Should I use a Registry cleaner to clean Windows?

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. And don't forget to stop by the Gadgetress' home for the PC Club, at ocregister.com/link/pcclub, to find out how to ask a question and read past answers.*

QUESTION: Your recent article, "How to clean up your hard drive", and giving the info on CCleaner, available at www.ccleaner.com, were very helpful and easy to use. This program also has a registry cleaner. I am not that familiar with the registry portion of my computer and what all the symbols and abbreviations mean, but this program suggests I should clean the registry. Can I rely on this program to remove what should be removed, without causing any harm or changes to my computer?
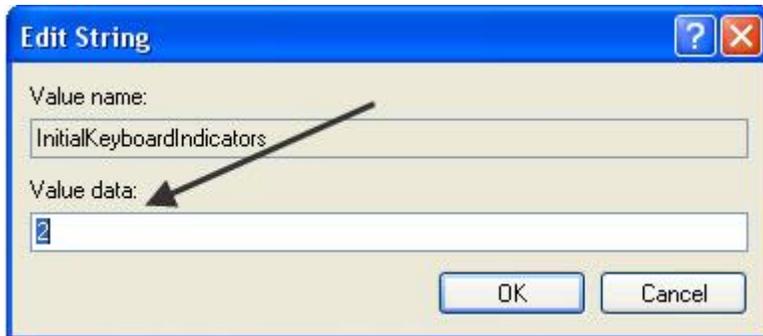
PC Club: It's true that CCleaner has a tool that is a registry cleaner. The Windows Registry or just plain Registry as it's often referred to, is a database which stores settings and options for the Microsoft Windows operating systems. It contains information and settings for hardware, operating system software, most non-operating system software, and per-user settings. When first introduced with Windows 3.1, the Windows registry's purpose was to tidy up the profusion of per-program INI files (short for **ini**tialization files) that had previously been used to store configuration settings for Windows programs.

The Registry plays an extremely vital role in keeping your XP or Vista operating system running smoothly and is frequently polluted by invalid entries, missing or corrupt hardware drivers, or orphaned start-up programs and other problems. Some of these problems have no impact on your day-to-day PC activities, other problems can slow your PC down, and it is even possible that Registry problems can cripple your PC.

Let me start out by stating that **tinkering with the Registry can be risky business unless you know what you are doing**.

Wikipedia has a great explanation of how the Registry is organized (link: http://bit.ly/XosGt). Having said that, there are Registry changes or "hacks" that you can make to enhance your computing experience. For a simple example of tweaking the Registry, let's assume that you want to modify your Num Lock key's behavior so that it is automatically on when you turn on your system. I'm not recommending that you do this but only providing an example. Here are the steps:

1. Click Start, Run and enter "regedit" without the quotes in the box labeled Open and click the OK button. This will open the Registry editor.

2. Navigate to the key labeled HKEY_CURRENT_USER\Control Panel\Keyboard. You may have to click several plus (+) signs to expand some entries.

3. On the right side double-click the InitialKeyboardIndicators entry.

4. In the window that opens, enter a value of 1 for the Num Lock to be off or enter a 2 for it to be on.

This is one of the most simple and risk free changes you can make but it gives you the idea. A logical question to ask at this point is "How do I learn about these Registry tweaks?" There are several sites on the Internet that provide excellent information on this topic including the Eldergeek site (link: http://bit.ly/zEmTt). Just search Google for "registry tweaks" to learn more about this.

Now back to your main question - should you use a registry cleaner? Here's a quote from PC World Magazine:

"There's no truly safe way to clean your Registry, only safer ways. And since this is an inherently dangerous job, the safest option of all is to not do it. I know some experts say you should clean your Registry regularly to improve performance. I disagree. Clean your Registry only if Windows has a serious problem and nothing else works."

If you must clean your Registry remember the following:

1. Read the article by Steve Bass of PC World magazine (link: http://bit.ly/ukU1E) before making any changes.
2. Use a well known program such as CCleaner, www.ccleaner.com or Glary Utilities, www.glaryutilities.com which are both available for free.
3. Always back up your registry before making any changes. The programs mentioned above offer to do this.
4. If a web site promises you a free registry scan, avoid it. They'll soon ask you for your credit card.

 ~Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his blog at www.edwardns.com/blog.