Windows 11 Start Menu: What Are All Those Programs?

Discover the Many Free Programs Built into Windows 11 and What They Do

This article shows you:

- Where the programs on your Start menu came from
- The Microsoft programs included with Windows 11
- What these programs are for, and why you might find them useful

Along with fulfilling its duties as your computer's operating system, Windows 11 gives you a large collection of extra programs, ranging from simple card games to complex system-management tools. You've certainly used at least some of these, but your Start menu is groaning under the weight of many others – and there are yet more that you might not even be aware you've got!

What are they all, and would you want to use them? In this article, we'll take an alphabetical tour through the most useful programs included with Windows 11.

Contents:

What's On Your Own Start Menu?

When you open your Start menu in Windows 11 and click on **All apps**, you'll probably see quite a long list of items. Some of these are yellow folders (with a downward-pointing chevron to their right) and clicking one of these opens it to display yet more items inside it. (Another click on it will close it again.)

These 'items' are all programs installed on your PC, and they got there in one of four ways:

Programs you've downloaded and installed

- You've found them on websites and downloaded them during the time you've owned your PC. There are millions of programs available, some of them famous (like VLC Media Player, LibreOffice, Adobe Acrobat Reader and Google Chrome) and many less well-known. I obviously can't begin to guess which of those you might have decided to install, so you won't find those mentioned in this article.

Apps from the Store

- You've visited the Microsoft Store and installed apps from there. Again, there are thousands to choose from, and I don't know which you might have picked.

Software bundled with your PC

- Many new PCs come with some extra software added by the PC maker to give the impression of value for money. You'll find these on the Start menu too, but once again I can't guess what your own PC's maker might have thrown into the mix.

Programs included in Windows 11

- Your PC certainly came with Windows 11 installed on it (or you upgraded to it yourself from Windows 10), and Windows itself gives you a sizeable bundle of programs – a whopping 80 or so – to get you started.

It's that final group of programs I'll be explaining in this article – programs I know you have because you're using Windows 11.

I won't explain every single one of those programs, partly because it would take dozens of pages to cover all 80, and partly because some are too dull or too 'niche' to be of interest to most users. However, I will give you at least a quick explanation of every program you might find useful or interesting.

Introductions to the most useful Windows 11 programs

Useful Start Menu Programs from A to Z

Over the remaining pages of this article, I'll give you quick introductions to the programs included with Windows 11. You'll find many of these in the **All apps** section of your Start menu, and I'll tell you exactly where – either directly on the 'Start menu' itself, or in one of its folders (such as 'Start menu > Windows Ease of Access').

Where to find these programs

Rather oddly, though, a surprising number of useful programs don't advertise their existence at all! They are there and available to be used, but you won't find them on the Start menu. Instead, the best way to find them is to open the Start menu and begin typing their names, and I'll point those out along the way.

Calculator
Start menu

A simple calculator for doing quick arithmetic by clicking buttons or (perhaps more comfortably) by using the number and symbol keys on your keyboard's numeric keypad, pressing **Enter** for Equals. However, it's not as basics at it looks! Click the 'hamburger button' (three horizontal lines) in its top left corner, and you'll find you can switch to Scientific, Graphing, Programmer or Date Calculation modes, and you can also pick from a variety of unit converters (currency, volume and length).

Perform calculations or unit and currency conversions

Usefully too, you can force the Calculator window to stay on top of all your other windows by pressing the key combination **Alt+Up arrow**.

Calendar
Start menu

Manage your appointments and receive reminders

A terrific app for setting and managing appointments – either one-off events such as a party or a dental check-up, or recurring dates such as birthdays. Just click a date and type a description in the panel that opens, or click **More details** to add more information and specify particular options. You'll receive automatic pop-up reminders at the due time.

Character Map
Open the Start menu and type 'character map'

Use thousands of different characters in your documents

Your keyboard may only have keys for the most frequently-needed characters, but the fonts you're using contain hundreds more – mathematical symbols, foreign letters, cartoon pictures, and many others. The Character Map program lists all the characters included in the font you choose from the list at the top of its window. To use one of these characters, click it once, click the **Select** button and then click **Copy**. You can then return to the document you're writing and paste the character into it by pressing **Ctrl+V**.

Defragment and Optimise Drives
Open the Start menu and type 'defrag'

Keep your hard disk working at top speed

A vital program that helps to keep your hard disk in good shape and running at top speed (and, as a result, helping to maintain your PC's performance). In Windows 11 you don't generally have to use this program yourself: as long as your PC is occasionally left running but unused, Windows will take the opportunity to do this amongst its other housekeeping duties.

Disk Clean-up
Open the Start menu and type 'clean'

Clear out unnecessary files

A program that scans your hard disk looking for unnecessary files that are wasting space. It groups

them into categories, and you choose which categories of file to remove by ticking boxes. It's well worth running this program occasionally – particularly on a computer with a small or very-full hard disk – as these files can grow to occupy a surprisingly large quantity of space over time.

> Just one note of caution when you use the Disk Clean-up program: remove the tick beside **Recycle Bin** unless you're sure you want to empty your Recycle Bin!

Feedback Hub
Start menu

The Feedback Hub is where you can submit your suggestions or problems to Microsoft, with the intention of making Windows 11 better. Use the search box at the top of the front page to look for feedback on a particular topic, read what others have said, and you can 'Upvote' (agree with) someone's point and/or add your own comment. You can also click **Add new feedback** to type your own feedback, choosing a main category and subcategory for it (such as 'Microsoft Edge' and 'Website issues'). Just a little word of warning: it's in the nature of 'feedback' to be mostly negative, and not all users express their opinions in the politest way!

Read or submit feedback about Windows 11

File Explorer
Start menu

Your PC is all about files: every document, spreadsheet, picture, video and program you have is a file stored on your hard disk (or some other disk), and File Explorer is the vital program that lets you find, organise and browse through all these files. Rather than ferreting around in the Start menu for it, there are easier ways to start File Explorer: its icon should be pinned towards the left of your taskbar, and you can also press **Win+E** to open it.

Browse, search and organise your files

Films & TV
Start menu

Rent or buy films and TV programmes

This definitely isn't one of Windows 11's highlights! It exists chiefly to encourage you to buy or rent feature films and TV programmes from the Microsoft Store (and most of the titles you click will simply cause the Store app to open). The 'Explore' section allows you to watch short trailers and some enjoyable 360° videos (drag the screen to look around you). You can find and play the videos stored on your own PC from the 'Personal' section, but that's really the limit of its usefulness.

Groove Music
Start menu

Play your music collection

A simple-but-capable music player. It finds and cata-logues the audio files and playlists stored on your PC and lets you set some music playing with a couple of clicks.

Magnifier
Start menu > Windows Ease of Access

Zoom in to see your screen more clearly

This program is intended for users with some sort of visual impairment (although it can be useful for anyone who temporarily needs a zoomed-in view of part of the screen). In the tiny Magnifier window, click the **+** button to double the size of everything on your screen. Initially you'll see a close-up view of whatever is in the centre of your screen, but moving the pointer towards any edge of the screen causes the screen to scroll. The cog-shaped icon at the right of the window leads to Magnifier's options in the Settings app.

Mail
Start menu

Manage one or more email accounts

An email program which can collect messages from multiple email accounts and present them all in one place for easy reading and organisation. You can add

email accounts from several different webmail providers (Outlook.com, Google Gmail and Yahoo! Mail), as well as from POP3 or IMAP accounts (the type of email account your broadband supplier probably gives you). To add an email account, click the **Accounts** button at the far-left and then **Add account** on the right.

Maps
Start menu

Just as it says on the tin, this app gives you maps of the whole world, right down to street level if you zoom in. Extra features include turn-by-turn driving directions, live traffic updates in the form of amber or red overlays on sections of road, satellite views, and interactive 3D tours of some major cities.

View maps, traffic conditions and driving directions

As you explore the Maps app, the mapping data is downloaded from the Internet. That's unlikely to be a problem on a PC at home, but if you want to use this app on a tablet or notebook PC while travelling, it will only work when you have Internet access. The solution is to prepare in advance by downloading the map data for the country or region you'll be visiting: click the **…** button at the far-right of the toolbar, then click **Settings** followed by **Choose maps**.

Microsoft Solitaire Collection
Start menu

Every version of Windows comes with a few card games, and in Windows 11 they're bundled together in this single program. Choose between Klondike (traditional Solitaire), Spider, FreeCell, Pyramid and TriPeaks, or see if you can solve the 'Daily Challenges'. You'll also find links to other Microsoft games you can download free from the Microsoft store. The one drawback to this app is that every so often you'll have to sit through an advertisement for some other app before your next game begins.

Five-in-one card game program

Microsoft Store
Start menu

Easily install new apps for Windows 11

This is where you can find and download new programs (known as 'apps') for your PC, many for free. Some of these apps are created by Microsoft, but the majority are by other companies and individuals. As with all software, the quality and usefulness of these apps varies enormously, but they have the benefit of being safe to install (having been checked by Microsoft before inclusion), free from malware and other unwelcome extras, and easy to install and uninstall.

Microsoft Teams
Start menu

Text chats and video meetings

Teams is a new addition to Windows, and Microsoft is so proud of it that it gives you two different versions: you can open a miniature version by clicking the **Chat** icon on your taskbar (or pressing **Win+C**), but I recommend starting with the full version on the Start menu. Using Teams you can have 'chats' with people (typing messages back and forth, much like SMS messages on a mobile phone) or have 'meetings' in which all the participants can see each other via webcams and talk using microphones.

Microsoft To Do
Start menu

Task planner and list maker

This is a daily planner and task manager app, designed to help you make lists of tasks and keep track of what's still to be done and what's been completed. More practically, you can also use it to make simple shopping lists and to-do lists.

Set yourself reminders

Perhaps most helpfully, you can use this app to set reminders on your PC. Click **Tasks** at the left, then click **Add a task** and type some text such as 'Phone Sarah', then click the **remind me** icon further to the right and pick a date and time for your reminder. Finally, click the

text you typed a moment ago and press **Enter** to add it to your list of reminders, and Windows will pop up a reminder at the due time (whether or not this app is still open).

Narrator
Start menu > Windows Ease of Access

Like Magnifier, above, this is another tool for the visually-impaired. It reads aloud the contents of a window, as well as the captions and descriptions of controls like buttons and menus. It takes a little getting-used-to, but you can find comprehensive help for it at support.microsoft.com/help/22798.

Have the contents of windows read out loud to you

News
Start menu

A magazine-style program that displays the latest news stories gathered from a variety of sources (newspapers and magazines, news agencies and online publications). Use the category headings across the top to choose the type of stories you want to see ('UK', 'World', 'Entertainment', 'Technology' and so on). The buttons at the left allow you to choose which categories you're interested in or read your local news.

National, international and local news

Notepad
Start menu

A text editor, the simplest form of word processor, for creating text documents that don't need any formatting or fancy layout. The files it creates are small and can be opened using any word processor on any computer, making Notepad a good choice for sharing text, as well as for writing anything in which it's the text that matters rather than the visual appeal of the document.

Create simple, unformatted text documents

The first time you use Notepad, open its **Format** menu and make sure there's a tick beside **Word Wrap** (clicking it to add one if there isn't). You might also like

to choose **Format > Font** and select a font and text size you prefer. Both options are then used each time you start Notepad in future.

On-Screen Keyboard
Start menu > Windows Ease of Access

Type by clicking the keys on a virtual keyboard

For users who have difficulty typing on a traditional keyboard, the On-Screen Keyboard allows you to type by clicking keys on a picture of a keyboard shown on the screen. The keyboard stays permanently on top of all other windows: just click in the window in which your 'typing' should appear, and then start clicking the keys on this virtual keyboard.

Paint
Start menu

Hand-drawn art or simple picture-editing

A simple program for creating hand-drawn artwork or doing basic (very basic!) picture editing. To edit a photo the Photos app is a far better choice, but Paint can be useful for quickly cropping or resizing a picture and for designing artwork based on simple shapes.

Paint 3D
Start menu

Design your own 3-dimensional artwork

Despite the name, this app doesn't have much to do with the traditional Paint program above, except that it's for creating artwork – specifically, for designing 3-dimensional objects and scenes. It's enjoyable to experiment by adding, combining and customising 3D shapes and 'stickers', although it takes some perseverance (and perhaps a little artistic talent!) to achieve good results.

For more impressive results without really trying, click the **3D library** button and use the **Search** box to search for 'house', 'tree', 'cat', or whatever else takes your fancy, to find ready-made models you can add to your creation with a click.

People
Open from the Mail app

You won't find the People app listed on your Start menu: the only way to start it is to open the Mail app and click **Switch to People** at the bottom-left. Having done that, however, you can right-click the People app's icon on the taskbar and pin it there to keep it easily accessible whenever you need it.

People is Windows 11's address book, where you can store all the various contact details of your friends, family and colleagues. Contacts are listed alphabetically at the left, and when you click one, the details appear on the right (where you can also edit the contact's details). Click the **+** button on the toolbar to add a new contact. Other Windows 11 apps like Calendar, Mail and Skype use the People app to look up contacts' details when you want to get in touch with someone or refer to them in an appointment or reminder.

Windows 11's built-in contacts list

Photos
Start menu

At its simplest, this program is for looking through your photos. You'll arrive in the 'Collection' section where you can browse through all your photos in date order, click anything you want to see at full size and then continue stepping through them using the left and right arrow keys on your keyboard. Much more than that, though, you can view slideshows, create albums of related photos, and carry out basic editing. You can also turn groups of photos into mini-movies, complete with titles and background music, or edit and combine home movies taken with your digital camera or phone.

Explore and edit your photos, create albums and videos

Quick Assist
Open the Start menu and type 'quick assist'

There's a problem with your PC that you can't seem to solve yourself, but you know someone who could – if

Give or receive help with Windows

only they were here! With Quick Assist, they can connect to your PC via the Internet from anywhere in the world, see your screen on theirs and control it using their own mouse and keyboard while you watch. (Alternatively, of course, it might be you providing the assistance, or you may just want an easy way to collaborate on a document at the same time while speaking to each other on the phone.)

Scan
Start menu

Copy paper documents into your PC

If you have a scanner connected to your PC, or – more likely – a printer with a built-in scanner, this is the program that can put it to work for you, making it easy to 'photocopy' paper documents into your PC and save them as either image files or PDF documents.

When the program starts, click **Show more** and choose your scanning settings, then click **Preview**. When the preview of your document appears on the right, drag the circular blobs to outline the portion of the document you want to scan. Finally, click the **Scan** button to create and save your scan.

Skype
Start menu

Chat with friends and family via the Internet

A chat program that allows you to hold text- or video-based conversations with other Skype users, or (by buying 'Skype credit') make calls to landlines and mobile phones worldwide. You can find out more about using it at Microsoft's website: https://support.skype.com/en/skype/all.

Snipping Tool
Start menu

Create and save pictures of your screen

This handy little program lets you take pictures ('screenshots') of your screen, or part of it. Click the 'mode' button and choose **Rectangle mode**, click **New**

and then draw a rectangle around the part of the screen you want to copy, and you'll see it displayed as a picture in the Snipping Tool window, where you can draw on it using a variety of pen colours and sizes, highlight sections of it, and save it as a picture file.

Steps Recorder
Open the Start menu and type 'steps'

Some kind of fitness tracker, perhaps? Not at all! It's for use in demonstrating to someone a problem you're having with your PC. You click its **Start Record** button and then run through the actions that always cause the problem to occur, and it creates a file containing screenshots of what you did, notes of which programs you used, and other information to help someone diagnose the problem. You can then send this file to your helpful expert, rather than having to try to explain exactly what you did and what happened. To learn a little more about using it, start the program and press the **F1** key to open its help page on Microsoft's website.

Record your actions to help troubleshoot a PC problem

Sticky Notes
Start menu

The equivalent of those colourful, memory-jogging Post-It notes for your PC screen. When you start the program, a blank note will appear: just type your note, resize the square to make it smaller or larger, and perhaps drag it to one edge of your screen, out of the way. You can edit the note at any time by clicking it, change its colour by clicking the **…** button, add another note by clicking the **+** button, or delete the note by clicking the **…** button followed by **Delete note**.

Colourful notes to 'stick' to your screen

If you close the Sticky Notes program (by right-clicking its taskbar button and choosing **Close window**) your notes will disappear, but they'll come back next time you start it. The program also closes if you delete your last-remaining note.

System Information
Open the Start menu and type 'information'

Details of your PC and Windows

This simple program provides a mine of useful information about your PC and Windows. The 'System Summary' page gives you all the basics, and you can look through the items in the 'Components' section to find details of your PC's hardware.

Task Manager
Press Ctrl+Shift+Esc

Close a program that's locked up

The first time you start Task Manager, click **More details** to see the full-size window. This program has an awful lot of uses, but what's really worth knowing is that it can be used to close a program that's locked up and stopped responding. On the **Processes** tab, find that program in the list and click the **End task** button.

Tips
Start menu

Quick tips for Windows 11 users

This easily-overlooked app is well worth a look. As its name suggests, it's simply a large collection of tips to help you use various aspects of Windows 11. My suggestion is to click **Show all tips** on the first page, then click the topic you're interested in: you can then step through the tips in that topic using the grey arrows at the bottom-right of the window and go back to the main list of topics by clicking the arrow in the top-left corner.

Video Editor
Start menu

Turn photos and video clips into a finished movie

This isn't actually an app in its own right – it takes you to the Video Editor section of the Photos app (so you could reach the same place by starting the Photos app and clicking **Video Editor** at the top). Click **New video project**, then type a name for your creation, and use the **Add** button to select photos and video clips you want to

include in your new video. From here, you can drag items down to the Storyboard section at the bottom to arrange them into order, and use the Storyboard's toolbar to add titles and effects and adjust the duration of each item.

Voice Recorder
Start menu

With a microphone connected to your PC, this program lets you record your voice (or other sounds, of course) just by clicking the **Record** (microphone) button in the middle of the otherwise-empty window, and click **Stop** (square) when you've finished. Recordings remain in a list at the left, for playback with a click. You can right-click one to rename or delete it, or to choose **Open file location** (which takes you to the folder in which these audio files are stored, inside your 'Documents' folder).

Create recordings with your PC's microphone

Weather
Start menu

When you want to know what today's weather has in store, hour by hour, or see the forecast for the next week or so, the Weather app tells you at a glance. You can also use the search box at the top to find similar information for anywhere in the world – ideal to check the outlook for your upcoming holiday!

Check the weather forecast anywhere in the world

Windows Media Player
Open the Start menu and type 'media'

As its name suggests, this program handles the job of playing the music and video files saved to your computer, as well as audio CDs you insert into your PC's CD/DVD drive. In all this, it does a rather better job than the newer Groove Music and Films & TV apps also included with Windows 11. It can also be used to copy music from CDs, create CDs and DVDs, and create playlists of your favourite music.

Play your music and video files or listen to an audio CD

Windows Speech Recognition
Start menu > Windows Ease of Access

Control your PC with your voice or dictate documents

With a microphone plugged into your PC, this program allows you to control your PC and dictate documents by speaking – something that's obviously useful for anyone who finds typing awkward, but increasingly popular with all sorts of users. It takes some time to learn the many voice commands you can use with this powerful system, but persistence is rewarded, and this could soon become your preferred way of controlling your PC. You can learn more about it on Microsoft's website at <u>tinyurl.com/44mfpe4t</u>.

Windows Tools
Start menu

Find 'missing' programs

I mentioned earlier that many of Windows 11's built-in programs don't appear on the Start menu, and that the best way to find them is to open the Start menu and type their names. There is another way, however, and this is it: they've been gathered into an app named Windows Tools. If you open this app, you'll see all those 'missing' programs listed and you can start one by double-clicking it.

WordPad
Open the Start menu and type 'wordpad'

Create good-looking formatted documents

A surprisingly capable word processor, letting you create good-looking letters and documents without having to grapple with the complexities of Microsoft Word and its ilk. It can also open Microsoft Word (.DOCX) files. Its one drawback is that it doesn't let you see easily how many pages you've written (you could find that the 'Yours sincerely' has annoyingly landed at the top of a second page when you print out a letter), but choosing **File > Print** preview will allow you to check that before printing.