

Wait for Windows 11.1



By Fred Langa

Microsoft's incremental rollout of Win11 is continuing — newer, more-compatible PCs are receiving the upgrade now, while older PCs will receive it in the weeks to come.

You also can manually upgrade eligible PCs at any time, but note: Microsoft has changed the manual-upgrade methods, including a new Media Creation Tool and new ISO direct-download options.

Today's column covers that and more, including Fred's very mixed early reactions to the final, shipping version of Win11.

Win11: Off to a bumpy start

It's early days, but after installing (and re-installing, and re-re-installing ...) the final, shipping version of Win11, my three initial takeaways are:

- **It's gorgeous.** Clearly, an enormous amount of work has gone into refining the *visual appeal* of the operating system. Almost every dialog has been refreshed with smoothly rounded window corners; text is displayed in a new, highly legible version of the classic Segoe system font; there are new system icons; and dialog text and layouts have been reworked for simplicity and accessibility. Seriously, this is the best-looking Windows in a while.
- **The interface has been dumbed down.** The effort to produce a visually streamlined, accessible-looking Windows also carried over into the actual UI functions, some of which have been removed or suppressed. For example, context menus have been truncated; several basic desktop UI functions that used to take small, quick, mouse or finger motions now take time-wasting large sweeps and gestures. Also, some common tasks that used to be easily accomplished via the Win10 user interface now — astonishingly — can be accomplished in Win11 only via old-school Registry hacks. To me, that feels like going backward.
- **There are unexpected incompatibilities and unexplained failures,** even on highly-compatible hardware. In my own case, on an almost-new system just a few months old, and after trying multiple reinstalls of Win11, I'm still seeing system weirdness that I haven't yet figured out.

And I guess there's a fourth takeaway, too: **Don't rush into Win11!** The improvements are real but mostly minor, while the downsides are also real and maybe not so minor.

I think many users might be better served by sticking with Windows 10 until Microsoft releases an improved Windows 11 at some point in the future.

Allow me to explain.

New hardware, but the upgrade stumbles anyway

I'd previously tried the Win11 Preview builds on my older, daily-driver PC, a more-than-two-years-old, major-brand laptop. (See [It's way too soon to panic about Windows 11](#), AskWoody Plus, 2021-08-09.) The preview Win11 was promising, but nothing in it seemed "must-have" so I reverted the system back to Win10, to await the final version of Win11.

Windows Update still hasn't offered Win11 to that PC yet — Microsoft stages its automatic upgrade rollouts, starting with the newest and most compatible (and therefore least likely to cause trouble) PCs. My two-to-three-year-old system hasn't made it to the top of the list yet.

But my newer laptop, just a few months old, was recently offered an automatic upgrade via the normal Windows Update process. This Win10 Pro PC is almost brand-new, solid, fast, fully updated, and error-free. Except for the normal superficial personalizations, user files, and such, the PC is unmodified: the core system software is exactly as the OEM and Microsoft set it up to be.

As such, this system is just about as close to an ideal test upgrade case as I think you'll find in real life.

So when the Win11 upgrade was offered, I didn't hesitate: I saved my work, made a full just-in-case system image, and then let Update do its thing.

Upgrade attempts #1 and #2

The upgrade process started normally, just like a Win10 upgrade. But the PC seemed to hang when it went to restart itself: I got one of those "This app is preventing shutdown ..." notices, but the unclosed app had no name or identifying information; it showed only a generic icon. I couldn't tell what was causing the problem.

After a while, the system did reboot itself but almost immediately generated a "Something went wrong ..." blue error screen saying that the upgrade had failed. I certainly wasn't expecting that — it'd been years since one of my PCs had failed a standard upgrade — so I wasn't ready to jot down the error code. (Yes, I know: that was dumb of me.) I grabbed my phone to photograph the error message, but the screen cleared before I could snap the shot. While I stood there, feeling foolish, the PC rebooted itself and immediately began automatically rolling back to the previous Win10 setup. Oy.

The fully automatic rollback went fine, and the PC was rapidly returned to its pre-upgrade, Win10 state without further incident. But what caused the problem?

To investigate, I ran [CHKDSK](#), [DISM](#), and [SFC](#); checked [System Health](#), used the [Update Troubleshooter](#); and ran a full suite of OEM hardware diagnostics. All came up clean.

I was flummoxed. With no clues to go on, I had no idea what had caused the upgrade failure — or what to do to prevent it from happening again.

Unable to think of a better approach, I made no changes and instead simply reran the Upgrade from within Windows Update.

This time, it worked fine. After about 30 minutes, the system was up and running Win11, with my apps and personalizations correctly picked up and carried over.

But I couldn't bring myself to trust the new setup, which had now produced two totally opposite results — an upgrade success and an upgrade failure — despite my changing nothing in between. Something was funky, but what?

Rather than roll the dice on a maybe-unstable setup, I decided to take the longer, but more certain route — a full, from-scratch, manual installation.

I'd done that many times with Win10, but things have changed with Win11.

Changes with ISO downloads, the Media Creation Tool, and live upgrades

Win10 and Win11 have their own, separate, download pages. [Win11's](#) offers three primary upgrade/download options, compared to the two offered on the current [Win10 download page](#).

Here are the three major Win11 options:

1) The Windows 11 Installation Assistant is a small front end that you can download and run locally, on your PC. Once launched, it will attempt to upgrade the PC it's running on, much like the upgrade option offered through Windows Update (Figure 1).

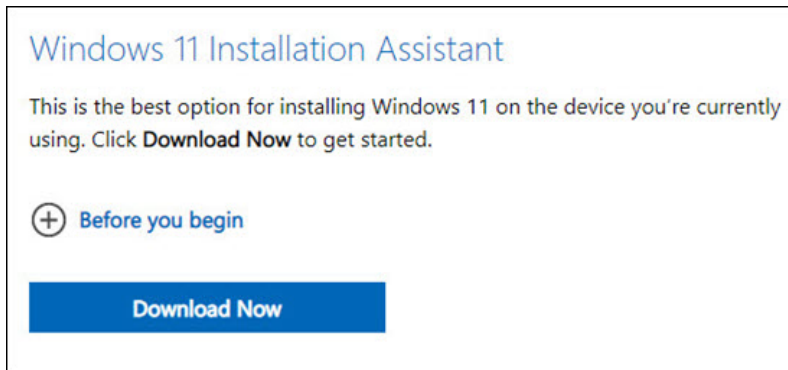


Figure 1. The Win11 Installation Assistant performs a live, in-place upgrade of the PC it's run on.

2) The Create Windows 11 Installation Media option lets you download a new, Win11-specific version of the classic *Media Creation Tool (MCT)*. Once launched locally on your PC, the MCT gives you the option of performing an in-place upgrade (much like Installation Assistant, above) or lets you download a bootable [ISO file](#) of a Windows setup disc/driver. You can save the ISO file in a safe place; mount it from within your current Windows and run setup from there; or burn the ISO file to a flash drive or DVD to create self-contained, bootable installation/recovery media. See Figure 2.

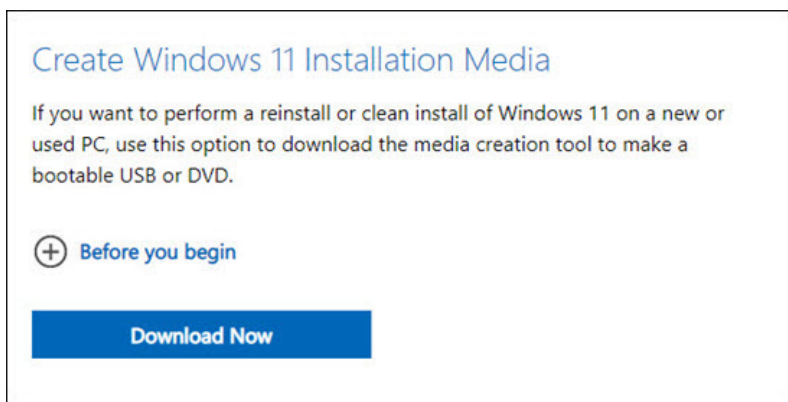


Figure 2. This option downloads a new Win11 version of the classic Windows *Media Creation Tool*.

By default, the MCT produces relatively compact ISOs that include only the files your specific PC needs to setup Windows again.

3) A wholly new option, Download Windows 11 Disk Image (ISO), lets you directly download a master ISO of Win11 in one step, without having to first download the Media Creation Tool mentioned above. See Figure 3.

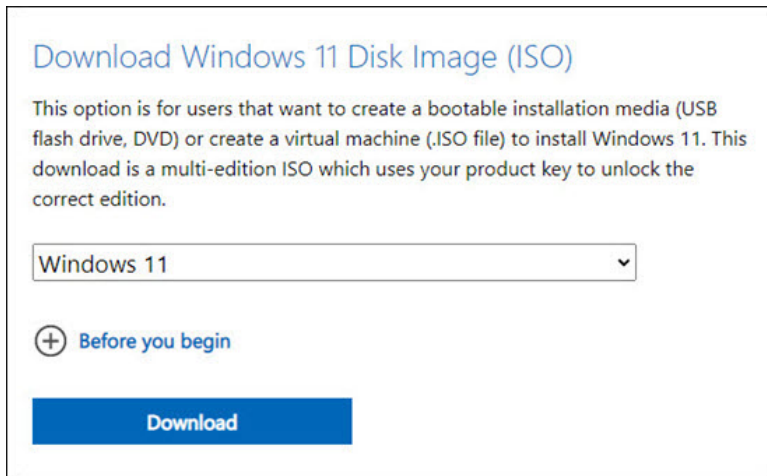


Figure 3. Unlike the MCT, this option allows direct download of all editions in a unified ISO bundle.

These ISOs are typically larger than the MCT ISOs because they can include all the major Win11 editions (Home, Pro, N, etc.) in one bundled package.

Figure 4 shows the file-size difference between two Win11 ISOs I downloaded on the same PC. The file I labeled **MCT** was produced by the *Win11 Media Creation Tool*, and the one I labeled **DIRECT** was produced by the *Download Windows 11 Disk Image (ISO)* option. As you can see, the latter — which contains multiple editions of Win11 — is about a full gigabyte larger than the PC-specific MCT version.

Name	Size	Type
Win11_English_x64_MCT.iso	4,376,256 KB	Disc Image File
Win11_English_x64_DIRECT.iso	5,369,126 KB	Disc Image File

Figure 4. The multi-edition DIRECT download ISO is about a full GB larger than the MCT version.

Despite the size difference, both ISOs work identically. You can save them, mount them, or burn them to a bootable flash drive or DVD. However, in a major departure from past practice, these ISOs **now require a product key in order to complete installation.** (Previously, you could install keyless, unactivated Windows setups for testing, say, in virtual PCs.) Because these ISOs now require a full, normal, paid-for product key, their use in test, diagnostic, exploratory, and demo setups is limited.

But if you want to proceed with the *Download Windows 11 Disk Image (ISO)* option, click the **Before you begin** link (Figure 3) for additional good advice and instruction.

Once you press **Download** to trigger this operation, you'll be presented with several additional menus and buttons toward the bottom of the page; use these to select your language of choice, and to actually begin the download.

Upgrade attempt #3 — this time, from scratch

I ended up using the MCT (option 2, above) to reinstall Win11 on the new PC, mainly because that was the most familiar option to me. And indeed, it operated in the utterly familiar fashion, just like the Win10 MCT.

When it was done, a fresh and unmodified Win11 was running — but with new problems.

Here's the one that first jumped out at me. My laptop has a 1TB SSD, split mainly between **C:** and **D:** partitions, plus the usual assortment of Recovery/Restore and other mandatory partitions.

After the upgrade, all partitions were fine except **D:**, which now appeared with a yellow exclamation-point warning icon to inform me that something's wrong (Figure 5). But what?

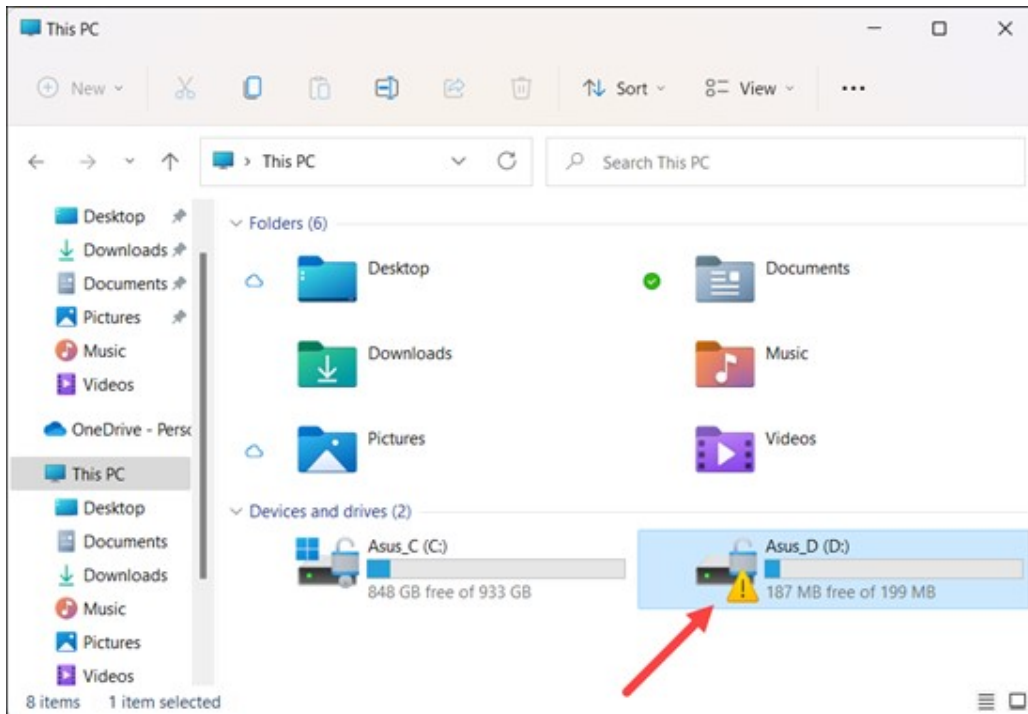


Figure 5. The from-scratch Win11 upgrade now says this drive has a problem, but diagnostics find nothing wrong.

Once again, I ran extensive diagnostics; once again, they showed nothing. Win11's built-in [CHKDSK](#) and drive Error checking (right-click a drive, select **Properties/Tools/Error checking**) both say the drive/partition **D:** is OK. The disk has been properly [TRIM](#)med. Win11's built-in [Disk Management](#) tool reports **D:** as *Healthy*. The [Windows error logs](#) show nothing involving that partition. Various third-party disk health and [SMART-monitoring tools](#) all show the disk as fine. The actual files on the disk are all intact and work fine.

Jeebus.

Is it a false negative — an indication of a problem that's not really there? Or is there some subtle problem that part of the OS can detect, but that no user-accessible tool or app can find and fix? And if so, what's the use of that?

That brings us up to the present, and I have to say I'm feeling rather frustrated with Win11. I'm not going to trust a setup that's reporting a drive error from the get-go, so I'll probably take the short way out — wipe out the partition, let Win11 set it up again, and see what happens. And if that doesn't work, I'll completely strip the SSD of all partitions and files, letting Win11 set up everything from the bare metal upward.

That would be install attempt #4. I can't recall the last time a new Windows version took that many tries just to get itself initially installed and error-free on my hardware.

But wait! There's ... less?

Although the **D:** drive issue is bad enough, there are other problematic items, including things that I *thought* were broken but which turn out to be strange, user-hostile choices made by Microsoft. It's baffling.

One small example: In Win10, changing the size of the taskbar icons takes three clicks. **Right-click** the Taskbar, select **Taskbar settings**, and then click **Use small taskbar buttons** on or off. Click, click, click; you're done.

You can't do that in Win 11. To change Taskbar icon size, you have to fire up the Registry editor, manually create a new Dword, save the change, and then reboot the PC. After the restart, the taskbar icons will have changed size, but if you want to change them back, you'll need to manually re-edit the Registry and reboot the PC again. To me, that feels like user-unfriendliness!

Or, how about Win11's truncated context menus? Unlike Win10, which will show you all available right-click options for a given file or folder, Win11 delivers only a subset of options. You have to select a new menu item to reveal the missing options, but that works only on a one-time basis. If you'd prefer to have complete, Win10-style context menus all the time (i.e., as the default), you again have to hack the Registry. Yikes.

(I'll publish the details on these Registry edits in the next newsletter. Meanwhile, check out Lance Whitney's [How Windows 11 changes File Explorer — for better or for worse](#) article in this issue.)

With this many issues in the early going, I have to say that Win11 doesn't feel like progress.

Why is setup bumpy on what should be nearly best-case hardware? How is moving from graphical UI tools to manual Registry hacks a step forward? What good does it do to flag supposed drive errors but then provide no way for the user to discover what the error actually is — or what to do about it?

This is stuff you might expect in beta versions — not in shipping software.

In the next column, I'll go into more detail on these and other problems (including workarounds, where known), and I'll also talk a bit more about Microsoft's strange interface choices for Win11 — a gorgeous, polished graphical UI that seems to deliver less functionality than Win10's!

But until then, please let me restate “takeaway #4” from the top of this column: **Don't rush into Win11!** There's simply no need for haste. The end-user improvements are mostly minor, and the downsides may be *not* so minor.