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Use Activity Monitor to Find What's Slowing You Down

Your Mac's built-in dashboard, in plain English — find the culprit in under a minute

Plain-English Mac help from:

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What's Inside

Everything in this guide, with page numbers. Skip to whichever chapter answers your question right now.

The 60-Second Version 3
The Short Version 3
What Activity Monitor Is 4
How to Open It 4
The Five Tabs at a Glance 5
CPU: Who's Working Too Hard 5
Reading the Names Without Fear 6
How to Quit a Stuck Program Safely 7
Memory: The Pressure Graph That Matters 7
Energy: What's Draining the Battery 8
What's Normal vs. What's Worrisome 8
Spotting Something That Shouldn't Be There 9
Sorting and Searching to Find Things Fast 10
Why the Fan Roars — and What It's Telling You 10
A Simple Weekly Habit 11
When to Call Bill 11
Everyday Cheat Sheet 13
A Note From Bill 14
Your Visit — and My Promise 15

SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

Activity Monitor is your Mac's built-in dashboard — it shows which program is working the Mac hard, and just looking can't harm anything. Open it with Command-Space, type its name, and press Return. Click the CPU tab, then click the "% CPU" heading so the busiest program rises to the top; if something you're not using sits high for a long time, select it and click the X to quit it.

The Memory tab's color-coded "Memory Pressure" graph tells you if too much is open — green is good, steady red means a real shortage. On a laptop, the Energy tab finds battery hogs. Quit only what you recognize.

1 The Short Version

When your Mac feels slow, hot, or the battery is draining fast, there's a built-in tool that tells you exactly which program is to blame. It's called Activity Monitor, and despite its official-sounding name, it's simply a dashboard — like the gauges on a car — showing you what's working your Mac hard. Once you can see the culprit, quieting it is easy.

This guide shows you how to open Activity Monitor and read just the parts that matter, in plain English, without needing to understand anything technical. You'll come away able to spot a runaway program in under a minute.

- Activity Monitor is a built-in dashboard, not something that can harm your Mac.
- You only need two of its tabs: CPU and Memory.
- Sorting by the busiest program points straight at what's slowing you down.
- You can quit a misbehaving program safely from right inside it.

TIP

Just looking at Activity Monitor can't break anything — it's like reading a gauge. The only action that does something is quitting a program, and even that is reversible: you just reopen the app.

2 What Activity Monitor Is

Think of Activity Monitor as the dashboard of your Mac. A car dashboard doesn't drive the car — it just shows you the speed, the fuel, the engine temperature. Activity Monitor is the same: it shows you how hard your Mac is working and which programs are doing the working, so you can make sense of a slowdown instead of guessing.

GOOD TO KNOW

Every program you run — and many you don't see — shows up here. That long list can look intimidating, but you don't need to understand every line. You're just looking for the one or two items that are working far harder than the rest.

3 How to Open It

Activity Monitor lives in the Utilities folder, tucked inside your Applications. There are two easy ways to reach it.

1. The quick way: press Command and the Space bar together to open Spotlight search, type “Activity Monitor,” and press Return.
2. The folder way: open Finder, click "Applications," open the "Utilities" folder, and double-click Activity Monitor.
3. When it opens, you'll see a list of programs and a row of tabs across the top: CPU, Memory, Energy, Disk, Network.

> **TIP**
> If you'll use it now and then, right-click (or Control-click) its icon in the Dock while it's open and choose “Keep in Dock.” Then it's one click away whenever the Mac feels slow.

4 The Five Tabs at a Glance

Across the top are five tabs. You really only need two of them, but here's what each is for so nothing is a mystery.

- CPU — how hard the Mac's “brain” is working, and which programs are working it. This is the main one.
- Memory — whether the Mac has enough working space for what's open. The second one to know.
- Energy — what's using the most battery, handy on a laptop.
- Disk — which programs are reading and writing files. Rarely needed.
- Network — what's using your internet connection. Rarely needed.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> For diagnosing a slow Mac, CPU and Memory tell you almost everything. You can happily ignore Disk and Network unless you're chasing something specific.

5 CPU: Who's Working Too Hard

The CPU tab is where you catch a runaway program — one that's quietly pinning your Mac at full effort and dragging everything else down. Finding it takes about fifteen seconds.

1. Click the "CPU" tab.
2. Find the column headed "% CPU" — it shows how hard each program is working.
3. Click that "% CPU" heading once so the busiest programs jump to the top of the list.

4. Watch for a program sitting high (well into double or triple digits) for a sustained time.
5. If it's something you're not even using, that's your culprit — the next chapter shows how to quit it.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> A program briefly spiking high is normal — opening a big file or a web page takes effort. The one to worry about is the program that sits high for minutes on end while you're doing nothing.

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6 Reading the Names Without Fear

The list in Activity Monitor is full of odd names — some are your apps, many are behind-the-scenes helpers with technical-sounding titles. This is where people get nervous. The key is: you don't need to know what each one is. You're only interested in the busy ones, and most busy culprits have recognizable names.

- Your web browser (Safari, Chrome) and its tabs are the single most common CPU hogs.
- Photos or a backup running in the background can work hard for a while — usually fine to leave.
- A program's name followed by “(Not Responding)” in red is frozen and safe to quit.
- Strange names you don't recognize using little effort are almost always normal system helpers — leave them be.

WATCH OUT

Don't quit things at random just because the name looks unfamiliar — many odd-named items are essential helpers. Quit only a program you recognize that's clearly misbehaving, or one marked “Not Responding.”

7 How to Quit a Stuck Program Safely

When you've spotted the program that's bogging things down, you can close it right from Activity Monitor — no need to restart the whole Mac.

1. Click once on the program in the list to select it.
2. Click the “X” (stop) button in the toolbar at the top of the window.
3. Choose "Quit" for a normal close, or "Force Quit" if it's frozen and won't close normally.
4. Watch the Mac perk up as that program lets go of the engine.
5. Reopen the app normally whenever you need it again.

WATCH OUT

“Force Quit” closes a program instantly without saving, so you'd lose any unsaved work in it — but that's unavoidable when it's frozen. For a program that's responding, choose plain “Quit” so it can save first.

8 Memory: The Pressure Graph That Matters

The Memory tab worries people because they think a full-looking memory means they need to buy more. Usually they don't. The one thing worth reading here is a little graph at the bottom called "Memory Pressure" — and it's color-coded, which makes it easy.

- Green: your Mac has memory to spare. All is well, even if the numbers look large.
- Yellow: it's working to keep up — usually just because a lot is open. Close a few things.

- Red, constantly: the Mac is genuinely short of memory for what you're asking of it.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> A healthy Mac often shows green even when memory looks “full” — that's the Mac using memory efficiently, which is a good thing. Only steady red, with little open, points to a real shortage.

9 Energy: What's Draining the Battery

On a laptop, the Energy tab answers a different question: why is my battery disappearing so fast? It ranks programs by how much power they're using.

1. Click the "Energy" tab.
2. Click the "Energy Impact" heading to sort the thirstiest programs to the top.
3. Note anything high that you're not actively using.
4. Quitting a power-hungry background program can noticeably extend your battery.

> **TIP**
> A web browser with lots of tabs, or a video playing in a background tab, is the usual battery thief. Closing those tabs often does more for battery life than any setting change.

10 What's Normal vs. What's Worrisome

It helps to know what ordinary looks like, so you don't chase shadows.

- Normal: brief spikes when you open things; background tasks (backups, photo processing) working for a while then settling.
- Normal: lots of items in the list using little or no effort — that's just the Mac's helpers idling.
- Worth a look: one program sitting very high for a long time with nothing to show for it.

- Worth a look: the fan roaring constantly while CPU stays pinned high even when you're idle.

GOOD TO KNOW

If the same program keeps hogging the CPU every day, the answer usually isn't to keep quitting it — it's to update it, reinstall it, or find out why it's misbehaving. That's a good thing to look into together.

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11 Spotting Something That Shouldn't Be There

Occasionally Activity Monitor reveals more than a lazy program — it can hint at unwanted software. A program you don't recognize, constantly using the CPU or network heavily, especially one with a name designed to look official, can be a sign of junk software that slipped in with a download.

WATCH OUT

If you see an unfamiliar program working hard and using the internet, and your Mac also has new pop-ups, a changed browser homepage, or a toolbar you didn't add, don't start deleting things yourself. Note the name and call — removing unwanted software cleanly takes care, and guessing can make it worse.

GOOD TO KNOW

This is uncommon, and most busy items are perfectly innocent. But Activity Monitor is genuinely useful as an early warning — if something feels off, it's worth having a professional confirm what it is.

12 Sorting and Searching to Find Things Fast

When the list feels overwhelming, two small tricks make Activity Monitor far friendlier. Both just help you focus on what matters instead of scrolling past dozens of lines.

1. Click any column heading (like “% CPU” or “Memory”) to sort by it — the heaviest users jump to the top.
2. Click the same heading again to flip the order if you'd rather see it the other way.
3. Use the search box in the top-right corner to type part of a program's name and find it instantly.
4. If you know the app that's misbehaving, searching its name is quicker than hunting through the list.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Sorting by the column you care about — CPU for slowness, Energy for battery — turns a long, scary list into a short, useful one. The worst offender is always right at the top.

13 Why the Fan Roars — and What It's Telling You

On many Macs, a slowdown comes with the fan spinning up loudly. That's not a fault — it's the Mac cooling itself because something is working the processor hard. Activity Monitor tells you whether that “something” is reasonable or a runaway.

- Open the CPU tab while the fan is roaring — whatever sits at the top is causing the heat.
- If it's a demanding task you started (a video, a big download), the fan is just doing its job; let it finish.
- If it's a program you're not even using, pinned high for no reason, that's a runaway worth quitting.
- A fan that roars constantly, with the CPU pinned high even when idle, points to a stuck program or something that needs a closer look.

WATCH OUT

If the fan runs hard all the time and Activity Monitor shows a program you don't recognize keeping the CPU busy, don't just keep quitting it — that's a clue worth investigating properly, and a good reason to call.

14 A Simple Weekly Habit

You don't need to babysit Activity Monitor. But a quick glance now and then keeps you in control of your Mac instead of mystified by it.

- When the Mac feels slow, open it and check the CPU tab first — the culprit is usually obvious.
- Glance at the Memory Pressure color: green is good, steady red means too much is open.
- On a laptop with poor battery life, check the Energy tab.
- Quit only what you recognize and clearly need to — then reopen later if needed.

WATCH OUT

Think of it as the car dashboard: you don't stare at it constantly, but a quick look when something feels off tells you what's going on. That alone turns a mysterious slowdown into a solvable one.

15 When to Call Bill

Activity Monitor is a wonderful tool for seeing what's slowing your Mac, and most of the time the fix is as simple as quitting a program or closing some browser tabs. But if the same thing keeps hogging your Mac, if you spot something you don't recognize working hard, or if you'd simply like help making sense of what you're seeing, I'm glad to help.

- The same program hogs the Mac every day no matter what you do.
- You see an unfamiliar program working hard — possible unwanted software.

- Memory Pressure sits in the red even with little open, on an older Mac.
- You'd just like someone to look at it with you and explain what's normal.

I come to you, read the dashboard together, deal with whatever's really slowing your Mac — safely — and leave you comfortable using Activity Monitor yourself whenever you'd like.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this by the Mac. Open Activity Monitor whenever things feel slow.

I want to...	Do this...
Open it fast	Press Command + Space, type “Activity Monitor,” press Return
Find the slowdown	CPU tab click “% CPU” heading look at the top
Quit a stuck program	Select it click the X button Quit (or Force Quit if frozen)
Check memory	Memory tab Memory Pressure: green good, red = too much open
Find a battery drain	Energy tab sort by Energy Impact
Spot something odd	Unknown program working hard + pop-ups = note it, don't delete
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042

BEFORE YOU GO

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 results.

HOW I CAN HELP

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GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

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