

The Best Windows Backup Solutions

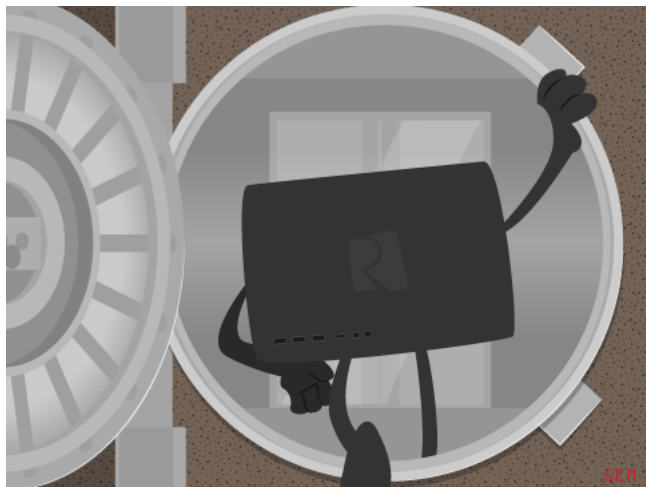


Illustration: [Gordon McAlpin](#)

Why Back Up Your Stuff?

Hard drives fail all the time. They're one of the most fragile parts of your PC, and at the same time it's where all your important data is stored. Therefore, backing up your important files elsewhere is vitally important. Not only is it a good idea to back up important files (such as My Documents), but creating an image of your hard drive and backing that up is good too – because you want to preserve your Windows and application installation and settings. Nobody wants to have to hunt down all their serial numbers and reinstall everything after data loss.

What are the Options?

There are two major types of backups: drive-based backup and cloud-based backup.

Drive-Based Backup

Drive-based backup uses an external device of some kind, like a hard drive. Here are the pluses and minuses of this approach.

+ Controlled by you

Drive-based backup tends to be manually controlled or scheduled by the user, while cloud-based storage can often be in the background and automatic. There are exceptions, of course.

+ Much more secure

Drive-based backup is just as secure as the rest of your system, hopefully behind a Windows Firewall. With cloud-based backup, you're transmitting files over the Internet, which is inherently unsafe.

+ Faster backup

Drive-based backup is limited only by the connection to your hard drive, which is usually very fast. FireWire is much faster than USB for transferring a lot of files.

– Can fail just as easily as your internal drive

Backup drives are just as fragile as your primary drive, so it helps to have files synced to two or more locations.

– Limited by the size of the drive

You'll need just as much space on the backup drive as the primary drive, even with compression, so this drives the price up.

– Can be difficult to access and sync from multiple locations or remotely

A single backup drive, unless used with special software, is only going to be accessed by the PC its connected to.

Cloud-Based Backup

Cloud-based backup is online storage space and syncing accessed via the Internet. Here are the pluses and minuses of this approach.

+ No additional hardware required

Cloud-based backup is software based, so the cost of the app, if any, is the only barrier.

+ Syncs and auto-backups easily

Cloud-based backup tends to be hands-free with as little user intervention as possible.

+ Not reliant on any one drive that could fail

Your stuff is stored all over the network, so it's not very likely that you'll lose your data to one outage.

– Security is an issue, due to the possibility of cloud solutions being hacked or taken down

There are numerous reports of cloud-based storage being hacked or discontinued.

– Limited by Internet speeds

Backing up a lot of files over the Internet can take a really long time and will add to your Internet usage quota through your provider.

– Free solutions have only a few gigabytes of storage

You're limited to a couple gigabytes unless you pay the cash, which limits this solution to essential files only.

I'm going to talk about free solutions for both drive and cloud-based backup, then talk about the paid solutions. It's important to choose one, regardless of which it is. Nobody wants to lose important documents forever.

Free Backup Solutions

Drive-Based

Windows Backup and Restore is the app that comes with Windows XP, Windows Vista and Windows 7. It's got the advantage of being built-in, and you can choose to back up some or all of your files. On Windows Vista and 7, find it by clicking **Start**, then **Control Panel**, then type **Backup** in the Search box and press **Enter**, then click **Back Up Your Computer**, then click **Set Up Backup**. On Windows XP, click **Start**, then **Run...**, then type **ntbackup.exe** and press **Enter**. If it doesn't run, you'll need to install it from your Windows XP disc.

[Windows Backup and Restore](#) is somewhat rudimentary. You can choose individual files to back up, and even create an image of your hard drive, but fine tuning is out of the question. Also, it doesn't support cloud backup or even backup to a networked hard drive ... attached drive, CD or DVD only.

[Microsoft SyncToy](#) is a little-known, free utility that allows you to sync files between two different locations, meaning that those files are the same regardless of where they are. It is simple in design and user-friendly but limited in options. Though it doesn't autosync files like other apps might, you can run a manual or scheduled sync whenever you'd like.

[SyncBack Freeware](#) is another simple solution for both syncing files and backing them up. Like the other apps above, it's not all that full featured, but for the majority of users, it does the job fine.

[Todo Backup](#) is a free, but full-featured solution for those that like to have a lot of control over their backups. Todo Backup will back up to a network drive and even through FTP, which are really nice additions to have. The number of features it offers is hard to beat.

Cloud-Based

[Dropbox](#) offers two gigabytes of storage free, and it's one of the easiest cloud-based sync and backup applications to use. It creates a virtual drive on your PC in your Documents folder which has all your important files in the cloud, and also creates local versions of those files that sync automatically, without any action on your part. Use it like a Documents folder for your most important files. Whenever you access your Dropbox on any PC or mobile device, you can be sure that it's the most recent version. Finally, you can share folders or files easily with any other Dropbox user.

[Microsoft SkyDrive](#) is functionally similar to Dropbox, but since it's Microsoft, it's a little better integrated into Windows. Also, it offers 25 GB free, but each individual file must be 50 GB or smaller. It's online storage, plain and simple.

If all you want to do is create an image of a hard drive and put it somewhere else, with no individual file backup, no cloud and no syncing, then [DrivelImage XML](#) is a good choice and free for private use.

Paid Backup Solutions

Drive-Based

[SyncBackSE](#) and [SyncBack Pro](#) are the paid versions of SyncBack Freeware above. Each is far more full featured to different degrees. Check the website for the full list of feature differences between Free, SE and Pro and decide yourself what fits you best. I like that Pro can integrate itself with Amazon's and Google's storage solutions. SE is \$35 and Pro is \$55.

Cloud-Based

[MozyHome](#) is a popular cloud-based backup and file sync solution that runs through the Web and costs \$6 / month for 50 GB and one PC and \$10 / month for 125 GB and three PCs. Having only a single PC as part of the backup plan doesn't seem very efficient, so the \$10 plan seems best here. Like DropBox, the backup and sync happens automatically and in the background.

One of the nicest things about [Backblaze](#) is the price. \$5 per month per PC, for unlimited backup storage space. Like MozyHome, it runs in the background, but unlike MozyHome, it doesn't offer sync solutions. It's strictly online backup, but if that's what you want, the price is right, especially if you've got a ton of files. If you've got more than two PCs and not a lot of files, then MozyHome is a better deal.

[Carbonite](#) is the most expensive solution, but also the most well known and trusted, so it might be worth paying them based on trust alone. The Home edition costs \$60 per year per PC, which works out to \$5 / month, for unlimited backup space. This edition does not support backing up external hard drives, an annoying limitation. For that, you'll need HomePlus, which costs \$99 per year (\$8.25 / month). HomePlus also adds on drive imaging, a feature noticeably absent from other cloud-based backup solutions. If both the cloud and a total system image are important to you, then this is the way to go.

Good luck, and let us know in the comments which backup solution you tried!