

Oh, give me land,
Lots of land under starry skies above,
Don't fence me in...

(From "Don't Fence Me In" <http://ingeb.org/songs/ohgiveme.html>)

Windows might well sing this song as a reminder to users to not fill up their hard drives.

Windows uses two main memory resources to do its work. There's the system's RAM (random access memory) that is fast but limited in size. Our current computers are coming with 4 GB (gigabytes) of RAM. Older systems have as little as .5 GB. Then there's the free memory on the hard drive. Hard drives are averaging well over 100 GB these days with older systems as low as 40 GB. It's slower for Windows to use hard drive memory but there's a lot more of it and Windows likes lots of room to work.

Imagine that you're working on a large project with multiple printed pages, pictures and posters (yes, you know I'd prefer you didn't print any of this stuff out but we all know I'm fighting an uphill battle on that one). The easiest way to organize it all is to spread it out on your desk. But if your desk is already covered with other stuff then where do you put it all? It can get very messy and become terribly inefficient as you keep shifting things around.

Windows tries to do the same thing when running programs and processing data. It wants to spread out and if you don't give it the room then things can really slow down. And I mean **R-E-A-L-L-Y S-L-O-W D-O-W-N**. I've worked on systems with little free hard drive space that can take over a half hour to do what a normal system can do in under five minutes. There's absolutely nothing wrong with the system except that the hard drive is full.

People love songs on their computers. People love large images of the grandchildren. People love videos of family functions or YouTube postings. These all take up lots of room. When I find hard drives that are virtually full, it is most often due to large collections of MP3, JPG and/or MPEG files.

File management is an important skill to learn if you use a computer. It's mostly just keeping track of all the stuff you've saved and knowing when to delete it or move it off to another storage device, be that CDs, DVDs or an external drive.

There's a simple rule of thumb. Actually, two. The standard rule is to keep 10% of your hard drive free for Windows to play in. Being raised in the country I prefer more space. My personal rule is to keep 25% free. Do this and Windows will have plenty of room to roam and not slow you down.

Here's how to take a quick look at the free space on your hard drive. I'm a visual person and prefer a pie chart to simple numbers so I'll show you one way to get that view.

Double-click on "My Computer" then right-click on "Local Disk (C:)" (you may notice that as your cursor hovers over the local disk a small window opens up and tells you the free space and

total size of your hard drive. That's really all you need but like I said, I like pictures so...) and choose "Properties". That will open up a window similar to the image below.

That's the drive on my Dell Mini. I'm running Windows XP, Office 2007, Firefox, Thunderbird, MeetingMaker, Sophos, iTunes and a few other small apps on a 16 GB hard drive (the official size of the hard drive is always larger than the actual usable space or capacity). So if I can keep enough free space on my drive, you can certainly keep enough free space on yours.

Just keep that free space at least a quarter of the pie and you'll be happily computing under starry skies above until the cows come home.

