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1

Windows 8.1 Interface

Windows 8.1 features an interface called the Windows 8.1 Interface. While it has been designed primarily for use with touchscreen devices, it can also be used with standard screens. Here, we take a look at its main features.

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Windows 8.1 is basically one operating system with two interfaces.

What is the Windows 8.1 Interface?

The Windows 8.1 interface is a much-simplified (compared to the classic Windows interface) touchscreen interface of the type used in smartphones and tablets. Each installed program, or 'app' as they are known, is displayed on the Windows 8.1 Desktop, or Start screen, as a tile. While the ubiquitous icon does the same thing on the classic Windows Desktop, the main difference is that tiles can display live and constantly-updating content.

The apps themselves are also more streamlined than traditional programs and, accordingly, offer much less in the way of configuration options. The whole setup is designed to be clean, straightforward and quick, and thus much less demanding of system resources. Much of the eye-candy seen in Windows 7, such as Aero and transparent window borders has been removed.

This leads us to the rationale behind the interface. As two of the primary requirements for mobile devices are power efficiency and touchscreen control, its introduction clearly indicates that Microsoft considers mobile devices to be where the future lies.

Compatibility is another factor. Windows 8.1 will run on multiple platforms including smartphones, tablets, PCs and even the Xbox. This move toward cross-compatibility is one which is intended to establish Microsoft in the mobile market.

A key element in this is the OneDrive app. OneDrive enables users to store all their data and apps online and synchronize it across all their devices. As a result, they will be able to log into OneDrive on any Windows 8.1 device and access their data, apps and preference settings. Whatever or whoever's device they are using, it will be as though they are using their own.

There is a lot more to Windows 8.1 than just the interface, though. For example, it includes the older Windows 7 operating system as well. However, we'll start by taking a look at the various elements that comprise the Windows 8.1 interface.



In order to serve its primary function of a mobile device interface, Windows 8.1 has been stripped of all unnecessary visual enhancements and menus.

Key Elements

The Lock Screen

The first thing you'll see when you start up is the Lock screen, which by default shows just the time and date.



This screen is necessary because Windows 8.1 is a touch-supportive operating system and so requires a protective barrier to prevent accidental inputs. Microsoft has evolved this basic function by enabling users to customize the screen by changing its background and also by specifying various notifications to be displayed. These include the date and time as mentioned above.

Tap or click anywhere on the screen and the logon password box appears.

Start Screen

Having logged on, the user is then taken to the Windows 8.1 Desktop (also known as the Start screen). This is populated with a number of tiles, each of which represents an app. Some of these apps, such as Desktop and Video are static, whereas others are dynamic and are able to display updated content in real-time. Examples include the Email, Calendar and Weather apps.

To run an app, simply tap or click its tile. Tiles can be repositioned by dragging to a new location. When dragging a tile to the left or right, a gray bar will appear; if the tile is released on the far side of the bar, it will start a new group. This feature enables groups of tiles to be created.



Many Windows apps can be configured to display updated data in real-time on the Lock screen.



A lock screen is not necessary when Windows 8.1 is used with a non-touchscreen monitor. Many users will find it useful, though, purely as a means of displaying important information.

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Tiles on the Windows 8.1 Start screen

Clicking the username at the top-right corner reveals options for changing the user picture, locking the PC, and logging out. The icons to the right of this reveal power options and a search box.

Menus

At first glance, the Start screen appears to be completely bereft of user options. There's no Start button, no Taskbar and no notification area. Right-click on the Start screen and all you see is a "Name groups" option (see below). However, most things are still available – you just need to know where to look. Microsoft, in its "keep it lean and mean" spirit, has stripped out many of the old options and changed the way much of what's left is accessed.

Right-click an empty part of the Start screen to reveal the "Name groups" option mentioned above. Click this and you'll see a "Name group" box appear at the top of each group of tiles. Click in a box and you'll be able to give the group a name. Click on the screen to return to the Start screen.

Right-click on the tiles themselves and you'll see menus offering options such as Resize, Pin to Taskbar, Unpin from Start, Uninstall, etc. These are contextual and so vary from app to app.



Menus in Windows 8.1 are more contextual than in previous versions of Windows, i.e. they now provide related options.

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Right-click on the background of an open app and options bars open at the top and bottom offering related functions.

Charms Bar – The Charms bar is located down the right-hand side of the screen and, by default, is hidden from view. Hover the mouse over the top or bottom right-hand corners of the screen and the bar will appear as shown below.



On it you will find options to search your PC, share data, access other devices, and change settings on the PC. No matter where you are in the system, these universal options can always be accessed.

The Search function can be used to search for anything on your computer from applications to settings. Just open the Search app and start typing to search for any required item. The Share button allows you to view share options for the running application. Start takes you to the Start screen, Device allows you to access and change the settings of devices connected to your computer, while Settings provides access to a number of system options, plus access to further PC settings.

The Charms bar is context-sensitive, which means that it shows current application-related settings and options. It is also universal in that it can be accessed from anywhere, no matter which application is in use.



To access the Charms bar, hover the mouse over the top or bottom right-hand corners of the screen. Another way is to press Win + C.



 The Windows key (or just "Win") is usually located at the bottom of the keyboard near to the space bar and often has an image of a flying window on it.



It's not actually necessary to open the Search app to do a search. Simply start typing while on the Start screen and the app will open automatically.

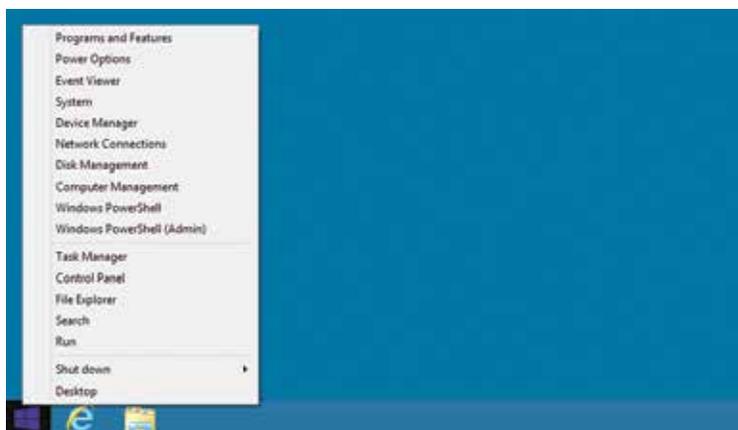
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Application Switch List – The top left-hand corner also activates a menu. Hover the mouse over the corner while on the Start screen and the Switch list will appear as shown below:



This shows all apps currently running on the PC down the left-hand side of the screen. To switch to a different app, simply click on it in the list.

Power User Menu – When on the classic Windows Desktop, right-clicking on the Start button opens a menu of options likely to be of interest to advanced users. This is shown below:



If you wish to access the Power User menu while on the Start screen, press Win + X. This also works on the classic Windows desktop.

Left-clicking on the Start button takes you to the Start screen.

Navigation

In its drive for Windows 8.1 to be all-encompassing, Microsoft has made it possible to manipulate the interface in three different ways: by touch, mouse and keyboard.

Touch

Touch gestures include swiping, sliding, tapping and pinching. The best way to get to grips with these is to experiment. The following, however, will get you off to a good start:

Swipe from the right – moving a finger from the right-hand side of the screen to the left opens the Charms bar.

Swipe from the left – moving a finger from the left-hand side of the screen to the right opens the Application Switch list, which shows all the open apps and enables the user to switch between them.

Swipe slowly from the left – by performing the above left-to-right action more slowly, it is possible to drag an app out of the Switch List and “snap it” to run side-by-side with the current app.

Swipe down from the top – moving a finger from the top of the screen to about halfway down will close the current app.

Swipe down – swiping down from the top of the screen brings up an option to view all the apps and programs installed on your PC, not just the Windows 8.1 apps. When performed in an open app, the same movement reveals related options. For example, in the Internet Explorer app, it opens a tab menu that shows a list of all open tabs, plus a new tab button.

Swipe down on a tile – this selects an app and at the same time opens the Options bar at the bottom of the screen.

Pinching and stretching – pinching enables the user to zoom out on the Start screen or an open app. Stretching zooms in.

Slide left/right – sliding a finger to the right of the screen scrolls across the Start screen. Sliding it left, scrolls back. The same movements in the Internet Explorer app open the next and previous pages.

Tapping – this action is used to select an option or to open an app.



The old Windows Task Switcher (Alt + Tab) can also be used to show open apps.



In many cases, the touch commands available are dependent on the application in use. For example, various rotational commands can be used to manipulate objects in drawing and layout applications such as Microsoft PowerPoint.



Spinning the mouse wheel while on the Lock screen will open the password box. When on the Start screen, it scrolls the screen.

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Mouse

Using the mouse to get around in Windows 8.1 is no different to any other operating system. The trick is knowing where to position the mouse to reveal the menus and features provided by the interface. We have covered this in pages 9-12.

Keyboard

Those of you who use the Start screen without the benefit of a touchscreen are well advised to get acquainted with the various keyboard commands relevant to it. In many cases, just as with keyboard commands and shortcuts in general, they are often quicker than using the mouse.

There are actually a whole bunch of these commands and a full list is shown on pages 144-146. The following are some of the more useful ones:

The key that will be used most is the Windows key, also called WinKey – see page 146. Pressing this key instantly returns the user to the Start screen regardless of where they are. It can also be used in conjunction with other keys to perform other actions. For example, Win + X opens the Power User menu as mentioned on page 12, while Win + C opens the Charms bar.

The Home and End keys jump from one end of the Start screen to the other, while the arrow keys can be used to select a tile. The Enter key opens an app.

Tapping the space bar opens the options bar at the bottom of the screen. Win + Tab opens the Application Switch list that allows the user to switch to a different app. While the list is open, pressing the Delete key closes the apps in turn. Alt + Tab opens a horizontal version of the Application Switch list. Note that you must have at least two apps running for Win + Tab and Alt + Tab to work.

Press Ctrl + Tab to open a list of all apps and programs installed on the computer and cycle through the list with the arrow keys.

A rarely-used key known as the Context Menu key (usually located close to the space bar) brings up a menu of related options when pressed in an open app. This appears at the top of the app window.



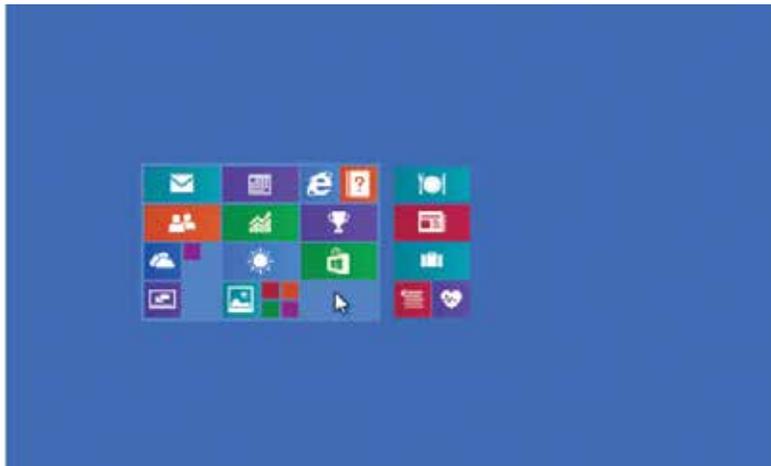
Organization

Windows 8.1's tiles are quite bulky and take up a lot of screen real estate. Therefore users with a large number of apps will find themselves having to constantly scroll across the Start screen unless they get their apps organized.

There are two ways to do this: The first is to arrange the apps in order of frequency of use so that the most frequently-accessed are located on the visible part of the screen. This can be done by individually selecting tiles and dragging them to the left side of the screen. The second is to reduce the size of the tiles – do this by right-clicking on a tile and clicking *Resize*. Depending on the app, you'll have options for *Small*, *Medium*, *Wide* and *Large*.

Another obvious user requirement is to have apps organized into related groups. Again, this can be done by dragging and dropping tiles. However, this is a laborious way of moving groups of apps.

A much quicker way is to select an app group and drag and drop the entire group. The way to do this is by making use of Windows 8.1's *Semantic Zoom* feature. Touchscreen users can “spread out” and, if you're using a mouse, press the *Ctrl* button while rotating the mouse wheel. Both actions reduce the size of the tiles as shown below:



Hovering the mouse over an app group automatically selects the whole group, which can then be dragged to a new location and released.



A new app group can be created by dragging an app to the right until a gray divider bar appears. Release the app at this point and the new group is created.



Unless specifically closed by the user, Windows 8.1's apps are always open, even if the user has switched to a different one. However, unlike with previous Windows versions, this has a negligible effect on a PC's performance. This is due to the fact that system resources allocated to the app are automatically reduced to a level just enough to keep it running.



It is possible to install third-party apps on Windows 8.1 – see page 66.

Apps

In keeping with Microsoft's intention of making inroads into the mobile market, the apps created for Windows 8.1 are very similar to the apps found in tablets.

The first similarity regards the way the apps display content in real-time. For example, there is a weather app that shows a constantly-updated ten-day forecast and a news app that displays current stories and images.

The second is simplicity. As with the Windows 8.1 interface itself, Microsoft has designed the apps to be clean and straightforward with the minimum of extraneous clutter – the app's content is intended to dominate. A consequence of this is that the traditional navigational aids such as toolbars, menus, preview panes, etc, are in evidence to a much lesser degree.

To use Microsoft terminology, the apps are “immersive applications” – which basically means they run in full-screen mode. For users with a large, wide-screen monitor this is definitely a restriction. However, this is mitigated to a certain extent by a feature called Snap. This makes it possible to have up to four apps running side-by-side – we explain how to set this up on page 68.

Traditional Windows programs will still work in Windows 8.1. However, because they have not been optimized for it, they can only be used in classic Windows, which is where the user will be automatically switched to when they are run.

It's important to be aware that Windows 8.1 apps are different to their classic Windows equivalents. For example, two versions of Internet Explorer are provided in Windows 8.1 – an Internet Explorer app and the classic Internet Explorer. While the latter supports plugins and add-ons, the app version doesn't.

Sourcing and Installing Apps

In order to provide as secure a computing environment as possible, official Windows 8.1 apps are only available from the Windows Store.

This effectively “sandboxes” them and, as a result, users are much less likely to introduce viruses and malware to their computers via downloaded software.

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To access the Windows Store, click the Store tile on the Start screen. You will then be asked to sign in with your Microsoft account.



Currently, the Windows Store is somewhat underpopulated in comparison to other app stores. However, this is likely to change quickly if Windows 8.1 proves to be popular, so check back periodically.

The first thing you'll see is a carousel showing large images of five featured apps. To the right of this is a list of top categories followed by a section called Picks for you, which shows a number of apps of the type often used by the user. For example, if you play a lot of card games, this section will feature card game apps. Moving along, there are sections showing trending apps, new and rising apps and top paid and top free apps.

At the top of the screen is a search box. Using it activates three filters – All categories, All prices and Sort by relevance. The category list can also be accessed by right-clicking on the screen.

On each app's page, there are ratings and reviews to the right of the main image. Next to these are sections for Details, Related apps, and other apps from the manufacturer. At the left are Buy or Install buttons (this option is available if the app is free). Below is the price, description and the app's features.

Once you've chosen and paid for an app, just click the Install button. It will then be downloaded and installed automatically. Once this has been done, the app's tile will be placed at the end of the Start screen, from where it can be dragged to the desired position.



By using the same account, all official apps installed on your PC will also be available on any other Windows 8.1 devices you may have.



Most of the time, it is not necessary to shut down an app. Due to the way that Windows 8.1 minimizes the system resources required by apps that aren't being used, you can, in fact, have a whole bunch of apps running at the same time without any noticeable degradation of system performance.

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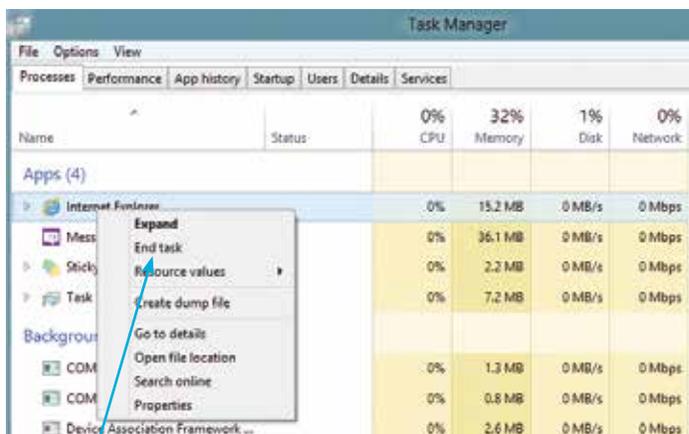
Closing Apps

Closing an app is very simple to do once you know how, but, as many users have discovered, the method of doing so is far from obvious.

Before we go any further with this, it must be pointed out that usually it is not actually necessary to close apps. This is because when a new app is opened, other running apps are switched to a state of suspension in which they use very little in the way of system resources.

However, there may be situations in which it is desirable or even necessary to close down an app. The following are three ways to do this:

- Simply press ALT + F4 – this kills the app instantly
- Move the mouse to the top of the screen and a title bar will appear. Click the X to close the app and the - to minimize it
- Type Task Manager and you'll see the Task Manager icon appear. Click this to open the utility and select the Processes tab where you'll see a list of all running apps and programs as shown below:



Right-click the app you wish to close and select “End Task”.



A quick way of opening the Task Manager is to press Ctrl + Shift + Esc.