# Chapter 1

# First Things First: Why You Should Clean

### In This Chapter

▶ Determining whether your system needs cleaning

▶ Balancing the pros and cons of cleaning

▶ Focusing your cleaning efforts

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*M*y system isn't messed up, is it? (What? Me worry?)

Yes, you should worry. Or, you should at least be aware that you may need to worry. Computer systems easily and quickly become untidy and messed up. If you don't clean yours, you run the risk of big problems down the road.

Do I really need to point out the benefits of a clean computer system? (I do — a little later in this chapter.) Does someone need to come into your house and point out why you need to pick up your clothes, dust the furniture, wash the dishes, and tend to the dog? Probably not; you know that a clean house is healthful, inviting, and safe.

It's the same with computers. Over time, your computer can become cluttered with unused programs, unknown data, and unwanted visitors. With a little effort, you can clean your system so that it runs at top form, and you can breeze through your work faster and easier than you can in an unclean system. In addition, clean systems are more reliable, less prone to failure, and easier to protect from attack by malicious programs.

Before you can begin cleaning, however, you need to recognize the need to clean and why you should spend the time to do it.

# Telltale Signs of an Unclean Computer

How can you know if your system needs cleaning? I've compiled a list of several sure-fire signs that you need help (envision Jeff Foxworthy standing in front of your computer):

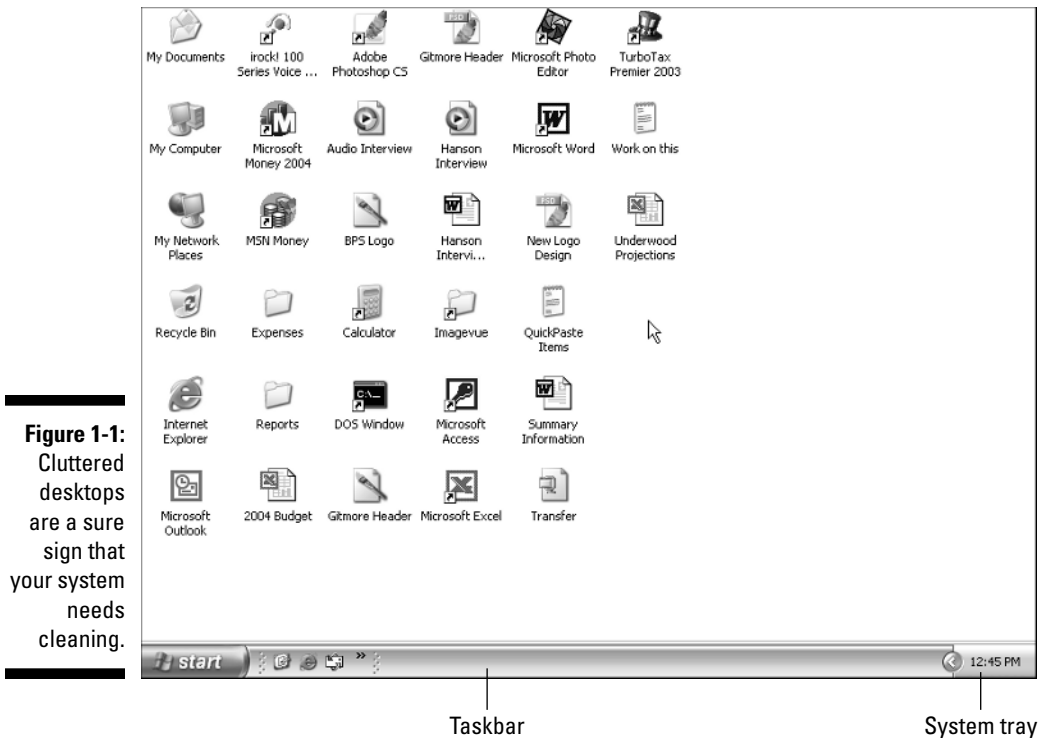You know you have a messed-up computer . . .

- ✔ If you have to leave a trail of breadcrumbs so you don't get lost finding your way through the options in your Start menu
- ✔ If every pop-up on your computer apologizes for bothering you and quietly closes on its own
- ✔ If you try to install a new program and the installation program reports your system to the Board of Health
- ✔ If you think *Defragment* is the name of a new rap song by Eminem (Yo!)
- ✔ If the only way to add more icons to your desktop is to get a larger desktop
- ✔ If you start the program to balance your checkbook, only to find that your son's illegal copy of Splinter Cell ate the last month's worth of transactions
- ✔ If someone mentions "backup" and chills run up and down your spine
- ✔ If virus software refuses to install itself on your system

Perhaps such observations aren't worthy of Jeff Foxworthy, but this list highlights those things that really are good indicators your computer needs cleaning. The next few sections detail some other obvious signs that you need help.

## The view from the desktop isn't pretty

Does your desktop look like the one shown in Figure 1-1? If so, you have problems. Maybe you bought into the old adage that a clean desk is a sign of a sick mind, and in the process lost your ability to effectively use your system. Whatever got you to this point, you need your Windows cleaned. Badly.

Your computer desktop is supposed to be a clean, inviting place where you store only a *few* icons of your most commonly used programs. For too many people, they become "catch-alls," repositories of every stray icon that comes their way.

Figure 1-1:
Cluttered
desktops
are a sure
sign that
your system
needs
cleaning.

Taskbar                                                                 System tray

**REMEMBER**

A cluttered desktop is a good sign that your entire PC is cluttered. The solution is to clean your system and rid yourself of all that mess.

If your desktop is as cluttered as the one shown in Figure 1-1 — and especially if it's even more cluttered — head to Chapter 12, where I give you some help regaining control.

## Traversing the Start menu jungle is an adventure

Can you imagine running Windows without the Start menu? Neither can I. The Start menu is indispensable to quickly and easily finding the programs you want to run.

At least, that's the way it's supposed to be.

On many systems that I've seen, the Start menu gets unorganized and cluttered with lots of programs the user seldom, if ever, uses. Figure 1-2 shows one such Start menu, just itching to be cleaned.

*TIP*

The Start menu is supposed to provide a convenient path to all the programs installed on your system. Over time, some paths are used more than others, and some paths become completely unused. Removing unused items from the Start menu and organizing what is left can make your system easier to use.

As you remove unused programs from your computer (which I show you how to do in Chapter 5), your Start menu will look better and better. When you really need to give your Start menu a makeover, Chapter 12 (where I discuss taking back control of the user interface) will be invaluable.

## Your PC is slower than molasses

I remember shortly after microwave ovens first came out (yes, I'm that old) watching my grandma use one to bake some potatoes. She would anxiously look through the oven's door and mumble "hurry up, hurry up."
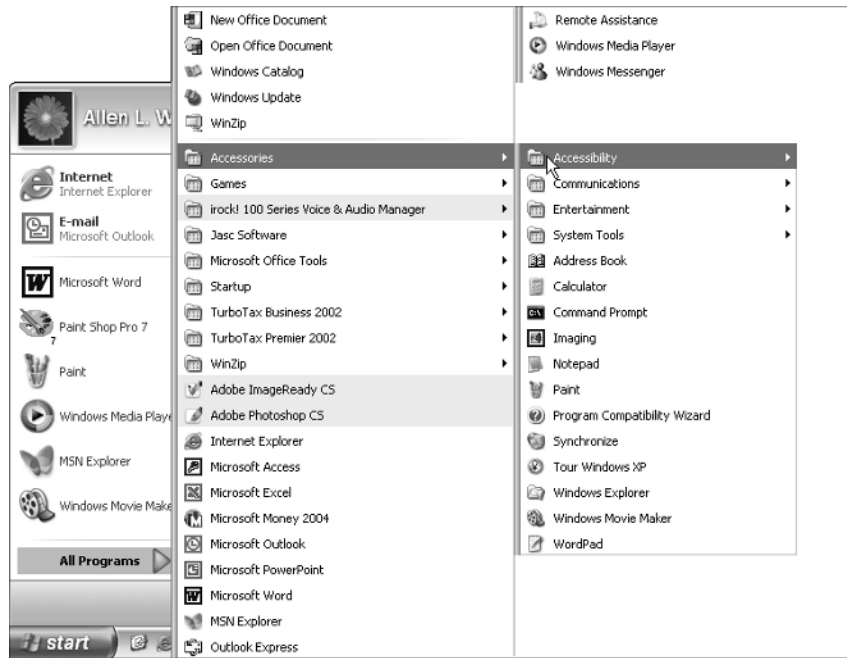


**Figure 1-2:**
Long, deep, and cluttered Start menus can hinder your work.

I chuckled about it then, but years later I find myself doing the same thing with my computer. When I got the computer, it seemed really, really fast. Now, after using it for a year or so, it seems to be slower than I remember it. Yes, it is still faster than doing things "the old way" (sort of like baking potatoes in a conventional oven), but I find myself talking to the computer, begging it to "hurry up."

*TIP*

If your PC seems slower than it should — particularly if it seems slower than when you first got it — then your system is a prime candidate for cleaning. Over time, the detritus that's collected during everyday use can start to bog down your computer. If you don't periodically banish that junk, it can affect the work you do. The change is typically slowly, ever so slowly, until you notice one day that your computer just doesn't run like it used to.

If you want to make your programs run faster, you're in luck because I show you how to do that in Chapter 4. To make Windows itself hum right along, check out Chapters 13 and 14, which cover getting the cobwebs out of Windows and making your file system run faster, respectively.

# You have files older than your dog

I've had my dog for just over eighteen months, which makes him ten or eleven years old in dog years, right? Does that mean he's been chewing up my son's shoes for eighteen months or eleven years? Hmmm. . . . Converting people years to dog years may be philosophically confusing, but there is nothing confusing about examining the age of the files on your computer. If you use My Computer or the Windows Explorer to look at the files on your computer, I'll bet you could find some that are three, five, or even ten years old.

I can hear you now: "Not on my system. I just got it a year ago, so I don't have anything as old as your dog." Wrong, bucko! Computer files tend to follow you around, over the years, without you even realizing it. For instance, computer files are commonly transferred from an old system to a new system. When transferred, the files retain their old file dates — they are old files.

You may also share files with other people in your office, family, or circle of friends. Place the files on your computer, and you may quickly forget about them. But they are there, aging like a not-so-fine wine, taking up space and adding to the general clutter of your system.

*REMEMBER*

A large number of old, old files are a sure sign that you need to clean your system. You can archive your data or create backups that allow you to remove unneeded data from your hard drive, freeing up space for other data and tasks. Chapter 7 gives you the straight scoop on how to keep only the data you need.

## Your system tray looks like a parking lot

The system tray is the area at the right side of your taskbar. Take a look at the bottom of your computer screen. Now, shift your eyes all the way to the right. You probably see the current time, and you may see a few icons. Even if you don't realize it, that's the system tray (refer to Figure 1-1).

In Windows XP, the system tray is a little deceiving because it hides some of the icons. Perhaps the folks in Redmond don't want you to be consciously aware of how cluttered this area can become. Don't let that stand in your way, however. If you click the small left-pointing arrow at the left side of the system tray, you see the entire contents of the system tray.

Each icon in the system tray represents a utility program that is currently running in your system. You may see icons for any number of programs. How many do you see? Five? Ten? More? Some programs that you install on your computer are a bit egotistical. They think they're so important that they deserve a place of honor in your system tray. When you install one of these egotistical programs, besides adding itself to your Start menu and your desktop, it stakes out prime ground in your system tray.

Clutter, clutter, clutter. If you have a bunch of icons in your system tray, your system is a prime candidate for cleaning. Get rid of a few of these babies, and you may find your system running leaner and faster than before.

Don't try to delete any of the system tray icons yet. Some of the icons will go away as you remove old programs. You also find out how to reclaim this prime area of your system by controlling what programs are run when your computer starts; Chapter 13 provides this important information.

# Cleaning Up: The Pros and Cons

If your system needs cleaning, you've come to the right place. *Cleaning Windows For Dummies* is a great resource that you can use to get your system back to near-new condition. If you're not convinced that your computer needs a good cleaning, then you're obviously a discerning person who needs to examine all the ins and outs of an issue before making a commitment. (That, or you're in denial and won't make a change until you're operating in crisis mode. Don't clean, and, I promise you, the crisis will come soon enough.)

If your mind works like mine — I know that is a scary thought for some — then you will want to examine the pros and cons of cleaning your system. Doing so can help provide the rationale for the cleaning work you do.

# The pros

You've finally reached the big time — the pros! Oh, sorry, wrong homonym. . . . In this instance, "the pros" mean *benefits*. Specifically, the benefits of cleaning up your system, which I list here:

- **Speed:** A clean system runs faster than one that needs cleaning. Do you remember when you first got your PC? You probably thought it ran very fast. If your system stays clean, you shouldn't notice it running any slower over time. Unfortunately, most systems don't stay clean and require your attention. Give it that attention — that is, do the cleaning — and your system can run just as fast as it did the day you got it.

- **Efficiency:** If you're using a clean system, you can get through your work faster, and you are therefore more efficient. A clean system doesn't make you immensely more efficient — if it did, the self-help publishing market would shrink dramatically. You can still get sidetracked playing games or arguing religion and politics on various message boards, but with a clean system you can do even those things more efficiently.

- **Reliability:** A huge benefit of a clean system is that it is more reliable than one that isn't. If you fail to clean your system, over time it goes from clean to cluttered to messed-up to unstable. Unstable systems crash. Unstable systems have a tendency to lose data. Unstable systems are a real pain. Clean your system, and you should see stability jump dramatically. No pain, big gain.

- **Stress reduction:** Do you like to sleep at night? Do you prefer having no worry? Believe it or not, having a clean system can reduce anxiety and provide peace of mind. How so? Consider the worry you would have if a virus infected your system, or if you weren't sure that the financial data on it was safe, or if you didn't know what programs were running on the system, or . . . . You get the idea. Worry comes in all shapes and sizes. If you clean your computer, you have a better handle on what's on your computer and how it's being used.

- **Economics:** Cleaning your computer can save you money — sometimes lots of money. I suspect that hard-drive clutter has helped boost the bottom line of hard drive manufacturers significantly over the past decade. Running low on space? Get a new drive. Computer running slow? Get a new system. Chances are, some of those new drives and new systems would have been unnecessary had the users done just a little housecleaning.

## The cons

Every coin has two sides, and unless you're a bunko victim, the two sides aren't the same. I'm no bunko artist, so I'm pleased to point out that doing a cleanup also has its negatives. You need to be aware of those negatives, right from the get-go:

- ✔ **Time-consumption:** Cleaning your computer takes time. You probably feel strapped for time right now, don't you? (Most people do.) Cleaning your computer can take anywhere from a trivial amount to a substantial amount of time. I've cleaned some systems — completely — in as little as two hours, while I've spent *days* cleaning other systems. How much time will your clean-up take? I can't answer that, but I can say be prepared for a time commitment and be patient — your time will pay off in the end when your computer is running more smoothly.

  Fortunately, you have some control over how and when to spend that time. You don't have to spend it all in a single block, although you could. You can spend the time over a period of days or weeks, as the time becomes available. Check out chapter 2, where I discuss setting up a cleaning schedule, which can help you manage your cleaning time.

- ✔ **The learning curve:** Part of the time required to do the cleanup is rooted in another drawback: the learning curve. Figuring out how to use some of the tools you use to clean takes time. If you're already comfortable with your computer and the cleaning tools, then your learning curve is lower than for those who are unfamiliar.

- ✔ **The bother:** I won't lie to you — cleaning up your computer can be a bother. If you approach the task as a chore, then it *will be* bothersome. But I encourage you to fight the urge to procrastinate cleaning; don't put it off as you might other bothersome tasks. To borrow a phrase, remember that it's not just a job — its an adventure. Try to overcome the "bother factor" by looking on it as a learning experience. If necessary, spread out the cleanup over several days so that you don't max out your stress level in a single session.

## Balancing pros and cons

You may come up with other pros and cons than those I present in the preceding two sections. Some may be specific to your particular situation. (Is your job in jeopardy if you don't clean up your computer?) If you write the pros on the left side of a sheet of paper and the cons on the right side, you can easily see how they balance out — and then determine which side wins.

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## Paying the price

If you're short on time, you may be tempted to pay someone else to clean your system. After all, you pay someone to clean your car, clean your office, clean your house, and clean your yard. Why not have someone else do your cleaning for you?

Why not, indeed. You certainly can have someone else clean your computer, but chances are good that you won't like the price. Plan on paying anywhere from $50 per hour to $150 per hour for computer cleaning. Do the math — if it takes two, four, six, or more hours to clean your computer, how much will you pay? Ouch!

Also, you should understand that cleaning isn't just a one-time thing. But if you change your behavior, you won't have to clean as often or pay as much in the future. You can't pay someone else to change your computer behavior. Because you can learn so much while you're cleaning, it is well worth your while to do the cleaning yourself, at least for the first time.

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In general, I think that the pros outweigh the cons by a significant amount (hence, this book). I'm guessing you think so, too; that's why you're reading this book. But you may need to work on timing, or you may need to work on attitude before you bring yourself to actually do it. Just keep in mind that having a clean computer is something that is beneficial in more ways than you can imagine.

# Keeping Your House Tidy

Just like keeping your house tidy takes concerted effort on your part, keeping your computer system clean takes effort also. Some people mistakenly think that caring for their computer should be as mindless and easy as caring for their TVs and don't even think about cleaning their computers. But if you've read this whole chapter, you now know you need to clean your system — and that there are benefits to cleaning it. So you're ready to jump right in and tackle the job. (You are ready, right?)

REMEMBER

I show you that you don't have to dread cleaning your system. Sure, this job takes some time, but it doesn't have to be an intimidating task. In fact, you can even clean your system over a period of weeks — a little here and a little there — and before you know it, it's done.

As you seek to clean up your system, the different areas you can focus on include

✓ **Your programs:** The entire purpose of your computer is to create an environment in which you can effectively use different programs. If your programs don't run well, the value of your computer decreases. If you

focus on cleaning up your programs or making them run faster (the focus of Chapters 3, 4, and 5), you immediately increase the value of your system.

✔ **Your data:** Chances are good that your programs eat, sleep, and breathe data. Programs need data to run, to fulfill their purpose in life. If your data is messed up, then your programs may just refuse to work properly. Managing data can be a monumental task, but doing so effectively will free up space on your hard drive and allow your programs to run faster. Head to Chapters 6 and 7 to find out more.

✔ **Your e-mail:** We live in a well-connected world. If you use e-mail (and who doesn't), then you can clutter up your system without even realizing it. Spam and viruses routinely bombard your system through e-mail. If you better manage your e-mail (I show you how in Chapters 8 and 9), you lessen clutter and make your system more secure.

✔ **Your Internet use:** E-mail isn't the only use for your Internet connection. As you browse around the Web, your system is routinely filled up with files you don't even know about. Whether these files are benign or harmful, they all add to the clutter of your system. If you pay attention to what's stored on your system, you can reduce the clutter and improve overall performance. Chapters 10 and 11 can help you tackle the Internet beast.

✔ **The operating system:** Ah, Windows. What can be said about Windows? Actually, quite a lot can be said — and not all of it bad! Windows is a great operating system, and one of its biggest strengths is its configurability. In Part IV, I show you ways to tweak and prod Windows into running faster than it ever did before.

There are also some advanced things you can do, such as tweaking your hardware (or adding new hardware), improving your security profile, and [shudder] diving into the Registry. Such endeavors (which I cover in Part V) are usually relegated to the last, after you have worked through the other cleaning areas. I recommend that you proceed into these areas with extreme caution.

How will you know when your system is finally clean? You'll know you've succeeded when your system runs smoother, faster, and more reliably than before. You'll know when you are able to finish your work quicker, without getting bogged down.