

04/21/09 - Can I recover my file?!

If you've used a computer very long at all, you've probably lost data. Maybe you lost a paper you were working on, deleted an email too fast, or worst of all, your hard drive crashed!

Losing data is always a painful thing, but here are some tips that will help you know whether or not your file might be recoverable. My next article will explain some steps you can take to avoid data loss in the future.

Let me compare your hard drive to a book. Just like a book has a table of contents, a hard drive has a Master File Table (MFT). The MFT stores information like the names and locations of files on the disk.

When you delete a file, it's usually still there, and has simply been removed from the MFT. It's like having a book with a chapter that's not listed in the table of contents. Files like that are easy to recover as long as they haven't been overwritten by another file, so you'll want to recover sooner rather than later if possible.

If you deleted your file a while back, it might be difficult to recover, because once a file is removed from the MFT a new file can be written on top of where the old one was. Similarly, if you save an old or bad version of a file that has the same name as a file you've been working on, you overwrite the file with bad data. In many programs, you can undo changes by clicking Undo (File->Undo), but once you close the file this option will probably be unavailable.

If your drive isn't showing up in My Computer, you'll want to make sure that everything is plugged in properly, and then check Disk Management (Go to the Control Panel -> Administrative Tools -> Computer Management -> Disk Management) to see if it's showing up there. You should also check and see if it shows up in your system BIOS (Usually you get there by pressing f2 or del on your keyboard during start up, but it varies). If it's not showing up, your drive is probably dead.

If you have a drive that has suddenly stopped showing files that used to be there, they may have been deleted or possibly the MFT has simply become corrupt. Data recovery software can usually help in these sorts of situations.

Even without spending any money you can run free file recovery software, such as the [free version](#) of Handy Recovery I linked to above, which can recover data in most basic scenarios. If the free version won't cut it, you can download a trial for the [full fledged version](#) to see if you'll be able to recover the data you've lost. If the files are there, you can recover them by buying a license for \$49. If you have a Mac, one option for data recovery software I've used with good success is [Data Rescue](#).