



An Extended Guide · No. 1977

The Mystery Cable Drawer — What to Keep, Toss & Recycle

Sort a tangle of old cords
into three tidy piles

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Let's empty that cable drawer together

Nearly every home has one: a drawer, a box, or a tangled bag full of cords. Some you use every day, most you haven't touched in years, and a few you can't even name. This guide turns that knot into three tidy piles in one calm sitting.

I'm Bill, and I run Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. I've spent 30+ years helping folks get comfortable with the gear in their homes, patiently and in plain language. Think of this guide as me pulling up a chair while we go through that drawer one cord at a time.

The whole job comes down to a simple idea: every cord is either a keeper, a spare, or something to recycle. Once you have those three piles in your head, sorting goes quickly — and the drawer finally makes sense again.

★ You can't make a wrong move here

There's no cord you can sort incorrectly and cause any harm. The worst that happens is you keep one too many, and we'll fix that next time. If you'd like a hand, tip the drawer out and call or text me at (330) 200-8042.

The whole system, on one page

If you remember only these things, you can sort any cable drawer in the land.

- ❑ Every cord ends up in one of three piles: **keep**, **spare**, or **recycle**.
- ❑ **Keep** a cord only if it matches a device you still own and use.
- ❑ **Spare** means one good backup of each common type — one, not six.
- ❑ **Recycle** everything that matches no device in your home.
- ❑ Do it in one sitting, on a big clear surface, in good light.
- ❑ Old cords are e-waste — recycle them, don't just drop them in the trash.

✓ Set a kitchen timer

A drawer like this is usually a 20-to-30-minute job, not an afternoon. Set a timer, make a cup of coffee, and work one cord at a time. You'll be surprised how fast three clear piles come together.

Why the drawer fills up in the first place

It helps to know this isn't a sign of disorganization — it's just how cords accumulate over the years.

Every gadget you've ever owned came with a cord, and the gadget often left the house long before the cord did. The phone got traded in, the old camera went to a grandchild, the printer finally quit — but their cables stayed behind, quietly, in the drawer.

On top of that, plug shapes changed over the years. A cord that fit your old phone won't fit the new one, so you bought another, and the old one joined the pile. None of this is your fault — it's just time doing what time does to a cable drawer.

✓ The goal isn't empty, it's clear

We're not trying to end up with no cords. We're trying to end up with only the cords you can name and use, each with a home. A small, honest drawer beats a big mystery one every time.

Setting yourself up for an easy sitting

A few minutes of setup makes the whole job calmer — especially on tired eyes and hands that don't love fiddly little plugs.

Pick a big, clear surface in good light — a kitchen or dining table is perfect. Empty the whole drawer out at once so nothing hides. If the cords are in a knot, gently tease them apart first; never yank, as that's how good cables get hurt.

Have three spots ready: one area for keepers, one for spares, and a bag or box for the recycle pile. Sticky notes or index cards labeled KEEP, SPARE, and RECYCLE take the guesswork out as you go.

✓ Good light does half the work

The plugs are small and the printing is tiny. Work near a window or under a bright lamp, and keep your phone handy — its camera makes a fine magnifier when you pinch to zoom in on a plug.

Keep, spare, recycle — what each pile means

The entire system is just these three piles. Here's exactly what belongs in each one, so you never have to wonder.

A **keeper** is a cord that matches a device you still own and actually use. The phone on your nightstand, the tablet by your chair, the TV box behind the set — if a cord feeds one of those, it stays.

A **spare** is one good backup of a cable type you use daily, in case your everyday one wears out. One spare per common type is plenty. A **recycle** cord is any that matches nothing in your home — the orphans from gadgets long gone.

★ The one-question test

For each cord, ask one thing: 'What in my house does this plug into?' If you can point to the device, it's a keeper. If it's your only backup for a daily cable, it's a spare. If you can't name a single thing it fits, it's recycle.

Naming a cord before you sort it

You don't need to be an expert on plugs. You just need to match each cord to something in your home, and there are easy ways to do that.

Look at both ends of the cord. Most charging cables have a flat rectangle (that's USB-A) on the power end, and one of a few small plugs on the device end. If the small plug goes in either way up, it's usually USB-C or Lightning; if it only goes one way, it's often the older Micro-USB.

If you can't place a cord by sight, carry it to the device you think it belongs to and see if it fits the socket. The device itself is the honest answer. Our guide on telling cables apart walks through every common plug with pictures if you'd like more detail.

✓ When a cord won't match anything

If you've walked a cord around the house and it fits nothing, that's your answer — it's an orphan, and it goes in the recycle pile. A cord that fits no device you own has no job to do.

Building your keeper pile

Start with the easy, happy pile: the cords you know and use. These earn their place in the drawer.

Go through and set aside every cord you can match to a working device — your phone, your tablet, the TV, a hearing-aid charger, a camera you still use. These are the cords that do real work in your home, and they're the heart of what we're keeping.

If a cord came in the box with a device and you still have that device, it's an automatic keeper — the original cable is the one you know works for everything that device can do. Set those aside with confidence.

✓ Label keepers as you go

A loop of masking tape with a word on it — 'phone,' 'TV box,' 'tablet' — turns a generic cord into one you'll never second-guess. Our labeling guide goes further, but even a scrap of tape today saves you hunting tomorrow.

Keeping the right spares — and only the right ones

A good spare is a comfort. Six spares of the same cord is just clutter wearing a disguise. Here's the balance.

For each cable type you use every day, keep one known-good backup. If your phone uses USB-C, keep one spare USB-C cable. If you have an older iPhone on Lightning, keep one spare Lightning cable. That's it — one working backup of each common type.

Pick your spares from the best of the bunch: no fraying near the plug, no kinks that won't straighten, and a plug that goes in snugly. The tired, flaky ones don't deserve a spot as a backup — those go to recycle.

! More spares does not mean more safety

It's tempting to keep 'just in case,' but a drawer of identical backups only brings back the mystery. One good spare of each type is genuine insurance; the rest is the clutter we're clearing today.

Two kinds of households, two sets of needs

Sorting feels different depending on what you're starting with. The three-pile system is the same — the size of the job is what changes.

If you have a small, manageable drawer

Maybe it's a phone, a tablet, and a handful of cords. Your job is quick: confirm the keepers, pick a spare or two, and clear the few orphans.

- Match each cord to a device and set the keepers aside first.
- Keep one good spare of your phone's cable where you'll find it.
- Recycle the two or three cords that match nothing you own.
- You'll likely be done before your coffee gets cold.

If you have decades of cords from gadgets long gone

A deep drawer or a bulging box means many eras of plugs all tangled together. Your job is bigger, but the same three piles still carry you through.

- Work in short stretches — no need to finish it all at once.
- Sort into rough groups by plug shape before you decide keep or toss.
- Be firm with orphans: if nothing in the house fits it, it goes.
- Bag the recycle pile and take it to a proper drop-off, not the trash.

★ A whole-drawer dig is a perfect kitchen-table job

If the box is deep and the plugs are a mystery, this is exactly the kind of thing I love to help with. Tip it all out and I'll help you name every cord, keep what works, and recycle the rest — in one calm sitting. Call (330) 200-8042.

What to do with the orphans

The recycle pile is usually the biggest, and that's a good sign — it means the drawer is about to get a lot lighter.

Cords and chargers are electronic waste, often just called e-waste. That means they shouldn't go in your regular household trash, where they do no good and can cause harm. The metals inside are worth recovering, and cables are easy to recycle in the right place.

The good news is that dropping them off is simple and usually free. Many electronics stores, home-improvement stores, and phone shops keep a recycling bin right inside the door, and your county almost certainly has a drop-off site for this exact thing.

! Please don't just toss cords in the trash

Cables are e-waste, not garbage. Tossing them in the household trash sends recoverable metal to the landfill, and some places ban it outright. A short trip to a recycling bin is the right home for an orphan cord.

Where to take your cables for recycling

You have more options than you'd think, and most are a quick errand you can fold into a trip you're already making.

- **Electronics and office-supply stores:** many keep a drop-off bin near the entrance for cords, chargers, and small electronics.
- **Home-improvement and hardware stores:** often host recycling bins, sometimes shared with the Call2Recycle battery program.
- **Phone and wireless shops:** frequently take old cables and accessories, whether or not you bought them there.
- **County drop-off sites:** your county's solid-waste district usually runs an electronics or household drop-off — call ahead for days and hours.
- **Community e-waste days:** many towns hold a collection event a few times a year where you can bring a whole box at once.

✓ Keep a recycle bag by the door

Rather than make a special trip, keep a small bag for dead cords and batteries near the door. When it's full, it rides along on your next trip to a store that recycles. The job never piles up again.

A word on batteries hiding in the drawer

Cable drawers often hold more than cables — a dead power bank, a pack of old batteries. A couple of these need special care, so let's be clear.

Loose alkaline batteries (the common AA, AAA, and the like) and little coin batteries often turn up in these drawers. Rechargeable packs and power banks do too. These don't go in the recycle bag with your cords — batteries have their own rules, and some can be a fire risk.

Our guides on safe battery disposal and on swollen or damaged batteries cover this in full. The short version is below, and it's worth reading before you handle anything that looks puffy or feels warm.

! A puffy or bulging battery is a fire risk

If a power bank or any battery looks swollen, puffy, or has pushed a case apart, don't press it, poke it, or toss it in the trash — a damaged lithium battery can catch fire. Set it somewhere away from anything that burns and take it to a battery-recycling drop-off or your county household-hazardous-waste site. If it's hot, hissing, or smoking, get away and call 911.

A quick check before a cord leaves the house

Most cords can go straight to the recycle bin, but a few are worth a second thought before they leave.

If a cord is the only one you have for a device you still use, it's not an orphan — walk it back to the keeper pile. And if a cable is a special one sold for a particular job, like moving data or carrying a TV picture, make sure you're not tossing something you'll want to replace.

There's no need to wipe or erase a plain cable — a cord holds no personal information. A power bank or anything with a screen is different; those you'd treat like a small gadget, not a cord. When in doubt, set it aside and ask.

★ Not sure if a cord is worth keeping?

If you're holding a cord you can't name and can't quite let go of, snap a photo of both ends and send it to me. I'll tell you what it is and whether anything in your home needs it — free, no commission. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Giving your keepers a sensible home

Now that the orphans are gone, let's make sure the cords you kept are easy to find next time — that's how the drawer stays sorted.

Group your keepers by where you use them, not just by type. The cords for your bedside go together, the living-room cords together, and so on. Small bags, bins, or even labeled sandwich bags keep each group from re-tangling into one knot.

Keep your daily cables where you actually use them — bedside, favorite chair, kitchen counter — and your spares together in one spot you'll remember. Our family-charging-spot guide takes this idea further if a busy house needs it.

✓ Loose loops, not tight wraps

Coil each kept cord in a loose loop and secure it with a twist tie or a strip of velcro. A tight wrap stresses the cord where it meets the plug — the very spot cables tend to fail. Gentle loops help good cords last.

The mix-ups I see most often

A few honest mistakes account for most cable-drawer trouble. Knowing them ahead means you'll sail right past.

- **Keeping cords for devices long gone:** if nothing in the house uses it, it's clutter — recycle it, kindly but firmly.
- **Keeping six identical backups:** one good spare of each type is plenty; the rest just rebuilds the mystery.
- **Tossing cords in the trash:** cables are e-waste and belong in a recycling bin, not the garbage can.
- **Recycling a cord you still need:** walk each one to its device first, so you don't part with a keeper by mistake.
- **Lumping batteries in with cables:** batteries have their own disposal rules — keep them out of the cord recycle bag.

! Be gentle untangling a knot

When cords are knotted, tease them apart slowly rather than pulling hard. Yanking a tangle strains the cords right where they meet the plug and can ruin a good cable. Patience here saves a keeper or two.

How to keep the drawer from filling up again

The sorting is a one-time job. A couple of light habits keep it from ever becoming a mystery again.

When you buy a new device, keep its cable with it and label it the day it arrives. When you retire a device, retire its cords at the same time — straight into the recycle bag by the door. That one habit stops the orphans from ever collecting.

Every so often — say, when the clocks change — take two minutes to glance through the drawer and pull anything that's crept in. A tiny tidy-up now and then beats another big dig down the road.

✓ One in, one out

A simple rule keeps any drawer honest: when a new cord comes in, an old or dead one goes out to the recycle bag. The drawer stays the same comfortable size, year after year.

When the drawer feels like too much

If the box is deep and the plugs all look alike, it's easy to stall before you start. Here's how to make it feel small again.

You don't have to finish in one go. Pull out a single handful, sort just those into keep, spare, and recycle, and stop there if you like. Ten cords sorted today is real progress, and the rest will wait patiently for tomorrow.

If your eyes tire or your hands cramp with the little plugs, take a break — there's no prize for speed. This is meant to be a calm sitting, not a chore to dread. Go at the pace that feels comfortable.

★ I'm glad to do the dig with you

Sorting a cable drawer is honestly one of my favorite little visits — it's quick, satisfying, and it clears a real daily annoyance. If you'd rather not face it alone, I'll come sit at the table and we'll do it together. Call (330) 200-8042.

The three-pile system, start to finish

Here's the whole method in order, the way I'd walk through it at your table.

Empty the drawer onto a clear, well-lit surface and set out three spots: keep, spare, and recycle. Pick up one cord at a time and ask what it plugs into. Match it to a device and it's a keeper; make it your one backup and it's a spare; match it to nothing and it's recycle.

When the piles are done, label and store your keepers where you use them, tuck one spare of each type in a spot you'll remember, and bag the recycle pile for a proper drop-off. The drawer that was a mystery is now a short, honest list of cords you know.

✓ Keep these pages in the drawer

You don't have to hold any of this in your head. Keep this guide right in the drawer, and the next time a cord has you stumped, the three-pile answer is right there waiting.

Sorting a parent's drawer over the phone

Many folks read these guides to help a parent or a friend who lives far off. The three-pile system works just as well over the phone.

Have them empty the drawer where you can both take your time. Ask them to hold each cord up to the device they think it fits, or to send you a photo of both ends. You name it, they sort it into keep, spare, or recycle — the same three piles, just over the line.

Finish by pointing them to a nearby store or county site that takes e-waste, so the recycle bag has somewhere to go. If a screen-share would help with the photos, that's exactly the sort of thing I can do remotely.

★ Remote help for the tricky ones

If you're sorting with a loved one from a distance and a few cords stump you both, I can often help right on the screen for \$49, or come to their home in Portage County for a flat \$99 visit. Call or text (330) 200-8042.

Your quick reference, start to finish

The short version you can lean on any time the drawer needs a sorting.

- ❑ Empty the drawer onto a clear, well-lit surface.
- ❑ Set out three spots: keep, spare, recycle.
- ❑ For each cord, ask: what in my house does this plug into?
- ❑ Matches a device you use = keep; your one backup = spare.
- ❑ Matches nothing you own = recycle.
- ❑ One good spare of each common type — no more.
- ❑ Cords are e-waste: drop them at a store bin or county site, not the trash.

★ Keep this guide in the drawer

You don't have to remember all of it — just that the answer is three piles, and I'm a phone call away at (330) 200-8042 whenever you'd like a hand.

Common Questions

The questions I hear most about sorting a cable drawer, answered plainly.

Q: How do I know if I still need a cord?

Walk it to the device you think it fits and see if it plugs in. If it matches something you own and use, keep it. If it fits nothing in the house, it's an orphan — recycle it.

Q: How many spare cables should I keep?

One good backup of each type you use daily. If your phone is USB-C, keep one spare USB-C; an older iPhone, one spare Lightning. More than that just rebuilds the mystery drawer.

Q: Can I just throw old cables in the trash?

Please don't. Cables are electronic waste — the metals inside are worth recovering, and some areas ban tossing them. Drop them in a store recycling bin or at your county site instead.

Q: Where can I recycle old cords for free?

Many electronics, office-supply, home-improvement, and phone stores keep a drop-off bin near the door, and your county almost certainly runs an electronics drop-off. A quick call ahead confirms the hours.

Q: What about old batteries and power banks in the drawer?

Those don't go with the cords. Batteries have their own disposal rules, and a swollen or damaged one is a fire risk — take it to a battery drop-off or household-hazardous-waste site, never the trash.

★ Still holding a mystery cord?

Sorting a drawer is one of my favorite quick jobs — satisfying, and it clears a real daily annoyance. Call or text (330) 200-8042 and we'll name every one and sort them into keep, spare, and recycle.

You don't have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made sorting your mystery cable drawer feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and don't worry about memorizing anything.

When you'd rather have a hand, that's exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that don't need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I don't do licensed electrical, gas, or appliance-repair work myself — for that I'll help you line up a trustworthy local pro.

★ Bill's Home Tech — real help, close to home

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you're ever not 100% happy with a visit, I'll make it right or refund it. That's a promise. — Bill

The Three Piles

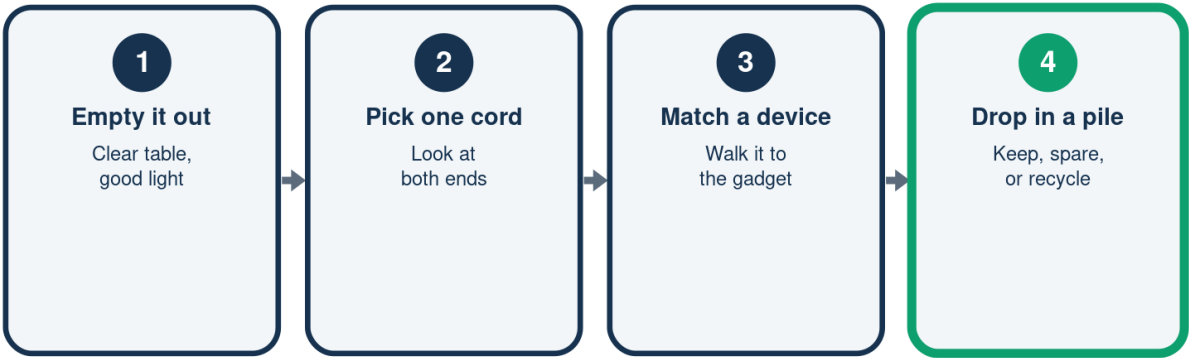
Every cord ends up in exactly one of these

	What it means	Where it goes
Keep	Fits a device	Labeled, by use
Spare	One backup per type	With the spares
Recycle	Fits nothing you own	E-waste drop-off

Ask of each cord: what in my house does this plug into?

Sorting, Step by Step

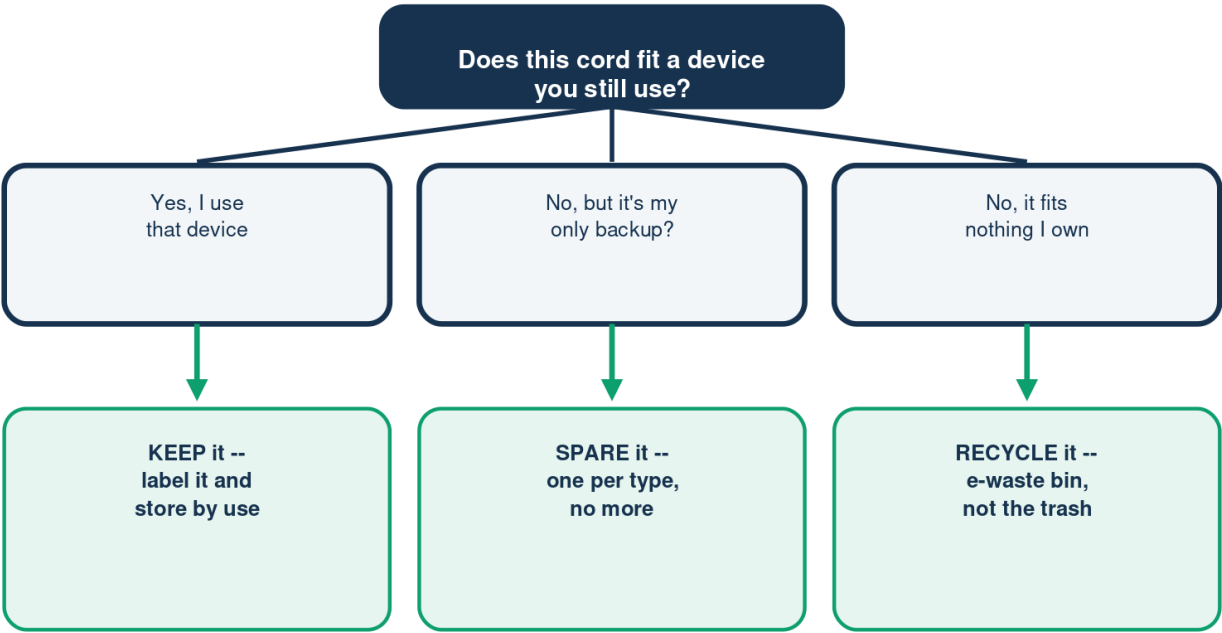
A calm way to work through the whole drawer



One cord at a time -- no need to finish in one sitting.

Keep, Spare, or Recycle?

Decide one cord at a time



Cords are e-waste -- never put them in the household trash.

Illustration - a schematic, not to scale. Your setup may differ.

Where Cords Go to Recycle

Free drop-offs you likely pass already

	Place	What they take
Store bins	Cords, chargers,	small gadgets
Phone shops	Old cables,	accessories
County site	Electronics,	household drop-off
E-waste days	A whole box	at once

Call ahead for days and hours -- most take cords for free.



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Prefer help without a visit?

Bill can screen-share and fix many things remotely — a flat \$49, free for Support Plan members.



A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill.

I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that comes from using these guides. Thanks for reading, and stay safe out there.

— *Bill*



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