, it opens to the new Library view—that is, a view of Windows 7's four default libraries (Documents, Music, Pictures, and Videos). As you can see in Figure 6.2, the Win7 version of Explorer also features a revamped navigation pane on the left, with five major sections: Favorites, Libraries, Homegroup, Computer, and Network.

note

Learn more about libraries in Chapter 7, "Extending File and Folder Management."

The easiest ways to navigate with Windows Explorer are to use the Favorites and Computer sections in the navigation pane. The Favorites section lets you go directly to your favorite folders (by default, these include Recently Changed, Public, Desktop, Downloads, Network, and Recent Places, although you can customize this favorites list), while the Computer section lets you drill down through all the drives and folders and subfolders on your computer system. Click an arrow next to a selection to expand that selection in the navigation pane; click any item to display the contents of that device or folder in the details pane of the Explorer window.

**FIGURE 6.2**

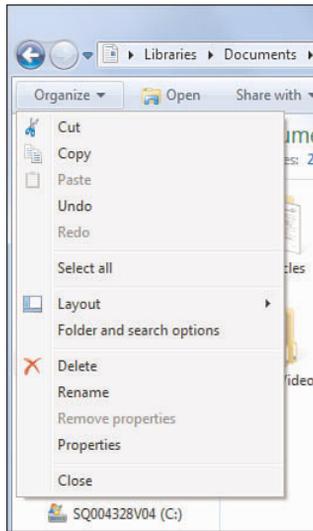
Welcome to Windows Explorer.

Above the navigation and details panes is a context-sensitive toolbar. The contents of the toolbar change depending on what you have selected in the navigation pane. For example, select **Computer** in the navigation pane and the toolbar displays options for **Organize**, **System Properties**, **Uninstall or Change a Program**, **Map Network Drive**, and **Open Control Panel**; select the **Documents** item and the toolbar displays options for **Organize**, **Share With**, **Burn**, and **New Folder**.

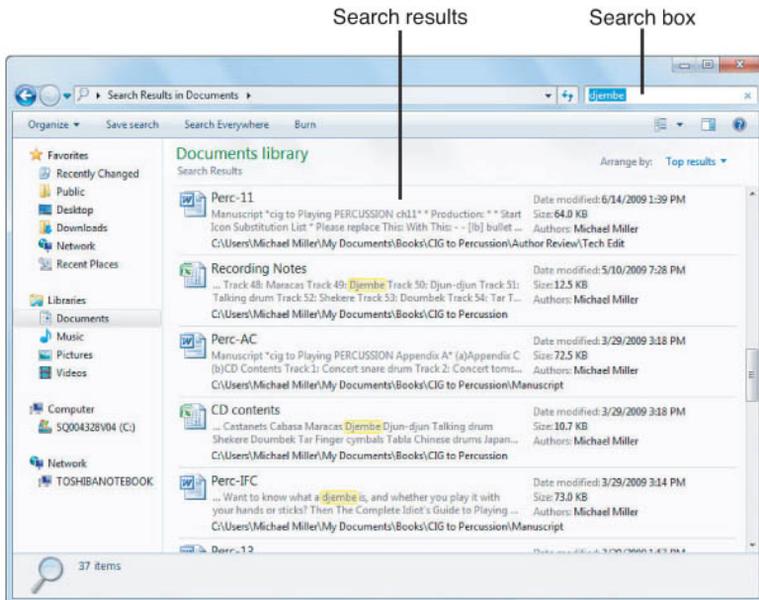
The one constant in the toolbar is the **Organize** button. Click this button to display the **Organize** menu, shown in Figure 6.3. This menu features all manner of file-related operations, such as **Cut**, **Copy**, **Paste**, **Delete**, and so on.

At the very top of the Explorer window are back and forward buttons and two boxes. The bigger box is the address box, although Microsoft likes to call it the *breadcrumbs bar*. This box displays the folder path, but you can go backward through the path (like following a trail of breadcrumbs) by clicking any folder in the path; click a right arrow next to a folder and you see all the subfolders branching out from that folder. It's really a nice way to navigate, once you get the hang of it.

The second box at the top of the Explorer window is the search box. As you might suspect, you use this box to search for files and folders on your system; just enter the file or folder name (or part thereof) and press **Enter**; Explorer then returns a list of items that match your search, as shown in Figure 6.4. It works pretty well.

**FIGURE 6.3**

Windows Explorer's Organize menu.

**FIGURE 6.4**

The results of a Windows Explorer search.

Displaying—or Hiding—Different Panes

There are quite a few things you can customize about Windows Explorer. Let's start with the Explorer window itself—and the various panes that are displayed.

By default, Explorer displays the navigation and details panes, as well as a small library pane, above the details pane, that displays information about the current folder or library. You can also opt to display a preview pane, to the right of the details pane, that displays a preview of any file you select in the details pane, as shown in Figure 6.5. It's kind of useful, but cuts down on the available real estate for navigation and browsing, which is probably why it's turned off by default.

The preview pane is not enabled by default.

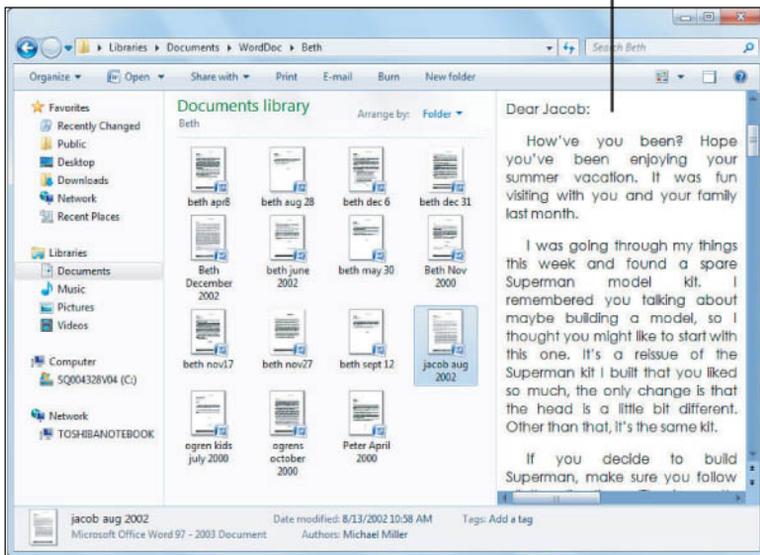


FIGURE 6.5

The Explorer window with the preview pane displayed.

To select which panes are displayed in the Explorer window, follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, select Organize, Layout.
2. Check those panes you want to display.
3. Uncheck those panes you don't want to see.

Pretty easy.

tip

You can also display the preview pane by clicking the Show the Preview Pane button on the far right of the Explorer toolbar. Click the button again to hide the preview pane.

Displaying the Menu Bar

There's one more screen element you might choose to display—especially if you're an old-timer, like me. You see, even though Microsoft does a good job placing context-sensitive operations on the Explorer toolbar, I still prefer the old-school pull-down menu bar that used to be part and parcel of just about every window in Windows. Well, Microsoft is doing away with menu bars, but still offers that option if you want to work at it. I do.

I simply find it easier to find things on the traditional menu bar, shown in Figure 6.6. For example, I know that file operations can always be found on the File menu, and that view options can be found on the View menu. Very little guessing involved.

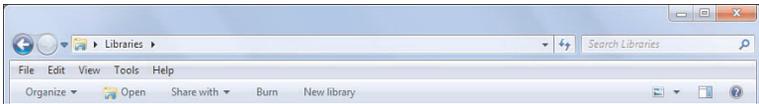


FIGURE 6.6

The Windows Explorer menu bar—not displayed by default.

To that end, you can opt to permanently display the Windows Explorer menu bar. Follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, select Organize, Layout.
2. Check the Menu Bar option.

tip

You can also temporarily call up the menu bar at any time by pressing the Alt key on your computer keyboard. Press Alt again to hide the menu bar.

Changing Views

How do you like to see your files and folders displayed? Well, Windows Explorer offers a lot of different view options, including the following:

- Content, shown in Figure 6.7, which displays one item per line with information about that item—including date modified, size, author, or type.
- Tiles, shown in Figure 6.8, which is a grid of small icons for each item, with filename and size beside each file icon.
- Details, shown in Figure 6.9, a line listing of each item with columns for name, date modified, type, and size. The nice thing about Details view is that you can sort folder contents by any column; just click the column header to do the sort. You can also rearrange the columns, by clicking and dragging any column head to a new position. You can even customize the columns displayed by right-clicking the column header row and checking or unchecking file attributes in the resulting pop-up menu. A very versatile view.
- List, shown in Figure 6.10, which lists the contents of the folder, no other details displayed, using as many columns as necessary. This is probably the most economical view.
- Icons—individual icons for each file or folder, sized from small (Figure 6.11) to extra large (Figure 6.12).

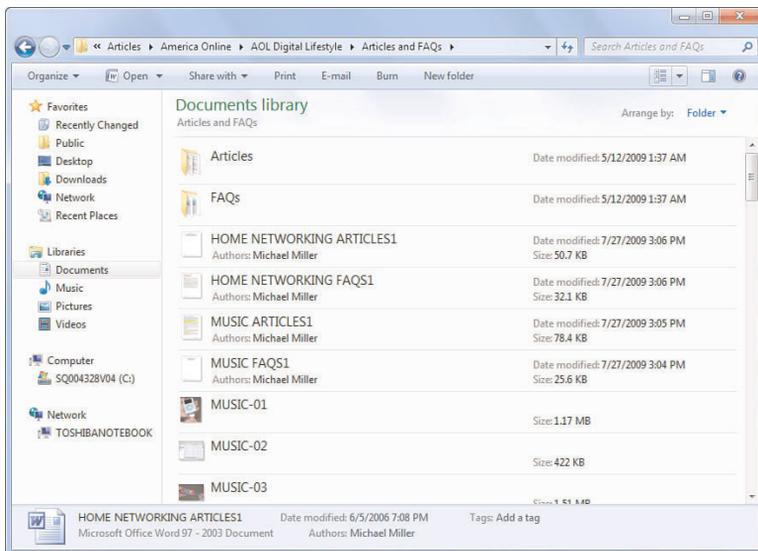


FIGURE 6.7
Content view.

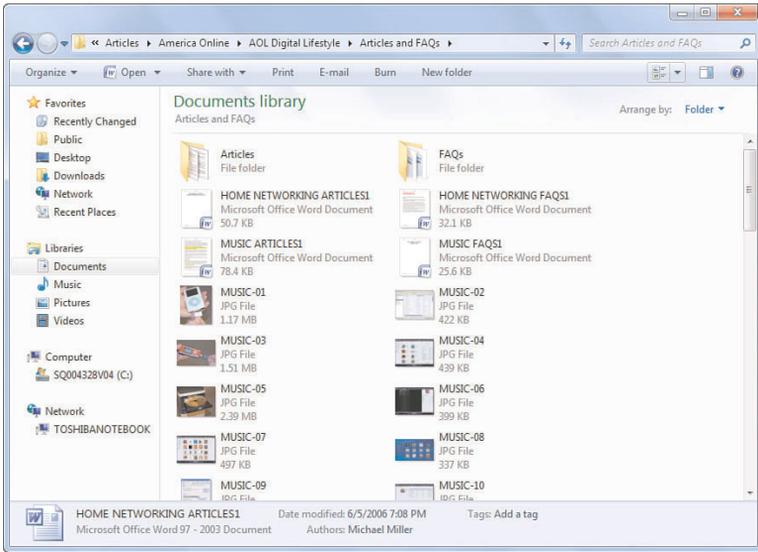


FIGURE 6.8

Tiles view.

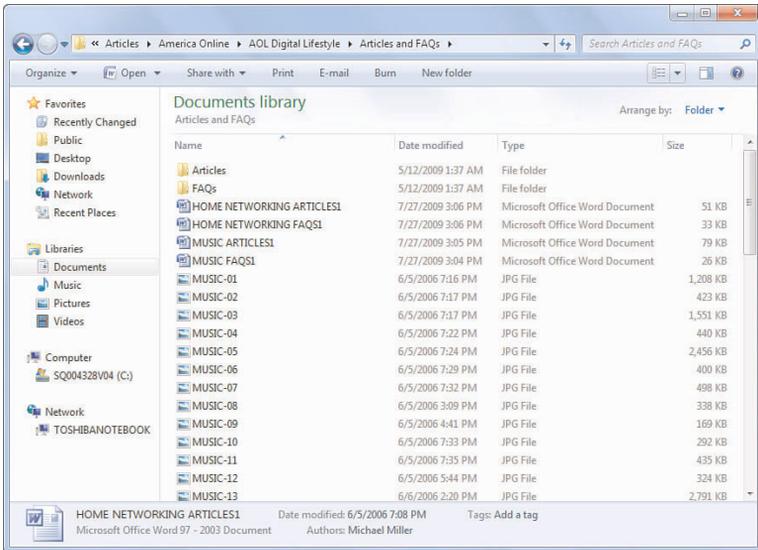


FIGURE 6.9

Details view.

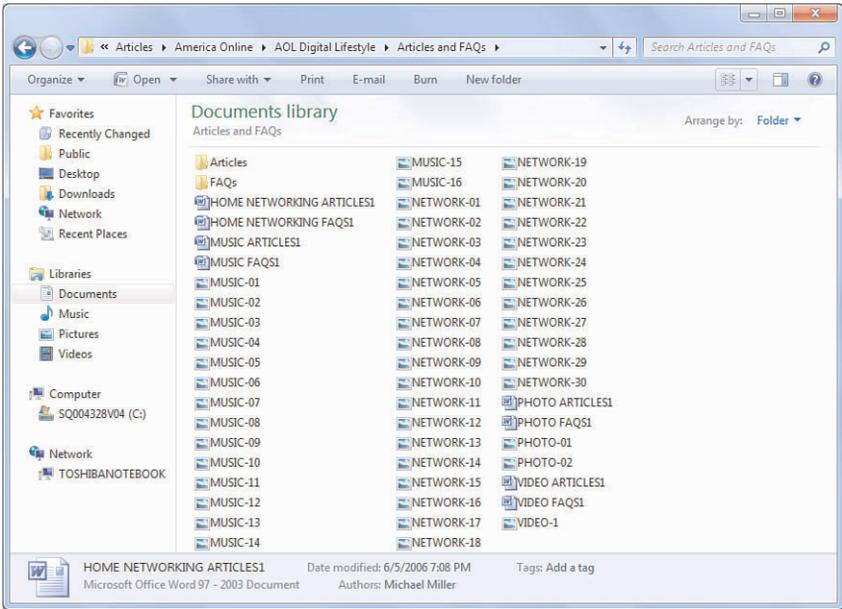


FIGURE 6.10

List view.

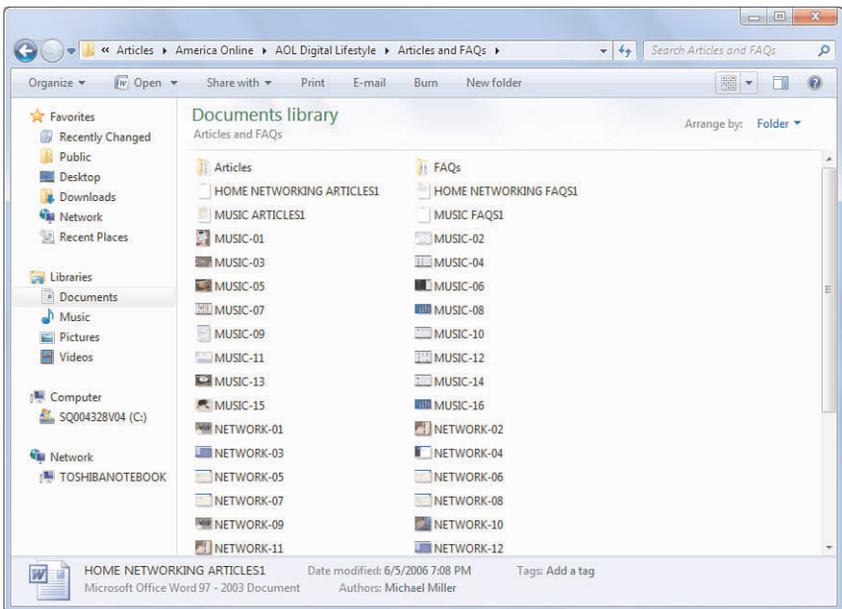


FIGURE 6.11

Small icon view.

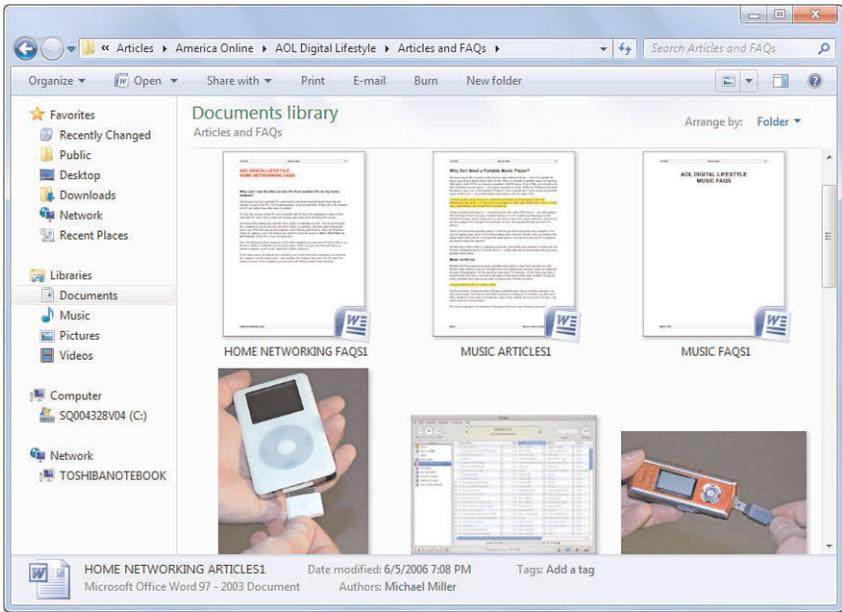


FIGURE 6.12
Extra large icon view.

note

In most views, file icons display a thumbnail preview of the file contents.

To switch views, simply click the Views button on the toolbar and select the view you want, as shown in Figure 6.13. For the icons views, use the slider to change icon size; the size is variable, so you aren't limited to a stock two or three sizes.

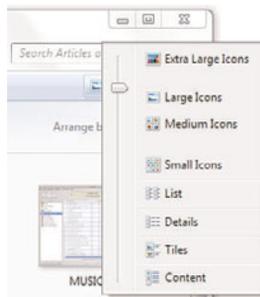


FIGURE 6.13
Changing Windows Explorer views.

caution

Useful as they are, displaying thumbnail views can slow down your PC's performance, especially when viewing photos (and folders containing photos). If you find your system getting sluggish, change to a non-thumbnail view.

Arranging and Sorting Files and Folders

No matter which view you select, you're still faced with the best way to organize folder contents—especially in crowded folders. Fortunately, you have several options.

Arranging Folder Contents

You can change how folder contents are arranged. By default, all contents are arranged by folder; in this arrangement, every file and folder appears as a separate item in the Explorer window. But there are several other options available, including the following:

- **Author**, where contents are stacked by who created them, as shown in Figure 6.14; double-click a stack to see all the files in that folder created by that author.
- **Date modified**, where contents are grouped by the date they were last modified, as shown in Figure 6.15.
- **Tag**, where contents are stacked by any tags assigned to the files. Since most files are not tagged by default, this is a less than useful view for most users.
- **Type**, where files are stacked by file type, as shown in Figure 6.16; double-click any stack to view all files of that type.
- **Name**, which lists files and folders in alphabetical order. (This is identical to Details view, but with files and folders mixed together.)

To change how folder contents are arranged, make sure the library pane is displayed; then click the **Arrange By** button and make a selection, as shown in Figure 6.17.

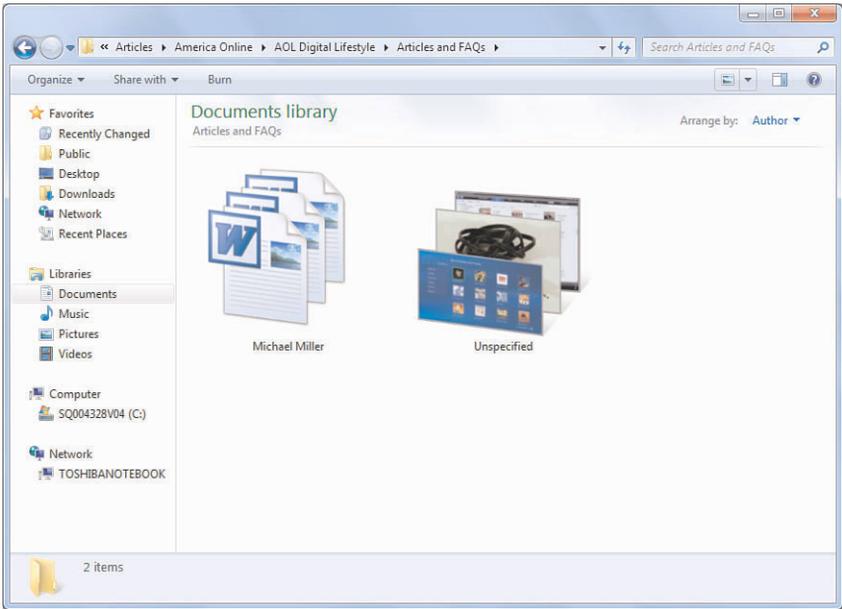


FIGURE 6.14
Arranging files by author.

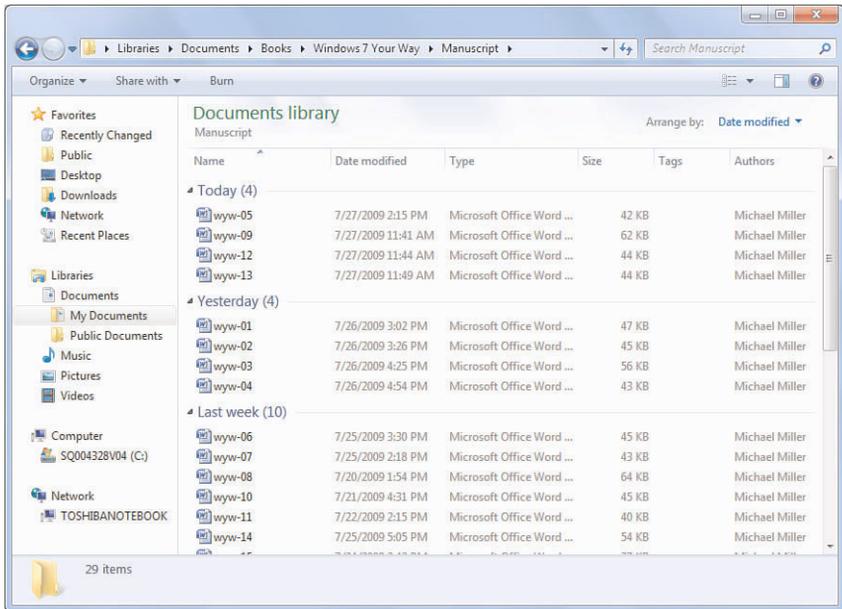
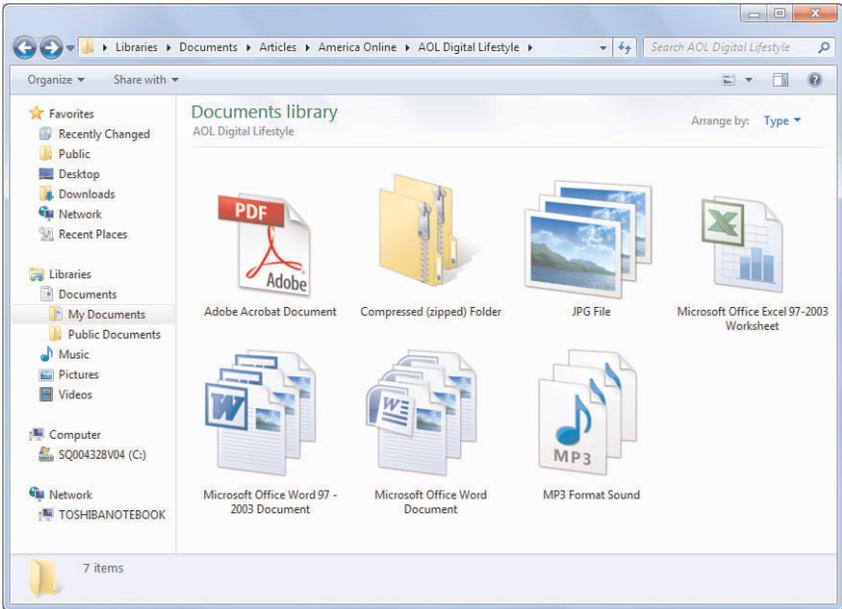
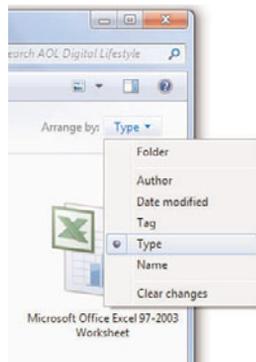


FIGURE 6.15
Arranging files by date modified.

**FIGURE 6.16**

Arranging files by type.

**FIGURE 6.17**

Arranging folder contents.

Sorting Folder Contents

Arranging folder contents is different from sorting those contents. You may want to sort a folder's contents by filename, file type, file size, or the

date the file was modified. Whatever view you're in, you can sort a folder's contents by following these steps:

1. Right-click in an open area of the details pane and select Sort By from the pop-up menu.
2. Select how you want to sort: Name, Date Modified, Type, or Size.
3. Select whether you want the contents sorted in Ascending or Descending order.

tip

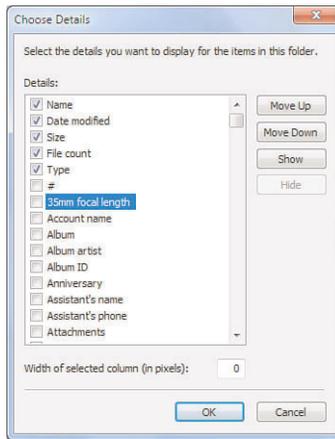
For more sort options, select More from the pop-up menu to display the Choose Details dialog box. Check those details you want to display, and then click OK. You can then sort by one of the new details by repeating the steps just listed; the new details should show up in the Sort By list.

Displaying More Details

Let's return for a moment to the Details view, which displays several columns of details about your files. By default, the details displayed are name, date modified, type, and size. But Windows lets you display a lot more different details, which can help you better manage your files.

To display more details in additional columns, right-click the column header row and select one of the details listed in the pop-up menu, or click More. This displays the Choose Details dialog box, shown in Figure 6.18. This dialog box gives you a huge array of details you can display about items in this folder, everything from 35mm focal length (for digital photos) to language to word count. Check those details you want to display, and then click OK.

This is a really great feature, one that most users don't delve into, that lets you drill down into specific details about your files. Want to display f-stop and exposure information about your digital photos? How about manufacturer and model information about product files? Bitrate and contributing artists for music files? Parental ratings? Vertical resolution? Closed captioning? These are all details you can display—and that help you figure out what's what on your hard disk.

**FIGURE 6.18**

Displaying additional file details.

Customizing the Navigation Pane

There's one last part of the Windows Explorer window to personalize, and that's the navigation pane. There are two things you can customize about this pane—which folders are displayed and which items are shown in the Favorites section.

Displaying More Folders

By default, the navigation pane displays five sections: Favorites, Libraries, Homegroup, Computer, and Network. There are other folders that could be displayed, however, including Desktop, your main user folder, and the Recycle Bin. To display these items, follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, select Organize, Folder and Search Options. (Alternately, open the Control Panel and select Folder Options.)
2. When the Folder Options dialog box appears, select the General tab, shown in Figure 6.19.
3. In the Navigation Pane section, check the Show All Folders option.
4. Click OK.

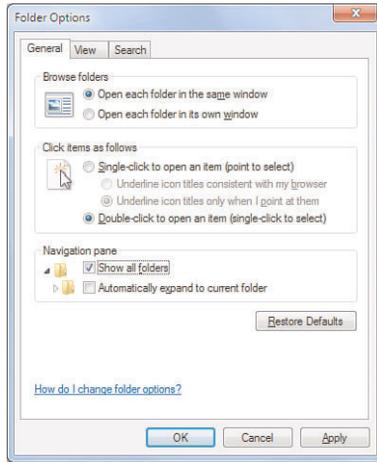


FIGURE 6.19
Adding more items to the navigation pane.

Adding Items to the Favorites Section

And what about the Favorites section of the navigation pane, where your supposed “favorite” folders are displayed? What if these really aren’t your favorites? What if you want to always show more folders here?

It’s actually quite easy to add items to the Favorites section. All you have to do is follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, navigate to and open the folder you want to display in the Favorites list.
2. Right-click the Favorites item in the navigation pane and select Add Current Location to Favorites.

tip

To delete an item from the Favorites list, right-click it and select Remove.

I like having a few particular folders present in the navigation pane whenever I open Windows Explorer. Adding those folders to the Favorites list makes this happen.

Adding Items to the New Menu

You may or may not be familiar with Windows Explorer’s New menu. You only see it when you right-click an empty space in the Explorer window;

the resulting pop-up menu has a New option. As you can see in Figure 6.20, select the New option and you have the option of creating new files of various types. It's a great way to quickly create new documents directly from Windows Explorer.

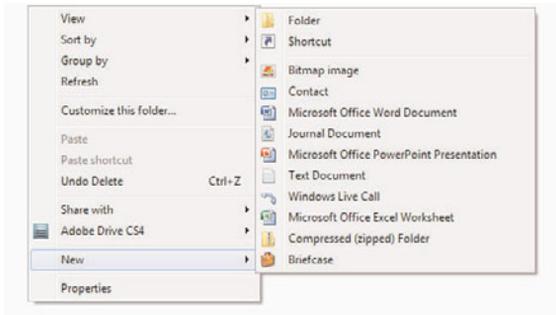


FIGURE 6.20

Windows Explorer's New menu.

Many applications add items to the New menu when the applications are installed. For example, Microsoft Office adds New items for its document types—Microsoft Office Word Document, Microsoft Office PowerPoint Presentation, Microsoft Office Excel Worksheet, and so forth.

You can add even more document types to the New menu, if you don't mind tweaking the Windows Registry a bit. This lets you easily create new documents of the types you work with most often.

note

Learn more about working with the Windows Registry in Chapter 27, "Tweaking the Windows Registry."

To add more options to the New menu, follow these steps:

1. Open the Start menu, enter **regedit** into the search box, and then press Enter.
2. When the Registry Editor window appears, open the **HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT** key, as shown in Figure 6.21.
3. Right-click the key for the file extension you want to add to the New menu and select **New, Key**. Name the new key **ShellNew**.
4. Right-click the new **ShellNew** subkey and select **New, String Value**. Name the new value **NullFile**.

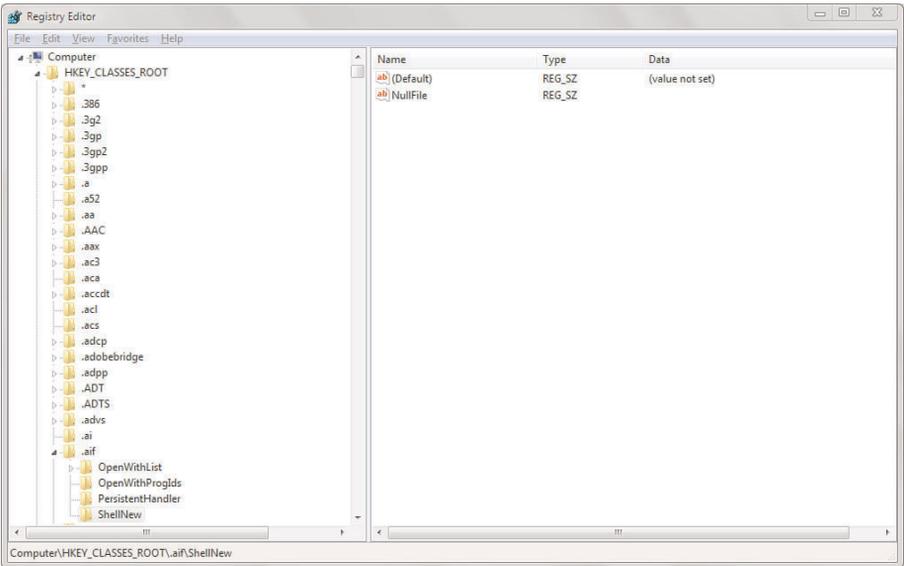


FIGURE 6.21

Using the Registry Editor to add a new file type to the New menu.

note

File types already present on the New menu already have a ShellNew subkey.

The next time you open Windows Explorer, when you right-click and select New you'll see the option for the file type you just added.

tip

You can also use the Registry Editor to remove file types from the New menu. Just navigate to the key for that file extension in the **HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT** key, and then right-click the **ShellNew** subkey and select Delete.

The Bottom Line

If you're like most Windows users, you use Windows Explorer a lot. How you use it, however, depends on how you have things configured. Fortunately, there's a lot of configuration possible—so you can use Windows Explorer to display files and folders your way.

Index

A

- AAC (Advanced Audio Coding), 138
- accelerators (IE8)
 - adding/removing, 262–263
 - explained, 261–262
- access, allowing through Windows Firewall, 356–357
- Accessibility options (IE8), 256
- accessing network computers, 233–234
- account names, changing, 197–198
- accounts, user. *See* user accounts
- Acronis True Image, 336
- Action Center configuration utility, 9, 353–355
- actions for MSE, selecting, 378–380
- activating. *See* enabling
- ActiveX security zones (IE8), 295–297
- add-ons (IE8), 260–261
 - removing, 279–281
- add-ons (Windows Media Center), 178
- adding
 - accelerators (IE8), 262–263
 - Favorites section items to Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 108
 - folders to Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 107–108
 - gadgets to desktop, 57
 - links
 - to Favorites bar (IE8), 242–243
 - to Favorites list (IE8), 246–247
 - New menu items to Windows Explorer, 108–110
 - subkeys to Registry, 460–461
 - taskbar icons, 73
 - toolbars to taskbar, 78
- adjusting. *See* changing
- Administrative Tools configuration utility, 9
 - disabling user accounts, 200
- administrator accounts, 192. *See also* User Account Control (UAC); user accounts
 - changing to standard accounts, 199
- administrator mode, running problem programs in, 401–402
- Adobe Photoshop CS4, 131
- Advanced Audio Coding (AAC), 138
- advanced options in MSE, configuring, 371–373
- Advanced options (Internet Options dialog box), 254–259
- advanced power plan settings, changing, 331–332
- advanced settings in Windows Firewall, 358–360
- adware, 350
- Aero interface, 48
- Aero Peek feature, 77–78
- AIF (Audio Interchange Format), 140

ALAC (Apple Lossless Audio Codec), 139

album art, changing, 133–135, 150–151

alert levels in MSE, 369

alerts. *See* notifications

All Programs menu (Start menu), sorting, 83

allowed items (MSE), removing, 381

allowing access through Windows Firewall, 356–357

alternate DNS servers. *See* third-party DNS servers

analyzing hard disk for fragmentation, 438–439

animation in web pages, disabling, 276

anonymous web browsing, 301

antispysware software, 388. *See also* Windows Defender

antivirus software, 387. *See also* MSE

Appearance and Personalization section (Control Panel), 6–7

Apple Lossless Audio Codec (ALAC), 139

applets, 5

applications. *See* programs

archiving files, 421

arranging. *See also* sorting

- folder contents, 103–105
- shortcuts on desktop, 55

associations (file types), changing, 29–32

attacks

- explained, 351
- Windows Firewall, 355
 - advanced settings*, 358–360
 - allowing access through*, 356–357
 - changing notification settings*, 357–358
 - disabling*, 357
 - restoring defaults*, 358

Audacity website, 65

audio. *See also* music; sound schemes

- muting, 311
- sharing
 - over Internet*, 186–188
 - on local networks*, 183–185
 - playing to other devices*, 188–189

Audio Interchange Format (AIF), 140

audio settings (Windows Media Center), 171

auto-loading programs, 424–425

- deleting
 - with Autoruns utility*, 430–431
 - from Startup folder*, 427
 - with System Configuration utility*, 429–430
 - utilities for*, 455
 - from Windows Registry*, 428–429
- identifying for deletion, 426–427
- types of, 425–426

AutoComplete (IE8), 253

automatic backups, configuring, 336–338

AutoPlay configuration utility, 9

- settings, configuring, 36–37

Autoruns utility, deleting auto-loading programs, 430–431

B

backgrounds

- desktop slideshows as, 39
- selecting, 43–47
- as slideshow, 47–48

Backup and Restore configuration utility, 9

- automatic backups, configuring, 337
- full system backups, 340
- restoring backed up files, 341
- system repair disk, creating, 344

backup devices, selecting, 336

backups

- of Registry, 459
 - before cleaning*, 465
- with Windows Backup, 335
 - automatic backup*, configuring, 336–338
 - files for backup*, selecting, 338–339
 - full system backups*, 340–341
 - restoring backed up files*, 341–342
 - scheduling*, 339–340
 - selecting backup device*, 336

batteries. *See also* lithium ion batteries

- Battery Status panel, 311
 - capacity, 325–326
 - extending life of, 332–334
 - indicator
 - lights/icons, 326–327
 - power plans
 - advanced plan settings*, 331–332
 - customizing*, 329–330
 - explained*, 327
 - selecting*, 328–329
 - switching, 334
 - Battery Vista gadget, 316
 - bit rates, 137, 141, 151
 - BitLocker Drive
 - Encryption configuration utility, 9
 - blocking websites, 289–291
 - blog files, avoiding opening, 304
 - bookmarks. *See* Favorites list
 - breadcrumbs bar, 95
 - brightness (monitor), adjusting, 62, 311
 - broadband connections, 270
 - broadcasting SSID, disabling, 386
 - browsers
 - changing default, 266–267
 - Google Chrome, 265
 - IE8. *See* IE8
 - Mozilla Firefox, 265
 - Opera, 266
 - optimization utilities, 455
 - Safari, 266
 - speeds, explained, 271
 - Browsing options (IE8), 256–257
 - bundleware, 416–417
 - removing, 417–418
 - buttons on Command bar (IE8), customizing, 239–241
 - buttons (taskbar). *See* icons (taskbar)
 - buying. *See* purchasing bytes, 424
- ## C
- cable connections, 270
 - cache
 - clearing, 272–274
 - DNS cache, increasing, 284–286
 - explained, 272
 - resizing, 274–275
 - calibration (monitor), 61–63
 - capacity
 - of batteries, 325–326
 - of hard drive, viewing, 441–443
 - Carbonite, 336
 - Category view (Control Panel), 8, 12
 - CDA (Compact Disc Digital Audio), 140
 - Center option (desktop backgrounds), 45
 - changing
 - advanced power plan settings, 331–332
 - album artwork, 133–135
 - color schemes, 48–49
 - computer name, 20–22
 - cursor schemes, 51–53
 - date and time, 17–18
 - default folders, 125
 - default programs, 25–28
 - default search engine (IE8), 250
 - default web browser, 266–267
 - description (of computer), 21
 - display format for Documents item (Start menu), 80
 - display language, 11
 - file type associations, 29–32
 - font/window size, 50–51
 - icon size in Start menu, 83
 - IP addresses, 221, 223–224
 - Jump Lists, number of items, 74
 - menu display speed, 461
 - names. *See* renaming network type, 217–218
 - notification area icons, 76–77
 - notification settings in Windows Firewall, 357–358
 - number of recent programs (Start menu) displayed, 85
 - Power button functionality, 86–87
 - shortcut images, 54–55
 - SSID/passwords, 385–386
 - taskbar icon display, 72–73
 - text size in IE8 (Internet Explorer 8), 248
 - themes, 39
 - creating new*, 43
 - finding hidden*, 42

- finding online*, 41–42
- selecting existing*, 40
- time zone, 18–19
- User Account Control (UAC) settings, 208–209
- user account passwords, 198–199
- user account pictures, 195–197
- user account types, 199
- views (Windows Explorer), 98–102
- check boxes for selection, enabling, 114–115
- choosing. *See* selecting
- Chrome, 265
- Classic view (Control Panel), 8
- cleaning Registry
 - backing up before cleaning, 465
 - cleaner usage information, 465–466
 - explained, 463–464
 - malware as Registry cleaners, 465
 - selecting Registry cleaners, 464–465
- clearing
 - cache, 272–274
 - recent files display (Start menu), 85–86
- ClearType, 63
 - disabling, 277
- clicking instant messaging links, avoiding, 303
- ClickLock, enabling, 320
- Clock, Language, and Region section (Control Panel), 6. *See also* date and time
- CMS Bounceback, 336
- color balance (monitor), adjusting, 62
- color calibration systems, websites for, 63
- Color Management configuration utility, 9
- color schemes
 - changing, 48–49
 - Windows Media Center, 172
- colors
 - selecting custom colors, 49
 - viewing encrypted files, 114
- Command bar (IE8), customizing, 239–241
- Compact Disc Digital Audio (CDA), 140
- compatibility mode
 - problem programs, running in, 403–404
 - configuring program settings*, 405–406
 - Windows XP Mode, checking via, 407
- Compatibility tab (Properties dialog), 405–406
- Compatibility View (IE8), 264–265
- compression
 - lossless compressed formats, 139–140
 - lossy compressed formats, 137–139
- computer attacks. *See* attacks
- Computer folder
 - drive letters, hiding, 114
 - empty drives, viewing, 113
- computer name, changing, 20–22
- computer viruses. *See* viruses
- configuration utilities (Control Panel)
 - custom utilities, 11
 - list of, 9–11
- configuring
 - automatic backups, 336–338
 - AutoPlay settings, 36–37
 - Control Panel, 8–9
 - Control Panel Start menu display, 12–13
 - cursor speed, 321–322
 - desktop computers for Remote Desktop Connection, 318–319
 - devices, 397
 - DNS server addresses, 223
 - double-click speed, 320–321
 - drive sharing, 232
 - file sharing, 228–229
 - files as hidden, 112
 - folder sharing, 231
 - gadgets, 58–59
 - HomeGroups, 215–216
 - IE8 (Internet Explorer 8), 251
 - Advanced options*, 254–259
 - Connections options*, 254
 - Content options*, 252–253
 - General options*, 251–252
 - Privacy options*, 252
 - Programs options*, 254
 - Security options*, 252
 - Instant Search, 115–117

- MSE, 366–368
- MSE advanced options, 371–373
- network connections, 211–212
- print sharing, 228–229
- printer settings, 396–397
- with Registry, 15
- with right-click menus, 13–14
- third-party DNS servers, 282–284
- touchpad properties, 322–324
- Windows Defender, 361–362
- Windows Media Center
 - audio, 171
 - color schemes, 172
 - display, 169–171
 - Media Center Settings, 168
 - music interface, 174–176
 - slideshow options, 172, 174
- workgroups, 212–214
- conflicts. *See* resource conflicts
- connections
 - network connections. *See also* network management; sharing
 - configuring, 211–212
 - HomeGroups, configuring, 215–216
 - IP addresses, changing, 221, 223–224
 - managing, 219–222
 - renaming, 221
 - workgroups, configuring, 212–214
 - printer connections, 391
 - with Remote Desktop Connection, 319–320
 - simultaneous Internet connections, enabling, 286–287
 - speed of, 269–271
 - video projectors to notebook PCs, 314
- Connections options (Internet Options dialog box), 254
- Content Advisor (IE8), 253, 289–291
- Content options (Internet Options dialog box), 252–253
- Content view (Windows Explorer), 99
- contrast (monitor), adjusting, 62
- Control Panel, 5–7
 - configuration utilities
 - custom utilities, 11
 - list of, 9–11
 - configuring, 8–9
 - sections, 6–7
 - Start menu display, configuring, 12–13
- converting MP3 files to WAV files, 65
- cookies
 - avoiding, 276
 - deleting, 275, 294–295
 - explained, 275, 291–292
 - privacy level settings, 292–294
- core applications. *See* default programs
- Credential Manager configuration utility, 9
- Crossfading and Auto Volume Leveling (Windows Media Player), 154
- cursor
 - pausing, opening submenus by, 83
 - pointer trails, enabling, 52
- cursor schemes, changing, 51–53
- cursor settings for touchpads, 323
- cursor speed, configuring, 321–322
- custom colors, selecting, 49
- custom configuration utilities, 11
- custom sounds for sound schemes, 64
- customizing
 - Command bar (IE8), 239–241
 - desktop. *See* desktop customization
 - Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 107
 - adding folders to, 107–108
 - adding items to Favorites section, 108
 - power plans, 329–330
 - Start menu, 83
 - with Group Policy Editor, 87–91
 - returning to default settings, 84
 - right-pane customization, 80–83
 - Windows Media Player display, 144

D

- Dashboard. *See* gadgets
- data files, 415
- data storage, hard disks, 413

- free space, 415
- performance issues, 414
- date and time
 - changing, 17–18
 - Date and Time dialog box, displaying, 16–17
 - displaying, 16
 - synchronizing with Internet time server, 20
 - time zone
 - changing, 18–19*
 - displaying multiple clocks, 18–19*
- Date and Time configuration utility, 9
 - date and time
 - changing, 17–18*
 - synchronizing with Internet time server, 20*
 - displaying, 16–17
 - time zone
 - changing, 18–19*
 - displaying multiple clocks, 18–19*
- Daylight Saving Time, 18
- debugging. *See* troubleshooting
- default actions in MSE, 368–370
- default folders, changing, 125
- default libraries, list of, 117
- default printer, setting, 396
- default programs
 - AutoPlay settings, configuring, 36–37
 - changing, 25–28
 - list of, 26
 - unbundling, 25–27, 32–33
- Default Programs
 - configuration utility, 9
 - AutoPlay settings, 36–37
 - default programs, changing, 27–28
 - default web browser, changing, 266
 - file type associations, 30–32
- default search engine (IE8), changing, 250
- default settings, returning to, 84
- default web browser, changing, 266–267
- defaults, restoring in Windows Firewall, 358
- defragmentation
 - analyzing disk before, 438–439
 - explained, 436–437
 - manually starting, 439
 - scheduling, 437–438
 - utilities, 454
- delete confirmations, disabling, 121–122
- deleted files, 416
- deleting. *See* removing
- description (of computer), changing, 21
- desktop, peeking, 77–78
- desktop computers, configuring for Remote Desktop Connection, 318–319
- desktop customization
 - backgrounds
 - selecting, 43–47*
 - as slideshow, 47–48*
 - color schemes, changing, 48–49
 - cursor schemes, changing, 51–53
- font/window size, adjusting, 50–51
- gadgets, 56
 - adding to desktop, 57*
 - configuring, 58–59*
 - finding online, 57–58*
 - third-party gadgets, 59*
- screen resolution, changing, 49–50
- screen savers
 - enabling, 60*
 - previewing, 61*
- shortcuts, 53
 - arranging on desktop, 55*
 - changing images for, 54–55*
 - creating, 53*
 - removing, 53*
 - renaming, 54*
- themes, 39
 - creating, 43*
 - finding hidden, 42*
 - finding online, 41–42*
 - selecting existing, 40*
- Desktop Gadgets configuration utility, 9
 - adding gadgets to desktop, 57
 - notebook PC gadgets, 316
- desktop icons. *See* shortcuts
- desktop PCs, installing memory, 449–450
- desktop slideshows, 39
 - creating, 47–48
- desktop themes. *See* themes
- Details view (Windows Explorer), 99–100
 - selecting details for, 106–107

- device drivers, 397
 - installing, 398
 - troubleshooting with Device Manager, 474–476
 - updating, 398–400
- Device Manager configuration utility, 9, 474–476
 - device drivers, updating, 398
 - resource conflicts
 - displaying*, 474–475
 - solving*, 475
- devices, configuring/installing, 397
- Devices and Printers configuration utility, 9
 - default printer, setting, 396
 - devices, configuring/installing, 397
 - explained, 394–395
 - network printers, installing, 394
 - opening, 394
 - printer settings, configuring, 396–397
 - printers, installing, 392
- diagnostic startup, 471
- dial-up connections, 269
- digital photos as desktop backgrounds, 44
- digital rights management (DRM), 143
- digital sampling, 137
- DIMM (Dual Inline Memory Module), 449
- disabling. *See also* hiding
 - ClearType, 277
 - Content Advisor, 291
- delete confirmations, 121–122
- double-clicking, 120–121
- drag/drop in Start menu, 83
- file icons on thumbnails, 113
- file size information in folder tips, 113
- low disk checking, 462
- pop-up tips, 114
- preview handlers, 114
- RSS feeds (IE8), 278–279
- SmartScreen Filter (IE8), 277, 299
- SSID broadcasting, 386
- SSVHelper Class plugin, 280
- Suggested Sites (IE8), 261
- touchpad tapping, 323
- user accounts, 200–201
- web page animation, 276
- web page graphics, 276–277
- Windows features, 433–434
 - what to disable*, 432–433
- Windows Firewall, 357
- wireless network connections, 311
- Disk Cleanup Utility, 418–419
- Disk Defragmenter utility
 - analyzing disks, 438–439
 - explained, 436–437
 - manually starting defragmentation, 439
 - scheduling defragmentation, 437–438
- disk fragmentation. *See also* defragmentation
 - analyzing disk for, 438–439
 - explained, 435–436
- disk scanning, ScanDisk utility
 - explained, 439–440
 - running, 440–441
- display calibration, 61–63
- Display configuration utility, 9
 - font/window size, adjusting, 50
 - monitor calibration, 61
- display language, changing, 11
- display resolution. *See* screen resolution
- displaying. *See also* viewing
 - date and time, 16
 - Date and Time dialog box, 16–17
 - explorer bars (IE8), 247
 - file extensions, 29, 111–112
 - full paths in title bar, 113
 - full-screen mode (IE8), 244
 - Jump Lists, 69–70
 - menu bar (IE8), 243
 - menu bar (Windows Explorer), 98
 - menus, changing speed of, 461
 - multiple clocks, 18–19
 - preview pane (Windows Explorer), 97–98
 - resource conflicts in Device Manager, 474–475

- toolbars (IE8), 241–242
 - Windows Explorer panes, 97
- DNS Advantage, 282
- DNS cache, increasing, 284–286
- DNS server addresses, configuring, 223
- DNS servers
 - configuring, 282–284
 - explained, 281–282
 - selecting, 282
- Documents item (Start menu), changing display format, 80
- Documents library, 117
- Dolby Digital Settings (Windows Media Player), 154
- Domain Name System. *See* DNS servers
- double-click speed, configuring, 320–321
- double-clicking, disabling, 120–121
- Download.com website, 52, 304
- downloading
 - MSE, 364
 - third-party programs, 28
 - website files, 307–308
 - Windows Live Essentials, 33–35
 - Windows XP Mode, 408
- drag/drop in Start menu, enabling, 83
- drive letters in
 - Computer folder, hiding, 114
- drivers. *See* device drivers

- drives
 - mapping, 235
 - sharing, 231–233
- DRM (digital rights management), 143
- DSL (digital subscriber line) connections, 270
- Dual Inline Memory Module (DIMM), 449
- DVDs, playing, 152–153
- DVI connections, 315
- DWORD, 462

E

- Ease of Access Center configuration utility, 9
- Ease of Access section (Control Panel), 6
- eBay toolbar, 241
- editing
 - pictures, 130–131
 - Registry, 15, 459
 - adding/deleting subkeys, 460–461*
 - for performance, 461–462*
 - starting Registry Editor, 459–460*
- email attachments, avoiding opening, 302–303
- emailing pictures, 129
- empty drives in
 - Computer folder, viewing, 113
- emptying Recycle Bin, 420
- enabling
 - ClickLock, 320
 - drag/drop in Start menu, 83
 - drive sharing, 232
 - encryption for file sharing, 219
 - file sharing, 218, 228–229
 - folder sharing, 231
 - HomeGroup connection management, 219
 - media streaming, 218
 - network discovery, 218
 - Parental Controls, 202–204
 - password protected sharing, 219
 - pointer trails, 52
 - pop-up windows (IE8), 299–300
 - printer sharing, 218, 228–229, 393
 - Public folder sharing, 218
 - screen savers, 60
 - selection check boxes, 114–115
 - simultaneous Internet connections, 286–287
 - single-clicking, 120–121
 - Suggested Sites (IE8), 261
 - touchpad tapping, 323
 - wireless network connections, 311
 - wireless network security, 384–385
- encrypted files, viewing in color, 114
- encryption for file sharing, enabling, 219
- enhancements, 153
- enhancing audio/video playback, 153–154
- enlarging font/window size, 50–51
- error scanning, ScanDisk utility
 - explained, 439–440
 - running, 440–441

excluding MSE from scans, 370–371

explorer bars (IE8), displaying, 247

Explorer. *See* IE8; Windows Explorer

Extenders (Media Center), 179–183

extending battery life, 332–334

extensions. *See* file extensions

external hard drives
as backup devices, 336
files to move to, 445
installing, 444–445
internal hard drives versus, 443

external monitors,
notebook PC connections, 312–313

external video, switching to, 315

F

F8 key (starting safe mode), 468

Favorites bar (IE8), adding links to, 242–243

Favorites list (IE8), adding links to, 246–247

Favorites section (Windows Explorer), adding items to, 108

file cleanup utilities, 454

file extensions
displaying, 29
file type associations, changing, 29–32

safe versus unsafe, 305–307
viewing, 111–112

file icons on thumbnails, disabling, 113

file sharing button (Explorer toolbar), hiding, 115

file size information in folder tips, disabling, 113

file swapping, 414

file type associations, changing, 29–32

file types, excluding from MSE scans, 370–371

files
archiving, 421
configuring as hidden, 112
data files, 415
deleted files, 416
libraries. *See* libraries
moving to external hard drives, 445
music file formats
bit rates, 141, 151
choosing, 141–142
digital sampling, 137
lossless compressed formats, 139–140
lossy compressed formats, 137–139
non-compressed formats, 140
setting in Windows Media Player, 151
program files, 415
Recycle Bin
emptying, 420
restoring from, 421
removing via Disk Cleanup Utility, 418–419

searching
configuring search, 115–117
in Windows Media Player, 148–150

sharing
enabling file sharing, 218, 228–229
encryption,
enabling, 219
explained, 227–228
files on other network computers, 233–234
precautions, 228

single-clicking versus double-clicking, 120–121

system files, 415
temporary files, 415

Fill option (desktop backgrounds), 44

finding
desktop themes
online, 41–42
files in Windows Media Player, 148–150
gadgets online, 57–58
hidden desktop themes, 42
Media Center applications, 178

FIOS (fiber optic service) connections, 270

Firefox, 265

firewalls, 351
third-party tools, 386–387
Windows Firewall, 355
advanced settings, 358–360
allowing access through, 356–357
changing notification settings, 357–358

- disabling*, 357
- restoring defaults*, 358
- first-party cookies, 294
- Fit option (desktop backgrounds), 44
- fixing. *See* troubleshooting
- FLAC (Free Lossless Codec), 140
- folder contents
 - arranging, 103–105
 - sorting, 105–106
- Folder Options configuration utility, 10
 - advanced settings, 113–115
 - displaying folders in Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 107
 - file extensions, viewing, 111
 - hidden files, viewing, 112
 - search options, configuring, 116
 - single-clicking, enabling, 121
- folder tips, disabling file size information in, 113
- folder windows, launching separately, 114
- folders
 - adding to Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 107–108
 - file extensions, displaying, 111–112
 - hidden files, viewing, 112–113
 - libraries. *See* libraries mapping, 235
 - media library folders
 - adding, 124–125
 - changing default folder, 125
 - table of, 123–124
 - Public folder, sharing, 230
 - enabling sharing, 218
 - sharing
 - creating shortcuts to shared folders, 235–236
 - other folders, 230–231
 - Public folder, 230
 - single-clicking versus double-clicking, 120–121
- fonts
 - adjusting size, 50–51
 - ClearType, 63
- Fonts configuration utility, 10
- fragmentation. *See* disk fragmentation
- Free Lossless Codec (FLAC), 140
- free space (hard disks), 415
- frozen programs, troubleshooting with Task Manager, 473–474
- fuel gauge, recalibrating lithium ion batteries to, 334
- full paths in title bar, displaying, 113
- Full scan (MSE), 375
- Full scan (Windows Defender), 363
- full system backups, 340–341
- full-screen mode (IE8), 244

G

- gadgets, 56
 - adding to desktop, 57
 - configuring, 58–59
 - finding online, 57–58
 - for notebook PCs, 316–317
 - third-party gadgets, 59
- games, disabling, 432
- gamma settings, 62
- GB (gigabytes), 424
- General options (Internet Options dialog box), 251–252
- Getting Started configuration utility, 10
- gigabytes, 424
- Google Chrome, 265
- Google Desktop, 59
- Google toolbar, 241
- Google Update, 425
- Graphic Equalizer (Windows Media Player), 154
- graphics in web pages, disabling, 276–277
- Group Policy Editor, Start menu customization, 87–91
- Guest accounts, 192

H

- hard drives, 441
 - archiving files, 421
 - bundleware, 416–417
 - removing, 417–418
 - data files, 415
 - deleted files, 416
 - external hard drives
 - files to move to, 445
 - installing, 444–445

- fragmentation. *See* disk fragmentation
 - low disk checking, disabling, 462
 - program files, 415
 - Recycle Bin
 - emptying*, 420
 - restoring files from*, 421
 - selecting for purchase, 443–444
 - sharing, 231–233
 - storage capacity, 413
 - free space*, 415
 - performance issues*, 414
 - system files, 415
 - temporary files, 415
 - unwanted files, removing, 418–419
 - unwanted programs, uninstalling, 421–422
 - viewing capacity of, 441–443
- Hardware and Sound section (Control Panel), 6
- hardware virtualization, enabling, 407
- HDMI connections, 315
- heat, lithium ion batteries and, 333
- hidden desktop themes, finding, 42
- hidden files
 - configuring files as, 112
 - viewing, 112–113
- hidden notification area icons, viewing, 76
- hiding. *See also* disabling; viewing drive letters in Computer folder, 114
- file sharing button (Explorer toolbar), 115
- taskbar, 72
- Windows Explorer panes, 97
- highlighting newly installed programs in Start menu, 83
- hives in Registry, 458–459
- home page tab sets (IE8), setting, 245–246
- home servers as backup devices, 336
- HomeGroup configuration utility, 10
- HomeGroup connections configuring HomeGroups, 215–216
- enabling manual management, 219
- HTTP 1.1 options (IE8), 257

I

icons

- for battery power, 326–327
- notification area
 - changing*, 76–77
 - viewing hidden*, 76
- shortcuts. *See* shortcuts
- size, changing in Start menu, 83
- taskbar
 - adding/removing*, 73
 - changing display*, 72–73
 - reordering*, 74
 - types of*, 68–69
- on thumbnails, disabling, 113
- viewing instead of thumbnails, 113

- Icons view (Windows Explorer), 99, 101–102. *See also* Large Icons view (Control Panel); Small Icons view (Control Panel)
- identifying auto-loading programs, 426–427
- identity theft
 - avoiding with SmartScreen Filter, 297–299
 - explained, 351–353
- IDrive, 336
- IE8 (Internet Explorer 8), 239
 - accelerators
 - adding/removing*, 262–263
 - explained*, 261–262
 - add-ons, 260–261
 - removing*, 279–281
 - animation, disabling, 276
 - browser optimization utilities, 455
 - cache
 - clearing*, 272–274
 - explained*, 272
 - resizing*, 274–275
 - ClearType, disabling, 277
 - Command bar, customizing, 239–241
 - Compatibility View, 264–265
 - Content Advisor, 289–291
 - cookies
 - avoiding*, 276
 - deleting*, 275, 294–295
 - explained*, 275, 291–292
 - privacy level settings*, 292–294
 - default search engine, changing, 250

- as default web browser, changing, 266–267
 - disabling, 432
 - explorer bars, displaying, 247
 - Favorites bar, adding links to, 242–243
 - Favorites list, adding links to, 246–247
 - full-screen mode, 244
 - graphics, disabling, 276–277
 - InPrivate Browsing, 301
 - Instant Search, 249–250
 - configuring, 115–117
 - Internet Options dialog box, 251
 - Advanced options*, 254–259
 - Connections options*, 254
 - Content options*, 252–253
 - General options*, 251–252
 - Privacy options*, 252
 - Programs options*, 254
 - Security options*, 252
 - menu bar, displaying, 243
 - pop-up blocker, 299–300
 - Quick Tabs, 244
 - RSS feeds, disabling, 278–279
 - security zones, 295–297
 - SmartScreen Filter, 297–299
 - disabling, 277
 - Suggested Sites, enabling/disabling, 261
 - tabbed browsing, 244–245
 - setting home page
 - tab sets, 245–246
 - toolbars
 - displaying multiple, 241–242
 - moving, 243–244
 - removing, 279
 - Web Slices, 263–264
 - zooming in/out, 248
- IIS (Internet Information Services), disabling, 432
- images. *See also* pictures
- Pictures library, 126
 - editing pictures, 130–131
 - emailing pictures, 129
 - picture properties, 126–128
 - previewing pictures, 126
 - printing pictures, 129
 - slide shows, 129
 - for shortcuts, changing, 54–55
- Incognito mode (Google Chrome), 302
- increasing DNS cache size, 284–286
- incremental backups, 338
- Indexing Options configuration utility, 10
- Indexing Service, disabling, 432
- indicator lights for battery power, 326–327
- InPrivate Browsing, 301
- installing
 - device drivers, 398
 - devices, 397
 - external hard drives, 444–445
 - memory
 - on desktop PCs, 449–450
 - on notebook PCs, 451–452
- MSE, 364
- network printers, 236–237, 394
- printers from Windows, 392
- programs
 - uninstalling
 - unwanted programs, 421–422
 - Windows XP Mode, 410
 - Windows XP Mode, 408
- instant messaging files, avoiding opening, 303
- instant messaging links, avoiding clicking, 303
- Instant Search (IE8), 249–250
 - configuring, 115–117
- internal hard drives, external hard drives versus, 443
- International options (IE8), 257–258
- Internet, sharing media over, 186–188
- Internet Explorer 8. *See* IE8
- Internet Information Services (IIS), disabling, 432
- Internet Information Services Hostable Web Core, disabling, 432
- Internet optimization
 - add-ons, removing, 279–281
 - animation, disabling, 276
 - browser speeds, explained, 271

cache
clearing, 272–274
explained, 272
resizing, 274–275
 ClearType, disabling, 277
 connection speeds, explained, 269–271
 cookies
avoiding, 276
deleting, 275
explained, 275
 DNS cache, increasing, 284–286
 DNS servers
configuring, 282–284
explained, 281–282
selecting, 282
 graphics, disabling, 276–277
 RSS feeds, disabling, 278–279
 simultaneous connections, enabling, 286–287
 SmartScreen Filter, disabling, 277
 Internet Options configuration utility, 10
 Content Advisor, 290
 privacy level settings, 292
 security zones, 296
 Internet Options dialog box (IE8), 251
 Advanced options, 254–259
 Connections options, 254
 Content options, 252–253
 General options, 251–252
 Privacy options, 252
 Programs options, 254
 Security options, 252

Internet time server, synchronizing date and time with, 20
 IP addresses, 281
 changing, 221, 223–224

J

Java virtual machine (JVM), 27
 JavaScript, 271
 jump lists, 14. *See also* right-click menus
 changing number of items, 74
 displaying, 69–70
 JVM (Java virtual machine), 27

K

KB (kilobytes), 424
 kernel. *See* Windows kernel
 Keyboard configuration utility, 10
 keys (Registry), 15
 kilobytes (KB), 424
 Konfabulator, 59

L

language, changing display language, 11
 laptops. *See* notebook PCs
 Large Icons view (Control Panel), 8, 12
 launching folder windows separately, 114. *See also* starting
 libraries
 creating, 118–120

default libraries, list of, 117
 explained, 117–118
 media libraries
folders, 123–125
Music library, 133–136
Pictures library, 125–131
Videos library, 131–133

Link-Layer Topology Discovery (LLTD), 217

links

adding to Favorites bar (IE8), 242–243
 adding to Favorites list (IE8), 246–247
 instant messaging links, avoiding clicking, 303

List view (Windows Explorer), 99, 101
 typing in search box, 115

lithium ion (Li-ion) batteries, 326
 heat and, 333
 recalibrating to fuel gauge, 334

living room systems

benefits of, 157–158
 explained, 157–159
 finding other Media Center applications, 178
 Media Center configuration
audio, 171
color schemes, 172
display, 169–171
Media Center settings, 168
music interface, 174–176
slideshow options, 172, 174

menus and operations, 161–163
 remote control operation, 159–160
 starting Media Center, 166–167, 177–178
 video connections, 164, 166

LLTD (Link-Layer Topology Discovery), 217

Location and Other Sensors configuration utility, 10

locations, excluding from MSE scans, 370–371

lossless compressed formats, 138–140

lossy compressed formats, 137–139

low disk checking, disabling, 462

M

Magnifier tool, 50

maintenance. *See also* performance
 archiving files, 421
 Recycle Bin
 emptying, 420
 restoring files from, 421
 unwanted files, removing via Disk Cleanup Utility, 418–419

malware, 302. *See also* security; spyware
 avoiding, 302–308
 blog/newsgroup/message board files, avoiding, 304
 email attachments, leaving unopened, 302–303

file extensions, safe versus unsafe, 305–307

instant messaging files, leaving unopened, 303

instant messaging links, avoiding clicking, 303

removable media files, avoiding sharing, 304–305

website files, downloading, 307–308

MSE, 363–364

alerts from, 377–378

automatic scanning, configuring, 366–368

configuring advanced options, 371–373

default actions, 368–370

downloading and installing, 364

excluding from scans, 370–371

explained, 364–366

manual scanning, 376

removing allowed items, 381

restoring/removing quarantined items, 381

scanning from Windows Explorer, 376–377

selecting actions, 378–380

SpyNet participation, 373–374

types of scans, 375–376

updating malware definitions, 374–375

viewing scanning history, 380

as Registry cleaners, 465

spyware, explained, 349–350

third-party antispware software, 388

third-party antivirus software, 387

viruses, explained, 347–349

Windows Defender, 360–361

automatically scanning for spyware, 361–362

handling spyware notifications, 363

manually scanning for spyware, 360

scan types, 362–363

managing

 networks, 216–217

advanced settings, 218–219

changing network type, 217–218

connection management, 219–222

 DNS server addresses, configuring, 223

 IP addresses, changing, 221, 223–224

 viewing network map, 216

 wireless networks, 224–225

 picture properties, 126–128

manually starting defragmentation, 439

mapping

 drives, 235

 folders, 235

MB (megabytes), 424

media, explained, 123

- Media Center. *See* Windows Media Center
- media features, disabling, 432
- media libraries
 - folders
 - adding, 124–125
 - changing default folder, 125
 - table of, 123–124
 - Music library, 133
 - changing album artwork, 133–135
 - music properties, 135–136
 - Pictures library, 125–126
 - editing pictures, 130–131
 - emailing pictures, 129
 - picture properties, 126–128
 - previewing pictures, 126
 - printing pictures, 129
 - slide shows, 129
 - Videos library, 131
 - playing videos, 132
 - video properties, 132–133
- media streaming, enabling, 218
- megabytes (MB), 424
- memory
 - installing
 - on desktop PCs, 449–450
 - on notebook PCs, 451–452
 - moving Windows kernel to, 462
 - overloading, 423–424
 - purchasing, 452
 - ReadyBoost
 - explained, 445–446
 - running, 446–448
 - virtual memory, 414
 - memory effect (notebook batteries), 326
 - menu bar
 - IE8, displaying, 243
 - viewing, 113
 - Windows Explorer, displaying, 98
 - menus
 - displaying, changing speed of, 461
 - Windows Media Center menus, 161–163
 - message board files, avoiding opening, 304
 - Microsoft .NET Framework, disabling, 432
 - Microsoft Message Queue (MSMQ) Server, disabling, 432
 - Microsoft Security Essentials. *See* MSE
 - MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), 140
 - minimizing all windows, 77–78
 - mirroring hard drive (full system backup), 340–341
 - Mobility Center. *See* Windows Mobility Center
 - modems, 269
 - monitor calibration, 61–63
 - monitors, external, notebook PC connections, 312–313
 - Mouse configuration utility, 10
 - cursor schemes, changing, 51
 - cursor speed, configuring, 321–322
 - double-click speed, configuring, 320–321
 - touchpad properties, configuring, 322–324
 - moving
 - files to external hard drives, 445
 - taskbar, 71–72
 - toolbars (IE8), 243–244
 - Windows kernel into memory, 462
 - Mozilla Firefox, 265
 - Mozy, 336
 - MP3, 138
 - converting to WAV format, 65
 - MSCONFIG. *See* System configuration utility
 - MSE (Microsoft Security Essentials), 363–364
 - alerts from, 377–378
 - automatic scanning, configuring, 366–368
 - configuring advanced options, 371–373
 - default actions, 368–370
 - downloading and installing, 364
 - excluding from scans, 370–371
 - explained, 364–366
 - manual scanning, 376
 - removing allowed items, 381
 - restoring/removing quarantined items, 381

scanning from
Windows Explorer, 376–377

selecting actions, 378–380

SpyNet participation, 373–374

types of scans, 375–376

updating malware definitions, 374–375

viewing scanning history, 380

MSMQ (Microsoft Message Queue) Server, disabling, 432

Multimedia options (IE8), 258

multiple clocks, displaying, 18–19

multiple toolbars (IE8), displaying, 241–242

music
album art, changing, 133–135, 150–151

DRM (digital rights management), 143

enhancing audio/video playback, 153–154

file formats
bit rates, 141, 151
choosing, 141–142
digital sampling, 137
lossless compressed formats, 139–140
lossy compressed formats, 137–139
non-compressed formats, 140
setting in Windows Media Player, 151

properties, 135–136

sharing
over Internet, 186–188

on local networks, 183–185
playing to other devices, 188–189

Windows Media Center music interface, 174–176

Music library, 117, 133
changing album artwork, 133–135
music properties, 135–136

Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI), 140

muting audio, 311

N

names, changing computer name, 20–22

navigation in Windows Explorer, 94–96

Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 107
adding folders to, 107–108
adding items to Favorites section, 108

Network and Internet section (Control Panel), 6

Network and Sharing Center configuration utility, 10
advanced settings, 218–219
connection management, 219–222
file and printer sharing, enabling, 228
HomeGroups, creating, 215
IP addresses, changing, 223

network map, viewing, 216

network type, changing, 217–218

opening, 216

printers, sharing, 393

third-party DNS servers, configuring, 282

wireless network management, 224

wireless network security, enabling, 384

network connections.
See also network management; sharing

configuring, 211–212
HomeGroups, configuring, 215–216
IP addresses, changing, 221, 223–224
managing, 219–222
renaming, 221
workgroups, configuring, 212–214

network discovery, enabling, 218

network keys, 383

network management, 216–217
advanced settings, 218–219
connection management, 219–222
DNS server addresses, configuring, 223
IP addresses, changing, 221, 223–224
network map, viewing, 216
network type, changing, 217–218
wireless networks, 224–225

network map, viewing, 216

network printers, 393
 enabling sharing, 393
 installing, 236–237, 394

network type, changing, 217–218

networks. *See also*
 wireless networks
 accessing computers on, 233–234
 sharing media on, 183–185

new features
 in taskbar, 67–68
 in User Account Control (UAC), 207

New menu (Windows Explorer)
 adding items to, 108–110
 removing items from, 110

newsgroup files, avoiding opening, 304

nickel cadmium (NiCad) batteries, 326

non-compressed formats, 140

non-Microsoft. *See* third-party

Notebook Monitor gadget, 316

notebook PCs
 batteries. *See* batteries
 external video, switching to, 315
 gadgets for, 316–317
 installing memory, 451–452

Remote Desktop Connection
connecting from notebook PC,
 319–320

desktop computer,
configuring,
 318–319
explained, 317–318
 touchpads, 320
cursor speed, configuring,
 321–322
double-click speed, configuring,
 320–321
properties, configuring,
 322–324

video projectors for connections
between, 314
resolution, setting,
 315–316
selecting, 314
speakers, 316

Windows Mobility Center, 309–310
battery status, checking, 311
brightness, adjusting, 311
external monitor connections,
 312–313
presentation settings, 312
sync settings, 312
volume, adjusting,
 311
wireless network management,
 311

notification area, 75–76
 changing icons in, 76–77
 viewing hidden icons, 76

Notification Area Icons configuration utility, 10, 76

notification settings, changing in Windows Firewall, 357–358

notifications
 from MSE, 377–378

in Windows Defender, handling, 363

Now Playing mode (Windows Media Player), 144–145

O

office computers. *See* desktop computers

OGG Vorbis, 139

OneCare, 364

online backup services, 336

online security
 Content Advisor, 289–291

cookies
deleting, 294–295
explained,
 291–292
privacy level settings,
 292–294

InPrivate Browsing, 301

pop-up blocker, 299–300

security zones, 295–297

SmartScreen Filter, 297–299

tips for, 302–308
blog/newsgroup/message board files, avoiding, 304
email attachments, leaving unopened,
 302–303
file extensions, safe versus unsafe,
 305–307
instant messaging files, leaving unopened,
 303
instant messaging links, avoiding clicking, 303

- removable media files, avoiding sharing, 304–305*
 - website files, downloading, 307–308*
 - open windows, minimizing all, 77–78
 - OpenDNS, 282
 - opening
 - blog/newsgroup/message board files, avoiding, 304
 - Devices and Printers configuration utility, 394
 - email attachments, avoiding, 302–303
 - instant messaging files, avoiding, 303
 - MSE, 365
 - Network and Sharing Center configuration utility, 216
 - submenus by pausing mouse pointer, 83
 - Opera, 266
 - optimization. *See* Internet optimization; performance
 - organizing files. *See* libraries
 - overloading memory, 423–424
- P**
-
- pages. *See* links
 - Paint utility, 130
 - PalmCheck, 324
 - panes (Windows Explorer), hiding/displaying, 97
 - Pantone Huey website, 63
 - parallel connections for printers, 392
 - Parental Controls (IE8), 252
 - enabling, 202–204
 - Parental Controls configuration utility, 10, 202
 - password protected sharing, enabling, 219
 - passwords
 - for user accounts
 - changing, 198–199*
 - creating, 194–195*
 - removing, 198*
 - for wireless networks, changing, 385–386
 - pausing mouse pointer, opening submenus via, 83
 - PC Decrapifier, 418
 - PC Pitstop website, 454
 - PC tune up utilities, 453–454
 - PCs, virtual, 406, 408
 - Peek button (taskbar), 77–78
 - performance. *See also* Internet optimization
 - browser optimization utilities, 455
 - defragmentation
 - analyzing disk before, 438–439*
 - explained, 436–437*
 - manually starting, 439*
 - scheduling, 437–438*
 - utilities, 454*
 - deleting auto-loading programs, 455
 - editing Registry for, 461–462
 - file cleanup utilities, 454
 - gadgets, effect on, 57
 - hard drives, 414, 441
 - files to move to external drives, 445*
 - installing external hard drives, 444–445*
 - selecting for purchase, 443–444*
 - viewing capacity of, 441–443*
 - memory
 - installing on desktop PCs, 449–450*
 - installing on notebook PCs, 451–452*
 - purchasing, 452*
 - PC tune up utilities, 453–454
 - ReadyBoost
 - explained, 445–446*
 - running, 446–448*
 - Registry, effect of, 463
 - ScanDisk utility
 - explained, 439–440*
 - running, 440–441*
 - thumbnail views (Windows Explorer), 103
 - Performance
 - Information and Tools configuration utility, 10
 - peripherals. *See* device drivers; devices
 - Personalization configuration utility, 10–11
 - backgrounds, selecting, 43
 - color schemes, changing, 48
 - desktop slideshows, 47
 - enabling screen savers, 60
 - themes
 - creating new, 43*
 - finding online, 41*
 - selecting, 40*

- Personalize Your PC website, 42
- pharming, 352
- Phishing Filter. *See* SmartScreen Filter
- phishing scams
 - avoiding with SmartScreen Filter, 297–299
 - explained, 351–353
- Phone and Modem configuration utility, 10
- photos as desktop backgrounds, 44. *See also* images; pictures
- Photoshop CS4, 131
- phreaking, 352
- pictures. *See also* images
 - editing, 130–131
 - emailing, 129
 - managing picture properties, 126–128
 - previewing, 126
 - printing, 129
 - sharing
 - on local networks, 183–185
 - over Internet, 186–188
 - slide shows, 129
 - for user accounts, changing, 195–197
 - Windows Live Photo Gallery, 130
- Pictures library, 117, 125–126
 - editing pictures, 130–131
 - emailing pictures, 129
 - picture properties, 126–128
 - previewing pictures, 126
 - printing pictures, 129
 - slide shows, 129
- pinning
 - Start menu items, 84–85
 - taskbar icons, 73
- Play Speed Settings (Windows Media Player), 154
- Play To feature, 188–189
- playing
 - media to other devices, 188–189
 - videos, 132, 152–153
- plug-ins. *See also* add-ons (IE8)
 - for Windows Media Center, 178
 - for Windows Media Player, 154
- pointer. *See* cursor
- pointer schemes. *See* cursor schemes
- pointer trails, enabling, 52
- policies, 87
- pop-up blocker (IE8), 299–300
- pop-up menus. *See* right-click menus
- pop-up tips, disabling, 114
- pop-up windows (IE8), enabling, 299–300
- Power button, changing function of, 86–87
- Power Options configuration utility, 10. *See also* power plans
- power plans
 - advanced plan settings, 331–332
 - customizing, 329–330
 - explained, 327
 - selecting, 328–329
- presentation settings for notebook PCs, 312
- presentations
 - external video, switching to, 315
 - video projectors
 - connection to notebook PCs, 314
 - resolution, setting, 315–316
 - selecting, 314
 - speakers, 316
- preview handlers, disabling, 114
- preview pane (Windows Explorer), displaying, 97–98
- previewing
 - pictures, 126
 - screen savers, 61
 - sound schemes, 64
- print and document services, disabling, 432
- printers. *See also* Devices and Printers configuration utility
 - configuring settings, 396–397
 - connecting, 391
 - default printer, setting, 396
 - enabling sharing, 218, 393
 - installing from Windows, 392
 - network printers, installing, 236–237, 394
 - sharing, 228–229
- printing pictures, 129
- Printing options (IE8), 258
- privacy level settings (IE8), 292–294
- Privacy options (Internet Options dialog box), 252
- Private Browsing (Firefox), 302

problem programs, running. *See also* troubleshooting

- administrator mode, 401
 - always running with administrator privileges*, 402
 - one time operation*, 402
- compatibility mode, 403
 - configuring*, 404
 - configuring program settings*, 405–406
- Windows XP Mode, 406, 408, 410
 - checking compatibility*, 407
 - downloading/installing*, 408
 - hardware virtualization*, 407
 - installing applications*, 410
 - seamless mode operation*, 410

processes, excluding from MSE scans, 370–371

program files, 415

programs

- auto-loading programs, 424–425
 - deleting from Startup folder*, 427
 - deleting from Windows Registry*, 428–429
 - deleting with Autoruns utility*, 430–431
 - deleting with System Configuration utility*, 429–430

- identifying for deletion*, 426–427
- types of*, 425–426

file type associations, changing, 29–32

frozen programs, troubleshooting with Task Manager, 473–474

problem programs, running

- administrator mode*, 401–402
- compatibility mode*, 403–406
- Windows XP Mode*, 406–408, 410

running programs, overloading memory, 423–424

unwanted programs, uninstalling, 421–422

Windows Live Essentials, downloading, 33–35

Programs and Features configuration utility, 10

- Windows features, disabling, 433

Programs options (Internet Options dialog box), 254

Programs section (Control Panel), 6

projectors. *See* video projectors

properties

- music, 135–136
- pictures, 126–128
- touchpads, configuring, 322–324
- videos, 132–133

Properties dialog box, opening from right-click menu, 14

protection. *See* security

Public folder, sharing, 230

- enabling, 218

purchasing

- hard drives, 443–444
- memory, 452

Q

quarantined items (MSE), restoring/removing, 381

Quick Launch toolbar, 67

Quick scan (MSE), 375

Quick scan (Windows Defender), 362

Quick Tabs (IE8), 244

Quiet Mode (Windows Media Player), 154

R

RAM (random access memory)

- installing
 - on desktop PCs*, 449–450
 - on notebook PCs*, 451–452
- moving Windows Kernel to, 462
- overloading, 423–424
- purchasing, 452
- ReadyBoost
 - explained*, 445–446
 - running*, 446–448

RAS Connection Manager Application, disabling, 432

ReadyBoost

- explained*, 445–446
- running*, 446–448

RealAudio Media, 139

- recalibrating lithium ion batteries to fuel gauge, 334
- recent files (Start menu), clearing display, 85–86
- recent programs (Start menu), changing number displayed, 85
- Recovery configuration utility, 10
- Recycle Bin
 - emptying, 420
 - restoring files from, 421
- Regedit. *See* Registry Editor
- Region and Language configuration utility, 10–11
- Registry, 15
 - backing up, 459, 465
 - deleting auto-loading programs, 428–429
 - editing, 15, 459
 - adding/deleting subkeys, 460–461
 - for performance, 461–462
 - starting Registry Editor, 459–460
 - explained, 457–458
 - organization of, 458–459
 - performance, effect on, 463
- Registry cleaners
 - explained, 463–464
 - malware as, 465
 - selecting, 464–465
 - usage information, 465–466
- Registry Editor, 15
 - adding/deleting subkeys, 460–461
- DNS cache, increasing, 284–286
- performance tweaks, 461–462
- simultaneous Internet connections, enabling, 286
- starting, 428, 459–460
- remote control operation (Windows Media Center), 159–160
- Remote Desktop Connection
 - connecting from notebook PC, 319–320
 - desktop computer, configuring, 318–319
 - explained, 317–318
- Remote Differential Compression, disabling, 432
- RemoteApp and Desktop Connections configuration utility, 10. *See also* Remote Desktop Connection
- removable media files, avoiding sharing, 304–305
- removing
 - accelerators (IE8), 262–263
 - add-ons (IE8), 260, 279–281
 - allowed items (MSE), 381
 - auto-loading programs
 - with *Autoruns* utility, 430–431
 - identifying for deletion, 426–427
 - from *Startup* folder, 427
 - with *System Configuration* utility, 429–430
 - utilities for, 455
 - from Windows Registry, 428–429
- bundleware, 417–418
- cookies, 275, 294–295
- Favorites section items from Navigation pane (Windows Explorer), 108
- New menu items from Windows Explorer, 110
- passwords from user accounts, 198
- quarantined items (MSE), 381
- scanning history (MSE), 381
- shortcuts, 53
- subkeys from Registry, 460–461
- taskbar icons, 73
- toolbars (IE8), 279
- unwanted files via Disk Cleanup Utility, 418–419
- unwanted programs, 421–422
- user accounts, 200
- renaming
 - computer name, 20–22
 - network connections, 221
 - shortcuts, 54
 - workgroups, 212–214
- reordering
 - pinned Start menu items, 85
 - taskbar icons, 74
- repairing Windows, creating system repair disk, 343–345. *See also* troubleshooting
- resetting. *See* changing
- resizing
 - cache, 274–275
 - taskbar, 74–75

resolution

- of screen, changing, 49–50
- for video projectors, setting, 315–316
- Windows Media Center display, 170

resource conflicts

- displaying, 474–475
- solving, 475

restore points, 342

restoring

- backed up files with Windows Backup, 341–342
- defaults in Windows Firewall, 358
- files from Recycle Bin, 421
- quarantined items (MSE), 381
- system files, 342–343

returning to default settings, 84

right-click menus, 13–14. *See also* Jump Lists

right-pane customization (Start menu), 80–83

RIP Listener, disabling, 432

ripped files, changing location in Windows Media Player, 152

RSS feeds (IE8), disabling, 278–279

rules, creating in Windows Firewall, 359

running

- ReadyBoost, 446–448
- ScanDisk utility, 440–441

running programs, overloading memory, 423–424

S

Safari, 266

safe file extensions, 305–307

safe mode, starting in, 468–470

sampling, 137

sampling rate, 137

satellite connections, 270

ScanDisk utility

- explained, 439–440
- running, 440–441

scanning

- for malware
 - automatically*, 366–368
 - manually*, 376
 - types of scans*, 375–376
 - from Windows Explorer*, 376–377
- for spyware
 - automatically*, 361–362
 - manually*, 360
 - scan types*, 362–363

scanning history (MSE), viewing, 380

scheduling

- backups, 339–340
- defragmentation, 437–438
- malware scanning with MSE, 366–368
- spyware scanning with Windows Defender, 361–362

screen calibration, 61–63

screen resolution

- changing, 49–50
- Windows Media Center display, 170

screen savers

- enabling, 60
- previewing, 61

scrolling with touchpad, 323

SDRAM (Synchronous Dynamic RAM), 449

seamless mode, running Windows XP applications in, 410

search box, typing in, 115

Search options (IE8), 258

searching

- files
 - configuring search*, 115–117
 - in Windows Media Player*, 148–150
- Instant Search (IE8), 249–250
- in Windows Explorer, 95

security. *See also* malware; online security

- Action Center, explained, 353–355
- attacks, explained, 351
- identity theft, explained, 351–353
- MSE, 363–364
 - alerts from*, 377–378
 - automatic scanning*, *configuring*, 366–368
 - configuring advanced options*, 371–373
 - default actions*, 368–370
 - downloading and installing*, 364
 - excluding from scans*, 370–371
 - explained*, 364–366
 - manual scanning*, 376
 - removing allowed items*, 381

- restoring/removing quarantined items, 381
- scanning from Windows Explorer, 376–377
- selecting actions, 378–380
- SpyNet participation, 373–374
- types of scans, 375–376
- updating malware definitions, 374–375
- viewing scanning history, 380
- phishing scams, explained, 351–353
- spyware, toolbars as, 242
- third-party tools
 - antispyware software, 388
 - antivirus software, 387
 - firewall software, 386–387
- User Account Control (UAC). *See* User Account Control (UAC)
- Windows Defender, 360–361
 - automatically scanning for spyware, 361–362
 - handling spyware notifications, 363
 - manually scanning for spyware, 360
 - scan types, 362–363
- Windows Firewall, 355
 - advanced settings, 358–360
 - allowing access through, 356–357
 - changing notification settings, 357–358
 - disabling, 357
 - restoring defaults, 358
- for wireless networks, 382–386
 - changing SSID/password, 385–386
 - disabling SSID broadcasting, 386
 - enabling, 384–385
 - tips for, 382–383
 - types of, 383–384
- Security options (IE8), 252, 258–259
- security zones (IE8), 295–297
- selecting
 - backup devices, 336
 - bit rate, 141
 - custom colors, 49
 - desktop backgrounds, 43–47
 - details for Details view (Windows Explorer), 106–107
 - files for backup, 338–339
 - hard drives for purchase, 443–444
 - MSE actions, 378–380
 - music file formats, 141–142
 - power plans, 328–329
 - Registry cleaners, 464–465
 - sound schemes, 64–65
 - themes, 40
 - third-party DNS servers, 282
 - video projectors for notebook PCs, 314
- selection check boxes, enabling, 114–115
- sensitivity of touchpads, adjusting, 324
- Service Set Identifier. *See* SSID
- Services for NFS, disabling, 432
- sharing
 - drives, 231–233
 - files
 - enabling file sharing, 218, 228–229
 - encryption, enabling, 219
 - explained, 227–228
 - file sharing button (Explorer toolbar), hiding, 115
 - files on other network computers, 233–234
 - password protected sharing, enabling, 219
 - precautions, 228
 - folders
 - creating shortcuts to shared folders, 235–236
 - other folders, 230–231
 - Public folder, 230
 - media
 - over Internet, 186–188
 - on local network, 183–185
 - playing to other devices, 188–189
 - printers, 228–229
 - enabling sharing, 218, 393
 - Public folder, enabling, 218
 - removable media files, avoiding, 304–305
- shopping. *See* purchasing shortcuts, 53
 - arranging on desktop, 55

- changing images for, 54–55
- creating, 53
- creating for shared folders, 235–236
- removing, 53
- renaming, 54
- Sidebar. *See* gadgets
- Simple Network Management Protocol (SNMP), disabling, 432
- Simple TCP/IP Services, disabling, 432
- simultaneous Internet connections, enabling, 286–287
- single-clicking, enabling, 120–121
- Skin Chooser window, 146
- skins (Windows Media Player), 145–146
- slideshow options (Windows Media Center), 172, 174
- slideshows, 39, 129
 - creating, 47–48
- Small Icons view (Control Panel), 8, 12
- Small Outline (SO) DIMM memory, 451
- SmartScreen Filter (IE8), 297–299
 - disabling, 277
- SNMP (Simple Network Management Protocol), disabling, 432
- SO (Small Outline) DIMM memory, 451
- software
 - bundleware, 416–417
 - removing
 - bundleware, 417–418
 - with Disk Cleanup Utility, 418–419
 - unwanted programs, uninstalling, 421–422
- solving resource conflicts in Device Manager, 475
- sorting. *See also* arranging
 - All Programs menu (Start menu), 83
 - folder contents, 105–106
 - shortcuts on desktop, 55
- SOS Online Backup, 336
- Sound configuration utility, 10. *See also* sound schemes
- sound schemes
 - custom sounds for, 64
 - previewing, 64
 - selecting, 64–65
- speakers for video projectors, 316
- Speech Recognition configuration utility, 10
- speed
 - of Internet connections, 269–271
 - of web browsers, 271
- Spyder3Pro website, 63
- SpyNet, 373–374
- spyware. *See also* malware; security explained, 350
 - MSE, 363–364
 - alerts from, 377–378
 - automatic scanning, configuring, 366–368
 - configuring
 - advanced options, 371–373
 - default actions, 368–370
 - downloading and installing, 364
 - excluding from scans, 370–371
 - explained, 364–366
 - manual scanning, 376
 - removing allowed items, 381
 - restoring/removing quarantined items, 381
 - scanning from
 - Windows Explorer, 376–377
 - selecting actions, 378–380
 - SpyNet participation, 373–374
 - types of scans, 375–376
 - updating malware definitions, 374–375
 - viewing scanning history, 380
 - third-party antispyware software, 388
 - toolbars as, 242
 - Windows Defender, 360–361
 - automatically scanning for spyware, 361–362
 - handling spyware notifications, 363
 - manually scanning for spyware, 360
 - scan types, 362–363
- SRS WOW Effects (Windows Media Player), 154
- SSID (Service Set Identifier), 384
 - changing, 385–386
 - disabling broadcasting, 386

- SSVHelper Class plug-in, disabling, 280
 - standard accounts, 192. *See also* user accounts changing to administrator accounts, 199
 - Start menu, 79–80
 - Control Panel Start menu display, configuring, 12–13
 - customizing, 83
 - with *Group Policy Editor*, 87–91
 - returning to default settings, 84
 - icon size, changing, 83
 - pinning/unpinning items, 84–85
 - Power button, changing function of, 86–87
 - recent files, clearing display, 85–86
 - recent programs, changing number displayed, 85
 - right-pane customization, 80–83
 - starting
 - defragmentation, 439
 - Registry Editor, 428, 459–460
 - in safe mode, 468–470
 - System Configuration utility, 429
 - from system repair disk, 470–471
 - troubleshooting startup
 - in *safe mode*, 468–470
 - with *System Configuration* utility, 471–473
 - with *system repair disk*, 470–471
 - Windows Media Center, 166–167, 177–178
 - Startup folder, deleting auto-loading programs, 427
 - startup programs. *See* auto-loading programs
 - Status bar (IE8), 242
 - status levels (MSE), 366
 - streaming. *See* sharing
 - Stretch option (desktop backgrounds), 44
 - submenus, opening by pausing mouse pointer, 83
 - subscribing to Web Slices (IE8), 263–264
 - Subsystem for UNIX-based Applications, disabling, 433
 - Suggested Sites (IE8), enabling/disabling, 261
 - swapping files, 414
 - switching
 - batteries, 334
 - to external video, 315
 - Sync Center configuration utility, 11
 - sync settings for notebook PCs, 312
 - synchronizing with Internet time server, 20
 - Synchronous Dynamic RAM (SDRAM), 449
 - System and Security section (Control Panel), 6
 - System configuration utility, 11
 - deleting auto-loading programs, 429–430
 - Remote Desktop Connection, configuring desktop computers, 318 starting, 429 troubleshooting with, 471–473 workgroups, renaming, 213
 - system files, 415
 - restoring, 342–343
 - viewing, 112–113
 - System Information utility, 476
 - system repair disks
 - creating, 343–345
 - starting Windows from, 470–471
 - System Restore, 342–343
 - system restore disks, 344
 - system startup. *See* starting
 - system tray. *See* notification area
- ## T
- tab sets (IE8), setting, 245–246
 - tabbed browsing (IE8), 244–245
 - setting home page tab sets, 245–246
 - Tablet PC Components, disabling, 433
 - tapping touchpad, 323
 - Task Manager. *See* Windows Task Manager
 - taskbar
 - adding toolbars to, 78
 - hiding, 72
 - icon display, changing, 72–73

- icon types, 68–69
- icons
 - adding/removing*, 73
 - reordering*, 74
- Jump Lists
 - changing number of items*, 74
 - displaying*, 69–70
 - moving*, 71–72
 - new features*, 67–68
 - notification area, 75–76
 - changing icons in*, 76–77
 - viewing hidden icons*, 76
 - Peek button, 77–78
 - resizing, 74–75
 - thumbnails, viewing, 69
 - unlocking, 75
- Taskbar and Start Menu configuration utility, 11
 - hiding taskbar, 72
 - Jump List items, changing number of, 74
 - moving taskbar, 71
 - Power button, changing function of, 87
 - recent files, clearing display, 86
 - recent programs, changing number displayed, 85
 - right-pane customization, 81
 - taskbar icon display, changing, 73
- TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), 222
- Telnet Client, disabling, 433
- Telnet Server, disabling, 433
- temporary files, 415
- testing Internet connection speed, 271
- text, disabling ClearType, 277
- text selections. *See* accelerators (IE8)
- text size, changing in IE8 (Internet Explorer 8), 248
- TFTP Client, disabling, 433
- themes, 39
 - creating, 43
 - finding hidden, 42
 - finding online, 41–42
 - selecting existing, 40
- third-party cookies, 294
- third-party DNS servers configuring, 282–284 selecting, 282
- third-party gadgets, 59
- third-party programs, downloading, 28
- third-party security tools
 - antispyware software, 388
 - antivirus software, 387
 - firewall software, 386–387
- third-party utilities
 - browser optimization utilities, 455
 - defragmentation utilities, 454
 - deleting auto-loading programs utilities, 455
 - file cleanup utilities, 454
 - PC tune up utilities, 453–454
- threats. *See* attacks; malware
- thumbnail views (Windows Explorer), performance, 103
- thumbnails
 - file icons on, disabling, 113
 - on taskbar, viewing, 69
 - viewing icons instead, 113
- Tile option (desktop backgrounds), 45
- Tiles view (Windows Explorer), 99–100
- time and date
 - changing, 17–18
 - Date and Time dialog box, displaying, 16–17
 - displaying, 16
 - synchronizing with Internet time server, 20
- time zone
 - changing, 18–19
 - displaying multiple clocks, 18–19
- title bar, displaying full paths, 113
- toolbars. *See also* Command bar (IE8)
 - adding to taskbar, 78
 - IE8
 - displaying multiple*, 241–242
 - moving*, 243–244
 - removing*, 279
 - as spyware, 242
 - Windows Explorer, 95–96
- Touch Sensitivity, 324
- touchpads, 320
 - cursor speed, configuring, 321–322
 - double-click speed, configuring, 320–321

properties, configuring, 322–324

Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), 222

troubleshooting

- antivirus software
 - problems, 388
- with Device Manager, 474–476
- problem programs, running
 - administrator mode*, 401–402
 - compatibility mode*, 403–406
 - Windows XP Mode*, 406–408, 410
- safe mode, starting
 - in, 468–470
- steps for, 467–468
- with System Configuration utility, 471–473
- with System Information utility, 476
- system repair disk, starting Windows from, 470–471
- with Task Manager, 473–474

Troubleshooting configuration utility, 11

Tucows website, 52, 304

TuneCab website, 65

tuning. *See* performance

typing in search box, 115

U

UAC (User Account Control)

- changing settings, 208–209
- explained, 205–206

- new features in Windows 7, 207
- unintended consequences of, 206–207

unbundling default programs, 25–27, 32–33

uninstalling

- device driver updates, 400
- unwanted programs, 421–422

unlocking taskbar, 75

unpinning

- Start menu items, 84–85
- taskbar icons, 73

unsafe file extensions, 305–307

updates to web pages, subscribing to Web Slices (IE8), 263–264

updating

- device drivers, 398–400
- malware definitions in MSE, 374–375

URLs, 281

User Account Control (UAC)

- changing settings, 208–209
- explained, 205–206
- new features in Windows 7, 207
- unintended consequences of, 206–207

user accounts

- account names, changing, 197–198
- creating, 192–193
- deleting, 200
- disabling, 200–201
- explained, 191
- Parental Controls, enabling, 202–204
- passwords
 - changing*, 198–199
 - creating*, 194–195
 - removing*, 198
- pictures for, changing, 195–197
- types of, 192
 - changing types*, 199

User Accounts and Family Safety section (Control Panel), 6

User Accounts configuration utility, 11

passwords

- changing*, 198
- creating*, 194

User Account Control (UAC) settings, changing, 208

user accounts

- account name*, *changing*, 197
- account types*, *changing*, 199
- creating*, 193
- deleting*, 200
- pictures*, *changing*, 195

usernames, 191

- changing, 197–198

utilities

- browser optimization utilities, 455
- defragmentation utilities, 454
- deleting auto-loading programs utilities, 455
- file cleanup utilities, 454
- PC tune up utilities, 453–454

V

VGA connections, 315

video connections (Windows Media Center), 164, 166

video projectors for notebook PCs
 connections between, 314
 resolution, setting, 315–316
 selecting, 314
 speakers, 316

Video Settings (Windows Media Player), 154

videos
 enhancing
 audio/video playback, 153–154
 playing, 132, 152–153
 properties, 132–133

Videos library, 117, 131
 playing videos, 132
 video properties, 132–133

viewing. *See also* displaying; hiding
 auto-loading programs, 425–426
 empty drives in Computer folder, 113
 encrypted files in color, 114
 file extensions, 111–112
 hard drive capacity, 441–443
 hidden files, 112–113
 hidden notification area icons, 76
 icons instead of thumbnails, 113
 menu bar, 113
 network map, 216
 scanning history (MSE), 380
 system files, 112–113
 taskbar thumbnails, 69

visualizations in Windows Media Player, 147–148

views (Windows Explorer), changing, 98–102

virtual memory, 414

virtual PCs, 406, 408

virtual scrolling with touchpad, 323

virtualization, enabling in hardware, 407

viruses. *See also* malware explained, 347–349

MSE, 363–364

alerts from, 377–378

automatic scanning, configuring, 366–368

configuring advanced options, 371–373

default actions, 368–370

downloading and installing, 364

excluding from scans, 370–371
explained, 364–366

manual scanning, 376

removing allowed items, 381

restoring/removing quarantined items, 381

scanning from Windows Explorer, 376–377

selecting actions, 378–380

SpyNet participation, 373–374

types of scans, 375–376

updating malware definitions, 374–375

viewing scanning history, 380

third-party antivirus software, 387

visualizations (Windows Media Player), 147–148

volume, adjusting, 311

W

WAV (Waveform Sound Files), 140
 converting MP3 files to, 65

web browsers
 anonymous browsing features, 302
 changing default, 266–267
 Google Chrome, 265
 IE8. *See* IE8
 Mozilla Firefox, 265
 Opera, 266
 Safari, 266
 speeds, explained, 271

web pages. *See* IE8; Internet optimization

Web Slices (IE8), 263–264

website files, downloading, 307–308

websites

auto-loading programs, list of, 427

blocking, 289–291
 color calibration systems, 63

cursor schemes, downloading, 52

desktop themes, finding, 41–42

for downloading third-party programs, 28

gadgets, finding, 57–58

- MP3 file conversion, 65
- WEP 64-bit security, 384
- WEP 128-bit security, 383
- whole house
 - audio/video systems connecting, 181–182
 - Media Center Extenders, 179–180, 182–183
- widgets. *See* gadgets
- window size, adjusting, 50–51
- windows, minimizing all, 77–78
- Windows Backup, 335
 - automatic backup, configuring, 336–338
 - files for backup, selecting, 338–339
 - full system backups, 340–341
 - restoring backed up files, 341–342
 - scheduling backups, 339–340
 - selecting backup device, 336
- Windows CardSpace configuration utility, 11
- Windows Defender, 11, 360–361
 - handling spyware notifications, 363
 - MSE and, 365
 - scanning for spyware
 - automatically*, 361–362
 - manually*, 360
 - scan types*, 362–363
- Windows Explorer, 93–96
 - Details view, selecting details for, 106–107
 - folder contents
 - arranging*, 103–105
 - sorting*, 105–106
 - folder windows, launching separately, 114
 - list view, typing in search box, 115
 - menu bar, displaying, 98
 - navigation in, 94–96
 - Navigation pane, 107
 - adding folders to*, 107–108
 - adding items to Favorites section*, 108
 - New menu
 - adding items to*, 108–110
 - removing items from*, 110
 - panes, hiding/displaying, 97
 - scanning for malware, 376–377
 - searching in, 95
 - views, changing, 98–102
- Windows features
 - disabling, 433–434
 - what to disable, 432–433
- Windows Firewall, 11, 355
 - advanced settings, 358–360
 - allowing access through, 356–357
 - changing notification settings, 357–358
 - disabling, 357
 - restoring defaults, 358
- Windows Gadget Platform, disabling, 433
- Windows kernel, moving into memory, 462
- Windows Live Essentials, downloading, 33–35
- Windows Live OneCare, 364
- Windows Live Photo Gallery, 130
- Windows Media Audio (WMA), 139
- Windows Media Audio Lossless (WMA), 140
- Windows Media Center
 - benefits of, 157–158
 - configuration
 - audio*, 171
 - color schemes*, 172
 - display*, 169–171
 - Media Center settings*, 168
 - music interface*, 174–176
 - slideshow options*, 172, 174
 - explained, 157–159
 - Extenders, 179–183
 - finding other Media Center applications, 178
 - menus and operations, 161–163
 - remote control operation, 159–160
 - starting, 166–167, 177–178
 - video connections, 164, 166
- Windows Media Player, 144
 - album art, 150–151
 - bit rates, 151
 - changing location for ripped files, 152
 - customizing display, 144
 - enhancing audio/video playback, 153–154

- Now Playing mode, 144–145
- playing
 - DVDs/videos, 152–153
 - plug-ins, 154
 - searching for files in, 148–150
 - setting audio file formats, 151
 - skins, 145–146
 - visualizations, 147–148
- Windows Mobility Center, 11, 309–310
 - battery status, checking, 311
 - brightness, adjusting, 311
 - external monitor connections, 312–313
 - power plans, selecting, 328
 - presentation settings, 312
 - sync settings, 312
 - volume, adjusting, 311
 - wireless network management, 311
- Windows Photo Gallery, 130
- Windows Process Activation Service, disabling, 433
- Windows Registry. *See* Registry
- Windows Search, disabling, 433
- Windows Task Manager
 - auto-loading programs, viewing, 425–426
 - troubleshooting with, 473–474
- Windows TIFF IFilter, disabling, 433
- Windows Update configuration utility, 11
- Windows Virtual PC, disabling, 433
- Windows XP Mode
 - applications, installing, 410
 - downloading/installing, 408
 - problem programs, running in, 406, 408, 410
 - checking compatibility, 407*
 - hardware virtualization, 407*
 - seamless mode operation, 410*
- Wireless Network gadget, 316
- wireless network management, 224–225
- wireless networks
 - enabling/disabling connections, 311
 - security, 382–386
 - changing SSID/password, 385–386*
 - disabling SSID broadcasting, 386*
 - enabling, 384–385*
 - tips for, 382–383*
 - types of, 383–384*
- WMA (Windows Media Audio Lossless), 140
- WMA (Windows Media Audio), 139
- WMP. *See* Windows Media Player
- workgroups, configuring, 212–214
- worms, 348
- WPA security, 383
- WPA2 security, 383

X

- XPS Services, disabling, 433
- XPS Viewer, disabling, 433

Y

- Yahoo! toolbar, 241
- Yahoo! Widgets, 59

Z

- zombie computers, 348
- zooming in IE8 (Internet Explorer 8), 248