

## Household Hacks: Fix Home Nuisances With Your Tech

**Pigeons perched on your window? Cables cluttered? Use your tech to make your home life just a little easier.**

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For every household nuisance, you can find a dedicated and--surprise, surprise--expensive product to fix it (usually in The Sharper Image catalogs). For instance, you can buy a bird-scarer to keep pigeons off your porch, a pricey home theater system to pump up your tunes, or color-coded cable organizers to sort out the mess behind your desk.

But before you lay out cash on some overpriced equipment, take a look at what your existing tech (and other supplies) can do for you. Here are a few household hacks to help you organize your life.

### Keep Your Windowsills Bird-Free

PCWorld senior video producer Chris Manners had a problem--a bird problem. Specifically, a flock of pigeons was roosting on his windowsill. How could he rid himself of these pests using technology? What kind of household hack could banish these feathered fiends? A couple of options came to mind.



Image courtesy of Zero One on  
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**Recycle your old media:** A common method of scaring birds is to attach streamers, or flash tape, to the window ledge or balcony so that it moves in the wind and creates reflections. Instead of running out to your local hardware store and picking some up, however, just hang some CDs out the window on a string. The reflective surface of the discs will function like flash tape, keeping your windowsills and balconies pigeon-free.

**Make your own ultrasonic sounds:** Another way to scare birds is to use an ultrasonic bird repeller--a little device capable of broadcasting ultrasonic sounds that are between 22 kHz and 30 kHz--beyond the range of human hearing, but audible to animals. Unfortunately, such devices cost anywhere from \$50 to \$500--and who wants to drop \$500 on something they can't even hear?

Luckily, you can find ultrasonic sounds on the Internet--in the form of ringtones. A number of ultrasonic ringtones are available, because sounds between 17 kHz and 20 kHz can usually be heard only by teenagers. Just download [one of these ringtones](#) and put it on loop.

The only drawback: Any teens or dogs in your house will suddenly start hearing things.

## Control Your House Remotely

We're one step closer to the completely automated future. You can now control a number of household appliances with your cell phone.



**Turn off everything with Picowatt:** A smart-plug designed by [Tenrehte](#), Picowatt is meant to help users control their [energy consumption](#)--it's basically a mini Wi-Fi router that runs [Linux](#). You simply plug Picowatt into an electrical outlet and plug your device into the Picowatt plug. Using a Web browser, you can then monitor the amount of energy that particular appliance is using, as well as turn it on or off remotely.

**Unlock your door with Kwikset SmartCode:** If you hate fumbling with your keys at the door--or if you have a child or significant other who routinely gets locked out--[Kwikset's SmartCode deadbolt lock](#) can help. The deadbolt features 128-bit encryption security, and you can open it with a key, a code, or wirelessly from an Internet-connected device. You can also check the status of the lock from your phone, as well as receive text or e-mail notifications when the lock is accessed.

## Blast Music Without Bugging the Neighbors

Want to rock out without knocking out the people next door? Here are a few tips that will help you improve the quality of your computer's sound without turning up the volume. (If cost is no object, on the other hand, check out "[The Ultimate Home Theater](#).")



Image courtesy of Monkey River  
Town on Flickr

**1. Set up your speakers:** For this step you'll need external speakers, either a 5.1 (five speakers and a subwoofer) system or a 7.1 system. Prices will vary, but you can find a brand-name 5.1 speaker setup for about \$80 (such as the [Logitech X 540](#)).

Place the front center speaker directly underneath your computer screen, in front of you. Put the front left and right speakers on either side of your desk, as close to listening level (the level of your ears) as possible.

Finally, position the back left and right speakers in the back left and right corners of the room, at listening level or above. You can put the subwoofer anywhere in the room, except a corner (directly underneath your desk is ideal).

If you buy a 7.1 system, you will have two additional speakers. Place these in the middle of the room, on opposite sides, facing each other and as close to ear level as possible. You won't notice a difference between a 5.1 system and a 7.1 system unless your room is larger than 25 by 25 feet.

**2. Configure your machine:** To set up the sound, right-click the volume control in your taskbar and select *Sounds* (you can also go to *Sound* in the Control Panel). Click the *Playback* tab and find your speakers/headphones. Right-click your sound device and click *Configure Speakers*. If you have a 5.1 or 7.1 system, configure your speakers for *5.1 Surround* or *7.1 Surround* accordingly.

If you have just two speakers, you're not completely out of luck. Configure your speakers for *Dual Stereo* or *Quadrophonic* sound instead of *Stereo* sound, and you'll get a little more depth.

If you have a solid audio card, you can also get the illusion of surround sound with the card's preset effects--for example, [Creative offers a number of "EAX Effects"](#) that do a good job of creating the impression that you're listening to music in an amphitheater, stone hall, orchestra pit, or recital hall.

**3. Splurge on some speakers:** Unfortunately, if your computer lacks an optical input or stereo inputs, or a decent audio card, your surround-sound choices may be limited. You have a couple of options, though--you can purchase

an adapter so that your 5.1 system will be able to plug into your computer's headphone jack, or you can splurge on surround-sound computer speakers. [Bose offers a \\$399 2.1 speaker system](#) that plugs into your computer via USB and uses digital processing to create the illusion of a 5.1 surround-sound system.

**4. Soundproof your space:** Tried all the audio tricks in the book and still not satisfied? You have a few ways to "soundproof" your space without [installing extra drywall/Sheetrock](#). First, cover your windows with long, heavy drapes; you can also cover walls with heavy drapes, to cut down on sound bouncing.

If you have the budget for it, replacing your single-pane windows with double-pane windows will dramatically improve your sound insulation. Also, make sure your space is carpeted (at least 25 percent should be covered) and furnished.

## Tweak Your PC's Sleep Mode, Cut Your Power Bill

You can put your computer in any of several different power-saving states, depending on whether you value your time or your electricity bill.

**1. Know your power modes:** Windows PCs support six different "power states": S0 (fully running), S1 (CPU stopped, RAM refreshed, running in low power mode), S2 (CPU off, RAM refreshed, running in a lower power mode than S1), S3 (traditional Standby, with the CPU off and RAM in slow refresh), S4 (Hibernate, with the hardware off and system memory saved as a temporary file), and S5 (Off). Note that S2 sleep mode is often disabled in computers and is accessed only when the computer is unable to go into S3 sleep mode.

**2. Decide between Sleep and Hibernate:** S3 is typically the default Standby/Sleep mode, while S4 is usually the default Hibernate mode. To access S3 or S4, simply click *Start* and then click the triangle next to the Shut Down button.

You can choose Sleep (Standby) or Hibernate from the menu that pops up. Resuming a computer from S3 sleep mode normally takes a few seconds, whereas resuming a computer from S4 sleep mode takes a few minutes, so use S3 for shorter sleep intervals and S4 for longer ones.

**3. Speed up sleep with S1 sleep mode:** If you're looking for an option that will save power and resume even faster than S3 sleep mode does, you can access S1 sleep mode. Resuming from S1 usually takes less than 2 seconds. To access S1, open your system's BIOS by restarting the computer and pressing the appropriate key during boot-up--typically you'll see a message similar to 'Press Del to enter Setup'.

Once you are in the BIOS, go to *Power Management, Suspend Mode*. There you will see an option to change the default suspend mode from S3 to S1. Change it and press **Esc** to exit the BIOS (be sure to select the *Save* option when it prompts you to save the settings).

From now on, when you choose Sleep from the Start menu, your computer will go into S1 sleep mode. Just a note for you conservationists out there: S1 sleep mode uses about 112 watts to S3's 5 watts, so it isn't as easy on your electric bill (or for laptop users, your battery) as S3 is.

## Organize Your Cables

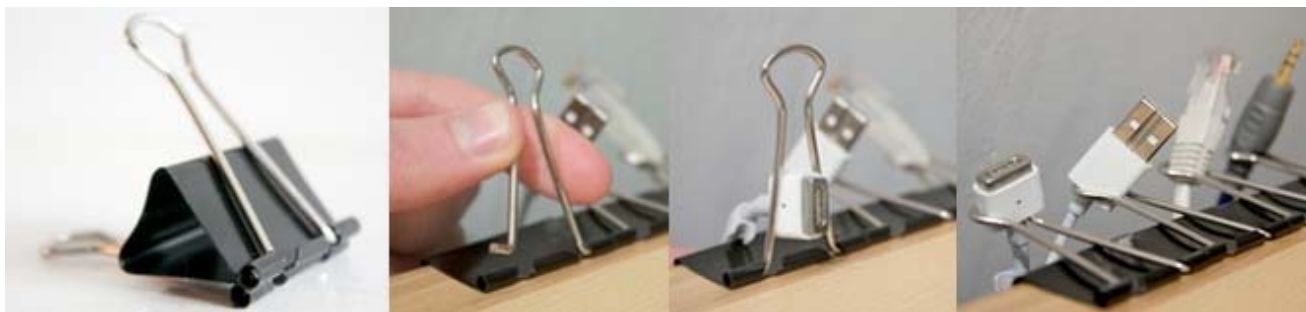
Though you can use your tech to fix all kinds of home issues, owning a lot of gear can create more problems--especially when it comes to the cables that connect your devices.

Fortunately, you have a number of ways to tidy up the jumble of wires behind your desk that don't involve buying overpriced "cable organizers" (or switching to an all-wireless setup). Try the following low-tech solutions to your high-tech problem.

**1. Reuse your electronics' twist ties:** Instead of buying pretty, color-coded zip ties to bind your loose cables together, reuse the twist ties that come with, um, every single electronic device you've ever bought. Gather a number of cables together (keep it a small number--three or four works perfectly) and wrap them with the twist ties.



**2. Hang cables from binder clips:** This is a neat little hack from [David Bakker at Lifehacking.nl](http://www.lifehacking.nl). Take a bunch of [binder clips](#) that are made for holding sheaves of paper, clip them on the back or side of your desk, and then thread your cables through them.



If your cables have plugs that are too large to thread through the silver part of the clip, you can remove the silver part--just squeeze the handle together until the wire pops out--and then reposition it once you've pushed the cable through.



**3. Use old toilet paper rolls to organize your unused cables:** The cables behind your desk aren't the only problem--you probably have a ton of cables that you aren't currently using (but that you still need access to on occasion). Instead of throwing them into the bottom of a filing cabinet drawer, try wrapping and organizing them with this [TP roll organizer box](#) from Instructables.com.

All you need are a bunch of old toilet paper rolls and a shoebox. Fold up your cables and stick them through the toilet paper rolls, and then organize the rolls in the box in a honeycomb arrangement.

Figured out your own high-tech solutions to low-tech problems (or vice versa)? Post them in the comments!

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