



## ComputerActive Magazine Avoid PC Disasters

Windows won't start. There are faults on the hard disk. Files have disappeared and the computer says there's no modem when it's right in front of you! Here's what to do when disaster strikes.

Many of us have become more and more reliant upon a computer for work, hobbies and home use, so when a major problem hits the PC, we can be left scrambling in the dark for a solution. When the computer doesn't show any signs of life after switching on, or refuses to start Windows. If important files have simply disappeared into cyberspace or been accidentally deleted, panic can set in.

If you're afflicted by a PC problem you can't resolve then you'd be glad you picked up this issue because over the following six pages you'll find the Computeractive disaster-recovery programme.

### Lost Files

Essential files can sometimes go missing and be hard to find or retrieve. Accidentally deleting a file is one of the common causes. Luckily, the versions of Windows dating as far back as 95, to the latest XP, all store deleted files in a Recycle Bin that's displayed on the **Windows Desktop**. By opening the Recycle Bin, you can see any files that have been deleted. To retrieve a file you didn't want to delete, right click on it in the Recycle Bin and choose Restore, or **drag and drop** it into a folder such as My Documents.

If the missing file isn't stored in the Recycle Bin, and you know you've accidentally deleted it, there may still be a chance of recovering it. When a file is deleted, it isn't completely removed. The main contents of the file are retained, but this can be overwritten if the computer stores another file over it. Older versions of Windows and in the days of DOS (versions 5 to 6.22), a program called Undelete was used to find deleted files and attempt to recover them. Windows 95 and later version don't have such a program, but there are plenty of similar programs available on the internet.

Programs such as Active Undelete and File Rescue Plus 3.0 can scan hard drives, floppy disks, CDs and memory cards for deleted files. File Rescue can scan **clusters** and recover pictures, music files and video. Once a deleted file is found, details concerning its condition and whether it can be recovered are displayed. All you have to do is select it and click on the recover button (see separate instructions on recovering a file using File Rescue Plus 3.0).

Sometimes, a deleted file may be successfully recovered, but it cannot be opened. Trying different recovery programs may result in a successful recovery.

Some recovery programs are designed to be installed after a disaster such as hard drive errors have happened, whereas others are best installed first for use when a

disaster happens. Fortunately, most of these programs have a free trial option, so you can try before you buy.

## Program Problems

If a program refuses to open, displaying a message that a particular file is missing, a recovery program may save the day. Also try a search of your computer using the Windows Search or Find. There are several methods of opening this program. The quickest is to right click on the Start menu and choose Search (Find for early version of Windows). After the program has opened, enter a name for the file you are looking for, make sure the correct drive is displayed and click on Search or Find Now. It may take a few minutes to search your computer and find any files or folders with the name you entered. Any files or folders found will be displayed in a list including their location and date (last modified). If you want to take a file and copy it into a folder for a particular program, right click on it and choose Copy. Then, use My Computer or Windows Explorer to locate the folder of the program you want to paste it into. Once you've found the correct location, click on the Edit menu and choose Paste.

If after retrieving a missing file, a program still won't open, the simplest solution is to either re-install the program or run a repair. Some programs, such as Microsoft Office, can be repaired by inserting the installation CD into the computer's CD drive. The CD will automatically run and find that the program has already been installed. A menu screen will appear with choices to remove programs, install more programs or repair programs. By selecting the repair option, the CD should inspect the installed programs and look for any problems such as missing files.

Windows XP also has a repair option. By inserting the installation CD, a repair option will appear on a menu screen whereby Windows XP can be checked and missing files repaired or reinstalled.

Where a program doesn't have a repair facility, a reinstallation of the software is the quickest answer. You may want to uninstall the software first and always backup any files created with the program. To uninstall a program, click on the Start menu, choose Settings, then Control Panel. From the screen that appears, open the icon labelled Add/Remove Programs. A list of programs to uninstall will appear. If the one you want is listed, select it, then click on the Remove button (Add/Remove for earlier Windows versions). Follow the instructions on screen. Once the program has been uninstalled, close the Control Panel, then use the program's installation CD to reinstall it.

Reinstalling software can sometimes clear up problems such as error messages where the program needs to close. If this doesn't fix the problem, you can look into the causes of the error by running a program called Dr Watson, which is supplied with Windows. To start the program, click on the Start menu and choose Run. From the box that appears enter drwtsn32 (drwatson for earlier versions of Windows). Eventually, Dr Watson will appear. It looks complicated, but from the list of Application Errors, the program causing trouble should be listed. If it is listed, select it and click on the View button. Another box will appear with information concerning the error that occurred. If you contact technical support for the program, the information displayed here may help.

Programs that are possibly conflicting with others or causing problems for the running of your computer, can be ‘switched off’ if they are running in the background. Some of these programs are displayed as small icons next to the clock on the **Windows taskbar** (usually in the bottom right corner of the screen). You can usually right click on one of these icons and choose to Exit or Close. Holding down the Ctrl and Alt keys on the keyboard, then pressing Delete, opens the Windows Task Manager, whereby you can select a program and click on the End Task button.

Some of the programs that run in the background and always open when Windows starts, can be switched off permanently, so you don’t have to manually close them each time you switch on your computer. This may also help to resolve any conflicts, which are causing program errors or other problems. To permanently switch off a program, click on the Start menu and choose Run. From the box that appears, enter the word msconfig, then click on OK. After a few seconds, a System Configuration Utility box will appear. Click on the Startup tab. A list of programs will appear. Any programs with tick marks are opened when Windows opens. Remove any tick marks from programs you suspect are causing problems, but make a note of which ones you un-tick. Click on OK then restart the computer to see if these changes have made any improvements.

When restarting a computer in Windows XP after making changes using the System Configuration Utility, a message box may appear warning you have made changes to the way Windows starts and consequently Windows is starting in Diagnostic or Selective Startup Mode. Add a tick mark to the option stating Don’t show this message... then click on OK. The message will not appear, but if you want to reverse any of the changes made to the System Configuration Utility, return to the program via the Start menu and choose Run.

### Safe Mode

When Windows struggles or even refuses to open, there are a couple of solutions to get you up and running in the short run. The first suggestion is called Safe Mode. This enables Windows to open, but most of your programs will not run, so you can rescue any important files before taking further action.

The option to start Windows Safe Mode will sometimes appear if your computer has crashed and you’ve had to restart it by switching it off, then on again. If such an option does not appear and you cannot start Windows, try pressing F5 on the keyboard when the computer starts (you may need to press it a few times). A list of options on starting Windows will appear. Use the arrow keys on the keyboard to select Safe Mode. There are various Safe Mode options (e.g. with networking for an internet connection), but you may want to try the simplest one first. Press Enter to continue and open Windows in Safe Mode. If successful, Windows will open and the words Safe Mode will be displayed in the corners of the screen. For Windows XP, a message box will appear with the option to use System Restore to revert the computer’s settings to a previous time and hopefully resolve any problems caused by recent changes. This may solve your computer problems, so click on the No button in this message box and follow the instructions on screen. If you don’t want to use System Restore, click on Yes instead.

Whilst running in Safe Mode, programs such as the System Configuration Utility (msconfig) can be run to select or un-tick startup programs. Diagnostic programs such as Dr Watson can be run to see details of any problems.

If your computer can only start in Safe Mode, there may be a virus, software or hardware problem. Anti-Virus programs such as Norton can be run from the installation CD after starting the computer to see if a virus is preventing Windows from opening. Just insert the installation CD into the computer's CD drive upon start up.

Software problems can be resolved using the suggestions we've supplied, but if the problem still exists, a complete re-installation of Windows may be the answer. You can use Safe Mode to backup any important files, then begin re-installing. Windows XP enables you to insert the installation CD when starting the computer and begin a new installation. For earlier versions of Windows, see the workshops in issues 108-110 for re-installing Windows (issue 111 covers repairing and reinstalling XP).

Suspected hardware problems can be resolved in Safe Mode. When an internal piece of computer equipment fails, such as a sound card, the computer may refuse to start normally, but can start in Safe Mode. Suspect equipment can be disabled, then Windows restarted to see if this equipment is to blame. This is often a process of elimination so disable one piece of hardware at a time.

To disable something, right click on My Computer and choose Properties. From the dialogue box that appears, click on Hardware tab and select Device Manager (just click on the Device Manager tab for earlier versions of Windows). A list of your computer's hardware will appear. Click on the plus symbols to expand sections of hardware. Once you've found the suspect hardware, you probably won't be able to test it in Safe Mode, so right click on it and choose Disable (for earlier Windows, choose Properties and look for a Disable option to select and tick).

After disabling a piece of hardware in Device Manager, a red cross will appear next to it for Windows XP. You can now close Device Manager and try to normally restart the computer. If the computer restarts normally, the disabled hardware is to blame and needs replacing. If the computer still refuses to start normally, return to Safe Mode, open the Device Manager and Enable (same steps) the hardware you disabled, then choose another piece of hardware.

### Simple Solutions First

When it comes to hardware problems and equipment not working or recognised by the computer, don't forget the simple solutions, such as checking the equipment is switched on and connected. Check all connections are secure and correct. A black on off switch at the back of the computer (usually has I O markings next to it) has been the cause of much colourful language when the computer won't even flicker into life and the start button has been jabbed several times. General electrical problems such as a blown fuse shouldn't be overlooked.

If your computer won't connect to the internet using a modem, plug a normal telephone into it and see if you can hear the dial tone. Check all the connections to the modem. Also check the settings for dialing up to the internet (telephone number, username and password). Some of these settings can be checked when trying to connect to the internet (username and password). Other settings can be checked by opening the Control Panel (click on the Start menu, choose Settings, Control Panel), followed by the Internet Options icon. From the dialogue box that appears, select the Connections tab, then select your internet connection account and click on the Settings button. Check the details displayed are correct.

Recording sound through a microphone that's connected to the computer often doesn't work because Windows has muted the mic! Yes, it happens and can be resolved by clicking on the Start menu, choosing Programs, Accessories, Entertainment and then Sound Recorder. From the program that appears, click on the Edit menu choose Audio Properties, then check the settings for the microphone or for recording sound.

In issue 159 of Computeractive, we covered cleaning your computer. Overheating leading to component failure or equipment switching itself off, is often caused by a build up of dust, which limits the cooling capabilities of hardware. Get the vacuum out and see if it helps.

Drivers for hardware can sometimes be the cause of a problem. These are programs used to operate a piece of equipment and can be viewed through the aforementioned Device Manager. Right click on the hardware listed in Device Manager and select Properties. From the dialogue box that appears, you can see if there are any problems with the hardware. There is also an option to update the driver, which may help (a connection to the internet is usually required). In issue 153 of Computeractive, we covered a workshop on resolving problems with Windows 98 drivers.

Major problems such as the computer not showing a glimmer of life when switched on should start with the obvious. Make sure the socket you are plugged into is working. Has the fuse in the plug for the computer's power lead blown? If you have another cable, use that instead. Is the onn/off switch at the back of the computer switched to on ( I )? A blown power supply unit is a common cause of computers that refuse to start. It's cheap to fix and if you're familiar with opening up a computer – warranty issues notwithstanding – you should be able to fit a new one. Otherwise, most local computer shops can help you out for around £40.

Other hardware fixes such as changing a faulty or failing hard disk and replacing RAM are similarly straightforward if you know your way around the insides of a PC. Some of our workshops have covered replacing such items, but don't take on something you are completely unsure of. A local computer shop is a safer solution if you are at all unsure.

I know there's an awful lot that could be covered but the word count is limited and we want to be able to sum up this feature's content with a few bullet points that list the major benefits within: Clear virus infections! Restore lost or damaged files! Repair Windows! Fix faulty equipment!

## Conclusion

When a major computer disaster hits you, you're often left stewing over the many 'if only' scenarios as you desperately try to recover lost files and get your computer up and running again. Naturally, some disasters can be avoided with up to date virus checkers, regular backups and regular maintenance. If your work is reliant upon a computer, have a contingency plan at the ready such as a second computer, so you can quickly transfer your files and continue working.

Some computer problems are unlucky and often difficult to resolve. Working through a problem slowly and carefully is the best approach, making notes of errors, screen messages and symptoms. You can then feed this information back to anyone trying to help you.

Computer problems can be frustrating, but help is available and with this guide to recovery, you should be able to find a solution.

Rob Hawkins.

The Microsoft Knowledge Base is a virtual font of information for the resolution of common (and not-so-common) PC problems. It includes thousands of articles on resolving computer problems.

Microsoft's Knowledge Base (called KB at times) can be accessed over the internet by going to [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com), clicking on Support down the left side of the screen and choosing Knowledge Base from the menu that appears. From the screen that appears, you can search for articles relating to a particular problem or piece of software. There are drop down lists to specify software, boxes to enter keywords to search for and options to reduce the amount of older out of date articles. Click on the Green Go button to see if the Knowledge Base can find any articles to help. A list of results will appear and you can select an article to read it in full.

In issue 160 of Computeractive (pages 70-75), we covered the help facilities available at [www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com) including a separate piece on the Microsoft Knowledge Base on page 73.

### The best cure

Prevention is always better than cure and when it comes to computers, this is also the case. Use an up to date virus checker and **firewall** to prevent viruses and hackers attacking your computer. Back up your important files onto a CD, or use backup programs such as Microsoft Backup. Programs such as Norton Ghost (£44.99) and Drive Image (see workshops in issue 149 and 150) can be used to backup an entire hard disk, which in the event of all data and programs being lost, can be used to quickly transfer files and get your computer up and running again. Even programs such as Roxio Easy Media Creator 7 for £70 (see review in issue 159, page 26) can be used to back up onto DVD.

Windows XP uses a System Restore facility, which enables the computer's settings to be returned to a previous time. This is useful if some changes have been made causing the computer to be faulty, but it doesn't always resolve problems. Symantec's GoBack (was owned by Roxio) behaves in a similar fashion and is also useful for pre-XP versions of Windows. This is only available with Norton System Works, which includes Norton Anti-Virus and other protection programs for around £50.

### Ask an expert

The internet is awash with websites and discussion groups willing to share and resolve your PC problems. Computeractive's forum (discussion group) lists many problems posted by our readers, whereby other readers and visitors to the site can provide advice and help. To access the forum, go to <http://forums.computeractive.co.uk>. To post your own problems, you'll need to register, but you can read the problem pages without registering.

Microsoft's Product Support Newsgroups are another discussion group or forum where problems can be shared and hopefully resolved. We covered this on page 71 of issue 160.

Other websites to consider for help include Virtual DR ([www.virtualdr.com](http://www.virtualdr.com)), where you can look for and post problems, but sometimes disappear off track with links to pages containing other information. The popular Win Drivers website has a forum at <http://forums.windrivers.com>, which can be rather technical, but is well organised and contains informative discussions.

Some of the disadvantages of using a forum concern the advice received. It may not be accurate, or you may not even understand it. Don't be afraid to ask.

### Useful Contacts

Norton Ghost and System Works – [www.symantec.co.uk](http://www.symantec.co.uk)

PowerQuest Drive Image –

Roxio Easy Media Creator – [www.roxio.com](http://www.roxio.com)

Software Shelf (File Rescue Plus 3.0) – Tel 01342 310950. Website:

[www.softwaresshelf.co.uk](http://www.softwaresshelf.co.uk) - free evaluation copy of File Rescue Plus 3.0 available for retrieving up to two files. Full license costs £27.57 to download.

Active @ Undelete – [www.active-undelete.com](http://www.active-undelete.com). File recovery software. Demo version available to download and install, but can only retrieve files to 64K. Full version costs US\$39.95 to download.

### Step by Step Guide to Using File Rescue Plus 3.0 (Evaluation)



An evaluation copy of File Rescue Plus 3.0 can be downloaded from [www.softwaresshelf.co.uk](http://www.softwaresshelf.co.uk) and installed on your computer. You can then recover two files using the following instructions. A full license to recover more files costs £27.57.

1. After downloading and installing File Rescue, open the program by clicking on the Start menu, choosing Programs, Software Shelf, File Rescue Plus. From the opening **dialogue box**, select the first option to perform a deleted file scan. Click on OK.
2. Within the next dialogue box, choose the drive you want to scan. If you are looking for a particular file, you can enter its name. Click on OK to continue and open the main screen for File Rescue.
3. The main screen in File Rescue lists all the deleted files the program can find on the drive chosen in step 2. Each file is accompanied by a last modified date, size and condition status (good or poor).
4. To rescue a file, select it and click on the rescue button at the top left corner of the screen. A message box may appear concerning recovery – click on OK. When a Save As dialogue box appears, choose a location to save your file and change its name if you want to. Click on Save.
5. After saving the file, a message box will appear – click on OK. Then use Windows Explorer or My Computer to open and check the recovered file. Some data may be lost.

### **Jargon Buster**

Windows Desktop

Drag and drop

Dialogue box

Clusters

Windows taskbar

Captions (jpg files are photographs and are too large for emailing when converted to TIF)

ActiveUndelete.tif – “Free demo version of Active Undelete allows files up to 64K to be retrieved. Full version costs \$39.95 – about £25.”

F5safeMode.jpg – “If your computer won’t start Windows, try pressing F5 after switching it on, then select to start up in Safe Mode.”

SafeModeBox.jpg – “Safe Mode usually gets a sick computer started. Windows XP includes a System Restore option to use older computer settings, which may not have been damaged.”

SaveModeDesktop.jpg – “Once in Safe Mode, files can be accessed, but most programs will not run. So you can backup any important files, then consider reinstalling Windows.”

Remove.tif – “To uninstall a program, click on the Start menu, choose Settings, then Control Panel. Open the Add/Remove Programs icon for a list of programs to uninstall.”

DrWatson.tif – “Details concerning program errors can be viewed using Dr Watson, which is supplied with Windows.”

Msconfig.tif – “Windows System Configuration Utility can be used to switch off programs when Windows starts up. This may resolve a start up problem or program conflict.”

MsconfigMessage.tif – “After using the Windows System Configuration Utility in Windows XP and restarting the computer, the message box shown here will appear. Add a tick mark to the option at the bottom to make sure it doesn’t reappear.”

Disable.tif – “Faulty hardware can sometimes be the cause of a computer not starting or running properly. Windows Device Manager can be used to disable your computer’s hardware.”