BILL'S HOME TECH
Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

BILL'S COMPLETE MANUALS

When Your Computer Won't Start or Freezes

Black screens, crash screens, frozen programs and safe restarts — explained in plain English, one calm step at a time

A plain-English guide for seniors and families

Take a breath — most of these problems are fixable

Written for you by Bill — Bill's Home Tech

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

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What's Inside

This is your guide for the moments when a computer won't turn on, won't finish starting, shows a scary error screen, or simply freezes. Read it in any order. If something is wrong right now, start with Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 — they'll calm things down and point you to the right chapter. Most of the guide is about Windows 11 computers, because that's where most of these problems show up, but there are chapters for Macs and Chromebooks too. Every step is written slowly, and every repair tool comes with an honest word about what it does and what it might undo.

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PART 1

Start Here

What to do in the first few minutes, what not to do, and how to tell which kind of trouble you're facing. If something is wrong right now, begin with Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 1

A Note from Bill

Hello, and welcome. If you're reading this, there's a good chance your computer just did something upsetting. Maybe it won't turn on. Maybe the screen went black, or a strange message appeared, or everything froze in the middle of an email to your grandchildren. Whichever it was, take a breath. You've come to the right place.

I'm Bill. Helping people get their computers working again is what I do every day, and I've written this guide the way I'd talk you through it on the phone: slowly, in plain English, and without making you feel silly for asking. If I use a word you don't know, I'll explain it right then.

Most of these problems are fixable

A computer that won't start or keeps freezing feels like a disaster, but most of the time the cause is something ordinary: a loose plug, a drained battery, an update that got stuck, or one program that misbehaved. Windows, Macs and Chromebooks all come with built-in repair tools, and this guide walks you through them from the gentlest to the most serious.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this guide does for you

It turns a scary moment into a short checklist. You'll know what to try first, which tools are safe, which ones might undo something, and when it's time to stop and get a hand — before anything you care about is at risk.

What this guide covers

- Calm first steps, and the handful of things **not** to do.
- A computer that seems completely dead — power, plugs, batteries and monitors.
- Black screens, stuck updates, and the crash screen Windows shows when something goes badly wrong.
- Windows' recovery tools: Startup Repair, Safe Mode, undoing an update, System Restore and Reset this PC.
- The BitLocker recovery key screen, and where to find that key.
- Frozen programs and a frozen computer — on Windows, Mac and Chromebook.
- Warning signs of a failing drive or overheating, and backing up before trouble.

- Fake crash screens and phone-number pop-ups — a very common scam.

And I'm only a phone call away

This guide will get you through a lot on your own. But if you're ever unsure — especially before erasing or resetting anything — call me at **(330) 200-8042**. There's no such thing as a silly question when your computer won't start.

So let's take it one step at a time, together.

— Bill

CHAPTER 2

Take a Breath: Calm First Steps (and What Not to Do)

When a computer misbehaves, the natural reaction is to press buttons, unplug things and click anything that offers help. A few calm minutes first will save you a lot of trouble — and keep your files safe.

The first five minutes

1. **Stop and look.** Read what's on the screen, even if it seems like gibberish. Is there a message? A code? A spinning circle? A percentage that's still moving?
2. **Take a photo of the screen with your phone.** This is the single most helpful thing you can do. Error screens often disappear on their own, and a photo lets you (or me) read it later.
3. **Give it a few minutes.** If a circle is spinning or a percentage is changing, the computer is still working. Make a cup of coffee and come back.
4. **Think back.** Did anything change recently? A new update, a new program, a new printer or mouse, a storm, a move to a different room, a spilled drink? Write it down.
5. **Then turn to Chapter 3** to find the chapter that matches what you're seeing.

> TIP
> **A photo is worth a thousand words**
> When you call for help, a clear photo of the error screen tells me more than any description. Hold the phone straight-on so the text is readable, and take two in case one is blurry.

What NOT to do

- **Don't call a phone number that appears on the screen.** Real Windows and Mac error screens never show a support phone number. A number on a "warning" is a scam (Chapter 25).
- **Don't unplug a computer in the middle of an update** unless it has truly stopped for a long time (Chapter 9 explains how long to wait).
- **Don't choose "Reset," "Erase," "Remove everything" or "Powerwash"** as a first step. Those are last resorts that can wipe your files. This guide always shows you gentler steps first.

- **Don't open the case or take apart a laptop.** Leave that to a repair person.
- **Don't let anyone you didn't contact yourself take control of your computer** to "fix" it.
- **Don't keep forcing a computer off and on over and over** if it smells hot, makes grinding noises or has been dropped or wet. Unplug it and get help.

STAY SAFE

If you see smoke, smell burning or the computer got wet

Unplug it from the wall right away (if you can do so safely) and don't turn it back on. For a laptop, unplug the charger. Water and heat damage get worse every time power goes through the computer. This is a time to call for help, not to troubleshoot.

Restart: the oldest fix is still the best one

If the computer is on and responding at all, a proper restart clears out a surprising number of problems: frozen programs, a sluggish mouse, Wi-Fi that dropped, a printer that disappeared. A **restart** is better than "shut down, then turn on," because on Windows a restart always gives the computer a completely fresh start.

Computer	How to restart properly
Windows 11	Select **Start**, then the **Power** button, then **Restart**.
Mac	Choose the **Apple menu** (the apple in the top-left corner), then **Restart**.
Chromebook	Select the clock area in the lower-right corner, then the **Power** button. Wait for it to turn off, then press the power key to turn it back on.

CHAPTER 3

Which Kind of Trouble Is It?

"It won't work" can mean many different things, and each has its own fix. Find the line below that best matches what you see, and go to that chapter.

What you see	What it usually means	Go to
Nothing at all. No lights, no sounds, no fan.	No power is reaching the computer, or a laptop battery is flat.	Chapters 5–6
Lights and fan come on, but the screen stays dark.	The monitor, its cable or input, or the display itself.	Chapters 7–8
A black screen with only a mouse pointer.	Windows started but something stalled while loading.	Chapter 8
"Working on updates" or a spinning circle that goes on and on.	An update is still installing, or got stuck.	Chapter 9
"Your device ran into a problem and needs to restart" and a stop code.	Windows crashed and is restarting itself.	Chapter 10
"Automatic Repair" or a blue screen with choices like Troubleshoot.	Windows couldn't start and opened its recovery tools.	Chapter 11
A screen asking for a BitLocker recovery key.	Windows' drive protection wants proof it's you.	Chapter 12
One program stopped responding.	That program froze; the rest of the computer is fine.	Chapter 17
Nothing responds — mouse and keyboard are dead.	The whole computer froze.	Chapter 18
A pop-up with a siren, a warning and a phone number.	A scam web page, not a real error.	Chapter 25

TIP

Using a Mac or a Chromebook?

Chapter 20 and Chapter 21 cover Macs, and Chapter 22 covers Chromebooks. The power and plug checks in Chapter 5 apply to every computer.

SCAM ALERT

A phone number on an error screen is always fake

Microsoft says its genuine error and warning messages never include a phone number to call. If a "crash" screen or warning shows a number, it is a scam web page — no matter how official it looks. Don't call it. Chapter 25 shows how to close it safely.

CHAPTER 4

Know Your Computer: Windows, Mac or Chromebook?

The right steps depend on what kind of computer you have. Here's how to tell, even if it won't start properly.

How to tell at a glance

Type	How to recognize it
Windows computer	Made by Dell, HP, Lenovo, Acer, ASUS, Microsoft Surface and many others. The keyboard has a key with the four-pane **Windows** logo, and the screen shows the Windows logo while starting.
Mac	Made only by Apple. There's an apple logo on the lid or on the back of the screen, and the keyboard has **Command** and **Option** keys. It shows an apple while starting.
Chromebook	Made by Acer, ASUS, HP, Lenovo, Samsung and others. Look for the word "Chromebook" or a Chrome logo, and a keyboard with a round-arrow **Refresh** key along the top row.

Which version of Windows?

Most of this guide is written for **Windows 11**, which is what nearly every Windows computer sold in the last few years runs. If your computer is working, you can check: select **Start**, then **Settings**, then **System**, then **About**, and look at the "Windows specifications" section.

GOOD TO KNOW

Still on Windows 10?

Microsoft ended regular support for Windows 10 on October 14, 2025. Home computers enrolled in Microsoft's Extended Security Updates program for consumers keep getting security fixes until October 12, 2027, as of November 2026. Many of the steps in this guide look similar on Windows 10, but some newer tools (like Quick Machine Recovery and the new black crash screen) are Windows 11 only. Our Windows 11 guide covers moving up when you're ready.

Write down a few details now, while it's working

If your computer is working today, take two minutes to note these down. When something goes wrong later, they make help much faster.

- The make and model (often on a sticker underneath a laptop, or on the back of a desktop).
- Windows, Mac or Chromebook, and which version.
- The email address you use to sign in to the computer (your Microsoft account, Apple Account or Google Account).
- Where your BitLocker recovery key is kept, for Windows computers (Chapter 12).

FROM BILL

Keep this guide somewhere you can reach it

If your computer won't start, you can't read a guide stored on it. Keep a copy on your phone or tablet, or bookmark it there, so it's handy on the day you need it.

PART 2

When It Won't Turn On

No lights, no sounds, or lights but nothing on the screen. Most of the time, the fix is about power and connections — not a broken computer.

CHAPTER 5

Is It Really Off? Power, Lights and Plugs

A computer that "won't turn on" is very often a computer that isn't getting power — or one that's actually on, with a screen that isn't showing anything. Let's check the simple things first, in order.

Look and listen

- Is there a small light on the computer — near the power button, on the front of a desktop, or near the charging port of a laptop?
- Can you hear a fan or a faint hum when you press the power button?
- Do the keyboard lights (like Caps Lock) turn on when you press that key?

If you see lights or hear a fan, the computer **is** getting power — skip ahead to Chapter 7 (the screen) or Chapter 8 (black screen). If there's nothing at all, keep going here.

Check the power, one link at a time

1. **Follow the cord.** Trace the power cord from the computer to the wall. Make sure it's pushed in firmly at both ends. Desktop power cords can work loose from the back of the computer.
2. **Try the outlet.** Plug a lamp into the same outlet. If the lamp doesn't light, the outlet or a wall switch is the problem, not the computer.
3. **Check the power strip or surge protector.** Many have their own on/off switch or a reset button, and some wear out with age. Try plugging the computer straight into the wall as a test.
4. **Check the switch on the back of a desktop.** Many desktop computers have a small rocker switch on the back, near where the cord plugs in. Make sure it's set to on (usually the "|" side).
5. **Press the power button once, firmly.** Hold it for a second or two, then let go and wait a full minute. Some computers take a while to show anything.

TIP

After a storm or power outage

If the computer stopped working after a thunderstorm or outage, check the surge protector first — some turn themselves off to protect what's plugged in. If the computer itself still shows no sign of life on a known-good outlet, it may have been damaged. That's a good time to call me.

Is it asleep rather than off?

A sleeping computer looks off, but it's really resting. Try a gentle wake-up before anything else: move the mouse, press a key like the spacebar, or press the power button briefly (don't hold it). On a laptop, open the lid fully.

GOOD TO KNOW

Pressing vs. holding the power button

A quick **press** of the power button usually turns a computer on, or wakes it from sleep. **Holding** the power button down for several seconds forces the computer off. Forcing it off is fine when it's truly stuck, but it skips saving your work — so try a quick press first.

CHAPTER 6

A Laptop That Won't Turn On

Laptops add two more suspects: the battery and the charger. A completely drained battery is the most common reason a laptop seems dead — especially one that's been sitting in a drawer for a few weeks.

Charge it properly first

1. Plug the charger firmly into the wall and into the laptop. Many newer laptops charge through a **USB-C** port — a small oval port. If your laptop has more than one, try the other one; on some models only certain ports accept power.
2. Look for a charging light on the laptop or the charger's brick. If there's a light, that's good news.
3. **Leave it plugged in for at least 30 minutes** before trying to turn it on. A very flat battery may need time before it has enough charge to start.
4. Press the power button once and wait a full minute.

> HEADS UP
> **Use the right charger**
> A phone charger may fit a laptop's USB-C port but not deliver enough power to charge or start it. Use the charger that came with the laptop, or one the maker says is right for it.

The "hard reset" or power drain

When a laptop has power but still won't start, most makers suggest a **hard reset** (sometimes called a power drain). It clears leftover electrical charge that can confuse the computer. It doesn't erase anything. The details differ by brand, so **follow your maker's instructions** — search the maker's support site for your model and "hard reset." The general idea is:

1. Unplug the charger and disconnect everything else: mouse, printer cable, USB drives, docking station.
2. If your laptop has a battery you can remove easily (most newer ones don't), remove it.
3. Press and hold the power button for the time your maker gives. HP's guide, for example, says 15 to 30 seconds.
4. Put the battery back (if you removed it), plug in only the charger, and press the power button normally.

STAY SAFE

Never pry out a built-in battery

Most modern laptops have a battery sealed inside. Don't try to open the case to get at it. A damaged lithium battery can overheat or catch fire. If a laptop's bottom is bulging, the trackpad is being pushed up, or the case is separating, stop using it, unplug it and get it looked at.

If it still won't turn on

- Try a different outlet, and if you can borrow a matching charger, try that. Chargers fail more often than laptops.
- Look closely at the charging port for bent pins, lint or a loose fit.
- If the laptop was dropped or got wet, stop trying and get it to a repair person.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Most "dead" laptops come back with a proper charge or a hard reset — no repair shop needed. And if it doesn't, you'll know it really is a hardware problem, which saves time and money when you get help.

CHAPTER 7

Lights On, Nothing on the Screen: Monitor Checks

If the computer's lights come on and you hear the fan, the computer may be working perfectly — it just isn't showing you anything. This is especially common with desktop computers, which use a separate monitor (screen).

For a desktop with a separate monitor

1. **Is the monitor on?** Monitors have their own power button and power light, usually on the front edge or underneath. A light that's amber or blinking often means "no signal."
2. **Check the monitor's own power cord**, at the monitor and at the wall or power strip.
3. **Check the video cable** between the computer and the monitor (often HDMI or DisplayPort). Unplug it at both ends and push it back in firmly.
4. **Check the input.** Many monitors have several inputs. Use the monitor's buttons to open its menu and choose **Input** or **Source**, then pick the one your cable is plugged into (for example, HDMI 1).
5. If the computer is connected to a TV instead of a monitor, use the TV remote's **Input** or **Source** button the same way.

> TIP
>
> **Computers can have two places to plug in a monitor**
>
> Some desktops have video ports in two places on the back: one group near the top and another lower down on a separate card. If the computer has a separate graphics card, the monitor usually needs to be plugged into that lower one. If it was recently moved, the cable may have gone back into the wrong spot.

For a laptop

- Turn the screen brightness up. Many laptops have brightness keys with a sun symbol on the top row.
- If an extra monitor or TV is connected, unplug it and see if the laptop's own screen comes back.
- Shine a flashlight at the screen at an angle. If you can faintly see the desktop, the backlight may have failed — a hardware repair.

Wake the screen with a keyboard shortcut (Windows)

Windows has a built-in shortcut for exactly this situation. Microsoft lists it as **"Wake PC from blank or black screen."** Press and hold the **Windows logo key**, **Ctrl** and **Shift** together, then tap **B**. The screen may flicker and you may hear a beep; give it a few seconds.

If you have more than one screen, or the computer was recently connected to a TV, press **Windows logo key + P** to switch between display modes. Each press moves to the next choice; pause a few seconds between presses.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

These checks take five minutes and solve a large share of "my computer won't turn on" calls — because the computer was on all along. If none of them help, Chapter 8 picks up from here.

PART 3

When Windows Starts but Doesn't Finish

Black screens, endless updates, the crash screen, the recovery menu and the BitLocker key screen — what each one means and what to do next.

CHAPTER 8

A Black Screen (With or Without a Mouse Pointer)

A black or blank screen after the computer starts is one of the most common Windows problems. Microsoft's own troubleshooting guide sorts it by *when* it happens, and so will we. If the screen never lights up at all, do the monitor checks in Chapter 7 first.

Try these first, in order

1. **Wait two or three minutes.** After an update, Windows can show a dark screen for a while as it finishes up.
2. **Press Windows logo key + Ctrl + Shift + B.** This resets the display. The screen may flicker and beep.
3. **Press Windows logo key + P** a few times, pausing between presses, in case Windows is sending the picture to a screen that isn't there.
4. **Unplug any extra monitors, TVs and docking stations**, then try again.
5. **Press Ctrl + Alt + Delete.** If a blue or dark screen with choices appears, Windows is running. Choose the **power** icon in the lower-right corner, then **Restart**.

A black screen with only the mouse pointer

If you can move the pointer but nothing else appears, Windows itself has started but the part that draws your desktop and taskbar has stalled. Microsoft's guide suggests restarting it from Task Manager:

1. Press **Ctrl + Shift + Esc** to open Task Manager. (If that doesn't work, press **Ctrl + Alt + Delete** and choose **Task Manager**.)
2. If Task Manager looks small and simple, choose **More details**.
3. In the list of processes, find **Windows Explorer**. Select it, then choose **Restart**. (If it isn't in the list, choose **Run new task**, type **explorer**, and press Enter.)
4. Your taskbar and desktop should reappear within a few seconds.

GOOD TO KNOW

"Windows Explorer" isn't the web browser

Despite the name, Windows Explorer has nothing to do with Internet Explorer or Edge. It's the part of Windows that shows your desktop, taskbar, Start menu and folders. Restarting it is safe; your open programs keep running.

Black screen after signing in, or after an update

If a black screen started right after an update, or right after you signed in, the gentlest next step is **Safe Mode** (Chapter 14). Microsoft notes that this kind of black screen is often tied to a display driver (the small program that runs the graphics) or an update that didn't finish installing. From Safe Mode you can undo the latest update (Chapter 15) or use System Restore.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Many black screens are fixed in a minute with a keyboard shortcut or a restart of Windows Explorer — no data lost, no repair shop. Knowing these two tricks spares you a lot of worry.

CHAPTER 9

Stuck on "Working on Updates"

Windows installs updates while it restarts. During that time you'll see messages like **"Working on updates"** along with **"Don't turn off your PC"**, or a spinning circle of dots. Most of the time, the right answer is patience.

How long should you wait?

There's no single answer. A small monthly update on a newer computer may take a few minutes; a large update on an older computer with a traditional hard drive can take much longer. My own rule of thumb:

- **If anything is changing** — a percentage creeping up, dots spinning, the screen occasionally flickering or restarting — leave it alone. Let it work, even if that means an hour or two.
- **Plug in a laptop** so the battery can't run out halfway through.
- **Leave it overnight** if it's late. Many "stuck" updates are finished by morning.
- **Only if nothing at all has changed for a long time** — several hours with the same number and no spinning — is it reasonable to force the computer off.

HEADS UP

Forcing it off during an update carries some risk

Turning off the power in the middle of an update can, occasionally, leave Windows unable to start. That's why patience comes first. The good news: Windows is designed to recover from this, and the tools in Chapter 11 through Chapter 15 can usually put things right.

If you've waited and it's truly stuck

1. Press and hold the power button until the computer turns off (usually 5 to 10 seconds).
2. Wait 30 seconds. Unplug any USB drives, printers or other extras.
3. Press the power button to turn it back on.
4. Often Windows will say it is **undoing changes** or finishing the update. Let it — this can take a while too.
5. If it won't start normally after two or three tries, Windows usually opens its recovery screen by itself. That's Chapter 11.

Avoid the surprise next time

- Restart your computer about once a week. It lets updates install in small, quick pieces rather than piling up.
- When Windows says an update is ready, choose a restart time that suits you, rather than letting it happen while you're in the middle of something.
- Keep some free space on the drive. Updates need room to unpack (Chapter 19).

TIP

Make it easier on yourself

Before you go to bed, choose **Start**, then the **Power** button, and pick **Update and restart** if you see it. The update installs while you sleep, and the computer is ready in the morning.

CHAPTER 10

The Crash Screen and What Stop Codes Mean

When Windows hits a problem serious enough that it can't safely keep going, it stops, shows a crash screen for a moment, saves some details about what went wrong, and restarts itself. For decades this was the famous "blue screen." On current versions of Windows 11, it looks different.

What it looks like now

On Windows 11 version 24H2 and later — which includes the current 25H2 — the crash screen is now **black** (or dark) instead of blue. Microsoft removed the old frowning face and the QR code. The message is short and simple, along the lines of:

"Your device ran into a problem and needs to restart."

Near the bottom, it shows a **stop code** — a name in capital letters joined by underscores, such as **MEMORY_MANAGEMENT** or **PAGE_FAULT_IN_NONPAGED_AREA** — and sometimes the name of the driver or file that caused it. Microsoft also added the stop code in its short number form (it starts with 0x) to make it easier to look up. Older versions of Windows 11, and Windows 10, still show the blue version with a sad face.

> TIP
>
> **It may vanish before you can read it**
>
> The crash screen can disappear quickly as the computer restarts. If it keeps happening, have your phone's camera ready, and take a photo the moment it appears. The stop code is the most useful part.

What the stop code means for you

You don't need to understand the code. It's a clue for whoever helps you, pointing to the area where the problem started. Roughly speaking:

If the code…	It's pointing at…
Mentions MEMORY	Something went wrong with the computer's working memory — sometimes a program, sometimes the memory chips themselves.
Mentions a DRIVER, or names a file ending in .sys	A driver — the small program that runs a piece of hardware like the graphics, Wi-Fi or a printer — misbehaved. Often fixed by updating or undoing that driver.

If the code…	It's pointing at…
CRITICAL_PROCESS_DIED	A core part of Windows stopped. Microsoft has a dedicated article for this one.
Mentions DISK, BOOT or INACCESSIBLE	Windows had trouble reading its own drive. Back up soon (Chapter 24) and see Chapter 23.

GOOD TO KNOW

Once is an accident; often is a pattern

A single crash, after which everything works fine, usually isn't worth worrying about. Windows restarts and carries on. If crashes happen again and again — or every time you do one particular thing — that's a pattern worth fixing. Chapter 19 covers repeat crashes.

Microsoft's basic steps for repeat crashes

1. **Remove any new hardware.** If you plugged in something new before the crashes started — a printer, a webcam, a USB gadget — shut down, unplug it, and restart.
2. **Check Device Manager.** Right-click **Start**, choose **Device Manager**, and look for any device with a yellow exclamation mark. Right-click it and choose **Update driver**.
3. **Check free space.** Microsoft suggests keeping 10% to 15% of the drive free.
4. **Install the latest Windows updates** — updates often include the fix.
5. **If it keeps crashing**, start in Safe Mode (Chapter 14) and try System Restore (Chapter 15).

SCAM ALERT

A real crash screen never asks you to call anyone

Scammers make web pages that look like the old blue crash screen, often with sirens, a frozen-looking browser and a "Microsoft support" phone number. A real Windows crash screen restarts the computer by itself and never shows a phone number. Chapter 25 explains how to tell the difference.

CHAPTER 11

"Automatic Repair" and the Recovery Menu

If Windows fails to start properly a few times in a row, it often switches to its built-in repair toolkit, called the **Windows Recovery Environment** (Microsoft shortens it to Windows RE or WinRE). You might first see **"Preparing Automatic Repair"** or **"Diagnosing your PC,"** followed by a message that your PC did not start correctly, with buttons for **Restart** and **Advanced options**.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

This screen looks alarming, but it's actually good news: Windows is offering to help. Everything in this toolkit is designed to fix startup problems, and most of the tools leave your personal files alone.

First, simply try Restart

Sometimes one clean restart is all it takes. Choose **Restart** once. If you end up back at the same screen, choose **Advanced options** instead.

Finding your way around

From **Advanced options**, choose **Troubleshoot**, then **Advanced options** again. Microsoft lists these main tools:

Tool	What it does
Startup Repair	Looks for and fixes problems that stop Windows from starting. Gentle; try it first. (Chapter 13)
Startup Settings	Lets you start Windows in **Safe Mode**, with only the basics running. (Chapter 14)
Uninstall Updates	Removes the most recent update, if the trouble started after one. (Chapter 15)
System Restore	Rolls Windows back to an earlier point in time, without touching your personal files. (Chapter 15)
Command Prompt	A typed-command tool for technicians. Best left alone unless someone you trust is guiding you.
System Image Recovery	Restores a complete backup image, if one was made. Rarely used at home.

You'll also see **Reset this PC** on the Troubleshoot screen. That is the last resort (Chapter 16), not the first.

Getting to this menu on purpose

If Windows is working, you can open the recovery menu yourself — handy when a technician asks you to, or to start Safe Mode:

1. Select **Start**, then **Settings**, then **System**, then **Recovery**.
2. Next to **Advanced startup**, choose **Restart now**.
3. The computer restarts into the blue menu with **Choose an option** at the top.

TIP

Another way in

You can also hold down the **Shift** key while you choose **Restart** from the Start menu's power button (or from the power icon on the sign-in screen). Keep holding Shift until the menu appears.

HEADS UP

A BitLocker key may be requested

Some tools in this menu ask for your BitLocker recovery key before they'll run. If that happens, Chapter 12 shows where to find it. Don't guess and don't give up — the key is usually saved in your Microsoft account.

CHAPTER 12

The BitLocker Recovery Key Screen

Many Windows 11 computers quietly protect everything on the drive with **encryption** — a lock that scrambles your files so a thief couldn't read them. On Windows this is called **BitLocker** (or "device encryption"). Usually you never notice it. But after certain repairs, hardware changes or updates, Windows may stop and ask for a long **recovery key** to prove the computer is still in the right hands.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> **This is a safety feature, not a virus**
>
> The BitLocker screen is a genuine part of Windows. It doesn't mean you've been hacked. It means Windows is being extra careful. The fix is to type in the key — a 48-digit number.

Where to find your recovery key

For most home computers, the key was saved automatically to the **Microsoft account** used to set up the computer. Here's how to get it:

1. On the BitLocker screen, write down the first 8 characters of the **Key ID**. That tells you which key you need.
2. On Windows 11 version 24H2 and later, the screen also shows a hint of which Microsoft account holds the key.
3. On **another device** — your phone, a tablet or another computer — open the web browser and go to **aka.ms/myrecoverykey**.
4. Sign in with that Microsoft account.
5. Find the key whose Key ID matches the 8 characters you wrote down, and type the full recovery key into the locked computer.

If the key isn't in your Microsoft account, check for a printout or a USB drive saved when the computer was set up. A computer from work or school may have its key with that organization's IT department.

HEADS UP

Microsoft can't recover a lost key

Microsoft says its support team cannot retrieve, provide or recreate a lost BitLocker recovery key. If the key can't be found anywhere, the remaining option is to reset the computer — which removes all of your files. That's why it's worth finding your key **now**, while everything is working.

SCAM ALERT

Only type your key on the locked computer

Never read your recovery key to someone who calls you, or type it into a website someone sends you. Get it yourself from aka.ms/myrecoverykey, and enter it only on your own computer's BitLocker screen.

FROM BILL

Do this today

If your Windows computer is working right now, sign in at aka.ms/myrecoverykey from your phone and make sure you can see a key listed for it. Write the account email in the Cheat-Sheet (Chapter 28). If you can't find it, I'm happy to help you sort it out before you ever need it.

PART 4

Windows Repair Tools, Gentlest First

Startup Repair, Quick Machine Recovery, Safe Mode, undoing an update, System Restore — and, only if nothing else works, Reset this PC.

CHAPTER 13

Startup Repair and Quick Machine Recovery

When Windows won't start, the first tools to reach for are the ones that fix things without changing anything you've done. Windows 11 has two.

Startup Repair

Startup Repair looks for damaged or missing startup files and tries to put them right. It doesn't remove your files or programs.

1. Get to the blue recovery menu (Chapter 11).
2. Choose **Troubleshoot**, then **Advanced options**, then **Startup Repair**.
3. If asked, choose your account and type your password or PIN.
4. Let it run. It may take several minutes, and it may restart the computer.
5. If it says it couldn't repair your PC, that's not a failure on your part — go on to Safe Mode (Chapter 14) or System Restore (Chapter 15).

Quick Machine Recovery

Quick Machine Recovery is a newer Windows 11 feature. When many computers can't start because of the same widespread problem, Microsoft can deliver a fix through Windows Update, and Windows applies it from the recovery environment — without you having to do anything clever. It builds on Startup Repair and needs the computer to be able to reach the internet.

It's available on Windows 11 version 24H2 (with updates from 2025 onward) and 25H2. You can check its setting at **Settings** > **System** > **Recovery** > **Quick machine recovery**. The "Ways to Make Life Easier" topic walks through it.

GOOD TO KNOW

Why this matters

In past years, a single bad update could leave many computers stuck at startup, and each one had to be fixed by hand. Quick Machine Recovery is Microsoft's way of fixing that kind of mass problem remotely. It won't fix a broken drive or a problem unique to your computer, but it's a useful safety net.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Two repair tools that never touch your photos, documents or programs. Try them before anything that rolls back or resets.

CHAPTER 14

Safe Mode: Starting with Just the Basics

Safe Mode starts Windows with only the essential pieces running — no extra programs, and only basic drivers. The screen may look large and plain. That's normal.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What Safe Mode tells you

If the problem goes away in Safe Mode, then Windows itself is fine and something extra — a program, a driver or a recent update — is to blame. That's a big clue, and from Safe Mode you can remove the culprit or roll back with System Restore.

How to start in Safe Mode

1. Get to the blue recovery menu (Chapter 11) — either from Automatic Repair, or from **Settings** > **System** > **Recovery** > **Advanced startup** > **Restart now**.
2. Choose **Troubleshoot**, then **Advanced options**, then **Startup Settings**, then **Restart**.
3. After the restart you'll see a numbered list. Press **4** (or **F4**) for Safe Mode, or **5** (or **F5**) for Safe Mode with Networking if you'll need the internet.
4. Sign in as usual. You'll see the words "Safe Mode" in the corners of the screen.

HEADS UP

Have your BitLocker key handy

Starting Safe Mode this way may ask for your BitLocker recovery key. Chapter 12 shows where to find it.

What to do once you're in Safe Mode

- **Uninstall a program you recently added**: **Settings** > **Apps** > **Installed apps**, then the three dots next to it, then **Uninstall**.
- **Roll back to an earlier point** with System Restore (Chapter 15).
- **Back up important files** to a USB drive while the computer is working (Chapter 24).

Getting out of Safe Mode

Just restart normally: **Start** > **Power** > **Restart**. Windows starts the usual way.

> **TIP**
>
> **The old F8 trick doesn't work anymore**
>
> On older versions of Windows, people pressed F8 during startup to reach Safe Mode. On Windows 11 that usually doesn't work — use the recovery menu instead.

CHAPTER 15

Undo Recent Changes: Remove an Update or Use System Restore

If the trouble started right after something changed — an update, a new program, a new printer — the next step is to undo that change. Windows gives you two ways.

Uninstall the latest update

Microsoft notes that uninstalling an update keeps your personal files, apps and settings; only the changes from that update are removed.

If Windows won't start

1. From the blue recovery menu (Chapter 11), choose **Troubleshoot**, then **Advanced options**, then **Uninstall Updates**.
2. You'll be offered the latest **quality update** (the regular monthly kind) or the latest **feature update** (a bigger, yearly one). If you're not sure, start with the quality update.
3. Follow the prompts and let the computer restart.

If Windows is working

1. Select **Start** > **Settings** > **Windows Update** > **Update history**.
2. Scroll down and choose **Uninstall updates**.
3. Choose **Uninstall** next to the most recent one.

> GOOD TO KNOW
>
> **Windows may try to reinstall it**
>
> Windows Update will usually offer the same update again later. Often Microsoft has fixed the problem by then. If the same trouble comes back, call me — we can look at what's clashing.

System Restore

System Restore takes Windows back to how it was at an earlier moment, called a **restore point**. Microsoft describes it as undoing recent system changes **without affecting personal files**. Your photos, documents and email stay put. Programs, drivers and updates added after that point are removed.

1. From the blue recovery menu, choose **Troubleshoot** > **Advanced options** > **System Restore**. (If Windows is working, search for **Create a restore point** in the Start menu, open it and choose **System Restore**.)
2. Choose **Next**. Pick a restore point dated **before** the trouble began.
3. Choose **Scan for affected programs** to see which programs would be removed. Write them down.
4. Choose **Next**, then **Finish**. The computer restarts; this can take a while.

HEADS UP

System Restore only works if restore points exist

Restore points exist only if **System Protection** was turned on for the drive. If you see no restore points, that's why — move on to the next option, or call me. Once your computer is working, it's worth checking that System Protection is on.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

These are the "undo" buttons for Windows. They fix the most common cause of sudden trouble — a recent change — while leaving your personal files exactly where they were.

CHAPTER 16

Reset This PC — Only as a Last Resort

Reset this PC reinstalls Windows from scratch. It fixes almost any software problem, but it's a big step, and it's the one people most often regret rushing into. Please read this whole chapter before you use it.

The two choices, honestly

Option	What it really does
Keep my files	Reinstalls Windows and keeps your personal files (documents, photos and so on). **Removes your apps and settings.** You'll need to reinstall programs like Microsoft Office, your printer software and anything else you added, and set things up again.
Remove everything	Erases everything — files, apps and settings — and leaves the computer like new. Only for when you're giving the computer away or you've been told it's the only way.

HEADS UP

Back up before you reset — even with "Keep my files"

Microsoft itself advises backing up first, because some recovery options can result in data loss. If the computer can start at all, copy your important files to a USB drive or OneDrive first (Chapter 24). If it can't, call me — files can often be rescued before a reset.

Try a gentler repair first

If Windows still starts, Windows 11 has a gentler option: **Fix problems using Windows Update**, found in **Settings** > **System** > **Recovery**. It reinstalls the current version of Windows to repair it, rather than starting over. The "Ways to Make Life Easier" topic walks through it step by step.

If you do need to reset

1. Make sure important files are backed up, and that you know your Microsoft account email and password (you'll need them afterward). Have your BitLocker recovery key handy too.
2. Plug in a laptop. A reset can take an hour or more.
3. If Windows is working: **Start** > **Settings** > **System** > **Recovery**, then **Reset PC** next to **Reset this PC**.

4. If Windows won't start: from the blue recovery menu, choose **Troubleshoot** > **Reset this PC**.
5. Choose **Keep my files**, and read every screen carefully before choosing **Next** or **Reset**. If a choice confuses you, stop and call for help — there's no penalty for pausing.

> **FROM BILL**
>
> **This is a good moment to call**
>
> I'd much rather get a call *before* a reset than after. Often a problem that looks like it needs a reset can be fixed another way, and if a reset really is needed, I can make sure your files are safe and your programs get reinstalled afterward. Call (330) 200-8042.

PART 5

When Things Freeze

One program stuck, the whole computer stuck, and freezes that keep coming back — on Windows.

CHAPTER 17

A Frozen Program on Windows

Sometimes a single program stops responding. The window won't close, the title bar may say **"Not responding,"** and the pointer may turn into a spinning circle. The rest of the computer usually still works. Here's how to close just that program, gently first.

Step 1: Give it a minute

A program that's busy — opening a big file, printing, saving, or waiting on the internet — can look frozen when it's simply working hard. Wait a minute or two before doing anything else. If Windows shows a box offering to **Wait for the program to respond**, waiting is the safer choice.

Step 2: Ask it to close

1. Click once on the frozen window's title bar to select it.
2. Press **Alt + F4** (hold the Alt key and tap F4). This politely asks the program to close and may give it a chance to offer to save your work.
3. If a box asks whether to save, choose **Save** if you can.

Step 3: End it with Task Manager

If it still won't close, **Task Manager** can stop it. Task Manager is Windows' list of everything that's running.

1. Press **Ctrl + Shift + Esc** together. Task Manager opens.
2. If it looks small with just a list of names, choose **More details**.
3. On the **Processes** page, find the frozen program. It often says **Not responding** next to it.
4. Select it once, then choose **End task**.
5. Open the program again from the Start menu. Many programs, like Word, offer to recover unsaved work.

HEADS UP

Ending a task loses unsaved work in that program

End task closes the program without saving. Anything you typed since the last save in that program may be gone. That's why Alt + F4 and waiting come first.

HEADS UP

End only the program you recognize

Task Manager lists many things with technical names. Only end the program that's frozen — something you recognize, like Word, Outlook, Chrome or Solitaire. Ending unfamiliar items can make Windows unstable until you restart.

If Ctrl + Shift + Esc doesn't work

Press **Ctrl + Alt + Delete**. A full-screen menu appears with choices like **Lock**, **Switch user**, **Sign out** and **Task Manager**. Choose **Task Manager** and follow the steps above. If even that won't come up, see Chapter 18.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

One stuck program doesn't have to mean a full restart. You close just the problem and carry on, with everything else still open where you left it.

TIP

A frozen web browser full of warnings?

If your browser froze while showing a loud warning, a siren or a phone number, that's almost certainly a scam page designed to look like a frozen computer. Closing it with Task Manager is exactly the right move. Chapter 25 has more.

CHAPTER 18

When the Whole Windows Computer Freezes

Sometimes nothing responds at all: the mouse pointer won't move, the keyboard does nothing, and the clock in the corner has stopped. Here's what to try, from gentlest to firmest.

1. **Wait two or three minutes.** A computer that's very busy, or very low on memory, can stall and then recover on its own.
2. **Check the mouse and keyboard.** A wireless mouse with a dead battery looks exactly like a frozen computer. Try pressing **Caps Lock** — if its light turns on and off, the computer is still listening.
3. **Press Ctrl + Alt + Delete.** If the menu appears, choose the **power** icon in the lower-right corner, then **Restart**.
4. **Press Windows logo key + Ctrl + Shift + B** in case only the display is stuck.
5. **Force it off.** If nothing at all works, press and hold the power button until the computer turns off — usually 5 to 10 seconds. Wait 30 seconds, then press it once to turn it back on.

GOOD TO KNOW

Forcing it off is fine when it's truly frozen

Holding the power button is the computer equivalent of pulling the emergency brake. You won't hurt it by doing it occasionally when it's genuinely stuck. You'll lose anything unsaved, and Windows may take a little longer to start next time. Just don't do it during an update unless it's truly stuck (Chapter 9).

After it restarts

- Open the programs you were using. Many will offer to restore what you had open.
- Check for Windows updates: **Start** > **Settings** > **Windows Update** > **Check for updates**.
- Note what you were doing when it froze. If it happens again, that's a pattern (Chapter 19).

TIP

A slow computer isn't the same as a frozen one

If the computer eventually responds but takes ages to do everything, that's a slow computer, not a frozen one. Our Speeding Up a Slow Computer guide covers that in detail.

CHAPTER 19

Freezes and Crashes That Keep Coming Back

One freeze is a hiccup. Freezes or crash screens several times a week are a sign that something needs attention. The trick is to look for the pattern.

Ask yourself

Question	What it suggests
When did it start?	Right after an update, a new program or a new device? Undo that change (Chapter 15).
What were you doing?	Always in one program? Update or reinstall that program. Always when printing? The printer software may be the cause.
Is the computer hot?	Freezes after it's been on a while, with a loud fan, point to overheating (Chapter 23).
Is the drive nearly full?	A very full drive makes Windows struggle. Free up space (below).
Does it happen in Safe Mode?	If not, a program or driver is the culprit, not Windows itself (Chapter 14).

Check your free space

1. Select **Start** > **Settings** > **System** > **Storage**.
2. Look at the bar at the top for how much space is used and how much is free.
3. Microsoft suggests keeping 10% to 15% of the drive free. If you're below that, delete or move things you no longer need, or empty the Recycle Bin.

Check for driver problems

1. Right-click the **Start** button and choose **Device Manager**.
2. Look for any item with a small yellow exclamation mark.
3. Right-click that item and choose **Update driver**, then follow the prompts.
4. If updating doesn't help, Microsoft suggests disabling or uninstalling that device — but if it's something you rely on, like the Wi-Fi or graphics, it's best to call for help at this point.

Keep things up to date

- Windows updates: **Settings** > **Windows Update** > **Check for updates**.
- Your computer maker's update tool, if it came with one, often delivers driver and firmware fixes.
- Remove programs you no longer use: **Settings** > **Apps** > **Installed apps**.

FROM BILL

When the pattern is hard to spot

Repeat crashes are one of the trickiest problems to pin down at home. If you've tried the steps here and it keeps happening, that's a perfect time for a visit. I can read Windows' own crash records and find what the stop codes have in common.

PART 6

Macs and Chromebooks

Force Quit, restarting a frozen Mac, Safe Mode and macOS Recovery — plus hard resets and Powerwash on a Chromebook.

CHAPTER 20

When a Mac Freezes or Won't Start

Macs freeze less often than some computers, but it does happen. The ideas are the same as on Windows: close just the stuck app if you can, restart if you must, and check power if it won't start.

Force Quit a frozen app

1. Press **Option-Command-Esc** (hold the Option and Command keys, then tap Esc).
2. The **Force Quit** window opens, listing your open apps.
3. Select the app that isn't responding, then click **Force Quit**.

> HEADS UP
> **Unsaved work in that app may be lost**
> Force Quit closes the app right away. Give the app a minute first in case it's just busy, and if it comes back, save your work.

If the whole Mac is frozen or the screen stays blank

1. Press and hold the **power button** for up to 10 seconds, until the Mac turns off. (On many laptops the power button is the Touch ID button in the top-right corner of the keyboard.)
2. Wait a few seconds, then press the power button again to turn it back on.
3. If you use a separate display, make sure it's on and connected — Apple suggests ruling out the display first.

If the Mac won't turn on at all

- Check the power cable and outlet, just as in Chapter 5. For a MacBook, connect the charger and let it charge for a while before trying again.
- Disconnect everything else — hubs, drives, printers — and try again.
- On an older **Intel-based Mac**, Apple says resetting the SMC (a chip that handles power) may help. Macs with **Apple silicon** don't need this.
- If it still won't start, Apple says it may need service.

GOOD TO KNOW

Apple silicon or Intel?

If the Mac is working, choose **Apple menu** > **About This Mac**. If you see **Chip** (such as Apple M1, M2, M3 or M4), it's Apple silicon. If you see **Processor** with an Intel name, it's Intel-based. The steps in Chapter 21 differ between the two.

CHAPTER 21

Mac Safe Mode and macOS Recovery

Like Windows, a Mac has a **safe mode** that starts with only the basics, and a **recovery** system with repair tools. The way in depends on whether your Mac has Apple silicon or an Intel processor.

Safe mode on a Mac with Apple silicon

1. Shut down the Mac completely.
2. Press and hold the power button until the startup options appear.
3. Select your startup disk (usually called **Macintosh HD**).
4. Press and hold the **Shift** key, then click **Continue in Safe Mode**. Let go of Shift.
5. Log in. You may need to log in more than once. "Safe Boot" appears in the menu bar.

Safe mode on an Intel-based Mac

1. Turn on or restart the Mac, and immediately press and hold the **Shift** key.
2. Let go when the login window appears, then log in.

To leave safe mode on either kind of Mac, just restart normally. If the problem disappears in safe mode, something that normally loads at startup — often an add-on program — is likely the cause.

macOS Recovery

macOS Recovery is a separate, built-in system with tools such as **Disk Utility** (to check and repair the drive) and **Reinstall macOS**. To reach it on a Mac with Apple silicon:

1. Shut down the Mac.
2. Press and hold the power button until you see **Loading startup options**.
3. Click **Options**, then click **Continue**.
4. Follow the prompts to choose a user and enter that user's password if asked.

Intel-based Macs reach macOS Recovery with a key combination held at startup; Apple's article "How to start up from macOS Recovery" lists it. If you're unsure, call me before trying.

HEADS UP

Leave "Erase" alone

macOS Recovery and Disk Utility include options that erase the whole drive. Don't choose anything with "Erase" in its name unless you have a backup and know exactly why you're doing it.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Safe mode tells you whether the problem is the Mac itself or something added to it, and macOS Recovery gives you repair tools even when the Mac won't start normally.

CHAPTER 22

Chromebook: Restart, Hard Reset and Powerwash

Chromebooks are simple, sturdy computers, and most of what's on them is stored online in your Google Account. That makes their fixes simple too — but there's one big "erase" button to treat with care.

Frozen or not responding

1. If the screen is stuck, press and hold the **power** key until the Chromebook turns off.
2. Wait a few seconds, then press the power key to turn it back on.
3. If it won't turn on, plug in the charger and leave it for a while, then try again. Try a different outlet.

Hard reset (restarts the hardware)

If a restart doesn't help, Google suggests a **hard reset**. It restarts parts like the keyboard and touchpad. Google advises trying it only after other fixes, because it **might delete some files in your Downloads folder**.

1. Turn off the Chromebook.
2. Press and hold the **Refresh** key (the round arrow on the top row), then tap **Power**.
3. When the Chromebook starts up, let go of Refresh.

On a Chromebook tablet, press and hold the **Volume up** and **Power** buttons for at least 10 seconds, then release them. Some models use a different method; Google's "Reset your Chromebook hardware" page lists them.

Powerwash (factory reset) — last resort

Powerwash is Google's name for a factory reset. It **erases everything stored on the Chromebook** — settings, apps and files saved on the device. Files in Google Drive or on an external drive are not deleted. Copy anything in the **Downloads** folder to Google Drive or a USB drive first.

1. Sign out of the Chromebook.
2. Press and hold **Ctrl + Alt + Shift + R**.
3. Select **Restart**.

4. In the box that appears, select **Powerwash**, then **Continue**.
5. Follow the steps and sign in with your Google Account. The account you sign in with becomes the Chromebook's owner.

HEADS UP

School or work Chromebooks

A Chromebook managed by a school or employer can't be reset by you; its administrator has to do it.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Because a Chromebook keeps most things in your Google Account, even a Powerwash usually means you're back up and running within minutes of signing in — as long as anything in Downloads was copied first.

PART 7

Prevention and Staying Safe

Spotting a failing drive or an overheating computer early, backing up before trouble, and steering clear of fake crash screens and "repair" scammers.

CHAPTER 23

Warning Signs: Failing Drive, Overheating, Tired Battery

Computers often drop hints before they fail. Catching those hints early means you can back up and get help while everything still works — instead of after.

Signs a drive may be failing

The **drive** is where everything on your computer is stored. Watch for:

- Clicking, grinding or buzzing sounds from inside the computer (older, spinning hard drives).
- Files or folders that won't open, or that suddenly look damaged.
- Crash screens whose stop codes mention DISK, BOOT or INACCESSIBLE (Chapter 10).
- Windows getting slower and slower, with long freezes when opening or saving files.
- A Windows notification about a **critical warning** for a storage device.

Check drive health on Windows 11

For modern **NVMe** solid-state drives (the kind in most recent computers), Windows 11 can show the drive's health:

1. Select **Start** > **Settings** > **System** > **Storage**.
2. Choose **Advanced storage settings**, then **Disks & volumes**.
3. Select your main drive, then **Properties**.
4. Look at the **Drive health** section for estimated remaining life, available spare and temperature.

HEADS UP

If Windows warns about your drive, back up today

A critical-warning notice is a hardware warning. Software can't repair a worn-out drive. Copy your important files somewhere safe right away (Chapter 24), then get advice about replacing the drive.

Signs of overheating

- The fan runs loudly most of the time, even when you're doing very little.
- The bottom of a laptop is uncomfortably hot to the touch.
- The computer freezes or shuts itself off after it's been on for a while, especially on warm days.

Keep it cool

- Use a laptop on a hard, flat surface — a table or a lap desk — not on a bed, blanket or cushion that blocks the air vents.
- Leave a few inches of space around a desktop's vents. Don't tuck it into a closed cabinet.
- Dust builds up inside vents over the years. A professional cleaning can make a big difference.

STAY SAFE

Heat, swelling or a burning smell means stop

If a laptop is too hot to touch, the case is bulging, or you smell burning, turn it off, unplug it and don't use it until it's been checked. Lithium batteries that swell or overheat are a fire risk.

A tired laptop battery

Laptop batteries wear out gradually. If yours now lasts only a short time, or the laptop shuts off suddenly even when the battery shows some charge left, the battery may need replacing. That's usually a job for the maker or a repair shop on modern laptops.

CHAPTER 24

Back Up Before Trouble Strikes

Almost every computer problem in this guide becomes a minor inconvenience instead of a heartbreak if your photos and documents are backed up. If you take only one thing from this guide, let it be this chapter. Our Backing Up Everything guide goes into much more detail.

Windows Backup in Windows 11

Windows 11 includes **Windows Backup**, which can copy your main folders to **OneDrive** (Microsoft's online storage) and remember your apps, settings and Wi-Fi passwords.

1. Select **Start** > **Settings** > **Accounts** > **Windows backup**.
2. In the OneDrive folders section, choose **Manage sync settings**, and turn on the folders you want backed up: **Desktop**, **Documents**, **Pictures**, **Videos** and **Music**.
3. Turn on the switches for remembering your apps and your preferences, if you like.

If you ever get a new computer or have to reset this one, sign in with the **same Microsoft account**, and Windows offers to restore your backup.

> GOOD TO KNOW
>
> **Mind the storage space**
>
> A free Microsoft account includes 5 GB of OneDrive storage, as of November 2026. A lifetime of photos usually needs more, which means a paid Microsoft 365 plan or a second backup method. Check the prices on Microsoft's site before you buy.

A second copy on a USB drive

An external USB drive is a simple, one-time purchase that gives you a copy you can hold in your hand. Plug it in, open **File Explorer**, and drag your important folders (Documents, Pictures and so on) onto the drive. Repeat every month or so. Keep the drive unplugged between backups.

On a Mac or Chromebook

- **Mac:** Apple's built-in **Time Machine** backs up to an external drive. iCloud can also keep your Desktop, Documents and Photos online.
- **Chromebook:** most files already live in Google Drive. Just make sure anything in the **Downloads** folder gets moved to Google Drive.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

With a backup, a dead computer is a shopping trip, not a loss. You can choose a reset or a repair calmly, knowing the grandchildren's photos are safe no matter what.

FROM BILL

Not sure if you're backed up?

That's one of the most common things I check on a visit. In a few minutes I can tell you exactly what's backed up, what isn't, and set it up so it keeps working on its own.

CHAPTER 25

Fake Crash Screens and Phone-Number Pop-Ups

This is the most important safety chapter in the guide. Scammers know that people panic when a computer seems broken, so they build web pages that **pretend** to be a crashed or infected computer. They look frightening on purpose: a full screen, a fake blue "crash" screen, flashing warnings, a robotic voice, sometimes a siren — and always a phone number to call.

SCAM ALERT

The golden rule

Microsoft says genuine Microsoft error and warning messages **never include a phone number**. The FTC says the same about real security warnings: they never ask you to call. If a screen tells you to call a number to fix your computer, it is a scam. Every time.

How to tell a fake from the real thing

Real Windows crash screen	Fake scam pop-up
Appears, then the computer restarts by itself.	Stays on the screen and won't let you close it.
Shows a stop code and maybe a file name.	Shows a phone number, "Call Microsoft Support" or a countdown.
Silent.	Often has a siren, beeping or a recorded voice.
Never asks you to call, pay or download anything.	Urges you to call now, pay, or let someone connect.
Happens even with no web browser open.	Appears while you're browsing the web, often after a click or a typo.

How to get rid of a fake warning

1. **Don't call the number, and don't click anything on the page** — not even "OK" or "Close."
2. Press **Ctrl + Shift + Esc** to open Task Manager, select your web browser (Edge, Chrome or Firefox), and choose **End task**. (On a Mac, use Force Quit: Option-Command-Esc.)
3. If that doesn't work, restart the computer — or hold the power button to force it off.
4. When you open the browser again, if it offers to **restore** the pages you had open, say no.

Our Pop-Ups & Fake Virus Alerts guide covers these warnings in much more depth, including how to stop them from coming back.

SCAM ALERT

Microsoft won't call you

Microsoft says that unless you contacted them first, they won't call you to offer tech support — and their support will never ask you to pay with gift cards or Bitcoin. A caller who says your computer is "sending errors" is a scammer. Hang up.

Report it

- Report tech support scams to Microsoft at **microsoft.com/reportascam**.
- Report any scam to the Federal Trade Commission at **ReportFraud.ftc.gov**.

CHAPTER 26

If You Let a "Repair" Scammer In

These scams are convincing, and they fool careful, intelligent people every day. If you called a number on a pop-up, or let someone connect to your computer to "fix" it, please don't be embarrassed. What matters is acting quickly. Here's what to do, in order.

Right away

1. **Hang up** and don't take any more calls from them.
2. **Disconnect the computer from the internet.** Turn off Wi-Fi, or unplug the network cable. This cuts off any remote connection they set up.
3. **If you paid or shared card or bank details,** call your bank or card company using the number on the back of your card. Tell them it was a scam and ask them to stop or reverse the charge.
4. **If they asked for gift cards,** contact the company that issued the card as soon as possible.

Next

- **Change your passwords from a different device** — your phone or another computer — starting with email and banking. If you use the same password in several places, change it everywhere.
- **Have the computer checked** before you use it for banking again. Scammers often leave remote-access programs behind so they can come back.
- **Watch your accounts** for a few weeks for anything you don't recognize.
- **Report it** at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.

SCAM ALERT

Beware the "refund" call

A common follow-up: someone calls saying you're owed a refund for the bad repair, then claims they "accidentally" refunded too much and asks you to send the difference back. It's the same scammers. Hang up.

FROM BILL

You don't have to sort this out alone

If a scammer has been on your computer, I can check it for remote-access programs they left behind, clean it up and help you secure your accounts. Call (330) 200-8042.

PART 8

When to Call Bill and Your Cheat-Sheet

An honest word about when a hand is worth it, and a one-glance summary of the whole guide.

CHAPTER 27

When to Call Bill

I've written this guide so you can handle a lot on your own. But part of being helpful is being honest about when a hand will save you time, money or worry. Here's my straight advice, with no pressure.

Times it's well worth a call

- **Before any reset, erase or Powerwash** — especially if your files aren't backed up. I'd much rather help before than after.
- **The BitLocker key can't be found**, or you're not sure which account it's in.
- **Crashes or freezes keep coming back** after you've tried Chapter 19.
- **Signs of a failing drive** — strange noises, a critical warning, files that won't open. Getting your files off quickly matters.
- **The computer was dropped, got wet or smells hot.**
- **You called a number on a pop-up** or let someone connect to your computer.
- **You're simply not comfortable** going into the recovery menu on your own. That's always reason enough.

What working with me is like

I work at your pace — no rushing, no talking down and no jargon. I explain what I'm doing in plain words, and I'll tell you honestly when a computer is worth repairing and when it isn't. I bring 30+ years of professional experience to every visit, and Bill's Home Tech serves Portage County, Ohio. Many problems can be fixed over a remote session, as long as the computer can get online; others need a visit to your home.

FROM BILL

How to reach me

Call or text **(330) 200-8042**, or book a time at **billshometech.com/book**. My help is **$49 remote · $99 in your home**. This guide is free to keep and share.

GOOD TO KNOW

You may meet Sophie first

When you call or visit billshometech.com, you may be greeted by **Sophie**, my AI receptionist. She can answer quick questions and help you book a time with me. A real person — me — does the actual help.

SCAM ALERT

How to know it's really me

I'll never pop up on your screen or call you out of the blue saying your computer has a problem. You contact me, at the number or website above. If someone claims to be from "Bill's" and you didn't reach out first, hang up and call me directly.

Thank you for taking the time to learn this. A computer problem is a lot less frightening when you know what to try first — and when you know help is a phone call away.

— Bill

CHAPTER 28

Your Computer Trouble Cheat-Sheet

The whole guide, boiled down. Keep a copy on your phone or near the computer.

The essentials

If…	Do this
First thing, always	Take a photo of the screen. Don't call any number shown on it.
Restart (Windows)	**Start** > **Power** > **Restart**.
Frozen program (Windows)	**Alt + F4**; then **Ctrl + Shift + Esc** > select it > **End task**.
Frozen program (Mac)	**Option-Command-Esc** > select it > **Force Quit**.
Black screen (Windows)	**Windows logo key + Ctrl + Shift + B**; then **Windows logo key + P**.
Whole computer frozen	Wait a few minutes, then hold the power button until it turns off.
Stuck update	Be patient — hours, if anything is still moving. Plug in a laptop.
Recovery menu (Windows)	**Settings** > **System** > **Recovery** > **Advanced startup** > **Restart now**.
Safe Mode (Windows)	Recovery menu > **Troubleshoot** > **Advanced options** > **Startup Settings** > **Restart** > **4**.
BitLocker recovery key	On another device: **aka.ms/myrecoverykey**.
Chromebook hard reset	Turn off; hold **Refresh**, tap **Power**.

Write it down once

Keep handy	
Computer make and model	_____
Windows, Mac or Chromebook (and version)	_____
Account email used to sign in	_____
BitLocker key is in which account?	_____
Where my backups go	_____
Date of my last backup	_____

When something's wrong, in order

1. Breathe. Photograph the screen. Ignore any phone number on it.
2. Check power, plugs, charger and monitor input (Chapters 5–7).
3. Wait — especially if anything on the screen is still moving.
4. Restart properly, or close just the frozen program.
5. Try the gentle repairs: Startup Repair, then Safe Mode (Chapters 13–14).
6. Undo recent changes: uninstall the latest update or use System Restore (Chapter 15).
7. Back up before anything bigger. Reset only as a last resort (Chapter 16).
8. Call Bill at (330) 200-8042 — that's what I'm here for.

Habits that prevent most trouble

- Restart the computer about once a week.
- Let updates install; choose a convenient time rather than putting them off forever.
- Keep 10% to 15% of the drive free.
- Keep laptops on hard surfaces so the vents can breathe.
- Back up regularly — to OneDrive or iCloud *and* to a USB drive.
- Know where your BitLocker recovery key is *before* you need it.