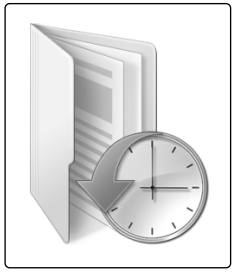
Discover the Effortless Way to Keep Backups of Your Files in Windows 10

This article shows you how to:

- ✓ Set up the File History feature on your PC
- ✓ Have your vital files backed up automatically at regular intervals
- ✓ Recover a deleted, damaged or missing file if disaster strikes



Do you keep backups – safety copies – of your files? If you're anything like the vast majority of computer users, you don't, and that means your irreplaceable files are at risk. The trouble is, backing up your files is a chore, and one you have to repeat fairly frequently.

If you use Windows 10, however, there's an easy solution: just let the built-in File History feature take care of the job for you! In this article I'll explain how to get File History set up and working, and I'll also show you how to recover one or more files from your backups if something goes wrong.

The Importance of Keeping Backups

Your personal files can't be replaced

If someone stole your computer, what would you have lost? Well, you'd have lost your PC, of course, and you'd be faced with buying another. But before long, I'm sure, your thoughts would turn to all the files that have gone with it – your personal documents, photos, videos, music collection, and so on. No amount of money is going to bring those back!

Risks to your files

Admittedly, your PC isn't likely to be stolen, but your files run the same risk in a variety of other ways:

Hard drive failure

- Most obviously, your hard drive could fail. It's unlikely to do it in a way that destroys your files, but you'd have to pay a specialist recovery service to get them back for you.

Accidental deletion

- You might accidently delete a file, or even an entire folder. If you notice in time, you could recover it from the Recycle Bin, but if you empty the Recycle Bin, it's probably gone for good.

Accidental replacement

- When you save a new file for the first time and give it a name, you can type the name of a file that already exists. Windows will warn you that you're about to replace the existing file, but if you carry on regardless, that older file is gone: you won't find it in the Recycle Bin.

Moved or renamed by mistake

- You might accidentally move a file or folder elsewhere, or change its name, mistaking it for something else. It still exists, of course, but when you can't find it later on, it's as good as gone.

Mucked up during editing

- While editing a file, you might muck it up in some way – deleting a page from a document, or overdoing the brightness in a photo. If you notice before you close the program, you might be able to put things right using its Undo feature; if you don't, your only option is to try to fix the file by hand.

A backup copy would save you

In all these potentially-disastrous situations, having up-to-date backups would save you. You'd simply go to the drive where your backup copies are stored, find the file or folder you've lost or messed up and copy it to your main hard drive. In many ways, then, backups are like an insurance policy for your files, but one that doesn't cost you anything – at least, not in financial terms.

But backups take time and effort!

What it does cost you is time and trouble: you have to remember to keep your backups updated, and you have the palaver of copying everything to your backup drive at regular intervals. The effort involved is probably why many of us don't bother, and simply trust to luck.

A Quick Explanation of How File History Works

File History is different

File History is a clever feature of Windows 10 that removes all the effort from keeping backups. It takes just a few minutes (at most) to set up, and from there it takes care of everything completely automatically.

Automatic backups every hour

Here's how it works. Every time you create a new file, or you edit one and save it, its name is added to a hidden list stored on your hard drive. Every hour, File History examines this list of new and modified files and makes a backup copy of them, then empties the list ready to start again. All this happens silently in the background, so you'll never be aware there's anything going on. In this way, your backups are never more than an hour out of date.

Example: you mess up a file

There's a clever twist to this, though, and it explains the word 'history' in the name of this feature. Let's say that you created a new document two days ago. Yesterday, you opened it again to do some more work on it, and you unknowingly deleted a vital part of it. Today, you've just opened it again and realised your mistake.

File History still has older versions of it

Of course, File History would have made a backup of yesterday's mucked-up version of the document, so you might expect to have lost the 'clean' copy from the day before. But with File History, that doesn't happen: it has kept both versions of the document, and you can recover the version you want.

And, as you continue to work on the document over the coming days and weeks, File History will take and keep a new copy of it whenever it changes. In other words, it maintains a 'history' of all the various versions of all your files so that you can always get back to the version you want. The only constraint is how much space you have available to store all these copies, which we'll come to in a moment.

Which files does File History back-up? Essentially, everything stored in your personal folder, the folder in **C:\Users\[your name]**. That includes your Documents, Pictures, Music and Videos folders (along with one or two others such as your Downloads, Favourites and OneDrive folders), and these are probably where you store all your files.

If you've created folders anywhere else which you'd like to be backed-up, you can tell File History to include those too, and I'll show you how a little later.

What do you need?

You must use a separate drive

There's never any point in storing backups on your main hard drive: if that were to fail, you've lost your backups too, just when you need them most! For this reason, File History insists you use a separate drive, and the best choice is to use an external hard drive that connects to your PC via a USB cable.

An external hard drive is best

You can buy a 120 GB external hard drive for around £20, or a much larger 1 TB drive (almost 10 times the size) for

around £40. The larger the drive, the better, since you'll be able to keep more versions of all your files for longer. That said, unless you keep a lot of very big files – videos in particular – a 120 GB drive should be quite large enough for the job.

The external drive doesn't have to be used solely for your File History backups: you can use it to store other files as well, and File History will happily just use whatever space remains. So, if you already have an external hard drive which isn't empty but does have plenty of free space, you can use that rather than buying another. Similarly, you could pay the extra for a higher-capacity drive and use it to store other files along with your File History backups.

You could use a flash drive…

An alternative, if you prefer, is to use a USB flash drive. It's a more expensive way of buying storage space, but it has the dual benefits of being much more compact and not needing to be plugged into a mains socket. A 128 GB flash drive costs around £25–30.

…or a memory card

Yet another alternative is to use a memory card if your PC has a built-in card reader. This is a little more expensive again, with a 128 GB memory card costing about £30–35.

Get File History Set Up and Working

Ready to start using File History

You're equipped with a nice roomy external hard drive (or a flash drive or memory card), and you're ready to get File History set up and working on your PC. Just follow the straightforward steps. (For simplicity, I'm going to assume you're using an external hard drive; if you're not, just mentally substitute 'flash' drive' or 'memory card' wherever I refer to your external hard drive in the steps.)

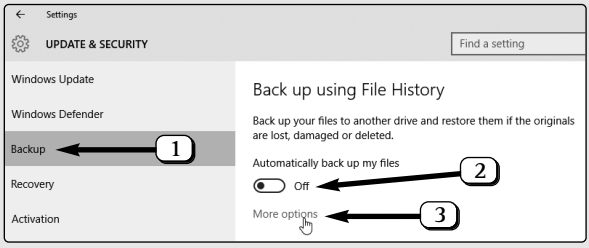
1. If you haven't done so already, plug your external hard drive into a mains socket and connect it to a USB socket on your PC. If this is the first time you've used the drive, wait while Windows identifies it and sets up the necessary driver software to get it working. After a few seconds you'll see a message that the drive is ready to use.

Open the Settings app

2. Open the Start menu and click on **Settings**.
3. When the Settings window opens, click the **Update & security** icon.
4. At the left of the window, click on **Backup** (1).
5. On the right, do you see a + sign followed by the words **Add a drive**? If you do, jump to step 6 below.

Tell Windows to stop using the drive it's chosen

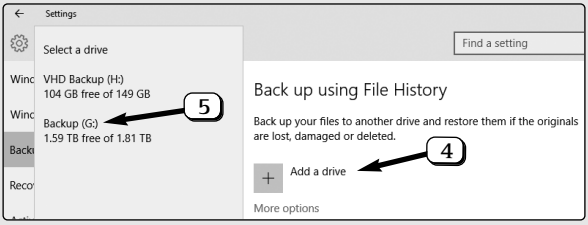
Instead, do you see the words **Automatically back up my files** and a switch set to **Off** (2)? If you do, it means that Windows has already chosen one of your PC's drives to use for File History; the trouble is, we can't be certain it's the one you intended to use! Let's make absolutely sure: click on **More options** (3), then scroll to the bottom of the page that appears. Click the button marked **Stop using drive**, then go back to the main Backup page you just left by clicking the arrow in the extreme top-left corner of the window.



Choose the drive you want for your backups

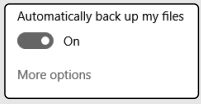
6. Click the words **Add a drive** beside the + sign (4) and a panel headed **Select a drive** pops up. This panel

lists the drives on your PC which are suitable for use with File History. There's quite likely only one drive listed here – your external hard drive – which makes this step easy. If there are two or more, identify the drive you intended to use. (An external hard drive will usually be named 'Local Disk'; a flash drive or memory card is usually named 'Removable Disk'. In the screenshot below, I'm using a drive I've previously named 'Backup'.)



File History is now switched on

7. When you've identified the drive you plan to use for File History, click it (5). When you do this, the panel will disappear. In place of the words 'Add a drive', you'll now see the words 'Automatically back up my files' and an On/Off switch set to **On**. That's it – the File History feature is now up and running. Don't close this window just yet, though: in a moment, we'll look at some of the options you may want to tweak.



File History is now making its first backup of all your files, and this could take several hours (depending on how many files you have). However, this happens entirely in the background: you can carry on using your PC in the normal way and it won't slow you down at all.

Likewise, when you're ready to stop work and shut down your PC, just go ahead and do it: File History will simply carry on next time you start the computer. As I mentioned earlier, part of the beauty of File History is that you can leave it to take care of itself!

Adjust File History options and choose folders to backup

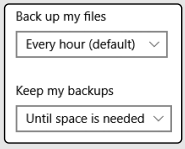
Check the other options

There's one option for File History I recommend chang-ing, and a couple of other things you might like to adjust, so let's have a look at those now. Follow these steps:

1. Just below that On/Off switch, click on **More options**.
2. Near the top of the page that appears, you'll find the following two options:

Hourly backups should be fine

- **Back up my files**: this lets you choose how often File History should check for new and edited files and make backups of them. I suggest leaving this set at **Every hour (default)**, but you might like to choose a shorter period (such as **Every 30 minutes**) to reduce the amount of work you could possibly lose. There's nothing to be gained by choosing a longer period than every hour.



Set File History to do everything itself!

- **Keep my backups**: here, File History proposes to keep your backups 'Forever'. With this setting, if your external hard drive became full, you'd have to 'clean it up' by choosing which backups to delete, and that's a pain. My suggestion is to open this drop-down list and choose **Until space is needed**. This way, File History deletes your oldest backups auto-matically when it needs space to add new ones, saving you the bother of doing it yourself.

Folders that don't need to be backed up?

3. A little further down, you'll see the heading **Back up these folders**, leading to a list of all the folders File History will backup. If there's a folder in this list you don't want to include in the backups, you could tell File History not to bother with it: just click the folder's name and then click the **Remove** button that appears to its right. However, unless you're really anxious to conserve space on your backup drive, there's no good reason to do that.

Any other folders you want to include?

4. Do you store any files in folders other than those in this list? If you do, you can tell File History to keep backups of those folders too. To do that, click the words **Add a folder**; in the dialog that appears, navigate to the folder you want to backup, click it once to select it (or double-click it to open it) and then click the **Choose this folder** button at the bottom of the dialog. This folder will be added to the list. You can repeat this step as often as you like to add more folders.

Done

5. Click the **x** button in the top-right corner of the Settings window to close it.

From now onwards, as I mentioned, you can forget about File History until the time comes that you need to use it to recover a file from your backups.

If you ever want to, you can disconnect your backup drive from your PC. However, be sure to do it safely: open File Explorer (by pressing ⊞ + E), click on **This PC** at the left of the window, then right-click your backup drive's icon and choose **Eject** and wait for a notification that it's safe to remove the drive. While the drive is disconnected, File History will continue working, but it will keep copies of your files in a temporary location on your main hard disk. Next time

you connect your backup drive, those copies will be added to your backups. If you leave the drive disconnected for a few days, you'll see a pop-up message saying 'Reconnect your File History drive'. Do that, and at some point File History will update your backups. If you'd like to speed things along (perhaps because you want to disconnect the drive again afterwards), you can go back to the Settings app, click on **Update & security**, then **Backup**, then **More options** and click the **Back up now** button.

How to Recover a Lost or Damaged File

You need to find a file or folder

Disaster has struck! You've somehow deleted a file or a folder, or you've just discovered that a file has become damaged in some way. Except that it shouldn't be a disaster at all, just an inconvenience: thanks to File History, you should be able to get it back again with a few clicks. Exactly how you do it depends on whether the file has been deleted or not:

- If a file (or a folder) does seem to have vanished, use Method 1 below to get it back.
- If you still have the file, but it's been mucked up, use Method 2 on page 12 to find an older version of it.

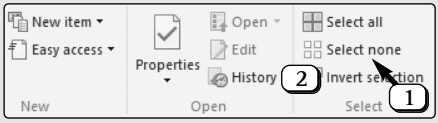
Method 1: recover a deleted file or folder

Make sure nothing is selected

1. Open File Explorer by pressing (Win) + (E).
2. In the File Explorer window, make your way to the folder in which your lost file or folder used to be.
3. Make sure there are no files or folders selected in this window. To make absolutely sure, you can click the **Select none** button (1) in the 'Select' group on the **Home** tab of the Ribbon.

Open the File History window

4. Now, in the 'Open' group on the Ribbon, click the **History** button (2).

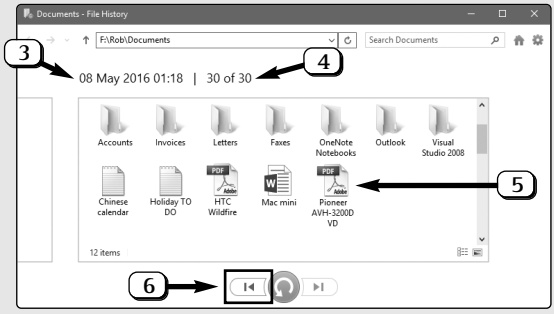


It shows the latest backup of this folder

5. Now you'll see a window like the one pictured below, which shows File History's most recent backup of this folder. Near the top, you'll see the date on which this backup was made (3) and the total number of backups there are of this folder (4), and the large box (5) lists all the files and folders that are contained in this backup.

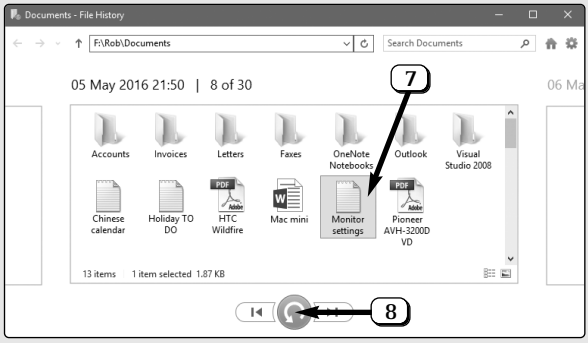
Step through older backups

6. Can you see the file or folder you've lost? If not, you need to check an older backup, so click the **Previous version** button (6) to step back in time. Still not there? Click the same button again to step back further.



Restore the lost file or folder

7. It may take a few clicks of that **Previous version** button, but eventually you'll have stepped back far enough that you reach a backup taken at a time when your lost file or folder did still exist. When you find it, click once to select it (7) and click the circular green **Restore to original location** button (8).



Done!

8. Quick as a flash, another File Explorer window opens showing the contents of the folder you opened in step 2, and you'll see that it now contains the file or folder you'd lost: File History has just recovered it for you. You can now close the File History window you've been using for the last few steps, and one (or both) of the open File Explorer windows.

Method 2: find an earlier version of a file

You need to recover an old version of a file

In this situation, you haven't actually lost a file: it still exists, and you can still find it. However, for one reason or another, you want to find an older version of it. Perhaps you've mucked it up in some way, or you've accidentally saved a different document over the top of it to replace it. Alternatively, perhaps you'd just like to see how the file has changed since you began work on it. Whatever the reason, follow these steps:

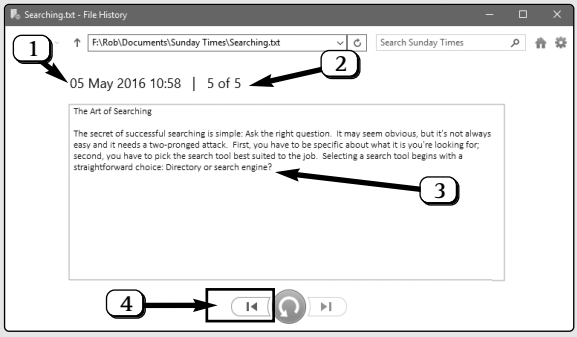
1. Open File Explorer by pressing ⊞ + E.
2. In the File Explorer window, make your way to the folder containing the file. When you find the file, click it once to select it.

Open File History

3. In the 'Open' group on the Ribbon's **Home** tab, click the **History** button.

You may see a preview of this version of the file

4. Now you'll see the File History window for the file you selected in step 2. Near the top of the window you'll see the date and time of the latest version of this file (1) and the number of versions that exist (2). In the box below (3), you'll see either of two things:
   - If Windows can display a preview of this file, you'll see it displayed.
   - Unfortunately, Windows can't preview every type of file. In that case, you'll just see the words **This version can't be previewed** and an **Open** button.



Look at previous versions to find the one you want

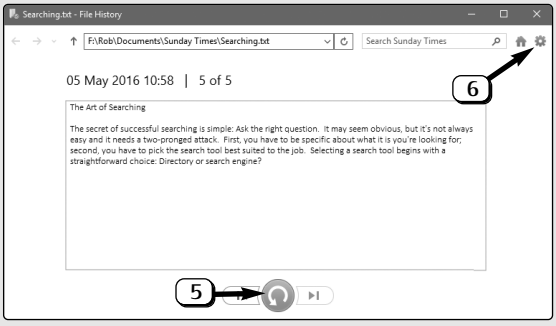
5. If you are seeing a preview of this file, is it the version you want to recover? If not, click the **Previous version** button (4) to step back to the previous version of the file. Keep doing this until you arrive at the version you want.

   If you're not seeing a preview, click the **Open** button. Windows will start whichever program is needed to display this file and show it to you. Is it the version you want? If not, close the program that just opened,

click the **Previous version** button (4) to step back to the previous version and click **Open** again to look at this version, and so on. When you do find the version you want, close the program that opened so that you're back at the File History window again.

Save the older version to a different folder

6. At this point, you've found the version you want of the file and you're looking at the File History window. One option to recover it is to replace the current version with this one (by clicking the green circular **Restore to original location** button (5) and then choosing **Replace the file in the destination**). However, the safer option is to keep both by saving the old version somewhere different: click the cog-shaped icon in the top-right corner of the window (6) and choose **Restore to** from the menu that appears. In the dialog that opens, navigate to a folder in which to save this version of the file and click the **Select Folder** button. The file will be saved to the folder you've chosen, keeping its current name.



Done!

You've finished! Windows now opens the folder to which the file was restored so that you can easily open the file if you want to. You can now close the File History window you were using.