Chapter 1

What Is Windows Vista?

In This Chapter

- Getting to know Windows Vista
- Introducing the new features in Windows Vista

hances are, you've probably heard about Windows: the boxes and windows and mouse pointer that greet you whenever you turn on your computer. In fact, millions of people all over the world are puzzling over it as you read this book. Almost every new computer sold today comes with a copy of Windows preinstalled — cheerfully greeting you when first turned on.

This chapter helps you understand why Windows lives inside your computer and introduces Microsoft's latest Windows version, called *Windows Vista*.

What Is Windows Vista, and Why Are You Using It?

Created and sold by a company called Microsoft, Windows isn't like your usual software that lets you write term papers or send angry e-mails to mail-order companies. No, Windows is an *operating system*, meaning it controls the way you work with your computer. It's been around for more than 20 years, and the latest whiz-bang version is called *Windows Vista*.

Windows gets its name from all the cute little windows it places on your monitor. Each window shows information, such as a picture, a program that you're running, or a baffling technical reprimand. You can put several windows on-screen at the same time and jump from window to window, visiting different programs. You can also enlarge a window to fill the entire screen. (Hint: Double-click any window's topmost strip to fill the screen.)

Like the teacher with the whistle on the playground, Windows controls every window on your screen and each part of your computer. When you turn on your computer, Windows jumps onto the screen and supervises any running programs. Throughout all this action, Windows keeps things running smoothly, even if the programs start shoving each other around.

In addition to controlling your computer and bossing around your programs, Windows Vista comes with a bunch of free programs. Although your computer can run without these programs, they're nice to have. These programs let you do different things, like write and print letters, browse the Internet, play music, and even whittle down your camcorder's vacation footage into a three-minute short — automatically.

And why are you using Windows Vista? If you're like most people, you didn't have much choice. A few people escaped Windows by buying Apple computers (those nice-looking computers that cost more). But chances are, you, your neighbors, your boss, your kids at school, and millions of other people around the world are using Windows.

Windows Vista promises to keep its stranglehold on PCs for the following reasons:

- Microsoft took pains (and several years of work) to make Windows Vista the most secure version of Windows yet. (Just ask people who upgraded from previous versions.)
- ✓ Windows makes it easy for several people to share a single computer. Each person receives his or her own user account. When users click their names on the Windows opening screen, they see their *own* work just the way they left it. Vista adds new controls to allow parents to limit what activities their kids use the PC for, as well as how much of the Internet they can view.

- A new, automated version of Backup makes it easier to do what you should have been doing all along: Make copies of your important files every night.
- ✓ Finally, Vista's powerful new Search box feature means that it's not a disaster if you forget about where you stored your files. Just click the Start menu and type what that file contains in the Start menu's Search box: a few words in a document, the name of the band singing the song, or even the date you took that picture of Kelly at the office party.

Windows Vista: What's Neat and New



Microsoft releases a new version of Windows every few years. If you bought your PC between 2001 and 2005, you've probably grown accustomed to the frightening mechanics of Windows XP. That begs the nagging question, why bother upgrading to Windows Vista when Windows XP works just fine?

Actually, if Windows XP's running just fine, then you probably won't need Windows Vista. But Microsoft hopes the following improvements in Vista will push your hand toward your credit card.

Streamlined Start menu



The bright-blue Start button lives in the bottom-left corner of the desktop, where it's always ready for action. By clicking the Start button, you can start programs, adjust Windows Vista's settings, find help for sticky situations, or, thankfully, shut down Windows Vista and get away from the computer for a while.

Click the Start button once, and the first layer of menus appears, as shown in Figure 1-1.



Figure 1-1: The Start button in Windows Vista hides dozens of menus for starting programs and applications.

Your Start menu will change as you work, constantly updating itself to list your favorite programs on its front page. That's why the Start menu on your friend's computer is probably arranged differently than the Start menu on your computer. Here are a few things to remember about this menu:



✓ Your Documents, Pictures, and Music folders are always one click away on the Start menu. These folders are specially designed for their contents. The Pictures folder, for example, displays little thumbnails of your digital photos. The biggest perk to these three folders? Keeping your files in these logically named folders helps you remember where you stored them.



- ✓ Vista drops the "My" from the front of your Documents, Pictures and Music folders. But they're the same thing: Places for you to store your files.
- Windows thoughtfully places your most frequently used programs along the left side of the Start menu for easy point 'n' click action.
- ✓ See the words All Programs near the Start menu's bottom left? Click there, and yet another menu opens to offer more options. (That new menu covers up the first,



though; to bring back the first menu, simply click the word Back.)

- ✓ Spot something confusing on the Start menu? Hover your mouse pointer over the mysterious icon. Windows responds with a helpful explanatory message.
- ✓ Strangely enough, you also click the Start button when you want to *stop* using Windows. (You click either the Power button or Lock button along the Start menu's bottom right.)

Quick search

Instead of forcing you to search for your files time and again, Vista automatically remembers your files' locations. For example, search for every document mentioning "celery," and Vista lets you save the results as a Celery folder. Whenever you create new documents mentioning "celery," Vista automatically drops them into the Celery folder for easy retrieval.

Giving Vista a test run

Microsoft let software developers and other techies download Vista on May 23, 2006, and the general public can download it from Microsoft's Web site (www.microsoft.com/windowsvista). Although giving Vista a sneak peek may sound fun, Vista's quite a demanding piece of software. Here's what you need to run Vista on your PC:

Broadband Internet Connection. You must download a gargantuan 3GB file. That rules out dial-up connections.

DVD burner and software. Vista won't fit onto a CD. Your PC needs both a DVD burner and DVD burning software. (That software must know how to handle an *ISO* file — a way of

squeezing a DVD's contents into one file.)

An empty partition. Vista requires a special spot on your PC's hard drive known as a partition. If you're like most people, Windows XP already lives on your hard drive's only partition. That means you must either delete Windows XP and all your files or install Vista on a second hard drive

If you can't help yourself, download Vista at Microsoft's Web site. Although the download's no charge, don't think you're upgrading your PC for free: Vista still squirms with bugs, and Microsoft built-in a kill-switch that kicks in after several months.

Live taskbar thumbnails and other visual cues

Microsoft spent some time decorating Vista with a threedimensional look. When you can't find an open window, for example, hold down the Windows key and press Tab. All the open windows appear on your PC in a Flip 3D view, shown in Figure 1-2.

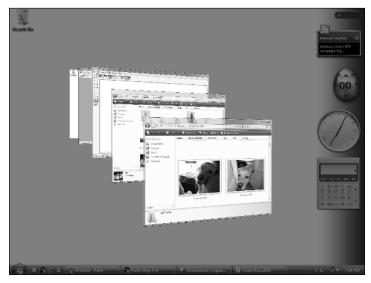


Figure 1-2: Press the Windows key and Tab to see a 3D-view of your currently open windows.

Hover your mouse pointer over any name listed on your desktop's taskbar, and Vista displays a thumbnail picture of that window's current contents, making the window you're looking for much easier to retrieve from the sea of programs.

Integrated multimedia experience

Vista's new version of Media Player sports streamlined, easier-to-use controls. The big star, however, is Vista's Media Center, which lets you watch television on your PC and even record shows onto your hard drive for later viewing.

Recording TV shows requires two important things, however: a TV tuner in your PC and the proper version of Vista. (Vista comes in a startling *five* versions.) Installing a TV tuner can be as simple as plugging a box into your PC's USB port or sliding a card inside your PC.

The Five Flavors of Vista

Windows XP came in two easy-to-understand versions: One for home, and one for businesses. Microsoft confuses things in Vista by splitting it into five different versions, each with a different price tag.

Luckily, only three versions are aimed at consumers, and most people will probably choose Windows Vista Home Premium. Still, to clear up the confusion, I describe all five versions in Table 1-1.

Table 1-1 The Five Flavors of Windows Vista	
What It Does	
Reminiscent of Windows XP Home Edition, this version leaves out Vista's fancier media features, such as DVD-movie burning, HDTV, TV recording, and other similar features. (You can still burn files to a DVD, though.) The backup program isn't automated, unfortunately, so you need to remember to back up your files.	
As a final blow, Microsoft left out Vista's Aero "glass" look shown in this book's color preview pages — Aero glass won't appear even if your PC's video is souped-up enough to handle the graphics.	
This version is Windows Vista Home Basic, but with the media features and the Aero glass look tossed back in. It targets people who watch TV on their PC or want to create DVDs from their camcorder footage. Plus, the backup program is automated, taking place whenever you want.	

(continued)

Table 1-1 <i>(continued)</i>		
The Version of Vista	What It Does	
Windows Vista Business	Just as with its brethren, Windows XP Professional, this aims at the business market. It includes the built-in fax program, for instance, something not found in either home version.	
Windows Vista Enterprise	This business market version contains even more tools, such as support for advanced computer setups.	
Windows Vista Ultimate	This version contains everything found in the Vista Home Premium and Vista Business versions. It's aimed at the wallets of hard-core PC users, such as gamers, people in the video industry, and similar people who spend their lives in front of their keyboards.	

Although five versions may seem complicated, choosing the one you need isn't that difficult. And because Microsoft stuffed all the versions on your Vista DVD, you can upgrade at any time simply by whipping out the credit card, visiting an online site, and downloading software that unlocks the features in a different version.

Which one's for you? Run through the following list to see what features are most important to you:

- If your PC can't display or record TV shows, and you don't want to make DVDs from your camcorder footage, then save a few bucks by sticking with Windows Vista Home Basic. It's fine for word processing, e-mail, and the Internet.
- ✓ If you want to burn DVDs and/or record TV shows on your PC, then pony up the cash for Windows Vista Home Premium.
- People who run Web servers on their PC and you'll know if you're doing it — will want Windows Vista Business.

- Dedicated gamers with hot-rod PCs will want Windows Vista Ultimate for its extra gaming tweaks. Plus, it has everything in the previous versions — there's no chance of missing a feature you spot on somebody else's PC.
- Computer techies who work for businesses will argue with their boss over whether they need Windows Business or Windows Enterprise versions.



That inexpensive **Vista Starter** version you may have heard about isn't sold in the United States. It's sold at reduced prices in developing nations like Malaysia. (It's not really a goodwill gesture as much as it's an attempt to reduce software piracy.)