VISTA

write caching will improve performance on SATA drives

This feature is disabled by default in Vista because if your computer loses power before a write is completed, you can lose data. If you're confident in your UPS's capabilities, crank it up and you'll see at least a 10 percent improvement in performance. Remember, write caching is supported only on SATA drives. The options are grayed out for older ATA disks.

DO IT In Explorer, right-click the drive you want to speed up and select Properties. Click the Hardware tab, select Properties again. Click the Policies tab. Check both of the boxes beneath "Optimize for performance."

XP/VISTA

clearing the prefetch directory (or cache) will improve startup time

One of the most notorious Windows tips ever is that deleting all the files in the Windows\Prefetch directory will cause your system to boot faster. We tested the tip by repeatedly measuring boot times on a trio of both XP and Vista machines with overstuffed Prefetch folders, then running the same test after clearing the folders out. The result: No improvement in boot time in any of the cases. Some testers have reported that clearing the Prefetch cache actually *lengthens* boot time, though we didn't experience this either.

DON'T DO IT

XP/VISTA

disabling unused network connections will improve boot time

Say you set up a network drive for a computer you had months ago but is no longer on your network: When Windows boots, it spends at least some time reconnecting to that drive, wasting precious seconds you could be spending on Facebook. While XP and Vista are better than older versions of Windows about network connections (who can forget those interminable "Connecting..." messages?) it still makes sense to disconnect from network shares you no longer need. You won't actually boot noticeably faster without those extra drive letters, but Explorer will become usable more quickly after launch. This is especially noticeable in Vista, which has a helpful "loading" progress indicator that overlays the address bar: Having any number of network shares will cause it to take an extra 10 to 20 seconds to fully load.

DO IT Right-click each shared folder in Explorer and select Disconnect. This will permanently remove them from your drive list unless you map them again.

XP/VISTA

you can tweak virtual memory settings for improved performance

In the Windows 95/98 era, conventional wisdom held that you should manually set your virtual memory (i.e., pagefile) size to at least 1.5 times the amount of RAM in order to optimize performance. (By default, Windows will manage pagefile size on its own: You will likely find the initial pagefile size set to 0.5x or 1x the amount of RAM you have). We were skeptical about this tip, but our benchmarks surprised us: Some systems showed no change at all, but some (particularly older machines) showed substantial improvement beyond the usual random noise we see in benchmark results. We got at least a 10 percent jump after we upped the initial pagefile size to 2x the amount of RAM on two separate machines. It won't work for all computers, so the jury's still out on this one, but because it's so easy to do and there are no negative consequences, it's worth a shot just to see if it has any effect.

DO IT In the XP System Control Panel, click Advanced, then (under Performance) click Settings, Advanced. In the Virtual Memory module, click Change. Click Custom size then up both Initial and Maximum size to roughly double your amount of RAM. Click Set (important!), then OK out of all windows. In Vista, click "Advanced system settings" in the System Control Panel and follow the same instructions.