CRITICAL: Before attempting any of the following procedures, you should back up your important files and ensure you have copies of all of your application software and serial numbers at hand in case you have to reinstall. You should also have access to a back up copy of Windows.

There comes a time in the life of every Windows user when you notice that your once powerful PC has become slow and sluggish. Applications that started quickly and ran robustly don’t have the oomph they once did. Windows itself takes longer to load, and your PC seems to freeze or crash more often.

Why does Windows become slower and quirkier over time? Old age? No social life? Well, the answer may lie in the software you install. Many applications either configure themselves or their components to be startup programs, loading automatically in the background as Windows boots. These startup programs gobble up their share of memory and other resources right off the bat, leaving less for other applications. Thus, the more programs in your startup routine, the more lethargic Windows is.

Many of us are familiar with the frequent annoyance of waiting for Windows to boot and watching various elements slowly appear on-screen, including an enormous number of icons for our System Tray and that irritating hourglass icon that won’t go away. Then, when Windows is finally ready, you discover your apps now take longer to open and run more slowly because of the memory juggling they must do to compete with all the startup items. Plus, as we discuss in our “Win The Spyware Battle” feature articles (on pages 68 to 79), some of these startup items are spyware and adware, which can be hazardous to your PC’s health because of the way they continuously hog system resources, making Windows unstable and bringing your PC to a crawl.

The most obvious way to see how many startup programs your system loads is to glance at the icons sitting in the System Tray. Unfortunately, it doesn’t end there, though; startup programs also hide in your Windows Startup folder, your Registry, and other sneaky places. You could easily have two dozen startup programs without knowing it.

If you use Windows XP/2000, you can view a list of your startup items and see how much memory each one is using by pressing CTRL-ALT-DELETE to open the Windows Task Manager. Choose the Processes tab and scroll through the list of files in the first column, Image Name. Some of these programs represent Windows services and other necessary items for your startup. (Several of the file names probably won’t seem familiar to you, but we’ll discuss that aspect in a moment.) Now look at the fourth column, Mem Usage, to see how much memory each item is consuming. When users add up these numbers, the total is often shocking to many of them.
The Windows Task Manager can show you all the startup items running on your PC and how much memory each one is using.

Don't Start With Me

Why do certain programs start up automatically? The reasons vary. Antivirus, antispyware, and firewall applications start automatically to protect you as soon as Windows loads. Some startup items, such as toolbars, enhance your Office suite, Web browser, and other applications. Several programs start automatically in order to go online and make sure they have the newest updates installed. Then there are other programs that have a big ego, so they load into memory from the get-go just in case you need them right away—even if you never do.

To make matters worse, many startup programs are sly; they rarely ask for permission to load automatically, and they usually don’t tell you how to prevent them from starting, either. Therefore, it’s up to you to find and disable the startup programs you don’t need.

Check your System Tray. As we mentioned, the first place to look for startup items is your System Tray. Hover your mouse pointer over each icon, and a small window shows you the name of the program. Oftentimes, you can right-click an icon to display a pop-up menu of commands, one of which may be a Setup or Preferences command. If so, click that command, search for a related option—such as Start Up Automatically or Display Icon In System Tray—and deselect it.

The Systray is located in the lower right-hand corner of your Windows screen. It typically displays the system clock, among other items.

Go directly to the source. Not all startup programs appear in the System Tray, so you may have to open the program itself to look for a Setup or Preferences command that’ll let you deselect the appropriate startup option.

Find specific instructions. Here are a few popular programs that muscle their way into your startup routine, along with steps on how to stop them.

AOL 9.0—AOL 9.0 throws a few items into your startup routine, including the AOL program and AIM (AOL Instant Messenger). A feature called Fast Start loads AOL into memory at startup. To disable it, right-click the AOL System Tray icon, select AOL 9.0, and choose Start-Up Settings. From the AOL Start-Up Settings dialog box, deselect the Enable Fast Start option, click Save, and close AOL. After you reboot, AOL will be gone from your startup routine. To disable AIM from the startup, right-click its icon in the System Tray, click Preferences, select the Sign On/Off category, deselect the Start AIM When Windows Starts option, and click OK.
QuickTime—To kick QuickTime out of your startup routine, open Windows’ Control Panel from the Start menu, click Switch To Classic View (if necessary for WinXP users), and double-click the QuickTime icon. For QuickTime versions prior to 7.0, click the drop-down menu at the top and select the Browser Plug-in item. Deselect the QuickTime System Tray Icon option and close the QuickTime Settings window. For QuickTime 7.0 or newer versions, open its Control Panel icon, choose the Advanced tab, find the Tray Icon section, deselect the Install QuickTime Icon In System Tray option, and click OK.

Windows Messenger—To prevent Windows Messenger from loading at startup, right-click the Windows Messenger icon in the System Tray and select Open to launch the program. Open the Tools menu, click Options, choose the Preferences tab, and deselect the first two checkboxes: Run Windows Messenger When Windows Starts and Allow Windows Messenger To Run In The Background. Click OK.

WinXP SP2 Security Alerts—WinXP’s SP2 (Service Pack 2) adds a new Security Center to Automatic Updates to notify you if you don’t have any firewall or antivirus protection, which is fine, but the Security Center also keeps “alerting” you if you disable Automatic Updates. To turn off this notification, open Control Panel, click Switch To Classic View (if necessary), and double-click the Security Center icon. From the Security Center window, click the last option in the Resources list on the left: Change The Way Security Center Alerts Me. Then, deselect the option for Automatic Updates.

Msconfig To The Rescue
Not all startup programs provide a way to disable them, either. Thankfully Windows includes the System Configuration Utility—also known as Msconfig—to hunt down your startup items.

Open the Start menu, choose Run, type `msconfig` in the Open field, and click OK. Choose the Startup tab, where you’ll see a list of all your startup items. Each entry reveals the name of the startup file, the directory path for the command itself, and the Registry key or other location where the item is stored. Scroll down the list and review each startup item and its command path. Typically, either the name or the command path will reveal which program the entry represents.

With the System Configuration Utility, you can view and disable any of your startup programs.

While viewing your startup items in the System Configuration Utility, you’ll hopefully find a few you know you can disable. To prevent an item from loading, deselect its checkbox (to be safe, only disable one item at a time), and click OK. Windows will then ask if you want to restart your PC or exit without restarting; click the Restart button. After Windows reboots, a message appears to confirm that you’ve made changes to the way Windows starts and asks if you want to display this message each time Windows loads. Elect not to display the message and click OK. In addition, make sure you don’t see any error messages when Windows starts, and then launch the program related to the startup item you just disabled to be certain it still runs properly.
If you see an error message or the program doesn’t run smoothly, you can enable it again. Open the System Configuration Utility, choose the Startup tab, and scroll to the bottom of the list. The System Configuration Utility usually retains entries for startup items you disable, so all you have to do is select a startup item’s checkbox to re-enable it.

What’s A Ctfmon Or A Ccapp?
If you weren’t able to identify some of your startup items because their obscure names didn’t give you a clue as to what they did, you can use various resources online to see what information they have. Or, even if you know what a certain program does, you might want to check these resources to determine if it’s safe to disable a particular item from your startup routine. The following Web sites have databases of startup items that you can use to identify them and determine which ones you can safely disable.

**Startup Applications List From Pacman’s Portal**
[sysinfo.org/startuplist.php](http://sysinfo.org/startuplist.php)
Paul Collins (aka Pacman), a British engineer, runs this site and maintains its more than 10,000 startup items. You can browse the names of startup programs or search for specific ones by file name. Pacman describes the startup item and recommends whether you can safely disable it. The site also names spyware and adware that may be lurking in your startup routine.

**Startup Application Knowledge Base**
[www.windowsstartup.com/wso](http://www.windowsstartup.com/wso)
This site provides information on more than 6,000 startup items with detailed descriptions and advice. You can browse through the list or easily search for files by name. Plus, this site also lists known spyware and adware.

**ProcessLibrary.com**
[www.processlibrary.com](http://www.processlibrary.com)
Here’s another site where you can search for or browse the names of thousands of startup items. You’ll find advice on each one, helping you decide whether you should disable it.

**Task List Programs From AnswersThatWork.com**
[www.answersthatwork.com/Tasklist_pages/tasklist.htm](http://www.answersthatwork.com/Tasklist_pages/tasklist.htm)
Although this site doesn’t provide a search tool, you can browse its massive list of startup programs. The names of these programs are organized alphabetically, making it easier to find a particular startup program. In addition, the descriptions and recommendations at this site are quite thorough.

**Free Tools**
The System Configuration Utility is OK, but it has its limitations. You’ll find more capable programs on the Web that can handle your startup items. The following free applications are startup program managers that work in a manner that’s similar to the System Configuration Utility but are friendlier and more effective.

**Startup Inspector**
Startup Inspector displays a list of your startup items, letting you easily enable or disable them. The program also explains what each startup item does and rates it to help you decide what you should do with it. Even if you disable an item, Startup Inspector will keep it in its list just in case you need to re-enable it. This software also can identify adware and spyware lurking in your startup routine.
Startup Control Panel
www.mlin.net/StartupCPL.shtml
Created by Mike Lin, an MIT student and programmer, the Startup Control Panel application offers a simple interface from which you can manage your startup items. And like other apps in this category, you can disable a startup item without worrying about whether it will remain in the list should you decide to re-enable it.

StartupMonitor
www.mlin.net/StartupMonitor.shtml
Here’s another application from Mike Lin for this category, but this utility works differently than the others we cover in this article. Rather than manage existing startup programs, StartupMonitor watches your installations. That way, if a new application tries to start automatically, StartupMonitor will pop up to ask if you want it in your startup routine. By operating in this manner, this utility can keep your startup list from growing too large in the first place.

StartupRun
nirsoft.net/utils/strun.html
StartupRun from NirSoft includes details on each startup item, including a name, directory path, version number, manufacturer, and a brief description of the item. You can easily enable or disable any item and run several startup commands on the fly to see what each one does.

For A Better Start Next Time
In addition to some Windows startup items and utilities, there are other programs you need in your startup routine because they help protect your computer: antivirus, firewall, and antispyware applications, as well as their utilities that check for updates online. But you certainly can disable update checks for less critical programs such as QuickTime and RealPlayer.

You’ll also find that some programs are persistent, sneaking back into your startup even after you disabled them. To keep an eye on your startup items, you should periodically use the System Configuration Utility or run one of the startup program managers we mentioned. By disabling the startup programs you don’t need, Windows will load quicker and run faster. Of course, with a quicker startup, your morning coffee breaks may become shorter, but we don’t think you’ll be complaining.

by Lance Whitney