



Taking Your Data For A Drive: A Guide to USB Flash Drives

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By Walter L. Mora

Editorial Staff, TigerDirect.com

A World in the Palm of Your Hand

Could the age of floppys, zip disks and CDs be over? As media files are becoming more robust and heavy in size, portable devices that store them are getting smaller physically while storing a massive amount of information. CDs may be compact and floppys thin and small but they are limited in their storage space, security and not to mention susceptibility to damage, rendering the data unreadable. Enter the flash drive. A tiny unit that fits in the palm of your hands that can store up to 2 GB of data. These small, plastic devices connect to your computer via a USB port (which virtually every computer, desktop and laptop, has at least one) where data can be written and copied from an internal flash memory chip. You then simply attach it to your key ring, put it in your pocket and take a world of information with you wherever you go. Forget about damage to the data or if your client has the proper drives to access the files. Forget about some stranger accessing your files if you lose the flash drive as most require password and offer file encryption. If you prefer a drive that is more functional, get an MP3 flash drive player that not only stores data but can also allocate space to hold and play your favorite tunes. The following is a brief description of the various types of USB flash drives currently on the market. This list will of course evolve as time goes on to reveal more robust and possibly small removable storage devices.

Standard USB Flash Drives

We begin this guide with the standard USB flash drive. These drives are pretty simple, where you insert into an available USB port and drag files to and from the drive (your computer will recognize the drive as an external drive where you drag and drop from the USB flash drive window). The only difference among these drives is storage capacity, transfer speed (determined by the type of USB Connectivity - USB 1.1 or USB 2.0) and appearance such as size, shape and color.

Security USB Flash Drives

These drives work similar to the standard media drives but provide a security feature to prevent data loss and/or theft. Some utilize a built-in password prompt as bundled software that activates when copying to/from your drive. Another protective method that goes a step beyond a password is data encryption (64, 128 or 256 bit). A new method of protection is the integration of fingerprint authentication in addition to encryption codes, to guarantee your information is very secure.

MP3-USB Flash Drives

If USB flash drives were made to carry data around, why not let them burst out in song? Flash technology created the MP3 player that is so popular these days (Note - there are also Hard Drive players, like the iPod, but that's another story). Each offer many different features such as displays, capacity, functions (radio tuner, mic) and cosmetic appearance. These portable music flash drives not only play your music but can also store data files to be transferred from computer to computer. Consider these the flash drives jiggling with musical entertainment rather than just sitting in your pocket.

Innovative USB Flash Drives

I call these innovative because even though they look like your typical USB flash drives, they have an added feature to distinguish them from the rest. We just covered MP3 flash drive/players with LCD screens and they certainly fall into this category. However, there are those that are not music players but offer the ability to expand memory capacity (with flash memory card slots), provide wireless LAN connectivity and faster data transfer rates via a firewire connector instead of the common USB.

Multifunctional USB Drives

Some companies have decided to put a creative spin on the USB flash drive and make them, well, more multifunctional. Rather than just develop another plain piece of molded plastic with a cap to add to your key ring, companies have developed USB flash drives that act and look like objects we would use day to day. There are currently full functioning wrist watches and pens that contain a USB cable or connector to plug into a computer and download or upload files to a certain capacity. Some even include encryption software just in case you lose the pen or watch.