

What is an operating system?

An **operating system** is the **most important software** that runs on a computer. It manages the computer's **memory** and **processes**, as well as all of its **software** and **hardware**. It also allows you to **communicate** with the computer without knowing how to speak the computer's language.

Without an operating system, a computer is useless.



Watch the video below to learn more about operating systems.



Looking for the old version of this video? You can still view it [here](#).

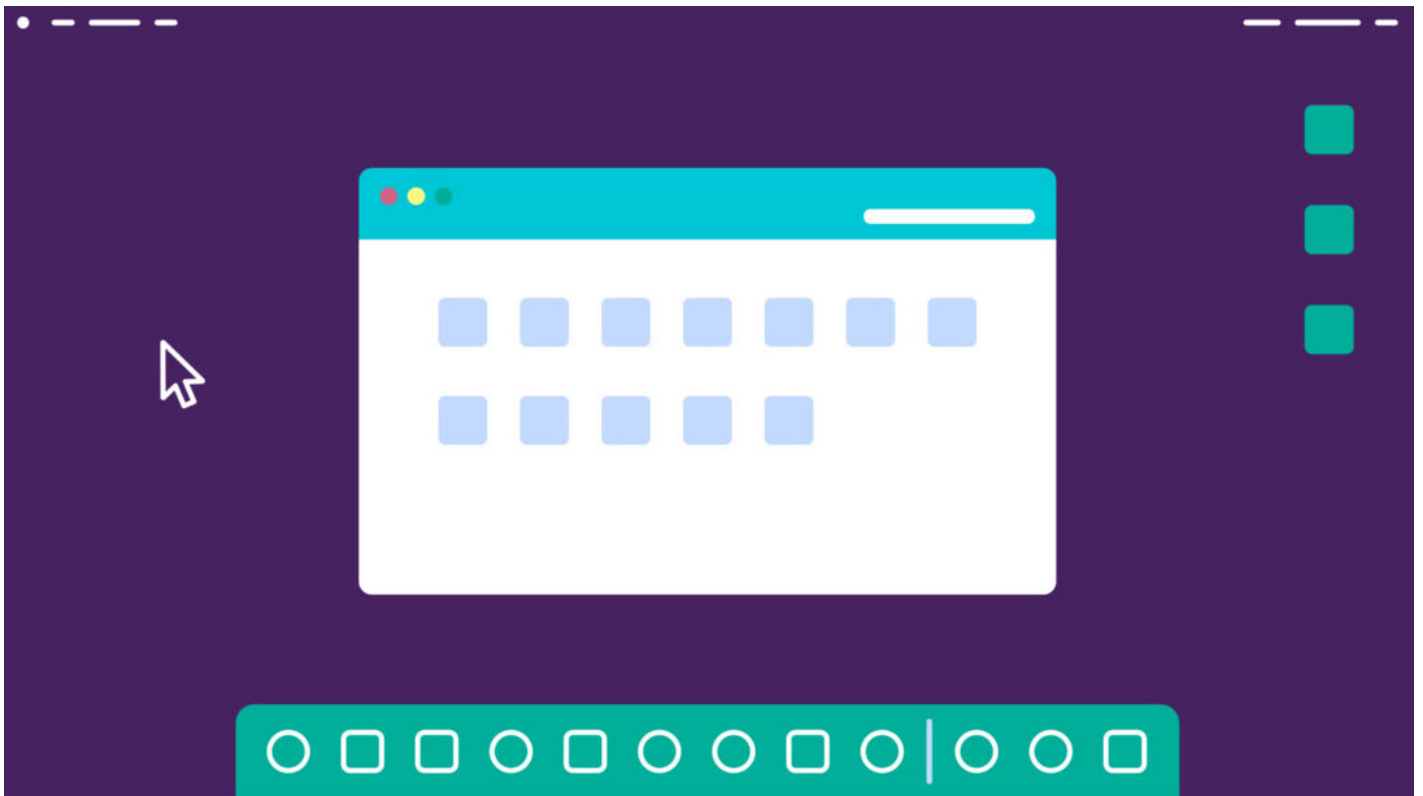
The operating system's job

Your computer's **operating system (OS)** manages all of the **software** and **hardware** on the computer. Most of the time, there are several different computer programs running at the same time, and they all need to access your computer's **central processing unit (CPU)**, **memory**, and **storage**. The operating system coordinates all of this to make sure each program gets what it needs.

Types of operating systems

Operating systems usually come **pre-loaded** on any computer you buy. Most people use the operating system that comes with their computer, but it's possible to upgrade or even change operating systems. The three most common operating systems for personal computers are **Microsoft Windows**, **macOS**, and **Linux**.

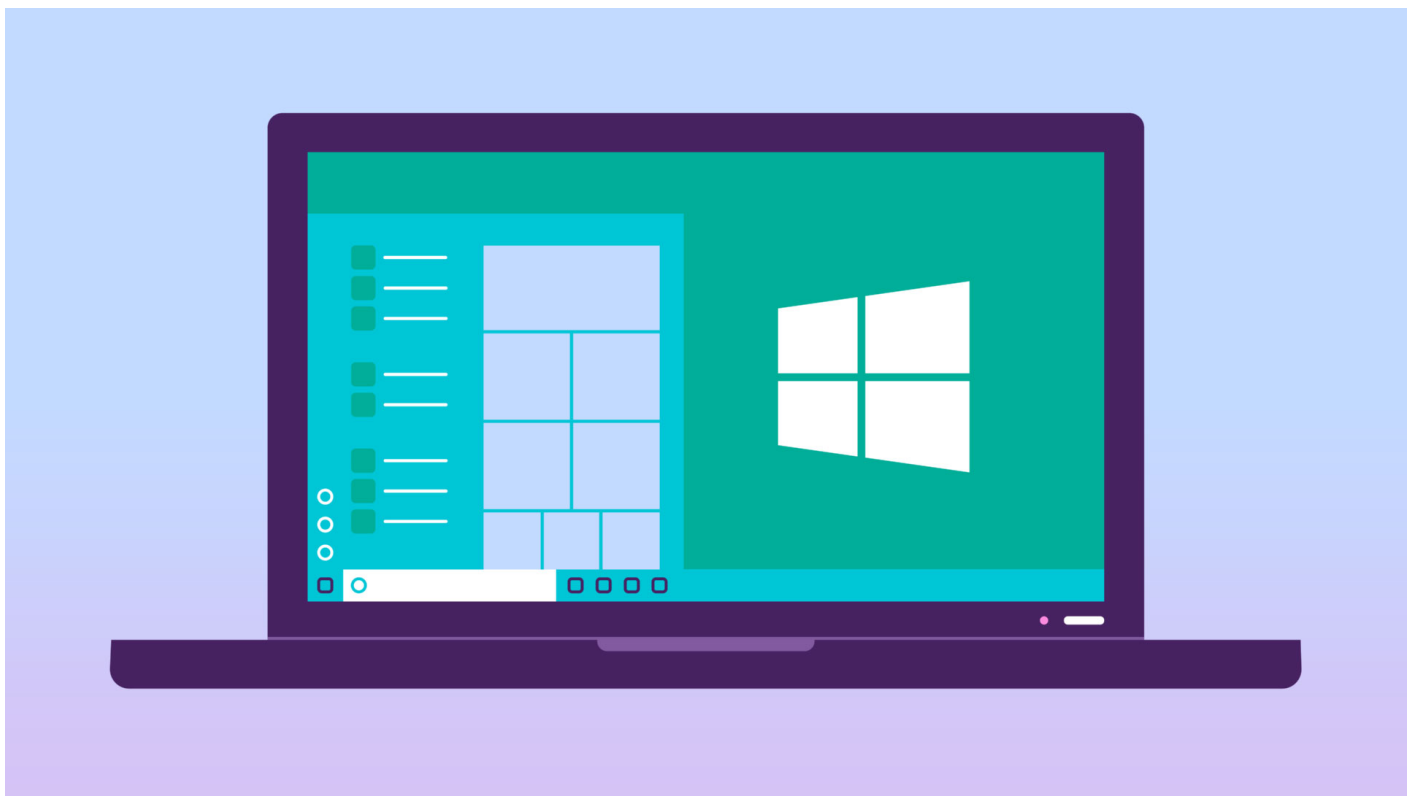
Modern operating systems use a **graphical user interface**, or **GUI** (pronounced **gooey**). A GUI lets you use your mouse to click **icons**, **buttons**, and **menus**, and everything is clearly displayed on the screen using a combination of **graphics** and **text**.



Each operating system's GUI has a different look and feel, so if you switch to a different operating system it may seem unfamiliar at first. However, modern operating systems are designed to be **easy to use**, and most of the basic principles are the same.

Microsoft Windows

Microsoft created the **Windows** operating system in the mid-1980s. There have been many different versions of Windows, but the most recent ones are **Windows 10** (released in 2015), **Windows 8** (2012), **Windows 7** (2009), and **Windows Vista** (2007). Windows comes **pre-loaded** on most new PCs, which helps to make it the **most popular operating system** in the world.

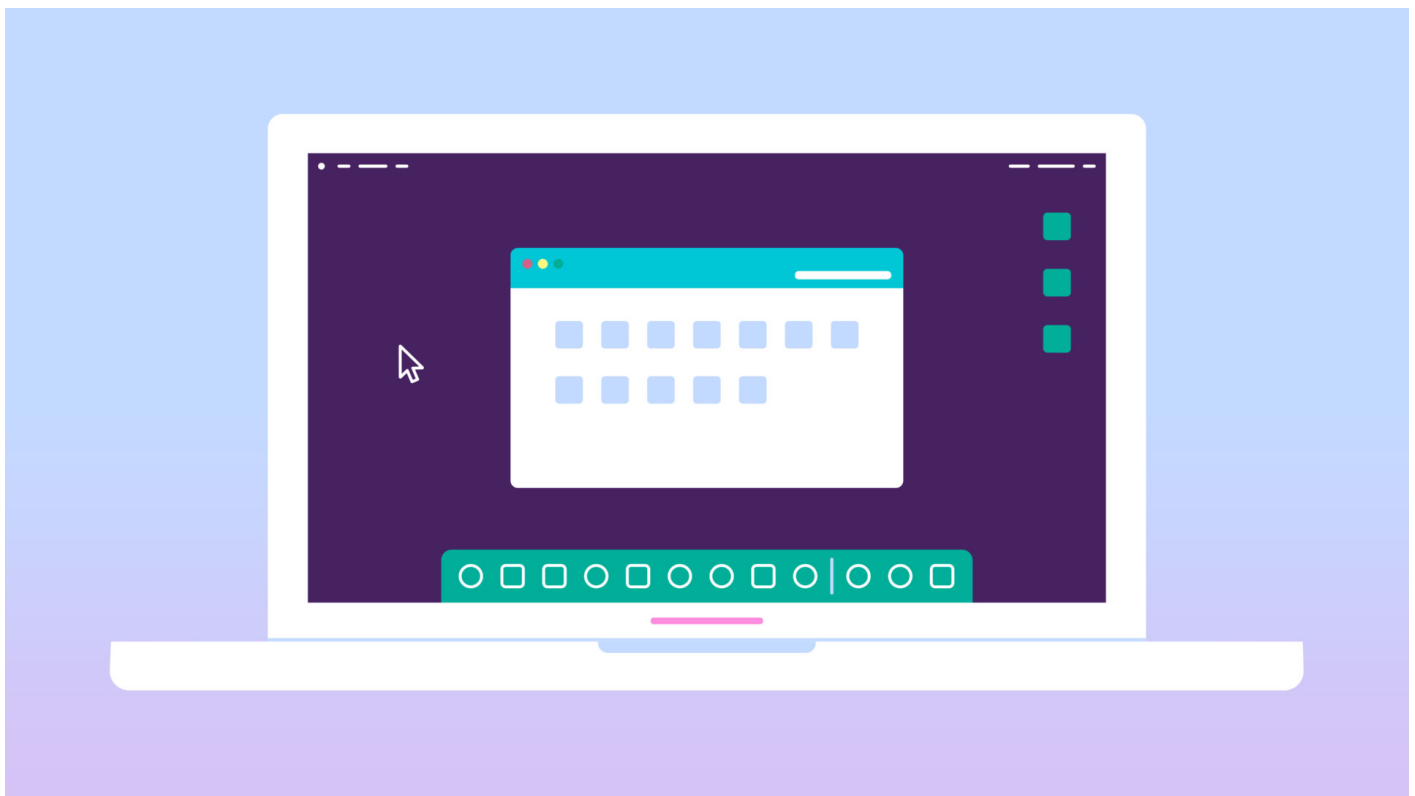


Check out our tutorials on [Windows Basics](#) and [specific Windows versions](#) for more information.

macOS

macOS (previously called **OS X**) is a line of operating systems created by Apple. It comes preloaded on all Macintosh computers, or Macs. Some of the specific versions include **Mojave** (released in 2018), **High Sierra** (2017), and **Sierra** (2016).

According to [StatCounter Global Stats](#), macOS users account for less than **10%** of global operating systems—much lower than the percentage of Windows users (more than **80%**). One reason for this is that Apple computers tend to be more expensive. However, many people do prefer the look and feel of macOS over Windows.



➤ Check out our [macOS Basics](#) tutorial for more information.

Linux

Linux (pronounced **LINN-ux**) is a family of **open-source** operating systems, which means they can be modified and distributed by anyone around the world. This is different from **proprietary software** like Windows, which can only be modified by the company that owns it. The advantages of Linux are that it is **free**, and there are many different **distributions**—or versions—you can choose from.

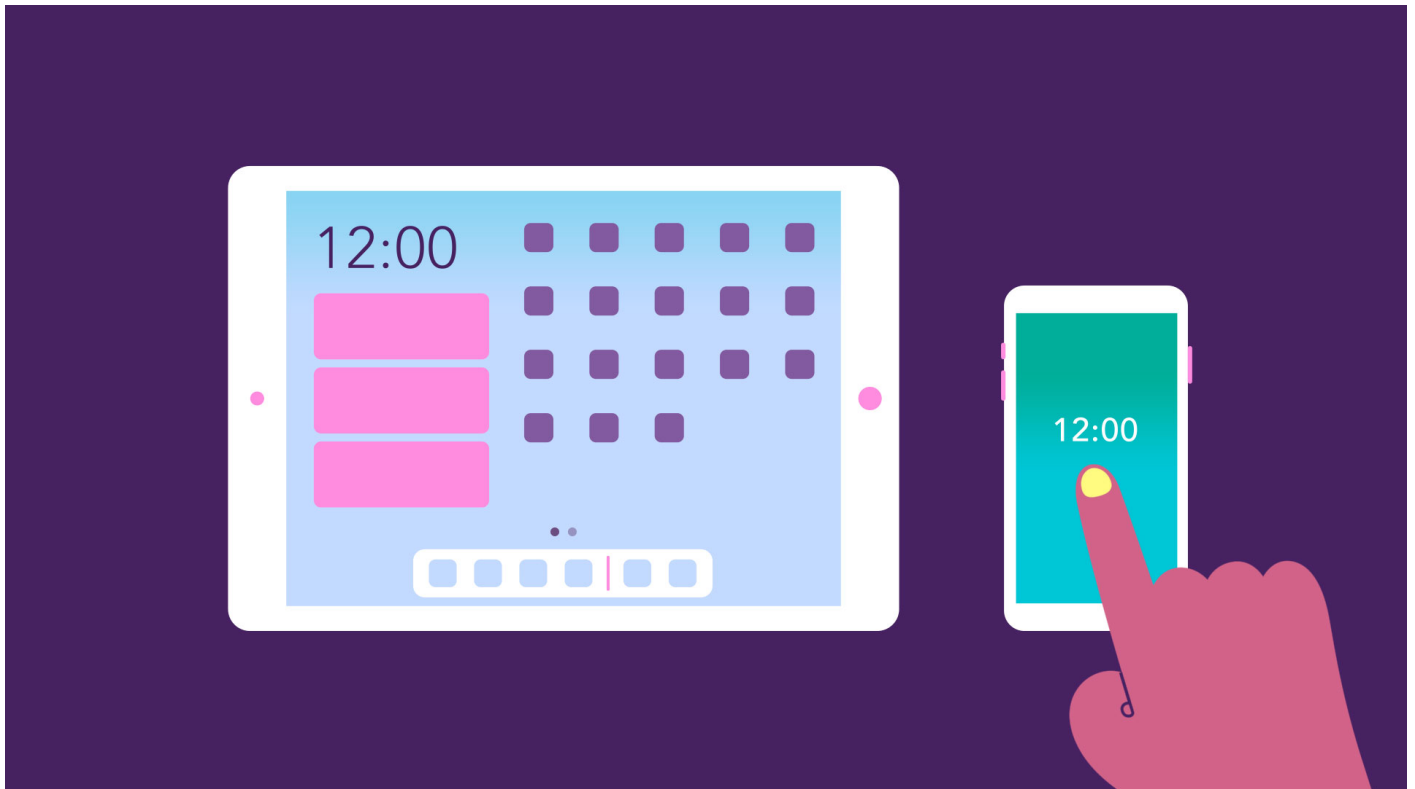
According to [StatCounter Global Stats](#), Linux users account for less than **2%** of global operating systems. However, most **servers** run Linux because it's relatively easy to customize.

➤ To learn more about different distributions of Linux, visit the [Ubuntu](#), [Linux Mint](#), and [Fedora](#) websites, or refer to our [Linux Resources](#). For a more comprehensive list, you can visit MakeUseOf's list of [The Best Linux Distributions](#).

Operating systems for mobile devices

The operating systems we've been talking about so far were designed to run on **desktop** and **laptop** computers. **Mobile devices** such as **phones**, **tablet computers**, and **MP3 players** are different from

desktop and laptop computers, so they run operating systems that are designed specifically for mobile devices. Examples of mobile operating systems include **Apple iOS** and **Google Android**. In the screenshot below, you can see iOS running on an iPad.



Operating systems for mobile devices generally aren't as fully featured as those made for desktop and laptop computers, and they aren't able to run all of the same software. However, you can still do a lot of things with them, like watch movies, browse the Web, manage your calendar, and play games.

➤ To learn more about mobile operating systems, check out our [Mobile Devices](#) tutorials.



Continue