

Langa Letter: Ten More Ways To Make Windows XP Run Better

Install The Recovery Console

The Recovery Console lets you start XP without the graphical user interface: It's roughly analogous to "booting to DOS" in older versions of Windows. It's useful for low-level maintenance, and in emergency situations when something has gone wrong and is preventing you from starting XP in the normal way.

I should point out that in a couple years of using XP on all my primary systems, I've never actually needed the Recovery Console. But I like having it handy, just in case: I depend on my PC for my livelihood, and should something go wrong, I want to be able to fix it as rapidly as possible.

Microsoft says; "In the Windows Recovery Console, you can: Use, copy, rename, or replace operating system files and folders; enable or disable service or device startup when you next start your computer; repair the file system boot sector or the Master Boot Record (MBR); create and format partitions on drives...." And so on. (See [this](#) for more information.)

You can access the Recovery Console several ways, including booting from your XP setup CD or installing the Recovery Console as a startup option right on your hard drive, so it's always instantly available. That's the way I prefer it. It's very easy to set up, and Microsoft provides complete instructions [here](#).

After installation, when you start your PC, you'll see a new dual-boot type of selection screen which will give you the choice of booting either to your normal installation of XP, or to the Recovery Console.

To keep the Recovery Console boot option from getting in your way, you can limit how long it appears on the startup screen. I set it to display for just three seconds; it's there if I need it--I can hit a key to stop the countdown--but it otherwise passes by quickly, allowing normal booting to continue.

You can adjust the startup behavior this way: Click to either My Computer/Properties/Advanced or to Control Panel/Performance and Maintenance/System/Advanced. (Both routes get you to the same dialog box.) Next, click Settings in the "Startup and Recovery" portion of the dialog. Set the "Time to display list of operating systems" to whatever value you wish. This value, in seconds, is how long the Recovery Console option will appear at startup.

If this brief run-through on the Recovery Console is too compressed for you, you can find a [longer, more-detailed explanation here](#). **Enable ClearType**

ClearType lets you adjust the boldness or opacity of your on-screen fonts, resulting in more readable type on some systems--especially on laptops and PCs with flat-screen LCD displays.

ClearType is built into XP; the basic on/off control is part of the Display/Properties/Appearance/Effects menu. But you'll get far better control of ClearType by visiting [this page](#) to activate it and to choose the specific settings that work best on your system.

If you'd like more information on ClearType, [this page may help](#).

Install WNTIPCfg

"Wntipcfg" is the "Windows NT IP Configuration" Tool; a graphical, point-and-click way to control and get information about your IP configuration. It replaces XP's built-in command-line tool, which is harder to use.

Once installed, Wntipcfg lets you easily see the addresses of any/all network cards in your system; to see how long each address is good for; and if you wish, to force the address to be released and renewed on demand. (This can be a fast and easy way to change your numeric Internet address, making it harder for hackers to find you.)

Wntipcfg is free. The download and additional information is [here](#).

Limit "Universal Plug And Play" Support

This and the following two items are free downloads from Internet guru [Steve Gibson](#).

"Universal Plug And Play," or uPnP, is a network-oriented outgrowth of the more familiar basic PnP (Plug and Play) hardware standard from the mid-1990s. UPnP will probably become more important in the future, but relatively few devices and services make use of it now. If it's not something you use (I don't) it makes sense to disable uPnP temporarily. This lets your firewall close--and preferably stealth--the uPnP port, so crackers can't break in, and in fact can't even see that there's a PC online if they look for that port.

The easiest way to control uPnP is with Steve Gibson's tiny, free "[UnPlug n' Pray](#)" utility, which I've installed on all my PCs. When you run it, the software tells you if uPnP is active; and if it is, offers to disable it nondestructively. Or, if uPnP is disabled, the utility lets you turn it back on with a click. This way, you can turn off uPnP now and yet reactive it easily on demand at any point in the future, should you need to. **Stop Messenger Spam**

Windows Messenger (not to be confused with MSN Messenger, the IM/chat toy) is a built-in operating system tool that normally allows, say, a network administrator to broadcast a message to everyone on a LAN; the message might be something like "Server going down for maintenance in 5 minutes. Please log off." Some other legitimate tools and services may use Messenger to display information, too.

But a problem arises when people who have no use for Messenger leave it enabled; and/or when people who need Messenger leave it set up so that it can be accessed freely from the Internet.

Spammers discovered this *en masse* in 2002. Ever since then, Messenger-based spam has afflicted unprotected PCs. These spam messages often are disguised as Administrative messages, trying to fool the unwary into taking whatever action the spammer wants.

The easiest fix is to use Gibson's free "Shoot The Messenger" utility that lets you toggle Messenger on or off at will. You'll find more information and the download [here](#).

Some firewalls also let you block Messenger by name. And all firewalls should let you block the ports that Messenger normally uses: Port 135 (TCP/UDP) and--less commonly, for a related but slightly different form of messaging--ports 137 and 139.

Tame DCOM

Microsoft's Distributed Component Object Model, or DCOM, is a protocol that enables software components to communicate directly over a network. As you might imagine, this can be good or bad, depending on how it's used, and whether or not the communication is authorized and nonhostile.

DCOM can be important in some circumstances (especially in enterprise settings), and may become more generally important in the future: It's not something you want to rip out of your operating system wholesale. But DCOM currently serves little purpose on most systems, and has been a security problem in the past. (See "[What You Should Know About Microsoft Security Bulletin MS03-026](#)" for example.)

To help control DCOM, Gibson offers this [tiny free utility](#) that lets you see your current DCOM setup; and to disable or enable DCOM at will. It's there if you need it, but safely inactive and inert if you don't. **AutoFix Two Major Problem Areas** Internet Explorer lets you put various sites and services into "Zones" with different security levels set via the Tools/Internet Options/Security menus.)

For example, you can assign a suspect site to a "Restricted" zone, in which the site's actions will be tightly monitored and controlled, helping to protect you from potential malicious downloads, scripts, and whatnot. A known-safe, known-friendly site might be given more latitude by assigning it to a different zone.

But the Zone settings can be confusing, so the online testing service at PC Pitstop offers a free "autofix" script that, with one click, adjusts 20 IE Restricted Zone security settings from their fairly lax defaults to much safer custom settings

A second free autofix offers a one-click way to tell Outlook Express to use the newly enhanced Restricted Zone settings. This helps reduce some of the worst vulnerabilities for Outlook Express, making this notoriously unsafe software a little more secure.

All the PC Pitstop autofixes are [here](#); run the full suite of (free) PC Pitstop tests to see which ones apply to your system.

Install TweakUI, And Related Add-Ons

Microsoft offers a free collection of 11 useful add-ons and extensions for XP [here](#). Some of the tools are extremely useful: For example, TweakUI offers easy access to a host of system settings that otherwise are hard to get at. Other tools, like the "Webcam Tmershot," are more specialized and narrowly focused, but all are worth a look. The software is a la carte: You can download any or all of the utilities, as you wish.

SendToAnyFolder

I move a lot of files around on my system, and the free "[SendToAnyFolder](#)" utility from Trogladite software makes it much easier than conventional cutting-and-pasting or dragging/dropping. The software adds itself to the right-click context menu in Explorer, letting you move a file or files to a different location on your hard drive with fewer clicks and mouse movements than otherwise.

Use A Startup Monitor

A "Startup Monitor" is a tool that notifies you when software has inserted itself into your PC's startup sequence. If the software is something that should run at startup, you can allow the change. But if the software is setting itself up surreptitiously--some browser hijackers do this, for example--you can disallow the change, and thus protect your system.

Perhaps the best known such tool is simply called StartupMonitor, from Mike Lin. He describes it as "a small utility that runs transparently (it doesn't even use a tray icon) and notifies you when any program registers itself to run at system startup. It prevents those utterly useless tray applications from registering themselves behind your back, and it acts as a security tool against Trojans like BackOrifice or Netbus.... StartupMonitor watches the Start Menu's Startup folders and the Run entries in the registry."

StartupMonitor is free, and available for download here <http://www.mlin.net/StartupMonitor.shtml> . There are many other startup-monitoring tools available on other sites, too, should you wish to try something different.

Ten From You?

These 10 tweaks all have become part of my routine setup for new systems: I install them on all my XP PCs.

Revised 6/1/2009 JMM