Adjusting the Windows display text size

There are several different ways to adjust the size of text and other screen objects under Windows. No one of these is the best method — each has its uses and trade-offs. This article explains your options.

1. Lower the Windows resolution

From Control Panel>Personalization>Display Options (Windows 7) or Control Panel>Appearance and Themes>Display (Windows XP), you can change the resolution of the entire Windows desktop. Choosing a lower resolution makes everything on the screen look larger, but there’s a side effect: On LCD ("flat panel") screens using anything but the native resolution of the screen results in text that appears fuzzy to most people. (The native resolution of the LCD will be the highest available setting.) This may appear to be the simplest solution, but it may not be worth the eye strain.

2. Increase the Windows font size (DPI)

If you dig a little deeper in Control Panel>Display, you can find the option to Adjust font size (DPI) of the whole Windows environment. (In Windows XP, look under Advanced on the General tab for the DPI Setting. This used to be known as "Large fonts"). Normal is 96 pixels or dots per inch, DPI; depending on the capabilities of your video card, you may be offered 125% (120 DPI) or even 150% (144 - 150 DPI). Choosing a higher DPI makes most things on the screen look larger and sharper, but there’s a down side: Some applications cannot make this adjustment, so their windows become completely unreadable. This happens most often with form-based applications, or programs that run inside Web browsers usually written in Java, Flash, or Silverlight. (For an example of an intolerant application, see the new Colleague UI 4 browser-based interface.) For such applications, there is no workaround and no way to increase just this application's DPI, so this solution may not work for you.

3. Use applications' DPI controls

Individual applications may have their own tools for changing text size. For example, most Web browsers have Zoom In and Zoom Out options on the View menu that let you choose from 7 - 14 different text sizes, both larger and smaller. These can usually be selected using the Ctrl+ and Ctrl- key combinations, respectively. Microsoft Office 2007 and 2010 applications have a Zoom slider control in the lower right corner of the application window, or a Zoom option on the View tab. In general, these application-specific controls do a pretty good job at the fixed intervals they offer. But be careful choosing a Custom setting: you might find that 90% is almost unreadable while 92% looks fine, so try several different Custom values. What's the down side to this solution? It doesn't affect Windows itself (the desktop, Windows Explorer, etc.), which leads to the next solution.

4. Adjust individual Windows display elements

Back in Control Panel>Display, you can go even deeper to find the Appearance controls to selectively modify individual screen elements, like title bar and menu text. In Windows 7, from Personalize choose Windows Color and Appearance, then "Open classic appearance properties for more color options", then the Advanced button. In Windows XP, from Display choose the Appearance tab then the Advanced button. Here you'll find a list of about 20 screen elements, about half of which have a value in the Font dropdown box. Next to that is the Size dropdown box, where you can choose a larger number to increase the size of that screen element. Make these adjustments in very small increments until you see the effect of each, or you can quickly make a mess. Once you have these set the way you want, save the settings as a custom Theme. (If you do make a mess, choose one of the built-in themes to get back to a well-balanced starting point.) Though this solution may take some time to optimize, it generally works in most Windows applications.

5. Get a larger monitor

This one seems obvious: bigger monitor, bigger text, right? Not necessarily! If you have a 17” monitor and a 19” monitor which both display at a native resolution of 1280 x 1024 (the most common monitors at Carleton), then text and objects will appear larger on the 19” monitor, as you’d expect. But if you have a 20” monitor with a native resolution of 1600 x 1200, text and objects will actually be displayed smaller than on the other two monitors. (Larger resolution means more of the desktop or document on the screen, but at a smaller size.) So you must consider monitor resolution as well as physical size.

You also need to consider the screen aspect ratio, either 4x3 like those 17” and 19” monitors mentioned before, or 16x9 like widescreen monitors and televisions. In general, to compare a 16x9 widescreen monitor to a 4x3 one, compare only the vertical (second) values. For example, compare a widescreen monitor with a resolution of 1680 x 1050 to a traditional monitor with a resolution of 1280 x 1024, because 1050 is close to 1024. If the traditional monitor is 17” from corner to corner, the widescreen monitor will have to be almost 21” from corner to corner to preserve the vertical text size.

Also, for best readability, ...

- With LCD screens, make sure that ClearType is turned on. Text will be noticeably crispier with ClearType (except on old CRT monitors), and you can tune ClearType to what looks best to you. In Windows 7, search for the ClearType Tuning control panel. In Windows XP, use the online ClearType Web tuner, at http://www.microsoft.com/typography/cleartype/tuner/tune.aspx.
- Windows has very good aids for those of us who are visually challenged. One of these is Magnifier, which can greatly enlarge any part of the screen. You'll find Magnifier under Start>Programs>Accessories; look for "Ease of Access" or Accessibility.
- Other elements of Windows can also have their sizes adjusted. In Control Panel>Mouse, you can adjust the cursor (pointer) size, color, and behavior. To find more, search the built-in Help and Support, from the Start menu.

Q: That's all very nice, Sande, but I need to change the size of the icons on the desktop. In Windows Explorer, I know I can right-click in the right pane and choose View and select from 5 different icon sizes. But how do I apply that to the desktop?

A: From WindowsSecrets.com, a weekly newsletter: (if there's only one Windows newsletter you read, this is it.)
Ultra-customize your desktop icon size: You can make your desktop icons almost any size you want with your mouse's scroll wheel. First, make sure the desktop has the focus (i.e., no other window is selected); then press and hold the Ctrl key while rolling the mouse wheel up or down. The desktop icons will step through many sizes, from huge to tiny. Select any size that works for you. (I like 'em very small, to save space.)

There are three other ways to adjust the desktop-icon sizes. See addictivetips.com’s article, "How to resize desktop icons in Windows 7 or Vista."

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