

Recover Deleted Files

Lost some important files? Can't find your documents anymore? A folder with photos is gone?

The problem of lost or mistakenly deleted files is quite common. Even if you backup your most important files frequently, there's always a chance that something happens right before the next backup. Home computers are often shared with other family members, so some files may be deleted simply as a matter of misunderstanding. For example, your son may think that you have already those photos and videos from your last vacation burned to a CD. So, he erases the photos and videos to free some space for a new game...

Is there a way to recover deleted files?

Yes. This operation is known as undelete, or unerase. Many years ago, before the introduction of Windows 95 with its Recycle Bin, small command-line utilities named 'undelete' or 'unerase' were supplied with operating systems to make possible recovering of mistakenly removed files. The undelete feature was also built into File Manager of earlier versions of Windows. In Windows 3.1, if you removed a file by mistake, you could choose to recover it by clicking the corresponding option in File Manager.

At this point, you may wonder: why those small utilities aren't there in the modern versions of Windows?

The Recycle Bin offers far better way to deal with removed files. It's safe and user friendly. You don't need to type commands with mysterious keys and switches anymore. Just click your Recycle Bin and recover files, if you need to do so.

Starting with Windows 95, files are not really deleted. Instead they are put into a special folder and are preserved there for a given period of time. Settings of the Recycle Bin can be adjusted by the user, including the general capacity and the preservation time. Defaults are pretty safe: files are stored for several weeks, and the general capacity of the Recycle Bin is around 10% of your hard disk's space. When the time is over, files are finally deleted and can't be recovered. Well, if you didn't care about the deleted files for several weeks, most probably you don't need them at all. It's reasonable.

Convenient?

In some ways, yes. However, you shouldn't forget that the files aren't deleted if they are put into the Recycle Bin. No space is freed. If it's space that you need right now, you should empty your Recycle Bin, or shouldn't use it at all.

Windows offers an alternative way to delete files. You can press a "Shift" key (left or right, it doesn't matter) on your keyboard while deleting to avoid putting the file into the Recycle Bin. Thus the space occupied by the file is freed immediately.

But with this method, you are risking to wipe out important files. This operation can't be undone. At least, not with the usual recovery from the Recycle Bin.

That's where you may need a recovery tool, like Advanced NTFS Recovery. This easy to use utility is able to scan your hard disk for lost and deleted files. If the required files can be recovered, the program will recover them, even if the file system itself is damaged. The program takes advantage of all NTFS features (if you are still using FAT, it's no problem, as Advanced NTFS Recovery can deal with different file systems; but you may consider upgrading to NTFS), and it can even access files in the 'raw' mode. Using its preview feature, you can see content of deleted files even without recovering them, which allows to estimate chances.

The worst part of it is that, once a file is deleted, your system can overwrite it any time. This can't happen if the file is in the Recycle Bin, but once the Recycle Bin is emptied, a new file can be written in the same area any moment. You can't control the process. You can't tell the system which of the deleted files are more important for you than the rest.

So, let's consider the above example with a son wanting to install a new game.

If you catch him right after he deletes your pictures, there are very good chances that you will be able to restore all your photos and videos. However, if he has already managed to install his game, some of the valued files (if not all) may be overwritten. If so, they can't be recovered anymore.

But don't jump to quick conclusions. File system follows its own rules when writing data, so you may find that although there's virtually no space left on your hard disk, the deleted files are still recoverable. Don't hesitate to perform a scan. Advanced NTFS Recovery doesn't write any data while scanning for lost files, so there is no danger of accidental overwriting.

Well, and if you don't have recovery tools on your computer yet? Before using a program you need to install it, which means that program files should be written to your hard disk. Won't they overwrite your valuable files?

The answer is... they may. Every single file, even a small one, can damage deleted files. It is impossible to say what files will be overwritten. Most important? Completely unimportant?

At this point, it is clear that if you want to restore deleted files, you should allow the system to write as few files as possible. If you can prevent the system from writing at all, chances to recover files are about 100%!

Yes. If you avoid saving files on the partition where the deleted files were, you may be able to restore every single file. No magic, just a bit of good programming.

But then, what about installing the program? Is there a possibility to install it safely, without damaging the files you need to restore?

Even if your computer has only one hard disk, there can be several logical drives. It's quite a common practice to create at least two logical drives: C and D. If that's the case with your computer and if you have lost files only on one of the drives, you can with no worry install Advanced NTFS Recovery onto another drive. The deleted files will remain absolutely safe.

However, there may be other situations. For example, what if your computer has only one logical drive? Or if you don't remember where exactly the files to restore were?

In such circumstances you may install the program onto removable or external media. Your USB memory stick or external hard drive are ideal solutions.

The most important thing to remember when you want to recover deleted files is the following: avoid using the drive where you lost files. Don't save anything there. Shut down programs that need to save something from time to time (for example, Microsoft Word creates a backup copy every 10 minutes), but be careful, as some programs save different kinds of files when shutting down. And, of course, don't panic. Your nerves are more important than any documents, even if it doesn't seem so in the moment.

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