



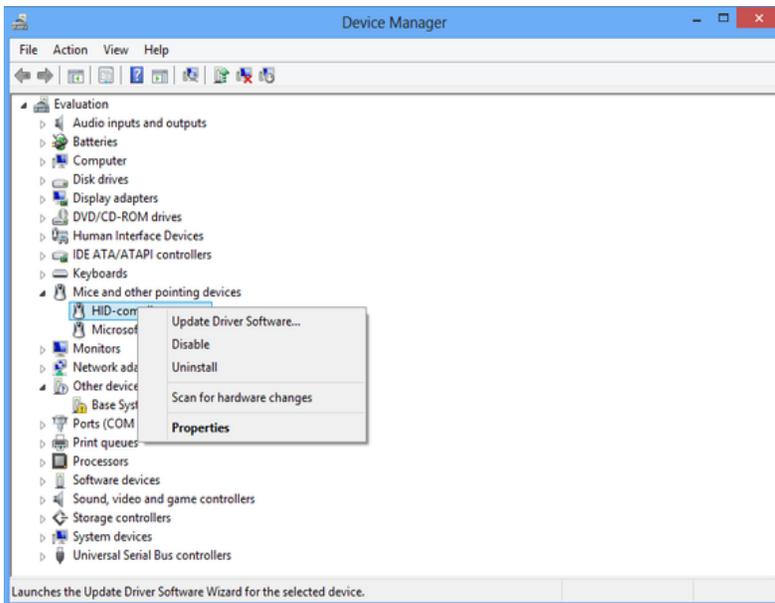
The right way to set up a new PC

Whether you're unboxing a new PC (perhaps, say, to flee the death of Windows XP) or freshly installing Windows on older hardware (maybe to prepare for Windows 8.1's handy spring update?), your job isn't done when you boot up the trusty ol' desktop for the very first time.

You could use a new system as-is, of course, but performing just a handful of tasks can help ensure that your PC is lean, mean, fully compatible with your hardware, and all-around *pleasant* for the foreseeable future. Even if you did everything yourself—starting from scratch with a blank hard drive, installing only Windows and Windows Updates—there is still plenty of tweaking to do to optimize a rig and rid it of performance-robbing bloat.

Ready? Good. Let's get going.

On DIY machines: Unplug and update drivers



Get used to staring at the device manager if you built a DIY PC and plan to update the drivers manually.

Some of you may consider this step overly fastidious, but the first time Windows Update screws up a driver installation, you'll thank me for this suggestion. Feel free to skip this section if you're using a prebuilt, boxed PC rather than a rig you've cobbled together yourself.

Upon first boot, Windows 8.1 will hit the Windows Update site (unless otherwise configured) and install updated drivers for whatever components it recognizes in a system. This can be helpful for more obscure components with drivers that aren't updated very often—like a network controller or keyboard, for example—but it can be somewhat of an annoyance for things like a GPU or storage controller.



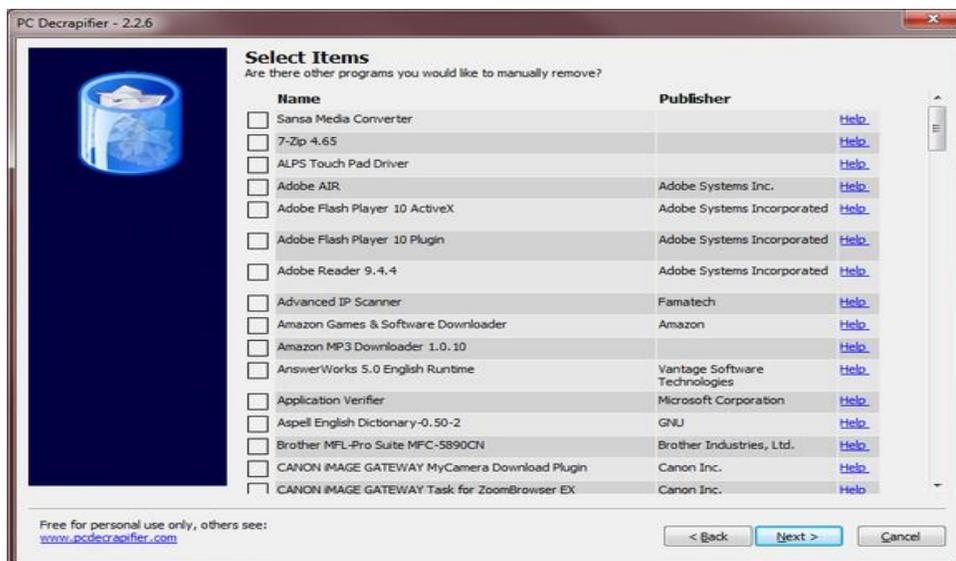
It's better to update drivers for discrete graphics cards like AMD's Radeon R9 290X manually rather than relying on Windows update.

During a recent installation of Windows 8.1 on a test machine, I actually had Windows start installing a graphics driver in the background, while I already had a more recent version running. I spent the next half hour cleaning up the mess and starting over.

I recommend disconnecting from the Internet before booting into Windows for the first time, to prevent Windows Update or any other auto-updaters from running. While you're disconnected, manually update all of your drivers yourself. Nvidia, AMD, and Intel often update graphics, chipset, and storage drivers on their sites well before they hit the Windows Update site. You'll need to have another web-connected PC available to download the drivers, of course. You can move them to your new PC using the portable storage of your choice. If your PC refuses to recognize some of your hardware, check out PCWorld's guide to finding drivers for unknown devices.

Take out the trash

Store-bought systems ship with a bucket of bloatware pre-installed at the factory that does little more than take up drive space and annoy you with nagging screens and prompts for purchases. Unless a particular piece of pre-installed software catches your eye, get rid of it!



PC Decrapifier is a wonderful, lightweight tool for blowing the bloatware out of your new PC in a hurry.

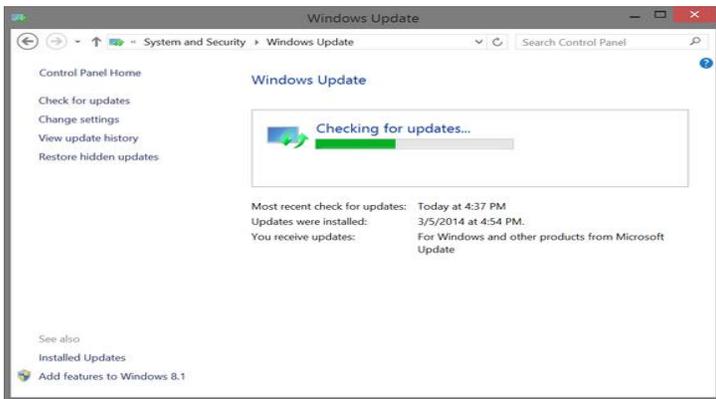
First, run a tool like the amazing PC Decrapifier, which automates the process of cleaning out known bloatware. Then open the Control Panel, head to *Programs > Programs and Features*, and work your way through the list of currently installed programs, removing anything you're not likely to use.

While you're at it, fire up the Windows 8 Task Manager (*Ctrl + Shift + Esc*), hit the Startup tab, and disable any background programs that don't truly need to run when Windows launches. (If you're using a past version of Windows, search for "msconfig" in the Start menu and use the Startup tab there.) Often you'll find dozens of programs that can be disabled, which will free up system memory and resources for other applications as well as speed up your boot time.

Regular housekeeping over the life of the PC won't hurt, either. Windows itself can also hog up a fair bit of drive space with temporary and junk files accumulated during the installation and update processes. Check out PCWorld's guide to keeping your PC in tip-top shape for more info.

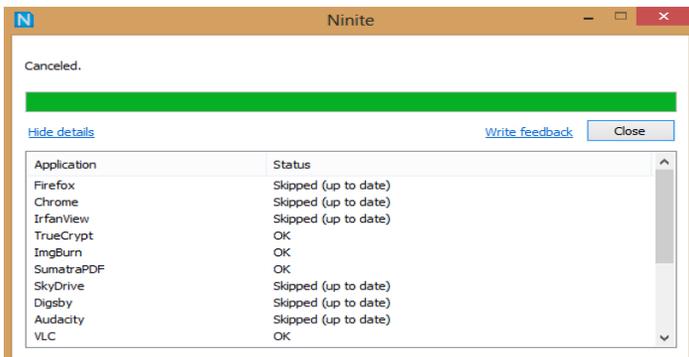
Run Windows Update, again and again

Once you've updated your drivers and cleaned out all the crapware, connect to the web and run Windows Update to patch the operating system and bring all of its components up to date.



You'll often find after installing an update or other Microsoft application (like Office, for example) that a number of new updates have become available. Continue to run Windows Update over and over and over again—restarting when necessary—until there are no more critical updates available for your PC. Once that's done, be sure to opt to have your computer automatically install Windows Updates as they become available, unless you have a compelling reason otherwise.

Install your apps



Ninite makes it a breeze to install great programs in one big bunch, saving you a ton of time.

After your machine is fully updated, it's time to install all of your favorite applications. I recommend taking this step *after* updating Windows itself to ensure all of the latest compatibility patches are installed, which is especially important with a fledgling OS like Windows 8.1. If you're wondering what to grab, check out PCWorld's guide to the 22 programs to install on your new PC first. It also talks about using a nifty tool/site called Ninite, which can automate the installation process of a number of popular applications, saving you a ton of time in the process.



You'll also want to install security and antivirus tools, of course—we have roundups of the best free and paid options available. Also make sure you snag Secunia Personal Software Inspector, another automation tool that keeps all your *other* programs up-to-date. It's wonderful.

Backup, backup, backup

Need we say...you need to back up your new PC, and make it an ongoing habit, of course?



Back up the image of your fresh and clean Windows installation to an external hard drive, another drive on your network, or heck, even a big stack of DVDs—though it'd take a *lot* of DVDs.

I recommend using Windows' built-in imaging tool or a similar third-party application to take a complete snapshot of the OS volume and squirrel it away, just in case you ever need to return the PC's entire Windows installation back to

like-new condition. Keep this separate from your regular backups. PCWorld's guide to backing up your PC for free explains how to use Windows' imaging tool as well as other no-cost solutions to keep your operating system *and* its entire file safe for years to come.

With your backup in hand, the crapware gone, the awesomeware installed, and everything up to date, your new PC is ready and raring to go. Enjoy the cat videos!