

## Chapter 1

# What Is Windows 8.1?

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Getting to know Windows 8 and 8.1
  - ▶ Discovering the new features in Windows 8.1
  - ▶ Deciding whether to switch to Windows 8
  - ▶ Upgrading to Windows 8.1
  - ▶ Figuring out whether your PC is powerful enough to run Windows 8
  - ▶ Knowing which version of Windows 8.1 you need
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**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 versions, *Windows 8* and *Windows 8.1*. I explain how Windows 8 differs from previous Windows versions and help you determine whether you should upgrade to Windows 8 from older Windows versions.

Finally, I explain what's new in Windows 8.1 and how to install this free upgrade onto your Windows 8 computer.

## *What Is Windows, 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 8.1*, shown in Figure 1-1.



**Figure 1-1:** The newest version of Windows, Windows 8.1, 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 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? Well, you probably didn't have much choice. Nearly every computer sold since October 2012 comes with Windows 8 or 8.1 preinstalled. 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.



- ✔ Windows 8 introduced 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.



- ✔ Microsoft released a major update to Windows 8 in the fall of 2013. Known as Windows 8.1, the free update makes Windows 8 run much more smoothly. You should definitely install it.

## 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.

Windows 8.1 places a link to SkyDrive, its online storage service, in every folder. But Microsoft isn't as quick to mention that you must pay an annual fee when you reach your storage limit of seven gigabytes.

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.

## What's New in Windows 8.1?

About a year after Windows 8 hit the shelves, Microsoft cranked out *Windows 8.1*, a free upgrade for Windows 8 owners that makes Windows 8 work much more smoothly.



Windows 8.1 changes Windows 8 in several ways:

- ✓ **Start button:** Discarded in Windows 8, the Start button returns to the desktop in Windows 8.1. Don't get too excited, though. The Start button fetches only the Start screen rather than the Start menu of days gone by.
- ✓ **Desktop and Start screen improvements:** Windows 8.1 makes it easier for desktop owners to stay on the desktop and for touchscreen owners to stay on the touch-friendly Start screen.
- ✓ **SkyDrive:** Microsoft's online file storage service, SkyDrive, comes built into the Windows 8.1 desktop. When you first sign in to Windows 8.1, Microsoft asks whether you'd like to store your files there automatically. (I explain how to tweak the SkyDrive options in Chapter 5.)
- ✓ **Skype:** Windows 8.1 drops the Messaging app but brings in Skype, a more full-featured messaging program.
- ✓ **Search:** Finding things is a lot easier in Windows 8.1, whether you're looking for files on your computer, apps in the Store, or information on the Internet.
- ✓ **Store:** The Windows Store finally reached 100,000 apps. Appropriately, the newly improved Store app makes it easier to search for specific apps.
- ✓ **Libraries:** Windows 8.1 removes libraries from folders. They still exist, though, and I explain how to turn them back on in Chapter 5.

Perhaps most important of all, Windows 8.1 eases the transition between the Start screen and the desktop. They can both share the same wallpaper, for example, a small change that eases the jarring sensation of switching between them.



In short, Windows 8.1 is an update you don't want to miss. To update a Windows 8 computer to Windows 8.1, visit the Windows Store and search for the Windows 8.1 Upgrade. It downloads and installs just like any other app. When your computer restarts, it will be running Windows 8.1, and all of your files will remain in place. Read the upgrade instructions carefully, though, as you may need to reinstall all of your apps and desktop programs after upgrading to Windows 8.1.

## Should I Bother Upgrading to Windows 8 or 8.1?

If you're happy with your current version of Windows, don't bother upgrading to Windows 8 or 8.1. In fact, 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. Windows 8 comes with a particularly steep learning curve because it's quite different from earlier Windows versions like Windows 7, Windows Vista, and Windows XP.

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. Desktop PC owners often find the new controls to be cumbersome.

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.



If you're already running Windows 8, though, take advantage of the free upgrade to Windows 8.1. The update smoothes over many of the rough edges in Windows 8.



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 rely on Windows XP mode in Windows 7, don't upgrade to Windows 8 or 8.1.

## What's So Different About Windows 8?



You've probably 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).

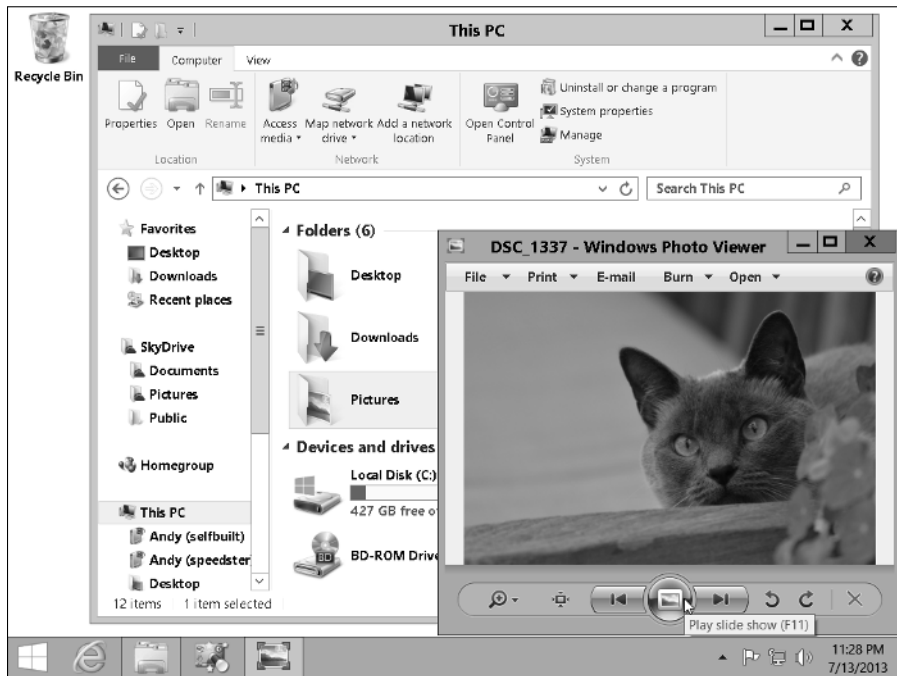
Other people are mostly *creators*. They write papers, prepare tax returns, update blogs, edit videos, or, quite often, tap whichever keys their boss requires that day.

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

- ✔ **Start screen:** For 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 new  
Windows  
desktop  
works much  
as it did in  
Windows 7.

- ✔ If you're sitting at a desktop PC, "on-the-go browsing" simply means an obstacle before reaching the desktop.
- ✔ Windows 8.1 changes many things, but Windows remains a split personality. I explain the Start screen in Chapter 2; the Windows desktop awaits your attention in Chapter 3.

## *Can My Current PC Still Run Windows 8.1?*

If you want to upgrade to Windows 8.1, your computer probably won't complain. Windows 8.1 should run without problem on any PC currently running Windows 8, Windows 7, or Windows Vista. In fact, Windows 8.1 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 8.1, but not at its best.

If you have a technogeek in your family, have him or her translate Table 1-1, which shows the Windows 8.1 hardware requirements.

<b>Table 1-1</b>	<b>The Windows 8.1 Hardware Requirements</b>	
<i>Architecture</i>	<i>x86 (32-bit)</i>	<i>x86 (64-bit)</i>
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 8.1 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.



Windows 8.1 drops the Windows Experience Index rating, leaving no easy way to check a PC's performance on the showroom floor. But because showroom floors are rapidly disappearing from the world's shopping malls, most people won't miss it.

Don't know what version of Windows runs on your current PC? If clicking the Start button brings a Start menu, right-click the menu's Computer entry, and choose Properties. The screen that appears lists your Windows version.

If there's no Start button, you're running Windows 8. And if clicking your Start button fills the screen with a bunch of colorful tiles, you're running Windows 8.1.

## The Four Flavors of Windows 8.1



Microsoft offers four main versions of Windows 8.1, but you'll probably want only one: the aptly titled "Windows 8.1" version.

Small businesses will choose Windows 8.1 Pro, and larger businesses will want Windows 8.1 Enterprise. Still, to clear up the confusion, I describe all the versions in Table 1-2.

<i>The Version of Windows 8.1</i>	<i>What It Does</i>
Windows RT 8.1	Designed for long battery life, this version only comes pre-installed, 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 8.1 includes versions of Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, OneNote, and the popular Outlook mail program.
Windows 8.1	Aimed at consumers, this version includes the Start screen, apps, and a full-featured Windows desktop that can run most Windows programs.
Windows 8.1 Pro	Aimed at the small business market, this version features everything from the Windows 8.1 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 8.1 Pro can record TV shows through a TV tuner with Windows Media Center, as well as play DVDs. (To upgrade Windows 8.1 to Media Center, buy a Windows 8.1 Pro Pack.)
Windows 8.1 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 8.1 Pro contains everything found in Windows 8.1, for example.

Here are some guidelines for choosing the version you need:



- ✔ If you're considering a tablet with **Windows RT or RT 8.1**, 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 8.1** or **Windows 8.1 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 8.1 Pro**.  
  
Want to play DVDs or record TV shows with Windows Media Center in Windows 8.1 Pro? Then pull out your credit card and upgrade online for the Media Center Pack. (To upgrade the consumer-oriented Windows 8.1 with Windows Media Center, buy the Windows 8.1 Pro Pack.)
- ✔ If you're a computer tech who works for businesses, go ahead and argue with your boss over whether you need **Windows 8.1 Pro** or **Windows 8.1 Enterprise**. The boss will make the decision based on whether it's a small company (Windows 8.1 Pro) or a large company (Windows Enterprise).



Most computers let you upgrade to a more powerful version of Windows 8.1 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.)

If you're already running Windows 8, Windows 8.1 is a free upgrade available from the Windows Store app. The upgrade leaves all of your files in place. Read the upgrade instructions carefully, though, as you may need to reinstall all of your apps and desktop programs after upgrading to Windows 8.1.

