

# Effectively Erasing Files

Before getting rid of an old home computer, or throwing away personal media, such as a disk, CD, or USB stick, you must make sure all your files are effectively erased. Otherwise somebody could “resurrect” your old files, which could harm your reputation or put you at risk of identity theft.

## **Where do deleted files go?**

Simply deleting files doesn’t actually erase them. When you delete a file, it’s usually transferred to your trash or recycle bin depending on your operating system and your settings. This “holding area” essentially protects you from yourself — it allows you to easily restore files you might have accidentally deleted. After you empty your trash or recycle bin, your computer simply removes the pointers to the data — not the data itself.

## **Can you erase files by reformatting?**

Reformatting your hard drive or CD may superficially delete the files, but the information is still buried somewhere. Unless those areas of the disk are effectively overwritten with new content, it is still possible for knowledgeable attackers to access the information.

## **How can you be sure that your information is completely erased?**

There are a number of free programs that erase or wipe hard drives. You can find them doing an Internet search. Be sure to only use programs from or recommended by reputable organizations, such as Consumer Reports, CNet, ZDNet, or PC World.

When choosing an erase or wipe program, look for programs that not only erase your old information, but also overwrite it with new random data. Three to seven passes is fairly standard.

Another effective way to make sure your information is completely erased is to physically destroy or ruin the disk. Wrap the disk in a towel and get to work with a hammer. There are also devices that destroy media by shredding it or punching patterns of tiny holes into it.

Here at the City, contact your department’s IT liaison, LAN administrator, or Help Desk if you need to erase data. We have tools and procedures in place to securely erase City data.