Three free Microsoft apps you'll want to use

By Doug Spindler on October 20, 2016 in Best Utilities

Microsoft offers many free utilities for better personal computing. There are three small apps that you should keep in your Windows toolkit. I hope you find these programs as useful as I do.

ZoomIt: Quickly magnify what's on your screen

Since Windows 95, Microsoft has included the Screen Magnifier app in its operating system. If, like me, you have a hard time seeing small type on your screen, you probably wanted to know to use it. I've been trying to figure that out for years, but I can never remember the various steps. It's funny, but my cat seems to know exactly how to turn it on, every time she pads across the keyboard — and leave me trying to figure out how to turn it off.

Years ago, at a Microsoft conference, I was watching a presentation given by the famous Mark Russinovich, creator of Windows Sysinternals. He needed a way to magnify the screen to show bits and pieces of code he'd written for the audience. He used Screen Magnifier, which worked but was difficult to use and incompatible with some applications. So Mark wrote his own program and called it **ZoomIt.**

(For years, Windows Sysinternals has provided an excellent collection of advanced utilities. The free tools are periodically updated, so it's worth checking the site (https://technet.microsoft.com/en-us/sysinternals/default) to see what's new.)

I find ZoomIt so easy to use and so valuable, I have it loaded on all of my computers. Anytime I need to read small text or enlarge the image on a screen to see a picture better, I activate ZoomIt.

After a decade of use, I've not found one application or webpage that's incompatible with ZoomIt. You activate the tool with a simple **Ctrl + 1** key combination. (Make sure you're pressing **1** [above "Q"] and not F1. Pressing the 1 on your numeric keypad won't work.)

Once activated, ZoomIt enlarges the screen to twice its normal size. You move around the magnified screen with your mouse, and using the mouse scroll wheel with zoom the image in and out. You can also set the default magnification from 1.25 to 4. Note that the image you're seeing is "frozen," somewhat like a screenshot. You won't see any ongoing changes to the content you're viewing until you close the magnifier by pressing the Esc key or right mouse button. Another feature worth mentioning: clicking the left mouse button on a magnified image freezes screen and magnification level and enables the draw mode (more on that below).

Use care downloading the tool. A word of caution about ZoomIt downloads. The tool is not included by default with any version of Windows. And, unfortunately, hackers have created malicious websites and programs called ZoomIt. Be sure you only acquire ZoomIt from Microsoft's TechNet site (https://technet.microsoft.com/en-us/sysinternals/zoomit.aspx) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

As with other Sysinternals tools, ZoomIt can be either downloaded as a ZIP file and kept on your machine or run directly from the Sysinternals site (Figure 2). The latter option still downloads an EXE file; it's useful when you want to run a Sysinternals tool but not have it actually installed on the local system — for example, when you're helping out a friend with PC troubleshooting.

Figure 2

The first time you launch ZoomIt, you will be presented with the typical licensing screen; this only happens once. Accept it, and you'll then be taken to the configuration dialog box. If you want to keep ZoomIt, the only suggested change is to have ZoomIt load automatically when your computer starts (see Figure 3). This way it'll always be available. While you're in the setting window, look through the other options. You might, for example, want to change the key combination that activates ZoomIt.
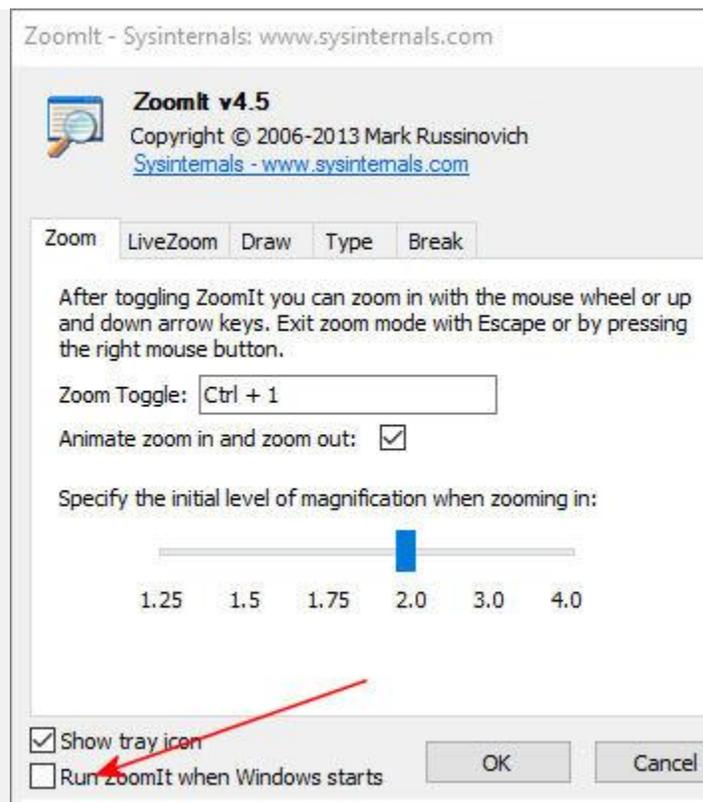

Figure 3

Click OK, and that's it. If ZoomIt is running you'll see its icon on your task bar (perhaps in the "hidden icons" box.
Give ZoomIt a try. Keep in mind that the magnified image is static; anything you type won't be passed to the underlying program.

ZoomIt includes tools for presenter. In addition to screen magnification, it lets you temporarily annotate the image with text or drawings. The LiveZoom option allows cleaner zooming directly from the keyboard, but I find it slow and jerky. ZoomIt's concise documentation is included with the various tools and options

Snipping Tool: Take a quick screenshot

There are many screen-capture tools, but I regularly use Microsoft's **Snipping Tool.** It can capture a full screen or just some portion of what's being displayed. You can then save the image as a file or email it to someone.

I use Snipping Tool to document online purchases, have a record of product keys, document how to do steps in an application and email them to help a friend, or send a tech-support person a picture of what's on my screen so they can assist me when I'm having a problem. This is a classic case of "a picture is worth a thousand words," when I need assistance.

Snipping Tool is easy to activate — it comes with every version of Windows from Vista on. It's also compatible with almost every application I've tried. For security purposes, a few programs will block it. You can take a "snip," but the capture will be blank. (For those cases, just use your smartphone's camera to take a picture of the screen.)

Launch Snipping Tool by entering its name in your Start menu search box. You can also find it under All Programs/Accessories. I like to pin it to my task bar, so it's always ready to use.

Snipping Tool is extremely quick and easy to use. To take a screen snip, click New or use the shortcut key: **Alt + N**; the entire desktop will then "frost" to let you know you are in snipping mode. If you change your mind, simply press ESC to cancel the snip.

With your screen frosted, the mouse pointer will change to crosshairs. Position the crosshairs to one side of what you'd like to snip, click-and-hold the left mouse button to draw a rectangle around the area to capture, and then let go of the button. Your new capture will show up in a Snipping Tool window.

Microsoft's capture app includes several editing and annotation options. Use the eraser tool to remove any personal information; the pen and highlight tools let you mark up your image (see Figure 4). Unfortunately, you can't *type* text in your snip.
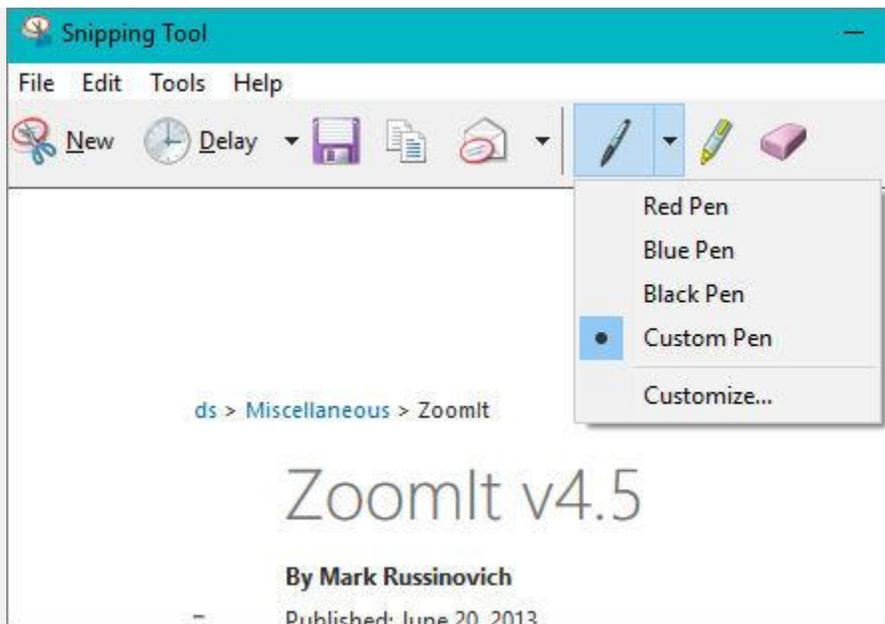

Figure 4

Captured images can be pasted into Word, PowerPoint, or another program via the clipboard; you can also save snips as a graphic file or use email — if you're using one of Microsoft's mail programs.

Snipping Tool also has a delay option. Use this to capture drop-down boxes or fly-out menus that typically close automatically when you move your mouse pointer. The delay gives you time to activate a drop-down or fly-out before the screen frosts.

There are more powerful, third-party snipping apps available — Snagit (trial and paid), for example — but Microsoft's tool is free, easy, and you already have it.

Steps Recorder: Document actions on the desktop

Originally named Problem Steps Recorder or PSR, Microsoft created this utility as a troubleshooting tool. Microsoft's tech-support technicians would have customers run **Steps Recorder** (SR) to document screenshots, keystrokes, mouse movements, and mouse clicks. The customer would send this recording to Microsoft, where technicians could follow just what a customer was doing when he or she had the issue. SR is included by default in Windows 7, 8,and 10.

I use SR to make a step-by-step "recording" the installation process for a new application. I find it really helpful when I must re-install software with the same settings. Those recordings can also help friends with software issues.

But I most often use the tool to make quick how-to instructions for application features I seldom use. It might be mail-merge for holiday cards or how to create a table of contents in Word. When helping friends, I start SR, make a recording, and then send ZIP-file instructions.

SR might sound like a tool that hackers might exploit. Don't worry; it has security features which prevent user name, passwords, and other confidential information from being recorded. (But to be safe, review the recording before sending it to anyone.)

To give Steps Recorder a try, enter "Problem Steps Recorder" (Win7) or "Steps Recorder" (Windows 10) into the Windows search box. SR works like a video recorder; click **Start Record** to begin, perform all computer operations, and then click **Stop Record.**

Practice using SR with Notepad. Start a recording, open Notepad, type in some text, save the new file, and then stop the recording. An SR window will open with some warnings, information, and the option to save the new recording (see Figure 5). It'll also display a sort of slideshow of the recorded steps.
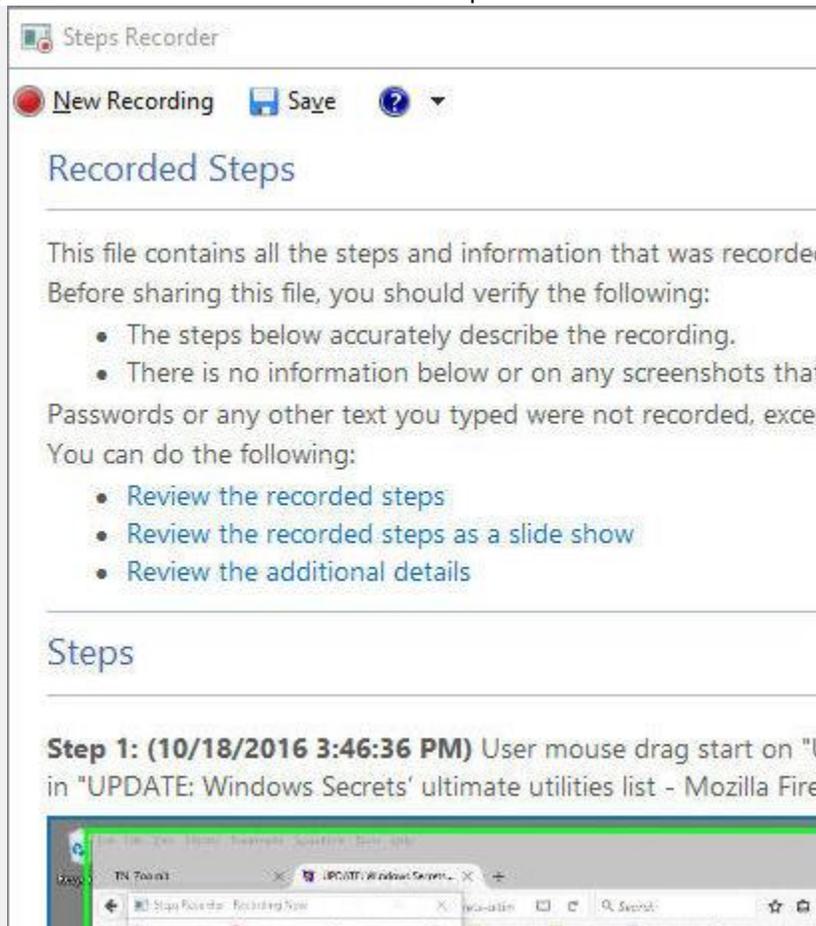

Figure 5

At any time during the recording, you can click the Add Comment option to insert a note about that specific step (for example, "problem stated here" or "confidential data was entered here; make sure it's deleted.") Sometimes, I'll add a cryptic note about the confidential data I entered; that note becomes a hint for what to enter the next time I use the recording. When you are done reviewing the descriptions and images of recorded steps, click Save to create a ZIP package.