Where to find your important files

Rose Vines wrote this tutorial in the April 2002 issue as a guide to backing up your important files. We still recommend taking preventative measure of backing up regularly, but Rose's tutorial is also a useful complement to Darren Yates's video tutorial on how to get data off a failed hard disk.

Every so often, someone tells me a story of a friend or relative who lost the only copy of their doctoral thesis or their novel when their computer went belly up. Usually the story is couched in terms like "You're a computer expert. Tell me why computers are so difficult/dumb/unreliable/dangerous."
Of course, these tales aren't about computer fallibility. They're about human stupidity. There's no sense in trying to put this gently: If you keep your <I>only<I> copy of any important data on your computer you are inviting catastrophe. If you are writing The Great Australian Novel and you don't have multiple backups -- on paper as well as on floppy, CD or Zip -- you should have your computer confiscated for your own good.
On the other hand, when people tell me they lost their browser favourites or their e-mail contacts, I have a lot more sympathy. Of course, you should be backing up these things along with your novel, but it's easy to forget the many little useful pieces of data lurking on our computers. And, unfortunately, Microsoft makes it well-nigh impossible to locate some of the data you're likely to want to protect.

^^^INSERT win9x-01.bmp (Figure 1) here, Laurence ^^^

For example, take a look at this screen shot of Microsoft Outlook Express. It shows where this program stores those all-important e-mail messages, stuck six folders deep in a sub-folder of an outlandishly named sub-folder. No wonder people forget to back up their e-mail! Whichever programmer thought up this little scheme should be sent to reprogramming camp.

Look for your data files
So, how do you ensure you back up each and every bit of important data? The trick is to organise your data logically, create a backup checklist, and perform regular backups using your checklist to guide you.
This may sound like a fair amount of work, but once you've laid the groundwork, the whole thing becomes close to automatic. Your backup software should let you save your settings, including all selected files and folders, and run a backup at any time or on an automatic schedule.
When organising your data, the place to start is with My Documents. As much as possible, use My Documents as your central repository. Store documents there as a matter of course and then use sub-folders to categorise your data.
Some programs, such as the Microsoft Office applications, automatically use My Documents as the default Save As folder. If possible, change the settings of other programs so that they, too, use this as the default location for saving files. If that's not

possible, or if it's inconvenient, take a note of where applications save files by default, and add those locations to your master list of folders to back up.

For instance, Lotus SmartSuite applications store documents in sub-folders of \Lotus\Work, so if you use SmartSuite you should add that folder and its contents to your backup list. Another example is Webshots, the wonderful Desktop wallpaper program (www.webshots.com). It saves all downloaded wallpapers in WBC files in the \Program Files\Webshots\Collection folder. And Post-It Notes stores your notes in the PSNData file in \Program Files\3M\PSNotes2\.

Take note of all your programs which store data or save documents and add their locations to your backup list.

If you regularly download programs, updates, patches and other files from the Internet, create a Downloads folder within My Documents. There you can store all those downloads which you think you'll need if you have to reformat and reinstall Windows.

Moveable My Documents

Keep in mind that My Documents moves around, depending on the version of Windows you use. If you have a single-user 98/Me system, My Documents is likely to be C:\My Documents, unless you've specifically changed the folder. If you are using Windows NT, Windows XP or a multi-user system, things become more complex. On NT, check out the \winnt\profiles\username\ sub-folders; on Windows XP, check through the contents of \Documents and Settings.

And on multi-user systems make sure you back up not only your data but the data of all other users.

One way to track down all the My Documents folders is to use Find/Search:

1. Click Start, Find/Search, Files or Folders.
2. Type <I>documents<I> in the search box and click Search Now.
3. Note all those folders which should be included in a backup.

Use Find/Search to track down specific filetypes you're likely to want included in a backup, too. Some filetypes to search for are: *.dbx (Outlook Express mail files); *.pst (Outlook mail folders); *.ost (Office offline message store); *.pdf; *.dot (Word templates); *.pab (Exchange address book).

Don't worry about including not-quite-essential files the first time you perform a full backup. For instance, not every file in My Documents and its sub-folders may need to be backed up, but do it anyway. It's much easier to create a backup which includes a folder's entire contents than it is to go through your whole computer and select only those files that are essential. You may need an extra CD or Zip disk for your backup, but after that first full backup you need only do small, fast differential or incremental backups to create copies of new or changed files.

Creating a backup

Once you have your master list of folders, it's time to run a full backup. In fact, consider two full backups. Once you've completed the first backup, take the backup disks and store them somewhere safe -- off premises, if possible. Then do another full backup and keep these disks close at hand.

For home environments, a simple set of full and differential or incremental backups should be sufficient. For business backups, consider implementing a rotating strategy

where you have one backup stored off-site; one backup for the previous period; plus the current backup. Some businesses go further, and have a full week or month's worth of daily backups on hand. It all depends on the value of your data.

To create your backups, you can use Windows' Backup utility or you can use a third-party backup program. My choice for home and small office environments is Second Copy 2000 (from www.centered.com but we've also included a trial version on this CD). Second Copy has a beautifully simple interface and tons of options and, once set up, it will automatically back up your data on a regular schedule.

Whichever program you use, when you perform a full backup make sure you enable the option to clear the archive bit on the source file. This marks the file as backed up. If you modify the file, the archive bit will be reset, allowing the modified file to be included in a future differential or incremental backup.

A trial restore

One of the reasons I like Second Copy is that it creates direct copies of files on the backup media. That makes it easy to restore a file, as all you have to do is use Windows Explorer to locate the file and copy it back.

Microsoft Backup, on the other hand, combines all files into a backup set (a QIC file). To restore a file from the set, you must use MSBackup once more to open the set, then search through it for the file you wish to restore.

That adds a level of complexity -- and danger -- to the whole operation. What happens if your QIC file gets corrupted? There goes your entire backup. On the other hand, with Second Copy if one file becomes corrupted, the others remain intact.

Regardless of which program you use, make sure you run a restore operation, whether that's a simple copy or an actual Restore, before you need to. This ensures your backup media is okay and that the files have been backed up correctly. And remember that backup media degrades over time -- even CDs.

What to include in your backup: A checklist
Folders:
- My Documents
- Downloads folder
- Windows\Application Data
- Windows\Cookies
- Windows\Favorites
- Windows\Local Settings
- Windows\Desktop
- Windows\All Users
- Windows\Profiles (for multi-user systems)
- \Documents and Settings (on Win XP systems)
- Winnt\profiles (on Win NT systems)
- Default File Save locations for applications.

Items:
- Normal.dot and other Office templates
- E-mail folders

- Address books
- Favorites
- Money/Quicken/MYOB Accounts
- Webshots collections, Post-It Notes and other program data
- Downloads/updates
- Recorded music
- Digital photos

Step by step: Creating a full backup using Second Copy 2000
^^ INSERT win9x-02.bmp
1. Select New Profile from the File Menu and in the next screen select Custom Setup, so you can adjust the options.

^^ INSERT win9x-03.bmp
2. Second Copy uses a series of questions -- What?, Which?, Where?, When?, How? -- to prompt you through creating a backup. For a full backup, specify the root folder (usually C:\) of your hard drive and enable the Include Sub Folders option when prompted to choose What to back up. In the next section, you'll be asked Which files to backup. Select the Only Selected Files And Folders option, then click the Select button. Go through each of the folders and select those you've noted on your master backup list.

^^ INSERT win9x-04.bmp
3. After selecting the folders you wish to backup, you'll be asked Where and When you want the backup. Select the backup location (CD, other hard drive, et cetera), then choose to perform a Manual backup for your full backup. You can then perform this backup at a time of your choosing. For incremental or differential backups, you should schedule the backup to run at a particular time.

^^ INSERT win9x-05.bmp
4. Second Copy lets you perform a variety of backups. In most cases, you'll want to use the Simple Copy method. If you're strapped for space on your backup media, you can use one of the compressed options. Then click the Advanced Properties button.

^^ INSERT win9x-06.bmp
5. In the Advanced Properties, tick the Clear Archive Bit After Copy option. When you perform a subsequent incremental backup, you should also enable the preceding option. If your backup is likely to occupy more than one disk, enable the Span Files Across Multiple Removable Disks option.

^^ INSERT win9x-07.bmp
6. Finally, you'll be asked to provide a descriptive name for the backup profile. To run your backup, place your backup media in the drive and double-click the profile's icon.