



*Hard disc with cover removed - don't ever remove the cover if you want the drive to work again!*

Disposing of your old computer may not be as easy as might imagine. You can not simply put it in a wheelie bin, destined for landfill. Computers contain several metals that will poison the ground. There are EU laws banning disposal in this way. Either take it to a local authority waste disposal site or contact your council to make a special collection.

Before disposing of it, though, it is prudent to ensure that no-one can get at the data on it. This applies whether the machine is going to cyber heaven or on to a new owner. Here's a list of the broad options available to you:

### **If the computer is condemned**

#### **1) Remove the hard drive and keep it.**

##### **Pro**

- 1) If the the drive is still readable then this gives you a backup of your data. You will need some means - such as an external USB drive case - to connect this drive to your new computer if you wish to read it.
- 2) There is no possibility of its contents falling into the wrong hands.

##### **Con**

- 1) It can be a bit of a chore getting the drive out of the case (particularly on older laptops).

2) You do have to keep the drive somewhere (although, as my mother used to say, “it won’t eat any meat”)

## 2) Remove the hard drive and destroy it.

If you open up the case of a hard drive and deface the mirror-like surfaces with a screwdriver or sandpaper then you are almost certainly putting it beyond any readability or use. I agree that it may be technically possible for someone with all the right (very expensive and specialist) equipment to read fragments of the drive, but I would rather start worrying about the possibility of being hit by a meteor than worry about this happening.

### Pro

- 1) There is virtually no possibility of data falling into the wrong hands
- 2) You don’t have to keep the drive

### Con

- 1) You haven’t retained any backup of your old machine
- 2) It can be a bit of a chore actually getting the drive out of the case (particularly on older laptops).
- 3) It can be difficult to open up the case of a hard drive in order to deface it

## 3) Delete everything off the hard drive

You could use a software utility such as [CCleaner](#) to completely wipe the drive (including the operating system and all programs and data - whether deleted or not)

### Pro

- 1) Easier than removing the drive
- 2) You can’t forget to delete specific data files

**Con**

1) You need to install and run the software and it can then take quite a long time to “scrub” the drive in this way (particularly if you set the software to make multiple “passes” over the drive).

**If the computer is going to a new home**

Removing the drive is a bit drastic. It is likely that the new owner won't have the expertise to source a new drive, install it, and re-install the operating system and software. In fact, even if s/he does have the knowledge and resources it is very likely that it just won't be worth doing. So, the aim is to pass on the computer so that it can be used with the minimum of fuss but without compromising your data. The options are:

**1) Delete sensitive information**

This includes your data files, your browser history, saved passwords etc. You may also need to un-install software that is licensed to you that you intend to install on your new machine.

**Pro**

1) This is the least amount of work you need to do in order to protect your data.

**Con**

1) You may miss some data when deleting.

2) The deleted data may be recoverable. If you have the slightest doubt about the integrity of the new owner or the destiny of the drive then the data that you think you have deleted could be vulnerable. This is because “deleting” data in the normal way does no such thing. What actually happens is that the operating system maintains a directory of the files that occupy the different parts of the drive. When you delete a file it simply changes the directory such that the space occupied by the (deleted) file is now eligible for re-use (ie the space can be over-written with a new file). The file itself is still present on the disc until the space is re-used and it can be “un-deleted” using special software tools.



## 2) Delete sensitive information and then “scrub” the drive

This consists of deleting the data as above, but then running special software that over-writes the space that may still be occupied by readable data. The software that I recommend for this is [Piriform's CCleaner](#).

Even this process can sometimes be “reversed” by highly specialised people and facilities. Frankly, I'm back to worrying about the meteor before worrying about this possibility. And if you are as paranoid as this, then you may also wish to consider the possibility of data still being present on the drive due to the drive head having shifted fractionally over time such that data you wrote onto the disc a long long time ago is still readable at the very edge of the tracks of data.

### Pro

- 1) Fairly easy to do and should satisfy the non-paranoid

### Con

- 1) You may still fail to delete important data
- 2) Won't satisfy the paranoid. If you belong in this category, then I recommend that you [read this article on data remanence](#)

## 3) Delete everything off the hard drive

You could use a software utility such as [CCleaner](#) to completely wipe and scrub the drive (including the operating system and all programs and data).

**Pro**

1) You can be sure that you didn't leave anything behind that you would rather have deleted.

**Con**

1) You need to install and run the software and it can then take quite a long time to "scrub" the drive in this way (particularly if you set the software to make multiple "passes" over the drive).

2) The new owner will need to re-install the operating system and software.

Conclusion: whether your old computer is at the end of its life or going to a new home you will almost certainly need to take steps to protect your confidential data prior to disposal.

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