What to do when your computer freezes

By Justin Ferris. Komando.com, February 8, 2016

We've all had it happen. You're doing something on your computer, whether it's an important project, some aimless browsing, or trying to beat your high score on Solitaire, and without warning everything freezes.
You wiggle the mouse, click the buttons a few times, tap some keys on your keyboard and nothing. Your 21st century piece of technology is as useless as a pet rock. What do you do next?

Restart
OK, this step is obvious. However, some people think they have to pull the computer's power plug or flip the switch on the power strip. Instead, simply hold the computer's power button for 5 to 10 seconds and it will restart with less disruption than a complete power loss.
There are a few things that can happen next when your computer comes back on. We're going to look at a few and what they tell you to do next.

Computer starts fine
If the computer starts up fine, immediately make sure you back up your information in case a serious problem is on the way. We recommend our sponsor Carbonite as a convenient, secure backup service. Otherwise, you could find yourself scrambling through more complicated ways to get files off a dead computer.
Then go back to using the computer as normal until it freezes again, although it might not. Find out why a restart often makes problems disappear. If the computer does freeze again, then keep reading for more steps to take.

Computer asks you how to boot
While restarting, the computer might say there was an error with Windows and ask if you want to start normally or in Safe Mode. The first time, choose to start Windows normally. Then follow the directions above to back up your data and see if the computer freezes again.
If this is the second time your computer has frozen, choose to boot in "Safe Mode with Networking." Try using the computer like this and see if it freezes again. If it does, then you're looking at either a software or a hardware problem. If it doesn't freeze again while in Safe Mode, then it's likely a software problem. Keep reading for tips to investigate both.

Computer freezes again immediately
If the computer freezes again immediately after it booting, whether in normal mode or Safe Mode, then you could have a serious software or hardware problem, but most likely a hardware problem.
Now we're going to look at some ways to narrow down and fix the cause.

Basic software troubleshooting
An occasional or consistent computer freeze could be the result of a program acting up. Use the keyboard shortcut CTRL + SHIFT + ESC to open Windows' Task Manager and then select the "Performance" tab. In Windows 8.1 and 10, you might need to click the "More details" link at the bottom of the Task Manager to see it.
Start using your computer as normal, but keep an eye the CPU, memory and disk categories. If the computer freezes, and one of these is really high, then that could be your answer. Make a note of which area was really high then restart the computer and open Task Manager again.
This time, however, choose the "Processes" tab. Sort the list by CPU, memory or disk, whichever was really high last time the computer froze, and see what process pops up to the top of the list as the computer freezes. This should tell you what software is acting up so you can uninstall or update it. Learn how to unravel what processes tell you about your programs.
You might also have hidden software, such as a virus, causing problems. Be sure to run a scan with your security software to uncover something that shouldn't be there.

In cases where your computer freezes during startup in normal mode, but boots OK in Safe Mode, the problem could be a program that's loading during the boot sequence. Use a program like Autoruns to selectively disable the programs that begin at startup and see which one is causing the problem.

If your computer is freezing during startup no matter what, and it's at the same point, then the problem could be corruption in Windows, or a hardware problem. A quick way to tell is to grab a Live CD for another operating system, such as Linux Mint or Tails, and boot with that.

If the other operating system boots OK, then you're probably looking at a problem with Windows and might need to reinstall.

Windows 10 (and 8) has a Refresh/Reset feature that's supposed to return Windows to a factory state. It's under Settings>>Update and recovery>>Recovery. If Windows is having trouble starting, it should pop up a Recovery option during boot that includes this, or you might have to use a disc.

If the other operating system has trouble too, then it's time to look at your hardware.

Basic hardware troubleshooting

A computer that freezes both in normal mode and Safe Mode, or with another operating system, can often indicate a problem with your computer's hardware. It could be your hard drive, an overheating CPU, bad memory or a failing power supply. In some cases, it might also be your motherboard, although that's usually fairly bulletproof.

Usually with hardware problem, the freezing will start out sporadic, but increase in frequency as time goes on. Or it will trigger when the computer is working hard, but not when you're doing more basic things. Fortunately, you can run some checks and see if that's the case.

Use a program like CrystalDiskInfo to check your hard drive's S.M.A.R.T. data for signs of impending failure. A program like SpeedFan can tell you if your computer processor is overheating, or if the voltages are fluctuating, which might be a problematic power supply.

If you want to go more in-depth, you can grab a diagnostic CD like FalconFour's Ultimate Boot CD. It has plenty of other tools for checking out your computer, including MemTest for putting strain on your memory to see if it's working OK. Learn about more signs that your computer could be close to dying. If your computer is newer, it might still be under warranty, in which case you'll want to contact the manufacturer or seller.

For an older computer, you need to decide if it's less expensive to repair or replace it. Let us help walk you through the decision-making process.