SOFTWARE & TECH

How To Reset Your Computer

Published: November 20, 2026 | Index ID: #-

When your computer begins to lag, encounters persistent errors, or behaves erratically, a full system reset often provides the most effective solution. Resetting your computer can restore its original performance by removing problematic software, clearing corrupted files, and eliminating clutter that accumulates over time. Whether you are preparing to sell your device, troubleshooting a recurring problem, or simply giving your machine a fresh start, understanding the correct methods is essential. This guide covers everything you need to know about **how to reset your computer** safely and effectively across different operating systems.

What Does Resetting a Computer Actually Do?

A computer reset is a process that restores the operating system to its factory state or to a clean baseline. The exact outcome depends on the method you choose. A **full factory reset** removes all personal files, installed applications, and settings, returning the system to the condition it was in when you first bought it. A **partial reset** or **system refresh**keeps your personal files intact while reinstalling the operating system and removing apps. Understanding these distinctions helps you decide which approach fits your needs.

Common Reasons to Reset Your Computer

- Slow performance: Over time, bloatware, background processes, and fragmented storage can degrade speed.
- Malware or virus infections: Persistent threats that cannot be removed by antivirus software may require a full wipe.
- Software corruption: Frequent crashes, blue screens, or error messages often indicate a damaged system.
- Preparation for resale or donation: A clean reset protects your privacy by erasing all personal data.
- Upgrading or downgrading the OS: Starting fresh can avoid compatibility issues when moving to a new version.

Preparing for a Reset: Critical Steps to Follow

Before you begin, take a few precautions to prevent data loss and ensure a smooth process. Skipping these steps can lead to irreversible problems.

Back Up Your Important Files

A factory reset will delete everything unless you choose the "keep files" option. Even then, it is wise to back up your documents, photos, videos, and project files. Use an external hard drive, cloud storage service, or a dedicated backup utility. Verify that your backup is complete and accessible before proceeding.

Ensure a Stable Power Connection

If you are using a laptop, **plug it into a power outlet**. A reset can take anywhere from 30 minutes to several hours. If the battery dies mid-process, you may end up with a bricked device. For desktop computers, a UPS (uninterruptible power supply) offers added protection against power outages.

Gather Your Product Keys and Credentials

Some applications require re-activation after a reset. Locate your Windows license key, Microsoft account details, Apple ID, and any software serial numbers. If you use two-factor authentication, have your recovery codes handy. Write down your Wi-Fi password if it is not stored elsewhere.

How to Reset Your Computer on Windows 10 and 11

Microsoft provides a built-in tool called "Reset this PC" that works reliably on modern Windows versions. The interface is slightly different between Windows 10 and 11, but the core steps are identical.

Step-by-Step: Windows 10 Factory Reset

1. Click the Start button and select the Settings gear icon (or press Windows + I).
2. Navigate to Update & Security and then click Recovery in the left pane.
3. Under Reset this PC, click Get started.
4. Choose between two options:

   Keep my files — Reinstalls Windows but preserves your personal data. Removes apps and settings.
5. Remove everything — Deletes all files, apps, and settings. Best for a fresh start or before selling.

Step-by-Step: Windows 11 Factory Reset

1. Open Settings (press Windows + I).
2. Go to System and then Recovery.
3. Next to Reset this PC, click Reset PC.
4. Choose Keep my files or Remove everything.
5. If prompted, select Cloud download or Local reinstall:

   Cloud download — Downloads a fresh copy of Windows from Microsoft servers. Requires internet and uses about 4–5 GB of data.
6. Local reinstall — Uses existing system files already on your PC. May not fix severe corruption.

How to Reset Your Computer on macOS (Ventura, Monterey, and Earlier)

Apple has changed the reset process across recent macOS versions. The most straightforward method involves using the System Settings (or System Preferences on older macOS). For modern Macs with Apple Silicon (M1, M2, M3), there is a special procedure for wiping and reinstalling.

Resetting a Mac with Apple Silicon

1. Back up using Time Machine or your preferred method.
2. Shut down your Mac. Then press and hold the power button until you see "Loading startup options."
3. Click Options and then Continue. You may need to enter your administrator password.
4. From the macOS Utilities window, choose Disk Utility. Select your startup disk (usually "Macintosh HD") and click Erase. Choose APFS format.
5. Quit Disk Utility, then select Reinstall macOS from the Utilities window.
6. Follow the on-screen instructions to complete the fresh installation.

Resetting an Intel-based Mac

1. Restart your Mac and immediately hold Command + R until you see the Apple logo or a spinning globe.
2. Select Disk Utility from the Recovery menu.
3. Erase your internal drive (choose Mac OS Extended Journaled or APFS depending on your macOS version).
4. Quit Disk Utility, then select Reinstall macOS.
5. Follow the prompts to complete the reset.

How to Perform a Hard Reset (BIOS/SMC/NVRAM)

Sometimes the operating system itself is not the only issue. A **hard reset**can fix hardware-level problems such as boot failures, power issues, and display glitches. These resets vary by manufacturer, but the following are common for PCs and Macs.

Resetting the CMOS or BIOS

If your computer won't boot or you forget your BIOS password, you can reset the motherboard's CMOS memory. **Warning: This resets all BIOS settings to default.**

- Desktop PCs: Turn off the computer, unplug the power cable, open the case, and remove the coin-cell battery on the motherboard. Wait 5–10 minutes, then reinsert the battery.
- Laptops (user-accessible): Some laptops have a CMOS battery. If not, look for a "CMOS reset" jumper or button near the RAM slots. Refer to your laptop's manual.
- Using a jumper: Move the CMOS jumper pin to the "clear" position for a few seconds, then return it.

Resetting SMC on Mac

The System Management Controller (SMC) manages power, battery, fans, and other low-level functions. To reset it:

- Apple Silicon Macs: SMC resets automatically when you shut down the Mac for 30 seconds and start it again. No manual action required.
- Intel Macs with T2 chip: Hold Control + Option + Shift (on the left side) and the power button for 7 seconds, then release. Wait a few seconds, then press the power button.
- Intel Macs without T2 chip (older models): Hold Shift + Control + Option and the power button simultaneously for 10 seconds.

Resetting NVRAM/PRAM on Mac

Non-Volatile RAM stores settings like volume, screen resolution, and startup disk. Resetting it can resolve certain boot issues. On an Intel Mac, restart and immediately press Option + Command + P + R for about 20 seconds. Apple Silicon Macs reset NVRAM automatically when needed.

Troubleshooting Common Reset Problems

Occasionally, a reset may fail or become stuck. Here are solutions for the most common issues:

- Reset freezes mid-process: Wait at least one hour. If it remains stuck, force shutdown by holding the power button. Restart and try again. If repeated, consider using installation media (USB or DVD) to reinstall the OS manually.
- "There was a problem resetting your PC" error: This often indicates corrupted system files. Try using the System File Checker (run sfc /scannow in Command Prompt as administrator) before retrying the reset. Or use the DISM tool.
- Missing recovery partition: Some manufacturers remove the recovery partition to save space. In such cases, you will need to download the official OS installer from Microsoft or Apple and create a bootable USB drive.
- Computer won't boot after reset: Boot into safe mode or recovery mode. On Windows, use a recovery drive. On Mac, use Command+R. From there, you can attempt a reinstallation or run diagnostics.

Alternative Methods: Clean Install vs. Refresh vs. Factory Reset

Understanding the nuances can help you choose the most appropriate method for your situation.

Clean Install

A clean install involves deleting all partitions on the hard drive and installing the operating system from scratch

using a bootable USB or DVD. This is the most thorough method and is recommended if you suspect disk corruption or want to change the file system. It bypasses any built-in recovery environment. **Caution:** This completely erases all data, including recovery partitions.

System Refresh (Windows)

Available in older Windows versions (8 and earlier), a refresh reinstalls Windows while keeping personal files and some settings. Windows 10 and 11 have merged this into the "Keep my files" option of Reset this PC.

Factory Reset vs. Hard Reset

Do not confuse a factory reset (software-level) with a hard reset (hardware-level). A factory reset wipes the operating system. A hard reset, like removing the CMOS battery, restores hardware firmware defaults. Both have their place, but they solve different problems.

What to Do After Resetting Your Computer

Once the reset is complete, you will need to go through the initial setup process. Here are the essential steps to ensure your system is secure and functional.

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