You want your burger with just the right fixings. You want your new car in your favorite color and configuration. You want your web browser’s home page to deliver the news and information you specify. You want your iPod to play your personalized playlists. So why shouldn’t you want to have Windows your way, too?

I’ve been writing about Windows for fifteen or so years now, and I know the first thing that most users do when they get a new computer is personalize the desktop with their own background images. People want to make Windows their own—to create their own custom copy of the operating system. They want their copy of Windows to look and feel like it was designed just for them.

Changing the desktop background is just one small step in what can be a long and involved personalization process. The reality is that there’s a lot about Windows you can customize, if you put your mind to it. In fact, there’s much more you can configure than most users realize.

That’s where this book comes in. Windows 7 Your Way is your guide to configuring the way Microsoft’s new operating system looks and acts. I’ll show you not only how to change the desktop background, but also how to create a desktop slideshow, change window colors and transparencies, and personalize the items on the taskbar and Start menu. And all that’s in just the first five chapters!

You see, Windows 7 is the most customizable version of Windows yet. Not only can you change Windows’ look and feel, you can also change the operating system’s default programs, which applications are associated with which file types, and what different users are allowed to do when logged on. Then there’s everything you can do with digital pictures and music, all sorts of network configuration settings, little tweaks for using a notebook PC on the road...well, as I said, there’s a lot you can change.
And the changes aren’t limited to superficial settings. There are also lots of things you can do to make Windows run faster—which is always desirable. Speeding up your system’s performance is the ultimate example of running Windows your way.

What’s in This Book

Windows 7 Your Way is all about customizing and optimizing Windows 7 on your computer system. Obviously, it covers all the new features of Windows 7; there’s something here for everyone!

To present all the various ways you can configure Windows 7 your way, this book contains 28 chapters, divided into 6 major parts. Each part walks you through a different way to have Windows your way, from basic interface personalization to hard-core system tweaks:

• **Part I: Personalizing Windows—Your Way** presents all the things you can do to reconfigure Windows 7’s basic settings. That includes personalizing the desktop, of course, but also working with the taskbar and Start menu, as well as setting Windows’ default programs. This is easy stuff that makes a big difference in terms of how Windows looks and feels.

• **Part II: Managing Windows Data and Media—Your Way** is all about working with various types of files. You’ll learn how to personalize Windows Explorer, as well as advanced methods of managing files and folders. There’s also a lot here about working with digital media files (photos, music, and videos), including using Windows Media Center to play your media files in your living room—and throughout your house.

• **Part III: Managing Windows Users and the Network—Your Way** is where you learn all about configuring Windows’ user accounts—and Windows’ User Account Control feature. There’s also a lot here about network configuration, including how to share files and devices over the network.

• **Part IV: Optimizing Windows Online—Your Way** connects you to the Internet—and helps you speed up your Internet connection. You’ll learn how to customize the Internet Explorer web browser, how to change default web browsers, and how to use IE’s new InPrivate Browsing mode to anonymously surf the Web. You’ll also learn how to surf safely—and avoid all the pesky nuisances that plague the Internet.
Part V: Using Windows on the Road—Your Way is the section to read if you have a notebook PC. Windows 7 offers a lot of configuration options for mobile users, as well as ways to extend your notebook’s battery life.

Part VI: Optimizing Windows Performance—Your Way presents many ways to speed up your Windows-based PC. You’ll learn how to prepare for optimization (think: protecting your data), manage your system security, remove unwanted programs and files, work with hard drives and system memory, and even tweak the Windows Registry for some high-level performance improvements. There’s also a section on running problem programs, including using the new Windows XP Mode with older applications. And we wrap things up with a section on troubleshooting Windows problems—those annoying crashes and freezes that keep you from using Windows any which way.

That’s a lot of stuff—but then again, there’s a lot you can configure in Windows 7. When you’re done, your version of Windows will be unique; you’ll truly have Windows 7 your way.

Who Can Use This Book

You don’t have to be a technical expert to use this book; many of the procedures discussed here require nothing more than a few clicks of the mouse. It helps if you know your way around the Windows desktop, of course, and there are a few more advanced options that require either tweaking the Windows Registry or performing simple hardware upgrades. But in general, just about anybody can perform most of the customization and optimization presented here.

One thing, though: This book is written specifically for computers running Microsoft Windows 7. If you have an older version of Windows, not all the instructions here will apply. (Although some will; Win7 isn’t that much different from Windows Vista and Windows XP.)

How to Use This Book

I hope that this book is easy enough to read that you don’t need instructions. That said, a few elements bear explaining.

First, this book contains several special elements, presented in what we in the publishing business call “margin notes.” There are different types of margin notes for different types of information, as you see here.
Because some of the solutions presented in this book involve third-party software utilities or new hardware devices, you’ll find web page addresses in the text accompanying the mentions of these products. When you see one of these addresses (also known as a URL), you can go to that web page by entering the URL into the address box in your web browser. I’ve made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the web addresses presented here, but given the ever-changing nature of the Web, don’t be surprised if you run across an address or two that’s changed. For that matter, some of the products and prices presented here are likely to change by the time you read this text. I apologize in advance, but that’s the way the world works.

There’s More Online…

When you need a break from reading, feel free to go online and check out my personal website, located at www.molehillgroup.com. Here you’ll find more information about this book and other books I’ve written. And if you have any questions or comments, feel free to email me directly at win7yourway@molehillgroup.com. I can’t guarantee I’ll respond to every email, but I do guarantee I’ll read them all.

Do It Your Way

With all these preliminaries out of the way, it’s now time to get started. Put on your reading glasses, fire up your mouse, and get ready to configure Windows 7 your way!
Customizing Windows Explorer

Working with Windows, more often than not, means working with files and folders. And working with files and folders in Windows means working with Windows Explorer.

As often as you use Windows Explorer, wouldn't it be nice to personalize it just a tad, make it a little easier to work with? Well, your wish is granted, as there are lots of ways to make Windows Explorer look and feel your way.

Read on to learn more.

Understanding Windows Explorer

Windows Explorer is an application that displays the contents of hard drives and folders. You use it to navigate all the folders and files on your computer.

This makes Windows Explorer a file manager application. In fact, Explorer replaced Windows’ self-named File Manager application, which ruled the roost from Windows 3.0 (1990) to Windows 95. Since that 1995 introduction, Windows Explorer has gone through quite a few permutations. In fact, there was time when it really wasn’t called Windows Explorer.

That time was 2001, and the release of Windows XP. With XP, Microsoft decided to make Explorer more “discoverable” and task based. So instead of launching Windows Explorer as a separate folder, you opened the My Documents or My Music or My Whatever folder. Each of these folders was really Windows Explorer, pointing to a distinct folder on your hard drive, even if it wasn’t called that.
So when you opened the Start menu and clicked My Documents, you launched Windows Explorer pointing to the My Documents folder. With Windows 7, the name Windows Explorer is back in vogue. Yes, you can still open the Documents folder, but you can also launch Windows Explorer in and of itself. In fact, Windows Explorer is one of the default icons in the new taskbar, as you can see in Figure 6.1; click the taskbar icon to open Windows Explorer. (You can also launch Explorer by opening the Start menu and selecting All Programs, Accessories, Windows Explorer.)

![Windows Explorer icon]

**FIGURE 6.1**
*Open Windows Explorer from the Windows 7 taskbar.*

**tip**
If you right-click Explorer’s taskbar icon, you also see a list of the most recently visited folders; click a folder to return to that location.

When you launch Windows Explorer, it opens to the new Library view—that is, a view of Windows 7’s four default libraries (Documents, Music, Pictures, and Videos). As you can see in Figure 6.2, the Win7 version of Explorer also features a revamped navigation pane on the left, with five major sections: Favorites, Libraries, Homegroup, Computer, and Network.

**note**
Learn more about libraries in Chapter 7, “Extending File and Folder Management.”

The easiest ways to navigate with Windows Explorer are to use the Favorites and Computer sections in the navigation pane. The Favorites section lets you go directly to your favorite folders (by default, these include Recently Changed, Public, Desktop, Downloads, Network, and Recent Places, although you can customize this favorites list), while the Computer section lets you drill down through all the drives and folders and subfolders on your computer system. Click an arrow next to a selection to expand that selection in the navigation pane; click any item to display the contents of that device or folder in the details pane of the Explorer window.
Above the navigation and details panes is a context-sensitive toolbar. The contents of the toolbar change depending on what you have selected in the navigation pane. For example, select Computer in the navigation pane and the toolbar displays options for Organize, System Properties, Uninstall or Change a Program, Map Network Drive, and Open Control Panel; select the Documents item and the toolbar displays options for Organize, Share With, Burn, and New Folder.

The one constant in the toolbar is the Organize button. Click this button to display the Organize menu, shown in Figure 6.3. This menu features all manner of file-related operations, such as Cut, Copy, Paste, Delete, and so on.

At the very top of the Explorer window are back and forward buttons and two boxes. The bigger box is the address box, although Microsoft likes to call it the *breadcrumbs bar*. This box displays the folder path, but you can go backward through the path (like following a trail of breadcrumbs) by clicking any folder in the path; click a right arrow next to a folder and you see all the subfolders branching out from that folder. It’s really a nice way to navigate, once you get the hang of it.

The second box at the top of the Explorer window is the search box. As you might suspect, you use this box to search for files and folders on your system; just enter the file or folder name (or part thereof) and press Enter; Explorer then returns a list of items that match your search, as shown in Figure 6.4. It works pretty well.
FIGURE 6.3
Windows Explorer's Organize menu.

FIGURE 6.4
The results of a Windows Explorer search.
Displaying—or Hiding—Different Panes

There are quite a few things you can customize about Windows Explorer. Let’s start with the Explorer window itself—and the various panes that are displayed.

By default, Explorer displays the navigation and details panes, as well as a small library pane, above the details pane, that displays information about the current folder or library. You can also opt to display a preview pane, to the right of the details pane, that displays a preview of any file you select in the details pane, as shown in Figure 6.5. It’s kind of useful, but cuts down on the available real estate for navigation and browsing, which is probably why it’s turned off by default.

To select which panes are displayed in the Explorer window, follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, select Organize, Layout.
2. Check those panes you want to display.
3. Uncheck those panes you don’t want to see.

Pretty easy.
Displaying the Menu Bar

There’s one more screen element you might choose to display—especially if you’re an old-timer, like me. You see, even though Microsoft does a good job placing context-sensitive operations on the Explorer toolbar, I still prefer the old-school pull-down menu bar that used to be part and parcel of just about every window in Windows. Well, Microsoft is doing away with menu bars, but still offers that option if you want to work at it. I do.

I simply find it easier to find things on the traditional menu bar, shown in Figure 6.6. For example, I know that file operations can always be found on the File menu, and that view options can be found on the View menu. Very little guessing involved.

FIGURE 6.6
The Windows Explorer menu bar—not displayed by default.

To that end, you can opt to permanently display the Windows Explorer menu bar. Follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, select Organize, Layout.
2. Check the Menu Bar option.

Changing Views

How do you like to see your files and folders displayed? Well, Windows Explorer offers a lot of different view options, including the following:
Content, shown in Figure 6.7, which displays one item per line with information about that item—including date modified, size, author, or type.

Tiles, shown in Figure 6.8, which is a grid of small icons for each item, with filename and size beside each file icon.

Details, shown in Figure 6.9, a line listing of each item with columns for name, date modified, type, and size. The nice thing about Details view is that you can sort folder contents by any column; just click the column header to do the sort. You can also rearrange the columns, by clicking and dragging any column head to a new position. You can even customize the columns displayed by right-clicking the column header row and checking or unchecking file attributes in the resulting pop-up menu. A very versatile view.

List, shown in Figure 6.10, which lists the contents of the folder, no other details displayed, using as many columns as necessary. This is probably the most economical view.

Icons—individual icons for each file or folder, sized from small (Figure 6.11) to extra large (Figure 6.12).
FIGURE 6.8
Tiles view.

FIGURE 6.9
Details view.
FIGURE 6.10  
List view.

FIGURE 6.11  
Small icon view.
In most views, file icons display a thumbnail preview of the file contents.

To switch views, simply click the Views button on the toolbar and select the view you want, as shown in Figure 6.13. For the icons views, use the slider to change icon size; the size is variable, so you aren’t limited to a stock two or three sizes.
caution
Useful as they are, displaying thumbnail views can slow down your PC’s performance, especially when viewing photos (and folders containing photos). If you find your system getting sluggish, change to a non-thumbnail view.

Arranging and Sorting Files and Folders

No matter which view you select, you’re still faced with the best way to organize folder contents—especially in crowded folders. Fortunately, you have several options.

Arranging Folder Contents

You can change how folder contents are arranged. By default, all contents are arranged by folder; in this arrangement, every file and folder appears as a separate item in the Explorer window. But there are several other options available, including the following:

- **Author**, where contents are stacked by who created them, as shown in Figure 6.14; double-click a stack to see all the files in that folder created by that author.
- **Date modified**, where contents are grouped by the date they were last modified, as shown in Figure 6.15.
- **Tag**, where contents are stacked by any tags assigned to the files. Since most files are not tagged by default, this is a less than useful view for most users.
- **Type**, where files are stacked by file type, as shown in Figure 6.16; double-click any stack to view all files of that type.
- **Name**, which lists files and folders in alphabetical order. (This is identical to Details view, but with files and folders mixed together.)

To change how folder contents are arranged, make sure the library pane is displayed; then click the Arrange By button and make a selection, as shown in Figure 6.17.
FIGURE 6.14
Arranging files by author.

FIGURE 6.15
Arranging files by date modified.
Arranging and Sorting Files and Folders

FIGURE 6.16
Arranging files by type.

FIGURE 6.17
Arranging folder contents.

Sorting Folder Contents

Arranging folder contents is different from sorting those contents. You may want to sort a folder’s contents by filename, file type, file size, or the
date the file was modified. Whatever view you’re in, you can sort a folder’s contents by following these steps:

1. Right-click in an open area of the details pane and select Sort By from the pop-up menu.
2. Select how you want to sort: Name, Date Modified, Type, or Size.
3. Select whether you want the contents sorted in Ascending or Descending order.

**tip**
For more sort options, select More from the pop-up menu to display the Choose Details dialog box. Check those details you want to display, and then click OK. You can then sort by one of the new details by repeating the steps just listed; the new details should show up in the Sort By list.

### Displaying More Details

Let’s return for a moment to the Details view, which displays several columns of details about your files. By default, the details displayed are name, date modified, type, and size. But Windows lets you display a lot more different details, which can help you better manage your files.

To display more details in additional columns, right-click the column header row and select one of the details listed in the pop-up menu, or click More. This displays the Choose Details dialog box, shown in Figure 6.18. This dialog box gives you a huge array of details you can display about items in this folder, everything from 35mm focal length (for digital photos) to language to word count. Check those details you want to display, and then click OK.

This is a really great feature, one that most users don’t delve into, that lets you drill down into specific details about your files. Want to display f-stop and exposure information about your digital photos? How about manufacturer and model information about product files? Bitrate and contributing artists for music files? Parental ratings? Vertical resolution? Closed captioning? These are all details you can display—and that help you figure out what’s what on your hard disk.
Customizing the Navigation Pane

There’s one last part of the Windows Explorer window to personalize, and that’s the navigation pane. There are two things you can customize about this pane—which folders are displayed and which items are shown in the Favorites section.

Displaying More Folders

By default, the navigation pane displays five sections: Favorites, Libraries, Homegroup, Computer, and Network. There are other folders that could be displayed, however, including Desktop, your main user folder, and the Recycle Bin. To display these items, follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, select Organize, Folder and Search Options. (Alternately, open the Control Panel and select Folder Options.)
2. When the Folder Options dialog box appears, select the General tab, shown in Figure 6.19.
3. In the Navigation Pane section, check the Show All Folders option.
4. Click OK.
Adding Items to the Favorites Section

And what about the Favorites section of the navigation pane, where your supposed “favorite” folders are displayed? What if these really aren’t your favorites? What if you want to always show more folders here?

It’s actually quite easy to add items to the Favorites section. All you have to do is follow these steps:

1. From within Windows Explorer, navigate to and open the folder you want to display in the Favorites list.
2. Right-click the Favorites item in the navigation pane and select Add Current Location to Favorites.

**tip**
To delete an item from the Favorites list, right-click it and select Remove.

I like having a few particular folders present in the navigation pane whenever I open Windows Explorer. Adding those folders to the Favorites list makes this happen.

Adding Items to the New Menu

You may or may not be familiar with Windows Explorer’s New menu. You only see it when you right-click an empty space in the Explorer window;
the resulting pop-up menu has a New option. As you can see in Figure 6.20, select the New option and you have the option of creating new files of various types. It’s a great way to quickly create new documents directly from Windows Explorer.

![FIGURE 6.20](image-url)

**FIGURE 6.20**
*Windows Explorer’s New menu.*

Many applications add items to the New menu when the applications are installed. For example, Microsoft Office adds New items for its document types—Microsoft Office Word Document, Microsoft Office PowerPoint Presentation, Microsoft Office Excel Worksheet, and so forth. You can add even more document types to the New menu, if you don’t mind tweaking the Windows Registry a bit. This lets you easily create new documents of the types you work with most often.

**note**
Learn more about working with the Windows Registry in Chapter 27, “Tweaking the Windows Registry.”

To add more options to the New menu, follow these steps:

1. Open the Start menu, enter `regedit` into the search box, and then press Enter.
2. When the Registry Editor window appears, open the `HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT` key, as shown in Figure 6.21.
3. Right-click the key for the file extension you want to add to the New menu and select New, Key. Name the new key `ShellNew`.
4. Right-click the new `ShellNew` subkey and select New, String Value. Name the new value `NullFile`.  


FIGURE 6.21  
Using the Registry Editor to add a new file type to the New menu.

**note**  
File types already present on the New menu already have a ShellNew subkey.

The next time you open Windows Explorer, when you right-click and select New you’ll see the option for the file type you just added.

**tip**  
You can also use the Registry Editor to remove file types from the New menu. Just navigate to the key for that file extension in the HKEY_CLASSES_ROOT key, and then right-click the ShellNew subkey and select Delete.

**The Bottom Line**  
If you’re like most Windows users, you use Windows Explorer a lot. How you use it, however, depends on how you have things configured. Fortunately, there’s a lot of configuration possible—so you can use Windows Explorer to display files and folders your way.
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