

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 and 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 by the IT department, so you do not need to back these up on your own. However, files stored on the hard drive (C: or D: drives) of your office computer or on removable disks are not backed up unless you do so yourself.

At home

On your personal computer, back up any files that you consider important, including documents, pictures, spreadsheets, presentations, financial data, 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 files that are associated with specific programs such as Internet bookmarks/favorites, locally-stored e-mail messages/folders (e.g., Thunderbird's Local Folders), software or music 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. For example, the normal.dot file for Microsoft Word, which contains your toolbar, styles, macros, and default template customizations. Depending upon which programs you use, there may be other things like these that you would also want to back up.

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:

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, the M drive has space limitations, so it's likely that not all of your files will fit there, in which case some items may still need to be stored on your hard drive and backed up in another location. 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.

USB flash drive

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

External hard drive

An external hard drive is a good option for storing backup files. Hard drives are pretty reliable in comparison to removable disks. External hard drives are relatively inexpensive and can be easily connected to a computer. Of course an external hard drive will only protect you from failure of your primary hard drive, not natural disaster.

CD/DVD

CDs are a relatively easy and common medium for backing up files. Blank CDs and DVDs are inexpensive and quite durable, making them ideal for backups. However, with the sizes of today's media files, the storage capacity of CDs (650-700MB) may not be sufficient; depending what you need to back up, you may need to use DVDs, which have a much larger capacity (4.7GB). The process of putting data onto a CD or DVD – called “burning” – is usually relatively easy, but varies depending upon the software that came with the CD burner.

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. There are several different DVD formats – DVD-R, DVD-R DL, DVD+R, DVD+R DL, DVD-RW, DVD+RW, DVD-RAM, DVD-ROM, and more – so make sure you get a type that's compatible with your equipment. Again, the “-R” disks can only be used once, while the “-RW” disks are reusable and can be burned, erased, and burned again.

Floppy disk

Computer manufacturers have pretty much phased out floppy disk drives, but if you still have one, be aware that floppy disks are the least reliable storage medium and should not be relied upon for backups.

Online/e-mail

There are various online backup services, such as Dropbox.com, where you can upload files to a remote server and even keep them synchronized between multiple computers and share them with other people. These services generally offer a limited amount of space for free, with more space available for a fee.

If you don't have many files to back up, you could also send files to yourself at a free web-based e-mail account like Gmail.

Storing backups

To fully 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 home computer, keep a copy of the backup in your office. You may also want to make more than one copy of your backup and keep them in separate locations.

How to back up

Copy the files/folders to your backup storage medium as you would any other file. For information about copying files, see the handout *Managing Files in Windows*, at <http://www.snc.edu/techsupport>.

For full backups, different versions of Windows have different backup utilities, and some external hard drives come with their own utilities.

Assistance and questions

If you have any questions or need more information, contact the Help Desk at (920) 403-HELP (4357) or helpdesk@snc.edu. The Help Desk is for St. Norbert College students and employees only.