

Backing up your Files

What is backing up?

Backing up your files means copying them to a second storage medium or location as a precaution, in case your primary storage medium (usually your hard drive) fails.

Why should you back up?

Even the most reliable new computer can break down, and hard drives can crash at any time, usually without warning. While today's hard drives are more reliable than they used to be, they still do break down sometimes, and when they do, it's often so severe that the data cannot be recovered. This is one of those things where people think "it won't happen to me", but there's a saying among computer people: "It's not a question of IF your hard drive will fail, it's a question of WHEN." Even if your hard drive never fails, a computer virus, fire, flood, or lightning strike could damage your computer or data, or it could even be stolen. Backups also come in handy when you get a new computer & need to transfer your files from your old computer to the new one.

How often should you back up?

You should back up your files regularly, but exactly how often is a personal decision. It will depend upon what types of files you keep on your computer, how important they are to you, and how frequently you change them. Think about all of the stuff that's stored on your computer. How you would feel if you lost it? People who have important files that change often may need to back up (at least those files) every day, while others may only need to back up every few months.

What should you back up?

On campus

On campus, all files stored on the network (M:, J:, and G: drives) are backed up for you, so you do not need to back these up on your own. The IT department backs up everything on all of our network servers and web server every weeknight, and stores backups in another building for added safety (in case of a catastrophic event, such as a fire or flood in Cofrin Hall).

However, files stored on the hard drive (C: or D: drives) of your office computer or on removable disks (floppy disks, Zip disks, etc.) are not backed up unless you do so yourself.

At home

On your personal computer, you should back up any and all files that you consider important, including all of your documents, pictures, databases, spreadsheets, presentations, financial data (e.g., Quicken), etc. This is a personal decision – only you can determine what is important enough to you to back up. (Would you be upset if you lost it and had to recreate it from scratch?)

In addition to your documents, you'll probably also want to back up certain files that are associated with specific programs. These would be things such as your Internet bookmarks or favorites, your e-mail address book and any locally-stored messages/folders (e.g., Thunderbird's Local Folders), software or music you purchased and downloaded from the Internet, etc.

A little more obscure, but potentially still important to some people, are files that define profiles, templates, or customizations for programs. Some examples are: the `normal.dot` file for Microsoft Word, which contains your toolbar, style, and default template customizations, or your e-mail profile or configuration files. Depending upon which programs you use, there may be other things like these that you would also want to back up.

Tip: To really protect your backup files, it's a good idea to store the backup in a different location from the computer. For instance, if you back up your computer at home, keep a copy of the backup in your office. You may also want to make more than one copy of your backup & keep them in separate locations. (I have duplicate CDs of my digital vacation pictures in my office and at home.)

Where to put the backup?

To back up your files, you need to copy them to another storage device or medium. There are several options:

CD/DVD

CDs are fast becoming the easiest and most common medium for backing up files. However, you can only use this method if you have a CD burner in (or attached to) your computer. CDs have a large storage capacity (650-700MB), are relatively inexpensive, and are quite durable, making them ideal for backups. The process of putting data onto a CD – called “burning” the CD – is usually relatively easy, but varies depending upon the software that came with the CD burner. If you have a DVD burner on your computer, you can of course use that, as DVDs have a much larger capacity than CDs (although they’re also more expensive).

Note: CD-R disks are CDs that can only be used once; once burned, they cannot be written over or burned again. CD-RW disks are reusable CDs that can be burned, then later erased and burned again. CD-RW disks are more expensive than CD-R disks, but both are relatively inexpensive.

Network drive or hard drive of another computer

On campus, you can copy personal files to your M drive (your personal network storage space), but since the network drives are already backed up, it makes more sense to use them as your primary storage location. Of course, network drives have space limits/quotas, so it’s possible that not everything will fit there, in which case some items may still need to be stored on your hard drive & backed up in another way. If you have more than one computer at home, you can put your backup files on the hard drive of one of the other computers.

A second hard drive or partition

Some people use a separate second hard drive or a hard drive partition to store their backup files. Hard drives are very reliable in comparison to removable disks. A partitioned hard drive has the physical drive space is divided into subsections called partitions, or “virtual drives,” each with its own drive letter (e.g., C: & D:). A second internal hard drive or hard drive partition is the cheapest way to store large amounts of data, but these must be installed or set up on your computer (it’s pretty geeky). External hard drives are a bit more expensive, but can be easily connected to a computer without opening it up. The down side of these methods is that they’ll only protect you from failure of your primary hard drive, not natural disaster or theft.

Floppy disk or Zip disk

Floppy disks are the least reliable storage medium. They fail often – even brand new disks – so *never* rely on them for your only copy of something (unless you truly don’t care if you lose it). Floppy disks should be your last choice for a backup medium, used only if you have absolutely no other way to back up. Also, because floppy disks have a small storage capacity (only 1.44MB), they’re not practical for backing up large amounts of data.

If you do have to use floppy disks for backing up, make 2 copies, on 2 separate floppy disks, in case one of them fails. In addition, it’s also a good idea to reformat your floppy disks periodically, as this refreshes the magnetic properties used by the disk for storing data.

The same warnings apply to Zip disks. They’re not reliable and shouldn’t be used for primary storage. However, they do offer a relatively large capacity (100-750MB), so are more practical for backing up a lot of data.

USB Flash drive

Although these removable storage devices are generally meant for transporting data between computers, they could also be used as backup devices if needed.

Online/e-mail

There are online backup services you can pay for, where you can upload your files to a secure server. We don’t recommend any particular services, but you can find them by searching online. If you don’t have much to back up, you could also open a free web-based e-mail account and send the files to yourself there, or upload them to your personal web site or free web space (password-protect them first).

How to back up

If you don't use Windows XP (or if you do, but don't have many files to back up), you can just copy the files or folders to your backup storage medium. For more information about copying files, see the handout *Managing Files in Windows*, at <http://www.snc.edu/techsupport>.

Windows XP Backup utility

With Windows XP, if you have a lot of files & settings to back up or want to back up everything on your computer, you can use Windows XP's built-in Backup utility. It can also to back up certain files on a schedule. To use the Backup utility:

Windows XP Professional

1. Go to Start ▶ [All] Programs ▶ Accessories ▶ System Tools ▶ Backup.
2. If you've never used the Backup utility, you'll see the Backup or Restore Wizard welcome window. Click Next and follow the instructions on the wizard. For a more detailed step-by-step guide to using the wizard, see http://www.microsoft.com/windowsxp/using/setup/learnmore/bott_03july14.msp.

Windows XP Home Edition

In Windows XP Home Edition, you'll need to install the Backup utility from your original Windows XP CD:

1. Insert your Windows XP CD into the drive and, if necessary, in My Computer, double-click the CD icon to display the Welcome screen.
2. On the "Welcome to Microsoft Windows XP" screen, choose Perform Additional Tasks.
3. Click Browse this CD.
4. In Windows Explorer, double-click the ValueAdd folder, then Msft, and then Ntbackup.
5. Double-click Ntbackup.msi to install the Backup utility.

Assistance and Questions

If you have any questions or need more information, please call the Help Desk at (920) 403-HELP (4357), contact us via e-mail at helpdesk@snc.edu, or stop by the Help Desk in Cofrin 101. The Help Desk is for St. Norbert College students and employees only.