Formatting a USB Hard Drive: Windows 7 & MAC OS/X

A quick and easy user guide for students and faculty on the go

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Disclaimer

The author of this guide and organizations associated with the author assume no responsibility for damages or losses that may result in the use of this guide. This guide is meant to be used to format a hard drive which is a process that is destructive to data and will remove data from the hard drive. It is the responsibility of the user to ensure that any required data is backed up prior to attempting to follow this guide.

Introduction

The convenience that portable USB hard drives offer is enjoyed where ever computer users need to safely and securely transfer files. Previously the only media to back up large amounts of data and transfer large amounts of files from one computer to another was File Transfer Protocol. (FTP) or burning to CD/DVD, both are time consuming. Although both are still widely used to transfer data, the use of USB drives and keys have become very popular due to the speed and the security they offer. When purchased assembled USB hard drives are already formatted, but the quickest way to clear unwanted data from a USB hard drive is by formatting it again. This guide assumes that the user has some basic computer knowledge and ability either with Windows 7 or Mac OS/X.

Plugging in a USB hard drive

Most USB hard drives vary in shape, size, and colour based on the manufacturer. All are very similar and function generally in the same way. The USB connection port can be identified by the USB icon shown here:

Some drives require a secondary power source and are usually powered using a power adapter. One end of the power adapter will be plugged into the wall outlet and the other, usually round end, is plugged into the power port on the drive – normally labeled "DC IN". These types of hard drives will also have a power button or power switch.

Figure 1. USB ports on a USB hard drive

To plug the USB cable into your USB hard drive match one end of the cable to the USB port on the drive and plug it in. The next few sections outline where to locate the USB port on your Windows 7 or Mac OS/X computer.

Plugging a USB hard drive into a Windows 7 computer

On your Windows 7 computer you should see at least two USB ports located on the front of the computer near the audio jacks as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Front USB ports for Windows PC

If you are unable to locate the USB ports at the front of the machine then check the back of your computer. To find where the USB ports are at the back of your computer trace the mouse or keyboard cable to where it is plugged in. Locate the rectangular shaped port as shown in Figure 3.
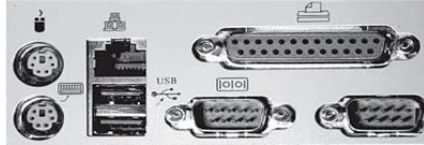

Figure 3. Back USB ports for a Windows PC

To locate the USB ports on a laptop look along the left and right side and you will find that the ports are marked with the USB icon next to them.

Plugging a USB hard drive into an Apple OS/X computer

On your Apple Macintosh computer there are USB ports located in a few places. First look on either side of the keyboard underneath the "Esc" and "F19" keys.

To find the USB ports on a Mac Pro computer look at the lower left front near the audio jacks or at the rear of the computer near the USB keyboard connector.

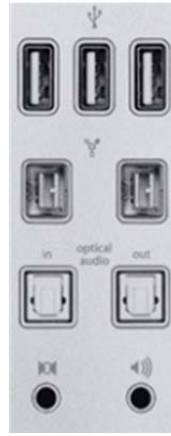*Figure 4. Front USB ports on a Mac Pro*

Figure 5. Rear USB ports on a Mac Pro

To find the USB ports on your iMac look at the back of your computer near the lower left or right corner – depending on the model, some iMacs have the ports on the left or right. The USB ports should appear similar to the USB ports shown above and can be identified by the USB icon.

If you are using a MacBook the USB ports are located along the left side of the laptop and will be marked with the USB icon.

Verify that the USB hard drive functions

After you plug in your USB hard drive it should make a spinning noise, some rapid clicking, and there should be an LED lighting up to indicate the drive is powered and spinning. All external USB drives function the same way no matter what computer operating system you are using. If the drive is not spinning or

Disconnecting the USB hard drive

Before you can safely unplug your USB hard drive you must first tell the operating system that you are going to unplug it. If you unplug your USB hard drive before telling the operating system that you risk corrupting the drive and possibly losing data.

Disconnecting the USB hard drive in Windows 7

To disconnect your USB hard drive in Windows 7 hold the mouse pointer over the icon on the quick launch menu that looks like a USB plug with the green check mark.

Figure 23. Remove hardware and eject media icon

With the mouse pointer held over the remove hardware and eject media icon right or left click on this icon to display the USB device listing. Select your USB hard drive from the list.

Figure 24. Remove hardware and eject media device listing popup menu

When Windows disconnects the drive a notification balloon will pop up exactly like the one on the right, indicating that it is safe to unplug the hard drive.

Figure 25. Message balloon indicating it is safe to unplug a USB device

Disconnecting the USB hard drive in Mac OS/X

To disconnect your USB hard drive in Mac OS/X click and hold on the orange coloured icon for your USB hard drive and drag it towards the Trash Bin on the right of the Dock and release the USB hard drive icon into the Trash Bin. Make sure you click and hold while dragging the USB hard drive icon to the Trash Bin. Once the icon disappears you can now unplug your hard drive.

Figure 26. Trash bin icon located on the Dock in OS/X

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