Start it up...

**Windows 95 doesn't *just* affect Windows —
Simon Collin suggests ways in which you can use
Windows to get the best results from DOS, too.**

Windows 95 has overshadowed nearly every other computing event this summer. In past months I've been writing about how Windows 95 will change the way you see and use DOS. Now it's arrived, I can show you how to tune it to make the most of your DOS applications.

One of the confusing aspects of Windows 95 is that, although it's a self-contained operating system, it seems to boot up under good old DOS and then switch to Windows. Several readers have asked whether this is correct and how Windows now processes the old CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT files.

In many cases, Windows 95 completely eliminates the need for CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT. In fact, it also knocks COMMAND.COM on the head, freeing up more conventional memory. Windows still uses CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT to load any non-native drivers or applications — typically a real-mode driver, such as an old CD-ROM or sound-card driver.

When you install Windows 95, it will check what's in the CONFIG and AUTOEXEC files and will treat the commands, in most cases, as if they were native Windows and load them automatically. For example, it will load system drivers like HIMEM.SYS and IFSHLP.SYS directly from Windows. It's the third-party drivers that might be in your CONFIG files that cause Windows to have to switch back to real mode and execute the COMMAND.COM DOS interpreter. COMMAND.COM is used to parse the lines in the two files and act on their instructions.

If your PC doesn't have extra drivers, there's no need for you to keep CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT. If you do have these two files on your PC, you're wasting RAM since Windows has to load COMMAND.COM to deal with them. To free an extra 8Kb of conventional memory, look in your CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT files to see whether a real-mode driver is needed; if not, you can delete these files and save some memory.

Before you do this, make sure you have a working Windows start-up disk (that was created during your setup) or create a system floppy disk. Once you have your floppy start-up disk in hand, start by renaming the two files to CONFIG.OLD and AUTOEXEC.OLD and restart your PC to see what difference it makes.

If your PC starts up as normal, you had no real-mode drivers in these files and you've saved 8Kb of precious memory. If you do have problems, insert the startup disk and reboot, then rename the .OLD files to their original CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT titles.

Multiple configurations

One excellent feature of Windows 95 is its ability to create custom CONFIG.SYS and AUTOEXEC.BAT settings for any DOS session running under Windows.

For example, if you have a particular peripheral that needs a special driver, but you only use it from a DOS application (such as a card to link to a mainframe, a voice synthesiser or a data acquisition adaptor), or if you need particular PATH settings or environment variables for an application, you can use Windows to isolate these requirements from everything else in the system.

If you want to set up a totally different CONFIG.SYS file to provide more BUFFER or FILES statements for a particular DOS application, the simplest way is to create a unique DOS session with its own CONFIG.SYS file. This will be executed by Windows when the DOS session is started.

The route to this solution is to modify the Properties of the DOS session. From the Windows Desktop, start an MSDOS session from the Start button. Alternatively, create a shortcut to a DOS session by moving onto the Desktop, clicking on the right-hand mouse button and selecting Create Shortcut.

Shortcut

Type in COMMAND.COM as the command line when prompted. This creates a shortcut icon to start the DOS session that you can access directly from the Desktop.

Highlight the MSDOS shortcut icon and click on the right-hand mouse button to view its Properties screen. From here, click on the Program tag and you'll see the basic details about the MSDOS shell. Click on the Advanced button. You are now given the option to define how the MSDOS session is started: it can be automatically set up by Windows or manually defined by you. Select the third radio button and you're given further options to define the AUTOEXEC.BAT and CONFIG.SYS files for this session.

In the two scroll boxes at the bottom of the window are the existing contents of the CONFIG and AUTOEXEC files that Windows is using as a default. If you want to change these to customise the settings (for new BUFFER and FILES statements) just edit the contents in the scroll box. You've now got a totally independent MSDOS session that will only load any memory-hungry driver, or statements, when you start it.