

What are drivers and why you should update them on a PC

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QUESTION: What do we need to know about drivers? Should they be updated regularly and what is the best way to do it?

PC CLUB: A driver, or more specifically, a device driver, is software that helps hardware devices function operate on the computer's operating system, such as Windows XP.



Without the right drivers, a computer's video card, modem or printer may not work properly. Microsoft builds many drivers into Windows XP and its other operating systems. Frequently, the built-in drivers are generic and don't provide all of the functionality the device's manufacturer intended.

It's up to the hardware device's manufacturer to provide Microsoft with software drivers so the devices work with Windows. This takes time and money. That's why when Microsoft launches a new operating system, as it plans to tomorrow with the new [Windows 7](#), some hardware devices may not work. Here's a story from 2007 about manufacturers scrambling to update drivers for Windows Vista: "[Vista ripples across industry: Manufacturers hustle to make sure their products are compatible.](#)"

However, it is not unusual for someone to buy a PC and use it for a long time without any problems and without even knowing what a driver is. On other occasions, a driver

may have to be updated. Here are some examples of when you'll need to update a driver:

1. When you purchase a peripheral such as a printer, you have to install software before it will fully function with your PC. This installation may install several helpful applications but it also installs the printer driver as well. This driver rarely requires updating unless there is a malfunction, in which case the manufacturer may offer new drivers.
2. When you convert a PC from Vista to XP, this is only possible if the XP drivers are available from the manufacturer. The reverse is also true: When you upgrade your operating system from XP to Vista, for example, you usually have to upgrade your drivers.
3. When you upgrade from Vista to the new Windows 7, most of the Vista drivers will work on Windows 7. However, my all-in-one HP printer did not. Windows 7 had a built-in generic driver for the printing function but the scanning feature did not work. I will have to keep visiting the HP web site to see if and when they update the driver. Since this costs the manufacturer time and money, they may choose not to do it.
4. When new hardware conflicts with existing hardware. Occasionally, someone might install software or hardware that causes a conflict with an existing driver such as the video driver. In that case, try downloading the latest video driver.
5. When you want all the features a hardware device offers. For example, a new wireless mouse and keyboard usually works immediately upon plugging it into your PC's USB port. No need to install the software that comes with it. This is because Windows has the built-in drivers for generic wireless mice and keyboards. But if you wanted to use the devices' other features, such as customizing the keyboard, you will need to install the software.

Finding the right driver

To locate a driver, use the manufacturer's web site. For example, searching Google for "HP support" will take you to [HP's site](http://bit.ly/nVswV) for downloading drivers (link: <http://bit.ly/nVswV>). You find your hardware device, download the appropriate driver to your computer and double click the icon to install the software. Of course, you should always, always, always backup your data before updating any drivers. Also, it's not usually required to remove the old driver before installing the new one.

