



Stump the PC Club is a free tech-advice column written by members of the North Orange County Computer Club, which has been in existence since 1976. Visit the club's site at noccc.org.

QUESTION: When I insert a memory card into my PC I frequently have several windows open with various options such as “Import pictures and videos”. How come more than one window opens and how do I know which option to choose?

PC CLUB: All versions of Windows have two features that come into play when external media are inserted including memory cards, flash drives, CDs, DVDs and external hard drives. These two features are called AutoPlay and AutoRun and are frequently confused with each other.

Also, their implementation changes as new versions of Windows have appeared. You can read Microsoft's definition of these features at <http://bit.ly/msautoplay> but I prefer the explanation at http://bit.ly/autoplay_writeup.

Let's discuss AutoPlay first. In essence here's what happens. When you insert a CD with media such as audio tracks on it, a window opens and asks you if you want to “Play audio CD using Windows Media Player”. On my PC I also get a choice to play it with iTunes since I installed that program. What's actually happening is that both Windows and iTunes in my case are monitoring the CD player to see if you insert a music CD or other type of CD. If you do, it is immediately recognized as such.

If you insert a memory card from a digital camera into a card reader Windows will also recognize that you inserted a device with pictures. You will then be given a choice to view the pictures along with other choices that depend on what software you have installed.

Where it gets interesting is if you install additional programs that work with pictures such as Adobe Photoshop Elements or the ACDSee Photo Manager. These programs also monitor your PC to see if you insert any devices and they may open a window in addition to the one that Windows opens. Therefore, you may get more than one window opening. You can cancel the one that you are not interested in and use the other or close them both and proceed on your own.

AutoPlay is a feature which was introduced in Windows XP which examines removable media and devices and, based on content such as pictures, music or video files, launches an appropriate application to play or display the content.

The AutoRun feature looks for a file named autorun.inf in the root directory or folder of any removable device. For example, the Office 2003 installation disc has an Autorun.inf file on it with the following contents:

```
[AutoRun]
OPEN=AutoRun.exe
ICON=AutoRun.ico
```

This file is a plain text file that contains instruction to your PC as what to do with the disc. In this case it instructs the PC to launch the file named AutoRun.exe. The name AutoRun.exe in this case is a coincidence. In other words, the disc's autorun.inf can instruct the PC to launch any file.

You can see that this can be dangerous since you can be handed a CD or flash drive with a dangerous program on it and it will run when the device is inserted. In Windows Vista and Windows 7, these programs are not automatically launched. You have to first click a link in a window that opens. That makes these Windows versions somewhat safer. I say somewhat since the user has to make a choice and we don't always take the precautions that we should.

For those of you that are nervous about leaving this feature on it can be controlled as follows:

Windows XP

- See <http://bit.ly/tweakui>

Windows Vista

- <http://bit.ly/vistatweakui>

Windows 7

- See <http://bit.ly/disableautorun>
- For more control, open the Control Panel, under **View by** select Small icons and select AutoPlay. Here you can turn off the feature completely or tweak the settings for all media types.

Note that in Windows 7 controlling AutoPlay also controls AutoRun.

Bear in mind that if you disable AutoRun, when you insert a CD or DVD such as Microsoft Office 2007, it will not start up automatically. You'll have to open My Computer or (Computer in Vista or Windows 7), navigate to the CD/DVD drive, right-click it and select open. You'll next have to locate the correct file to launch the application. In addition, Music CDs will not automatically play either.

It is probably not worth the trouble to turn off this feature when a little bit of care will avoid most risks. I leave my AutoRun turned on. - *Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his Web site at www.edwardns.com.*