Tips for Organizing Computer Files

MUO

Clear Away the Trash

1	Chances are, you have lots of data on your computer that you don't need.
2	Find everything that you don't want and delete it. It frees up storage space, and there's no point organizing things you don't need.
3	For example, get rid of files that you never access nor intend to.
4	Uninstall programs that you don't use, as many created unwanted files in your documents.
5	Tidy up your desktop so it isn't littered with icons and isn't a storage space for files.

Group Files in Folders

6	Folders are the backbone of a good organizational structure. They let you group files into logical collections.
7	By default, Windows comes with libraries like Documents and Pictures that you can use as a jumping off point. In File Explorer, right click and choose New > Folder to begin creating.
8	It might help to plan out your folder structure on some paper before you get cracking.
9	For example, do you want to split your Pictures folder by event, people, place, or something else? Do you want your Documents separated by life and work?
10	You can also create folders within folders.
11	That said, try not to make the hierarchy too deep, else you'll end up constantly clicking through folders when trying to find something.

Create a Consistent Naming Convention

12	It's best to have a consistent naming convention for both folders and files.
13	It should be clear what's inside without needing to open it, but it should also be relatively concise.
14	Don't forget that File Explorer can show you lots of great metadata. In the Ribbon, go to View > Add columns. Here you can add columns like Date modified, Type, and Authors. This means that you don't necessarily need to include this information within file names.
15	When using sequential numbers at the start of names, precede with zeros (e.g. 001, 002) to aid in sorting.
16	Ensure your spelling and grammar are accurate so that they correctly appear in any searches.
17	Don't use abbreviations. They might make sense at the time, but you'll probably forget what they mean.

Access Folders and Files Quickly

12	It's great to organize your files into structured folders, but you don't need to navigate through this structure every time you want to find something.
13	Windows has a powerful search. Simply open the Start menu, start typing, and it will scan everything on your computer.
14	Here are some Windows 10 search shortcuts and tips to know.
15	You can pin often-accessed folders to your Start menu. Right click and select Pin to Start to do so.
16	Also, drag a folder onto your taskbar to pin it there. Then, right click the File Explorer icon and it'll appear within the Pinned section.
17	You can adjust File Explorer to get a better overview of your data. Switch to the View tab in the Ribbon. Here you can choose different Sort by methods, enable the Details pane, change the Layout, and much more.
18	You can change them per folder too. For example, a Large icons layout is good for a folder of photos, while a List works better for documents.

Use Cloud Storage Providers

19 If you often collaborate on files with others or move between devices like a laptop and desktop, it can be a real pain to keep sending files back and forth. A great way to overcome this is to use a free cloud storage provider.

20 These services give you multiple gigabytes of space to store your data and sync it across all your devices.

21 Decent services, like OneDrive or Google Drive, will integrate directly into File Explorer so you can manage all your files from the same place.

Remove Duplicates and Use Shortcuts

22 Having multiple copies of the same file is a dangerous game. Not only is it a waste of storage space, but any changes won't sync between them. This could lead to having different versions of the same document, for example.

23 Duplicates can happen by accident and can be a pain to manually hunt down. That's why it's best to use a program like dupeGuru, which will scan your computer for duplicate files---in file name and contents, including a "fuzzy" search for similar files---and let you remove them.

24 Copies of files often arise when they are saved in different places. Don't do this. Instead, use shortcuts. Within the folder, right click and choose New > Shortcut and follow the wizard.

Use Note-Taking Apps

25 If you're the type of person who often needs to jot down notes or thoughts, don't leave stray text files across your computer.

26 Consider using a note-taking app like OneNote, Evernote, or a lightweight note-taking alternative.

27 Most of these apps let you store locally and online. They are primarily designed for scraps and have their own organization tools. It's far better to use these and keep everything in one place.

Archive Old Files if Necessary

28 Some people like to create an "Archive" folder on their computer and dump old files into it, but that's just like sweeping everything under the rug.

29 A proper archive is designed to store files that you no longer need regular access to but still need to keep. It's generally kept separate from your main drive, and you can also use slower and cheaper storage solutions.

30 To find out the history of a file, right click it and select Properties. Here you can see when the file was Created, Modified, and Accessed.

31 It's simple to quickly group together files based on their modified date. In File Explorer, click into the search box at the top right and then use the Date modified dropdown on the Ribbon. You can tie this parameter together with other search strings.

32 Generally, you only need to archive if you're low on storage space on your main drive. Otherwise, there's no harm in keeping the old data providing it's organized properly.

Stick to Your Organization Plan

33 Don't waste all your organizational work. Stick to your plan. It can be very tempting to save a file quickly by naming it randomly and chucking it on your desktop. There are lots of better ways to store your files than the desktop.

34 If you don't keep it up, you'll end up back in the mess of files that you began in. When creating or saving a new file, take a moment to give it a good name, and place it in the right folder. Your future self will thank you.