

# Chapter 1

## What Is Windows 8?

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting to know Windows 8
  - ▶ Discovering the new features in Windows 8
  - ▶ Deciding whether to switch to Windows 8
  - ▶ Figuring out whether your PC is powerful enough to run Windows 8
  - ▶ Knowing which version of Windows 8 you need
- 

**C**hances are good that you've heard about *Windows*: the boxes and windows that greet you whenever you turn on your computer. In fact, millions of people worldwide are puzzling over Windows as you read this book. Almost every new computer and laptop sold today comes with Windows preinstalled, ready to toss colorful boxes onto the screen.

This chapter helps you understand why Windows lives inside your computer, and I introduce Microsoft's latest Windows version, called *Windows 8*. I explain how Windows 8 differs from previous Windows versions, whether you should upgrade to Windows 8, and how well your faithful old PC and programs will weather the upgrade.

### *What Is Windows 8, and Why Are You Using It?*

Created and sold by a company called Microsoft, Windows isn't like your usual software that lets you calculate income taxes 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 nearly 30 years, and the latest incarnation is called *Windows 8*, shown in Figure 1-1.

**Figure 1-1:**  
The newest  
version of  
Windows,  
Windows 8,  
comes pre-  
installed on  
most new  
PCs today.



The name *Windows* comes from all the little windows it places on your computer screen. Each window shows information, such as a picture, a program, or a baffling technical reprimand. You can place several windows onscreen simultaneously and jump from window to window, visiting different programs. Or, you can enlarge one window to fill the entire screen.

When you turn on your computer, Windows jumps onto the screen and begins supervising any running programs. When everything goes well, you don't really notice Windows; you simply see your programs or your work. When things don't go well, though, Windows often leaves you scratching your head over a perplexing error message.

In addition to controlling your computer and bossing around your programs, Windows 8 comes with a bunch of free programs and *apps* — mini-programs. These programs and apps let you do different things, such as write and print letters, browse the Internet, play music, and send your friends dimly lit photos of your latest meal.

And why are you using Windows 8? Well, you probably didn't have much choice. Nearly every computer sold since October 2012 comes with Windows 8 pre-installed. A few people escaped Windows by buying Apple computers (those nicer-looking computers that cost a lot more). But chances are good that you, your neighbors, your boss, and millions of other people around the world are using Windows.

## Separating the ads from the features

Microsoft touts Windows as a helpful companion that always keeps your best interests in mind, but that description isn't really true. Windows always keeps *Microsoft's* interests in mind. You'll find that out as soon as you call Microsoft for help with a Windows problem. Microsoft charges \$100 an hour for phone support.

Microsoft also uses Windows to plug its own products and services. Internet Explorer opens to Microsoft's own MSN.com website, for example. The browser's Favorites area, a place

for you to add *your* favorite web destinations, comes stocked with *Microsoft* websites.

The Maps app uses the Microsoft Bing mapping service, rather than Google Maps or another competitor. The list goes on.

Simply put, Windows not only controls your computer, but also serves as a huge Microsoft advertising vehicle. Treat these built-in advertising flyers as a salesperson's knock on your door.



- ✓ Windows 8 introduces a radical new full-screen-sized Start menu that's designed for *touchscreens* — displays controlled with your fingertips. Now called a *Start screen*, it also appears on desktop PCs, oddly enough. Be prepared for some initial mouse awkwardness as you try to mimic a fingertip with your mouse pointer.



- ✓ The new automatic backup program in Windows 8, *File History*, greatly simplifies what you should have been doing all along: creating copies of your important files for safekeeping. Because Microsoft leaves it turned off, I explain how to turn it on in Chapter 13.

## What's New in Windows 8?



You may have worked with earlier versions of Microsoft Windows. If so, toss away that hard-earned knowledge because Windows 8 starts from scratch. Why? Because Windows 8 tries to please two camps of computer owners.

See, some people are mostly *consumers*. They read e-mail, watch videos, listen to music, and browse the web, often while away from their desktop PC. Whether on the go or on the couch, they're consuming media (and popcorn).

Other people are mostly *creators*. They write papers, prepare tax returns, update blogs, edit videos, or, quite often, tap whichever keys their boss requires that day.

To please both markets, Microsoft broke Windows 8 into two very different sections:

- ✓ **Start screen:** For the on-the-go information grabbers, the Windows 8 Start screen fills the entire screen with large, colorful tiles that constantly update to show the latest stock prices, weather, e-mail, Facebook updates, and other tidbits. Shown earlier in Figure 1-1, that information appears before you touch a button. And *touch* is a keyword: The Start screen works best with a touchscreen monitor or tablet.
- ✓ **Desktop tile:** When it's time for work, head for the Start screen's *desktop* tile. The traditional Windows desktop appears, shown in Figure 1-2, bringing all its power — as well as its detailed, cumbersome menus.

Some people like the convenience of having both types of computers built into one. Others find the two experiences to be oddly disjointed.

- ✓ In a way, Windows 8 offers the best of both worlds: You can stay on the Start screen for quick, on-the-go browsing. And when work beckons, you can head for the desktop, where your traditional Windows programs await.

**Figure 1-2:**  
The Windows 8 desktop works much as it did in Windows 7, but without a Start button.



- ✓ The catch is that the Windows desktop no longer contains the traditional Start button and the Start menu that sprouted from the corner. Instead, you must retreat to the new, Start *screen*. To open a program, click or tap a program's tile from the Start screen, and Windows shuffles you back to the desktop, where the newly opened program awaits.
- ✓ Welcome to the split personality awaiting you in Windows 8! I explain the Start screen in Chapter 2; the Windows desktop awaits your attention in Chapter 3.

## Should I Bother Switching to Windows 8?

In a word, no. Most people stick with the Windows version that came installed on their computers. That way they avoid the chore of figuring out a new version of Windows. Also, Windows 8 comes with a particularly steep learning curve because it's quite different from earlier Windows versions.

Also, many of the biggest changes in Windows 8 work best with *touchscreens* — those fingertip-controlled screens found on expensive cellphones, tablets, and some of the latest laptops. No matter what device it runs on, Windows 8 looks and behaves the same, whether it's controlled by fingers on a touchscreen tablet or by a mouse and keyboard on a desktop PC.

On the positive side, if you manage to figure out Windows 8 once, you'll know how to run it on *all* of your Windows devices: a tablet, Windows phone, a laptop, a desktop PC, and perhaps even a touchscreen television. On the negative side, being designed for so many different things makes Windows 8 behave a little awkwardly on *all* of them.

Instead of upgrading, stick with the masses and stay with your current computer. When you're ready to buy a new computer, the latest version of Windows will be installed and waiting for you. (But if you've bought Windows 8 on a DVD, you can install Windows 8 onto a computer you own that's currently running Windows 7, Windows Vista, or Windows XP; find out how at [www.dummies.com/go/windows8](http://www.dummies.com/go/windows8). There, you'll also find a plethora of other helpful Windows 8 tidbits.)



Windows 8 doesn't support *Windows XP mode*, a popular way to run a Windows XP desktop inside its own window within Windows 7. If you needed Windows XP mode in Windows 7, don't upgrade to Windows 8.

## Can My Current PC Still Run Windows 8?

If you want to upgrade to Windows 8, your computer probably won't complain. Windows 8 should run without problem on any PC currently running Windows 7 or Windows Vista. In fact, Windows 8 may run faster on your old PC than Windows Vista did, especially on laptops.

If your PC runs Windows XP, it may still run Windows 8, but probably not at its best.

If you have a technogeek in your family, have him or her translate Table 1-1, which shows the Windows 8 hardware requirements.

| <b>Table 1-1      The Windows 8 Hardware Requirements</b> |  |                     |
|---|--|---------------------|
| <b>Architecture</b>                                       | <b>x86 (32-bit)</b>                                      | <b>x86 (64-bit)</b> |
| Processor   | 1 GHz  | 1 GHz               |
| Memory (RAM)  | 1GB  | 2GB                 |
| Graphics Card   | DirectX 9 graphics device with WDDM 1.0 or higher driver |                     |
| HDD free space  | 16GB   | 20GB                |

In common language, Table 1-1 simply says that nearly any computer sold in the past five years can be upgraded to Windows 8 with little problem.

Windows 8 runs nearly any program that runs on Windows 7 and Windows Vista. It even runs some Windows XP programs, as well. Some older programs, however, won't work, including most security-based programs, such as antivirus, firewall, and security suites. You'll need to contact the program's manufacturer for an upgraded version.



Shopping for a new PC to run Windows 8? To see how well a particular showroom PC can handle Windows 8, point your mouse at any screen's bottom-left corner and click the right mouse button. When the menu appears, choose System. The Windows Experience Index appears. It has already tested the PC and given it a grade ranging from 1 (terrible) to 9.9 (extraordinary).

Don't know what version of Windows runs on your current PC? Go to the Start menu, right-click Computer, and choose Properties. The screen that appears lists your Windows version. (If your Start menu fills the screen with a bunch of colorful tiles, you're already running Windows 8. If so, right-click in the bottom-left corner, choose System from the pop-up menu, and the System window's Windows Edition section says which version of Windows 8 is running.)

## The Four Flavors of Windows 8



Microsoft offers four main versions of Windows 8, but you'll probably want only one: the aptly titled "Windows 8" version.

Small businesses will choose Windows 8 Pro, and larger businesses will want Windows 8 Enterprise. Still, to clear up the confusion, I describe all the versions in Table 1-2.

| Table 1-2 The Four Flavors of Windows 8 |   |
|---|---|
| <i>The Version of Windows 8</i>         | <i>What It Does</i>   |
| Windows RT                              | Designed for long-battery life, this version only comes preinstalled, mostly on touchscreen tablets and laptops. It runs the Start screen and apps, but its limited desktop won't run your own Windows programs. To compensate, Windows RT includes versions of Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and OneNote.   |
| Windows 8                               | Aimed at consumers, this version includes the Start screen, apps, and a full-featured Windows desktop that can run most Windows programs.   |
| Windows 8 Pro                           | Aimed at the small business market, this version features everything from the Windows 8 version, as well as tools used by small businesses: encryption, extra networking features, and similar tools. If you buy a Media Center Pack upgrade, Windows 8 Pro can record TV shows through a TV tuner with Windows Media Center, as well as play DVDs. (To upgrade Windows 8 to Media Center, buy a Windows 8 Pro Pack.) |
| Windows 8 Enterprise                    | Microsoft sells this large business version in bulk to large businesses.  |

Each version in the table contains all the features of the versions preceding it. Windows 8 Pro contains everything found in Windows 8, for example.

Here are some guidelines for choosing the version you need:



- ✓ If you're considering a tablet with **Windows RT**, make sure you realize that it *can't run regular Windows programs*. You're limited to its bundled Office programs and any apps you download from the Windows Store.
- ✓ If you'll be using your PC at home, pick up **Windows 8** or **Windows 8 Pro**.
- ✓ If you need to connect to a domain through a work network — and you'll know if you're doing it — you want **Windows 8 Pro**.

Want to play DVDs or record TV shows with Windows Media Center in Windows 8 Pro? Then pull out your credit card and upgrade online for the Media Center Pack. (To upgrade the consumer-oriented Windows 8 with Windows Media Center, buy the Windows 8 Pro Pack.)

- ✓ If you're a computer tech who works for businesses, go ahead and argue with your boss over whether you need **Windows 8 Pro** or **Windows 8 Enterprise**. The boss will make the decision based on whether it's a small company (Windows 8 Pro) or a large company (Windows Enterprise).



Most computers let you upgrade to a more powerful version of Windows 8 from the desktop Control Panel's System area. (Reach for your credit card before clicking the Get More Features with a New Edition of Windows link.)