

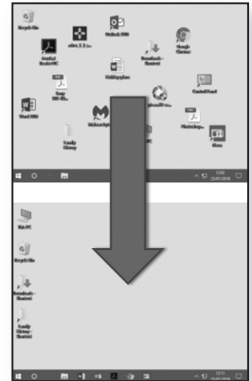
## Bring Some Order to that Chaotic Jumble of Icons on Your Desktop!

This article shows you how to:

- Decide what you really need on your desktop
- Identify and remove unneeded desktop icons
- Arrange the icons to make them quicker to find

Whenever you're downloading a file from a website, copying a file from a flash drive, or saving an attachment from an email message, you're faced with a decision about where to put it. The tempting choice is often to put it on the desktop.

The danger is that you'll leave it there for good. Over time, it will be joined by other files you save in the same way, and by icons for programs you install, and your desktop becomes a confusing jumble. In this article, I'll show you how to sift through all these icons, decide what's needed and what isn't, and gain a faster, more streamlined desktop.



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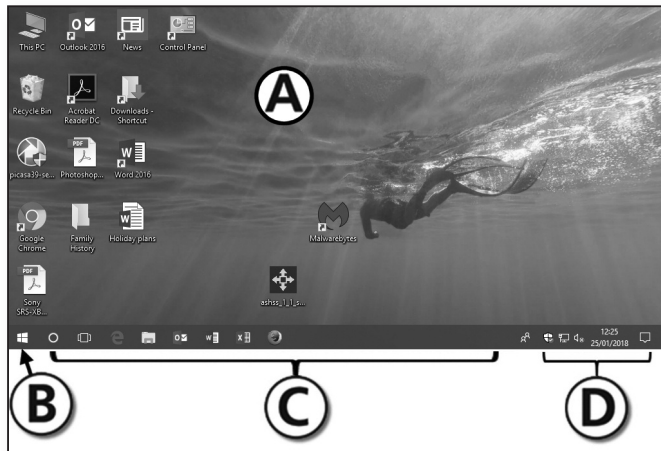
## Why a Tidy Desktop Matters

*A messy desktop is difficult to use*

The Windows desktop is rather like the workbench in a garage or the desk in an office. It's the ideal place to keep the few things you know you'll need over and over again, and you might put other things there temporarily until you get around to dealing with them. However, if it gets too messy, you'll find it difficult to get any work done because you're constantly looking for something amongst the clutter.



As well as making life easier for you, a streamlined desktop makes life easier for Windows too. The more icons you have on your desktop, the longer it takes for Windows to identify and display them all after your computer starts, and the longer you're left twiddling your thumbs before you can start work.



### Overview: the four zones of your desktop

*A tour of the desktop*

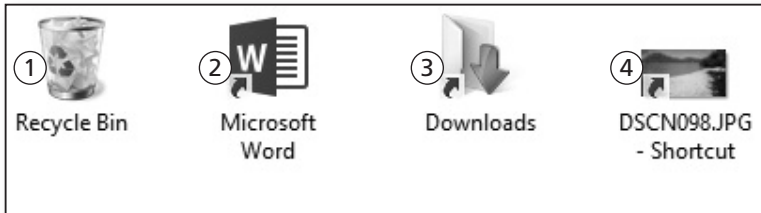
Before we start cleaning up, let's take a quick tour of the Windows desktop, as pictured above:

Ⓐ The **desktop** itself, containing a variety of icons.

- Ⓑ The **Start button**: clicking this (or pressing the **Win** key) opens the Start menu (or the Start screen in Windows 8.1).
- Ⓒ The **taskbar**, showing icons for programs that are currently running. It also acts as a 'dock' to hold icons for programs you use regularly, keeping them constantly available at a single click (a point we'll come back to on pages 8 and 9).
- Ⓓ **The notification area** (also known as the tray), containing the clock and a few small icons.

## The Various Icons on Your Desktop

There are four types of icon you'll find on your desktop: *Four types of icon*



- **Recycle Bin icon** ①: this is where Windows puts any files you delete, and a double-click on this icon opens the Recycle Bin to let you see what it contains. This icon is a fixture on the desktop and can't be deleted. *The Recycle Bin can't be removed*

You may also have an icon named **This PC** or **Computer**. If you have, this one also can't be deleted: it gives you quick access to the File Explorer (aka Windows Explorer) program where you can explore the disks and drives connected to your PC and the folders and files they contain.



- **Program icons** ②: when you install a program, an icon for the new program is often created on the *Icons for quick access to programs*

desktop. Its purpose is to give you a quick way to start that program when you need it: it just takes a double-click on that icon.

*Icons to open folders*

- **Folder icons** ③: you can specify that particular folders appear on the desktop in order to give you quick access to them – in the example above, the ‘Downloads’ folder.

*Icons to open files*

- **File icons** ④: these may be icons for text files, Word documents, PDF files, music files or (as in the example above) picture files, among many more.

### An important distinction: shortcut or original?

*An arrow in the corner denotes a ‘shortcut’*

If you look at the icons on your desktop, you’ll see that some of them (perhaps most of them) have a small arrow symbol in their bottom-left corner. This arrow tells you that the icon is a ‘shortcut’.



*A signpost to the real file or folder*

A shortcut is a tiny file that just acts as a reference – a kind of signpost telling Windows where to find the real file, folder or program. That real item is stored elsewhere on your computer, and the shortcut on your desktop just gives you a quick way to open it. But what difference does this make to our clean-up of the desktop?

*Shortcuts are always safe to delete*

- **Shortcut:** you can safely delete any shortcuts from your desktop without fear of losing any ‘real’ files. As an example, perhaps a program you installed some time ago created a shortcut on your desktop: if you rarely use that program, you could delete the shortcut to reduce desktop clutter, but the program itself would remain installed on your PC and available for use via the Start menu (or Start screen).

- **Original:** if you delete an original file or folder that's been saved on your desktop, it's gone. (In fact, as with everything you delete, it's been placed in the Recycle Bin, so you could recover it if you deleted it by mistake.) Thus, with an original file and folder, it's important to consider whether or not you want to keep it, perhaps moving it to a different folder if it's not something you really need on your desktop.

*Think carefully before deleting a real file or folder!*

### Restoring order to a jumbled desktop

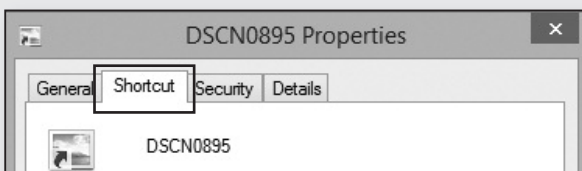
When you're cleaning up your desktop, keep these two important points in mind to ensure that nothing of value is lost:

- Don't try to rush through it! Deal with one icon at a time and decide whether it should be deleted, kept on the desktop or moved elsewhere.
- For each icon, check carefully whether it's a shortcut or an original by looking for the little arrow in its bottom-left corner.

*Work methodically*

*Shortcut or not?*

If you're ever unsure whether an icon is a shortcut or not – or you'd just like to double-check – here's what to do: right-click the icon and choose **Properties**. In the dialog that opens, look at the tabs along the top. If there's a tab labelled **Shortcut** (as in the screenshot below), it's definitely a shortcut; if there isn't, it's a real file or folder. Click **Cancel** or press the **Esc** key to close the dialog.



## Clean-up Time: Remove the Unnecessary Icons

To clean up the desktop, we'll work through the icons in two stages. Before you start, close any programs you're currently using.

### Stage 1: icons without arrow symbols (not shortcuts)

*Clean up original files and folders*

We'll start by dealing with any icons on your desktop that don't have little arrows in their bottom-left corner and therefore are not shortcuts. For each of these, there are two questions to ask yourself: first, what is it? and second, do I want to keep it and, if I do, does it need to be on my desktop?

*Check what this file or folder is*

If you're not sure what it is by looking at its icon, a good way to find out is to double-click it and see what happens. Once you can see what it is, close the window that opened and then decide what to do with the icon:

- If it's a folder with files inside it, you probably want to keep it. If it's an empty folder, it can be deleted.
- If it's a file of some sort (a document, spreadsheet, picture, PDF, music file, and so on), is it one you want to keep? If not, it can be deleted.
- It may turn out to be the installer for a program you downloaded in the past: when you double-click it, you find you're invited to follow the steps to install the program. You never need to keep these setup programs, so it can be deleted.

*Choose what to do with it*

Now you're ready to deal with this icon. If it's one you don't need to keep, delete it; if you do want to keep it, move it elsewhere.

*Not needed? Delete it*

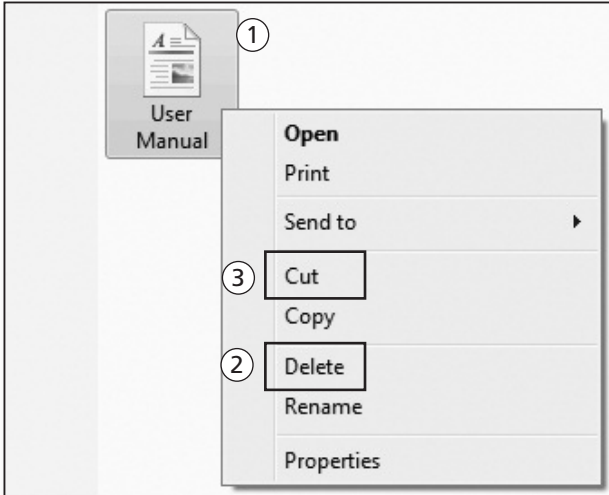
- **Delete:** right-click the icon ① and then click **Delete** ② on the context menu that appears. If you see a prompt asking if you're sure you want to delete the icon, click **Yes**.

If you delete a file accidentally when you meant to keep it, you can press **Ctrl+Z** straight away to undo the deletion. Alternatively, double-click the **Recycle Bin** icon to open it, find the file or folder you deleted, and then use the left mouse button to drag it to a blank space on the desktop and drop it there.



- Move:** if you want to keep the file or folder, but move it off your desktop to reduce clutter, right-click the icon ① and then click **Cut** ③ on the context menu that appears. Next, press **Win+E** to open File Explorer and make your way to the folder in which you want to place this item. Right-click a blank space in the right-hand section of the window and choose **Paste**: the file or folder will be moved into this folder from your desktop.

*Move it to a different folder to keep it*



**Stage 2: icons with arrow symbols (shortcuts)**

Now we'll turn our attention to the shortcuts on your desktop – the icons with little arrow symbols in their

*Do you need these shortcuts?*

bottom-left corner. Here the question to ask for each is a simple one: do you use this icon often enough that it deserves a place on your desktop?



As before, if you're not sure what a particular shortcut does, you can double-click it to find out (and then close the window that opened). However, if you don't know what a shortcut does by looking at it, you probably never use it, so it's unlikely to be worth keeping!

#### *Shortcuts to files and folders*

If it's a shortcut to a file or a folder, and you never (or rarely) need to open that file or folder, you might as well delete the shortcut. As in Stage 1, you do this by right-clicking the icon, choosing **Delete** and then clicking **Yes** if prompted. Since it's only a shortcut, the original file or folder isn't affected, and you can still find it in File Explorer by pressing **Win+E**.

Most of these shortcuts will be for programs, and the odds are that none of them need to be on your desktop:

#### *Programs you rarely use*

- Perhaps the shortcut was put there automatically when you installed the program, but you rarely use it? If so, you can delete it: you can still find the program via the Start menu or Start screen on the odd occasions you do use it. You can also start it by pressing **Win+S** and typing the program's name into the search panel.)

#### *Do you already have a quick-access icon?*

- Perhaps you already have an icon for this program on your taskbar? If so, that's far more convenient and probably what you use to start the program. Therefore, the extra icon on your desktop is unnecessary and can be deleted.



As noted above, the taskbar is a much better place to keep shortcuts to programs, not least because it's permanently visible, whereas the desktop is



covered up (at least partially) as soon as you open a window!

If there's a program shortcut on your desktop that you use regularly, use the left mouse button to drag it down to a blank space on your taskbar and drop it there. This makes a copy of the icon on your taskbar, and after doing this you can delete the icon from your desktop.

Your aim in performing this clean-up is to leave as few icons on your desktop as possible – just the ones you really do use regularly. The result is that each icon will now be much easier to find, and Windows won't have to work so hard at managing and displaying them all.

## Arrange the Remaining Icons for Easy Use

After deleting all the unnecessary icons, you're probably left with a peculiar-looking desktop that has icons dotted around it in odd places. Let's sort that out!

First, we'll check a couple of settings that determine how the icons on your desktop are laid out:

1. Right-click a blank space on the desktop.
2. On the context menu that opens, move the mouse to **View**.
3. On the submenu that appears, first have a look at the item named **Auto arrange icons**. Is there a tick beside it? If there is, click that item to remove the tick. (After doing this, repeat steps 1 and 2 above.)
4. Now have a look at the item named **Align icons to grid**. We do want a tick beside this item, so if it doesn't currently have one, click the item to tick it.
5. If these two items were already set as we wanted them (the first unticked, the second ticked), you

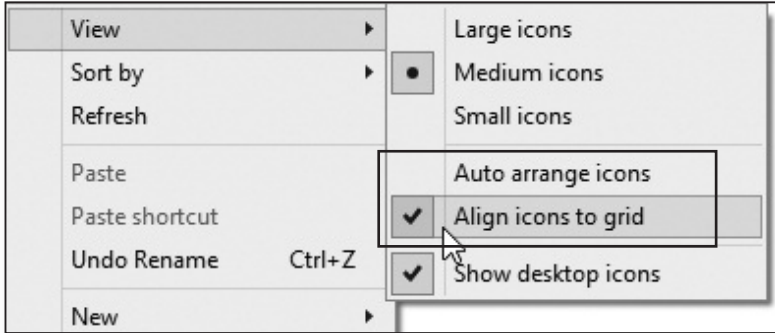
*Your remaining icons are dotted around*



*Turn off the 'auto arrange' option*

*Turn on the 'align to grid' option*

haven't needed to click anything, so just press the **Esc** key on your keyboard twice to close the menus.



What we've done in the steps above is to tell Windows not to arrange the icons on the desktop automatically; otherwise, Windows would insist on grouping them in columns at the left of the screen. However, we've told it to align the icons to an 'invisible grid' which ensures that they are always neatly lined up and can never overlap one another.

*Drag icons around to arrange them as you want them*

Now you can move the remaining icons to wherever you want them on the desktop. Perhaps you do want them arranged in a column at the left of the screen, or perhaps you'd like some along the top, others down the right-hand side, some in the middle – it's up to you! To move an icon, use the left mouse button to click it and drag it to wherever you want it (taking care not to drop it on to another icon in the process).

### Three Tips to Keep Your Desktop Tidy

*Keeping it neat should now be easier*

It's all too easy for your desktop to descend into a chaotic jumble of icons, but once you've spent some time having a clean-up, you'll probably feel more inclined to try to

keep it neat. Unfortunately, events do tend to conspire against you, so here are a few tips to help you keep your desktop streamlined and tidy:

**Tip 1: avoid unnecessary shortcuts to programs**

Many of the programs you install will add a shortcut to your desktop. They do this in the belief that you may not know how to start the program otherwise, or that you may intend to use the program so often that you'll want this icon right under your nose.

If you allow every new program to do this, you'll soon have a cluttered desktop again! When you follow the steps to install a program, look out for an option labelled **Create desktop icon** (or something very similar) and remove the tick beside it unless you're sure it's a program you really will want on your desktop.

*Tell a new program not to create a desktop icon...*

Alternatively, let it create that icon and then decide what to do about it. As explained on page 9, you can copy the icon to your taskbar if you really do want easy access to the program, and then delete the icon from your desktop.

*... or delete it afterwards*

**Tip 2: move or delete files you've downloaded**

When we download files from websites, many of us choose to save them to the desktop. After all, we usually want to do something with them as soon as they've been downloaded, so it's handy to have them arrive somewhere that's easy to find. (And, since the desktop is right under our noses, we'll notice them sitting there and remember that they're waiting to be dealt with.)

*If you save downloaded files to the desktop...*

However, don't just leave them there! If you downloaded a program, you'll double-click the icon to install it, and once that's been done the icon won't be needed again – it can (and should) be deleted.

*... don't leave them there*

If you downloaded a document, picture, music file or something else, you'll probably want to have a look at it

(or a listen to it), but again, don't leave it there. Decide whether you want to keep it or not: if you do, move it to a more suitable folder; if you don't, delete it.



The same applies to files you copy from a flash drive or some other disk. You might plonk them on the desktop initially as an easy way to get them on to your PC from that disk, but either delete them when they're no longer needed or move them elsewhere if they're to be kept.

### Tip 3: don't keep original files on your desktop

*Don't save documents to your desktop*

If you're working on a particular document over a period of days or weeks, you might be tempted to keep it on the desktop for easy access. However, it's best not to do that because it could so easily be deleted by accident. Eventually, too, you'll finish working on that document and won't need regular access to it, so it just becomes more clutter on your desktop.

*Put a temporary shortcut on your desktop instead*

Instead, save that file in your **Documents** (or **My Documents**) folder, where it really belongs. If you'd like easy access to it, go to your Documents folder, right-click the file and choose **Send to > Desktop (create shortcut)** and a shortcut to it will appear on your desktop. When you've finished work on the document, you can delete that shortcut to reduce clutter and the original is still safely stored in your Documents folder.

