



Hard Drives

My External Hard Drive Says It Needs to Be Formatted [Solved]

Last updated:

May 26, 2023

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Hard drives often behave strangely. You're probably nodding your head to this if you've just plugged in an external hard drive, and the hard drive says it needs to be formatted.

If you're using one of the hard drives with a high failure rate ([like some Seagate or Toshiba drives](#)), your drive might be more vulnerable to this error than if you're using an external drive from more reliable brands like WD (Western Digital).

Fortunately, you can quickly resolve the error and even recover your data. All you need to do is follow the step-by-step instructions provided in this guide.

Below, we also explain the reasons that can lead to this situation.



Let's dive right in.

Why Does My External Hard Drive Say I Need to Format It?

Your hard drive is asking for a format because of one of the following reasons (except in cases where your hard drive is brand new):

Case	Solution
------	----------

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	Filesystem corruption can also result from an abrupt power outage when you're using the drive.
 External hard drive was improperly formatted or the formatting process was interrupted	If you recently changed the hard drive's filesystem to one that Windows can't read, Windows will ask you to format the hard drive. You might also see this error if you interrupted the formatting process the last time you were formatting the hard drive.
 External hard drive is physically damaged	Bad sectors can result from logical (soft bad sectors) or physical damage (hard bad sectors). Soft bad sectors are typically fixable using tools like the Check Disk utility on Windows. It's also possible (though harder) to fix hard bad sectors. But in rare cases when the hard drive is severely physically damaged, you'll be unable to fix it.
 External hard drive was infected by viruses	Viruses can harm your external hard drive in more ways than one. It can also make the hard drive inaccessible and trigger a prompt that asks you to format the external hard drive.

If Windows is asking you to format the external hard drive before you can use it, you must recover the data first.

The reason? If you try fixing the hard drive and something goes wrong, you might lose all the data. And some methods for fixing the hard drive also involve formatting the hard drive, wiping out all the data.

How to Recover Data From an External Hard Drive That's Asking to Format

Recovering data is mission-critical when you lose access to your hard drive. This ensures you don't lose data even if you somehow end up damaging the hard drive further when trying to fix it.

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- Want to learn more about Disk Drill? Check out our [detailed review](#). We talk about how it works and what it finds. We also have another article where we look at [how safe it is](#).

Disk Drill is one of the [best data recovery solutions](#) because it makes data recovery a cakewalk with an intuitive interface and robust feature set. As we explain in the step-by-step guide below, Disk Drill lets you create a Byte-to-Byte backup of your external hard drive.

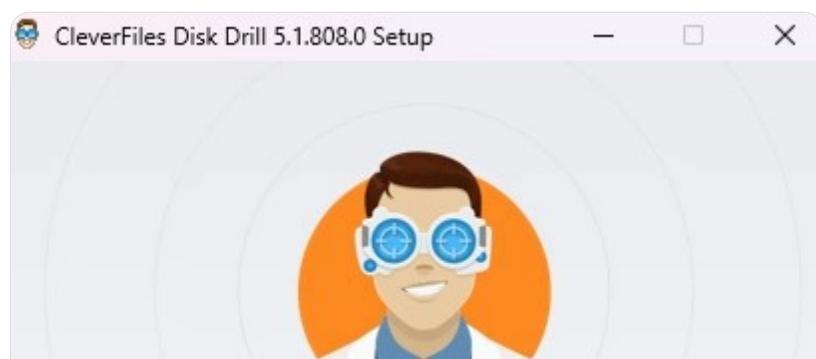
Creating a Byte-to-Byte backup helps you create an image of a hard disk that you can't access. It also ensures you don't push a hard drive over the edge when it's on the verge of failure.

This is especially helpful when you're not sure why your external hard disk isn't opening and is asking for a format — remember, creating an image is a far less intense activity than scanning a hard drive for data recovery.

Let's talk about how you can recover data using Disk Drill.

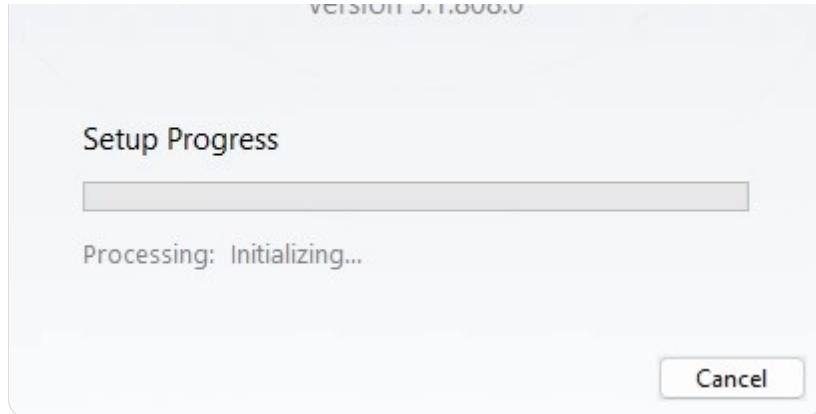
Step 1: Install Disk Drill

Start by [downloading Disk Drill](#) and installing it on your computer.



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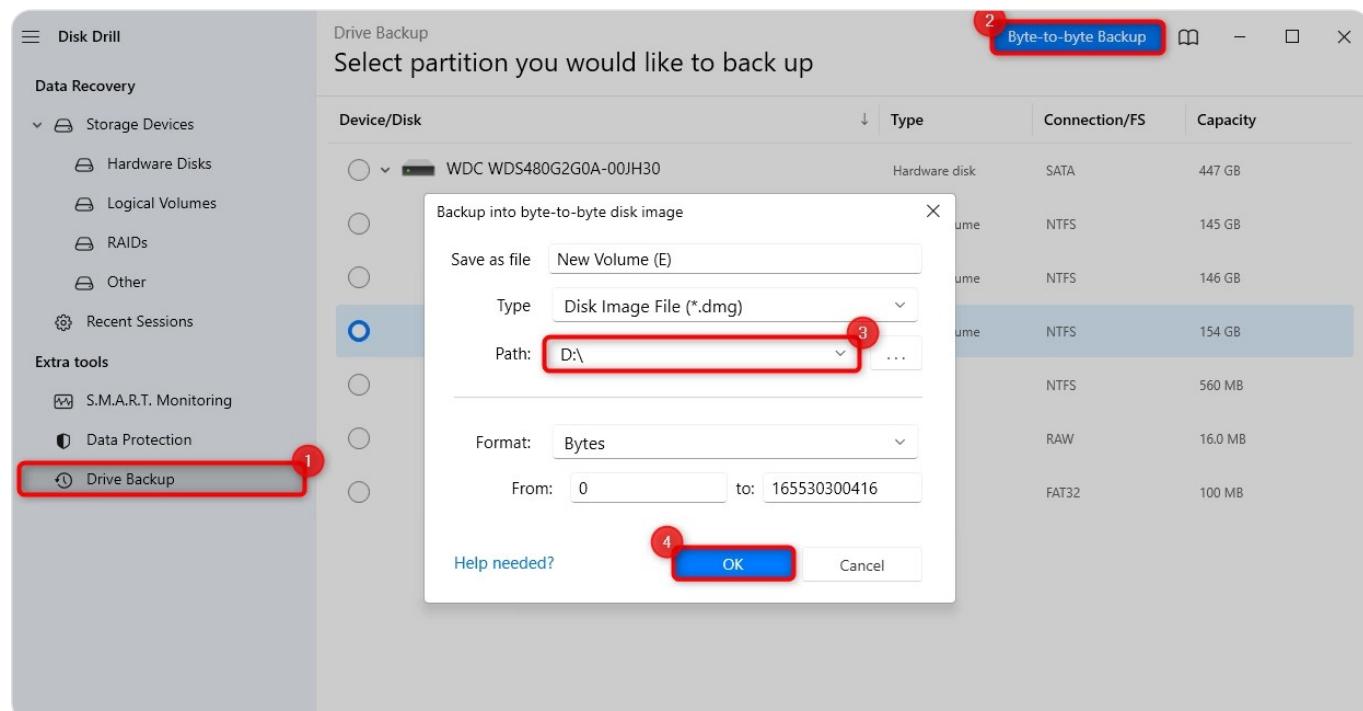
[OK, I got it](#)



Step 2: Create a Byte-to-Byte Backup

Launch Disk Drill and navigate to the **Drive Backup** section using the left sidebar. Select the external drive that's asking for a format and click on the **Byte-to-Byte backup** button at the top.

Select a location to save the backup file and click **OK**.



Even if the reason Windows is asking to format the external drive is because of an

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exFAT

NTFS/NTFS5

HFS/HFS+ (used on Mac devices)

APFS (used on Mac devices)

ReFS

ext2/ext3/ext4

In fact, Disk Drill can also [recover data from a RAW external hard drive](#) (i.e., a drive with no filesystem).

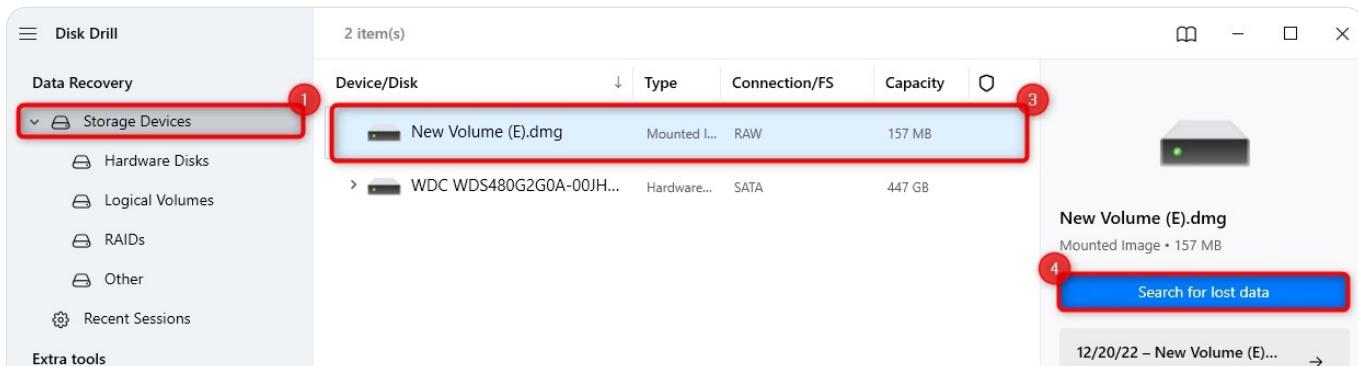
Once the backup image is ready, you're ready to start the scan.

Step 3: Scan the Backup Image

Navigate to the home screen by clicking on **Storage Devices** from the left sidebar. Select the option to **Attach disk image** from the bottom.

Use File Explorer to find the backup image you just created and select it. When you do this, you'll see the drive listed on the home screen.

Click on the **Search for lost data** button to start the scan.



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Once the scan is complete, search for the files you want to recover. Disk Drill allows you to search for files in various ways.

Disk Drill helps you access deleted files (that are still in the hard drive's physical memory) as well as files on the drive that have become inaccessible because of an error.

If you're looking to recover files that weren't deleted but have simply become inaccessible because Windows is asking you to format the drive, you'll find these files in the "Existing" section in the search results.

A screenshot of the Disk Drill software interface. On the left, a sidebar titled 'Scan results' lists categories: Dashboard (selected), Microsoft recovery partition... (16 files), Pictures, Video, Audio, Documents (12 files), Archives, and Other (4 files). In the center, a main pane shows a file list for 'Microsoft recovery partition.dmg' with 16 files / 995 MB. The list includes columns for Name, Recovery chances, Date modified, Type, and Size. A red box highlights the 'Name' column header. Below the list, a search bar contains the text 'jpg'. On the right, there is a preview area with a dashed box placeholder and the text 'Please select a file to preview'. At the bottom right is a blue 'Recover all...' button.

You can filter the scan results by category (like pictures and documents) using the left sidebar. Or you can use the search bar to search for a specific file type (like .jpg or .pdf).

A screenshot of the Disk Drill software interface. The search bar at the top contains the text 'jpg'. The main pane shows a file list for 'New Volume (E).dmg' with 1 file / 0 MB. The list includes columns for Name, Recovery chances, Date modified, Type, and Size. A red box highlights the 'Name' column header. At the bottom right is a blue 'Recover all...' button.

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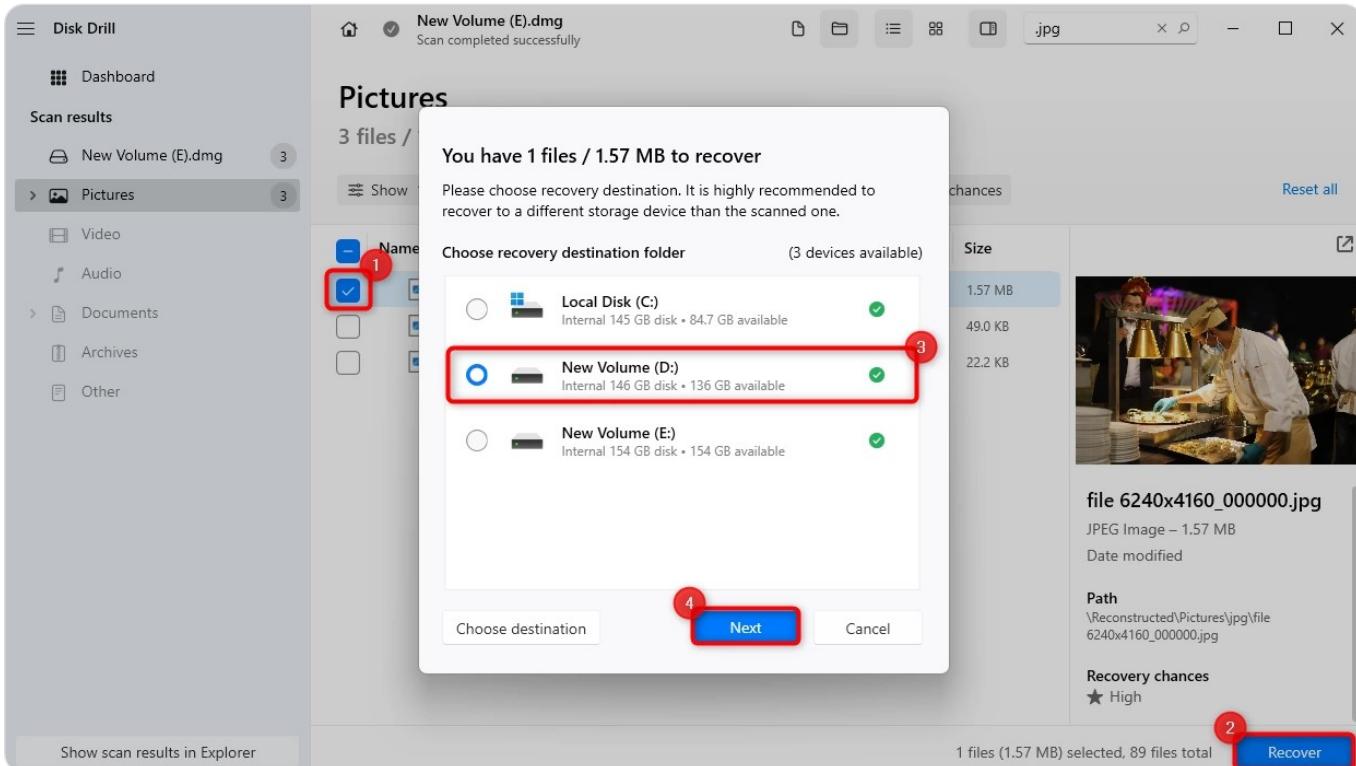
OK, I got it



Step 4: Recover Files

Once you've found the files you want to recover, check the box next to them.

Click on the **Recover** button from the bottom-right, select a recovery location (this should be different from the hard drive Windows is asking you to format), and click **Next**.



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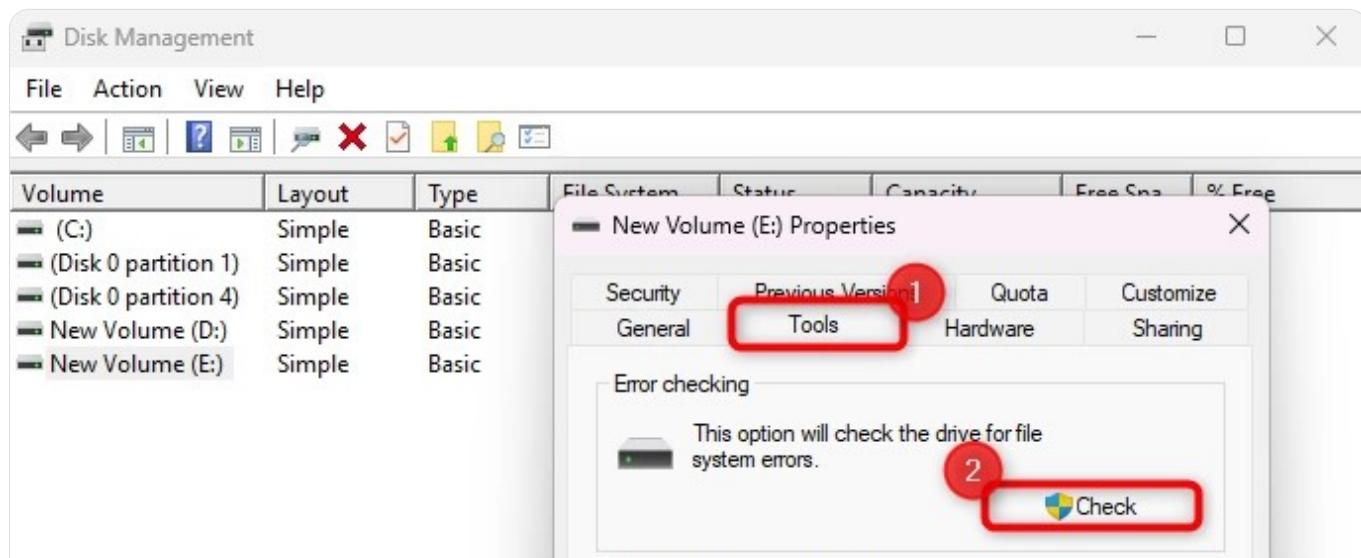
OK, I got it

How to Fix an External Hard Drive Partition That Says It Needs to Be Formatted

Method 1: Run Error Checking Tool

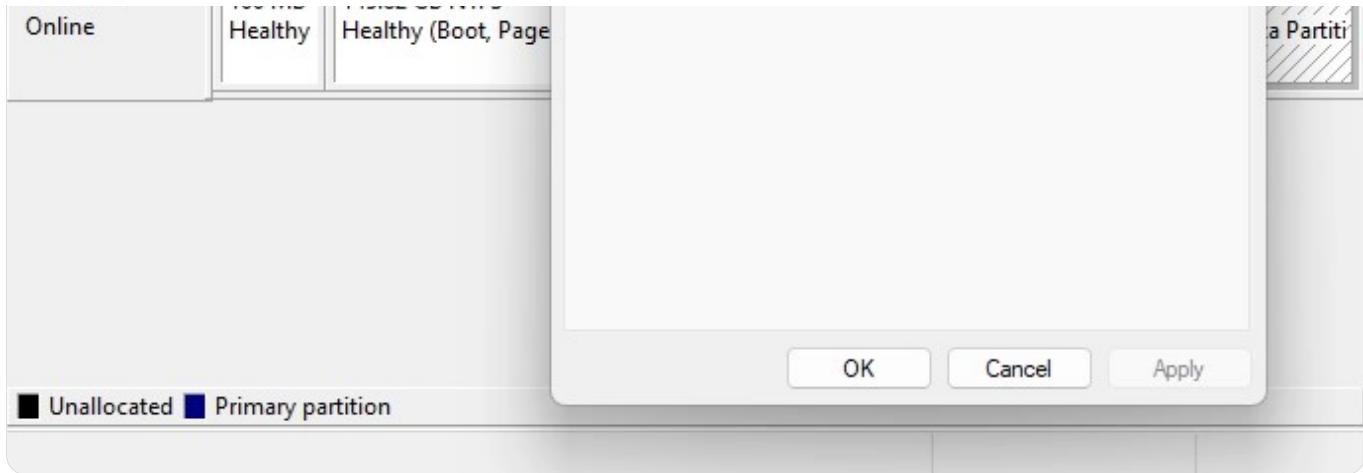
Windows error checking tool is a built-in utility that can scan a storage device for errors, and in some cases, fix those errors. If Windows is asking you to format the external hard drive because of logical errors like filesystem corruption or soft bad sectors, the error-checking tool might be able to fix those errors.

- ① To run the error-checking tool, launch the Windows Disk Management Console. You can launch the console by searching “disk management” in the Start Menu and pressing **Enter** (provided you’re using Windows 10 or 11).
- ② Search for the hard drive you want to scan, right-click on it, and select **Properties**. Switch to the **Tools** tab.
- ③ Next, click on the **Check** button in the **Error checking** section of the window.



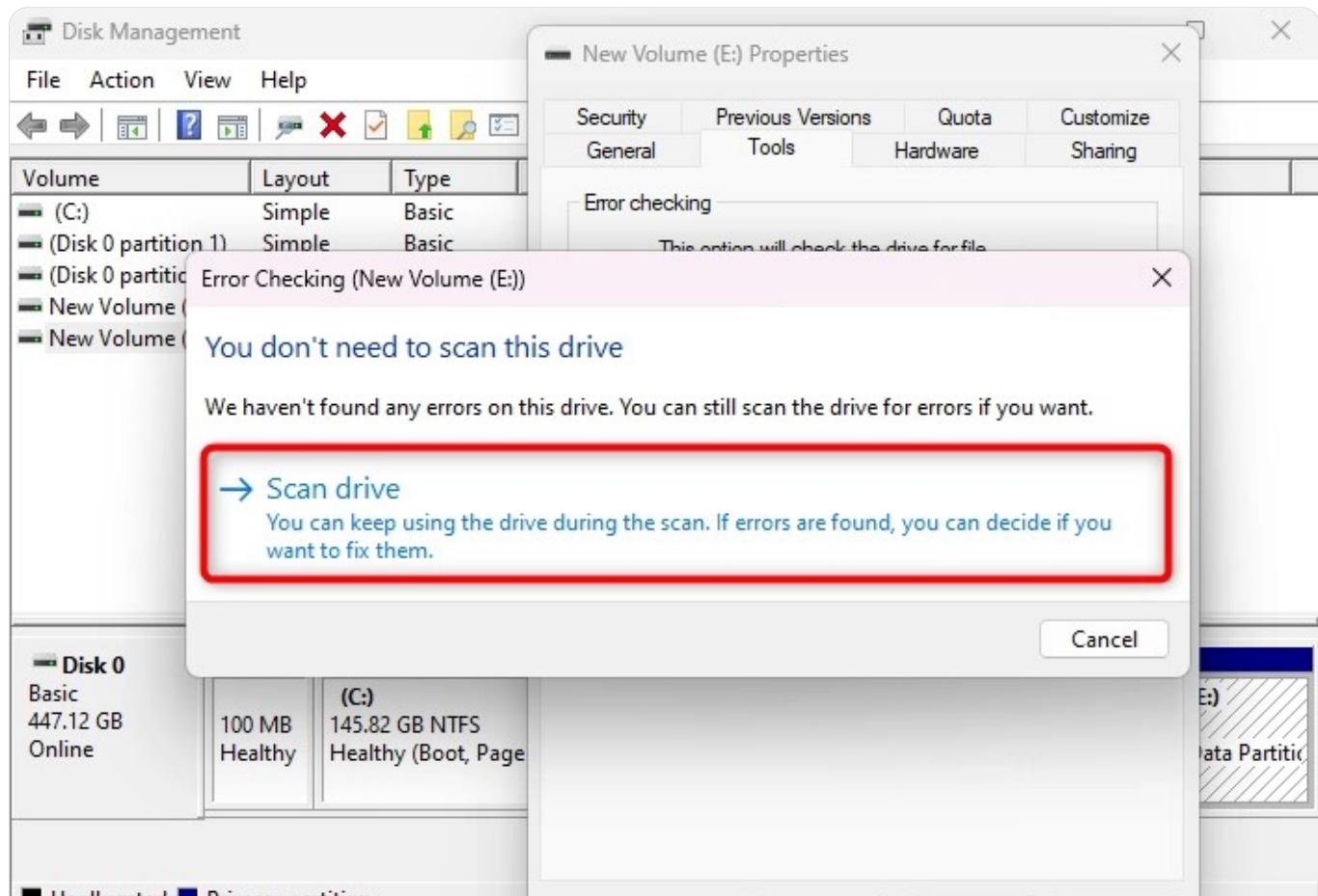
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- ① Select **Scan drive** in the window that pops open.

Let Windows scan the drive. If Windows finds an error, it will try to fix those errors automatically or let you know that no errors were found.



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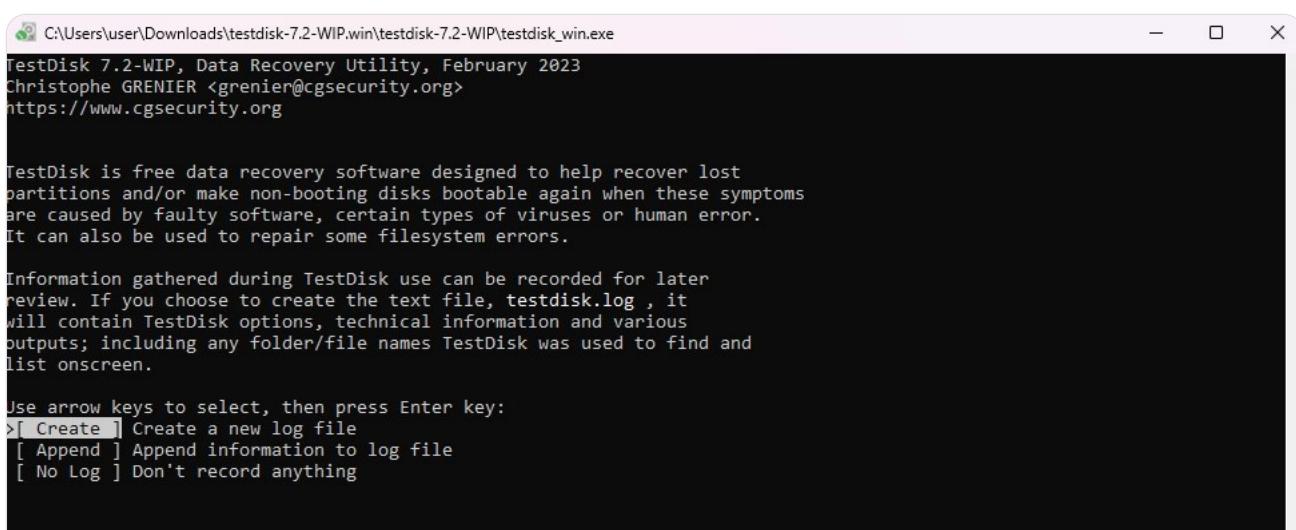
OK, I got it

Method 2: Repair External Hard Drive Partition With TestDisk

TestDisk is an [open-source data recovery solution](#) that helps [recover lost partitions](#) and fix boot issues. The lack of a graphical user interface can make TestDisk seem intimidating, but we make the process easier by illustrating every click you'll need to fix the external drive that's asking you to format.

 Interested in TestDisk? Check out our [comprehensive review](#) to learn more about its features and performance.

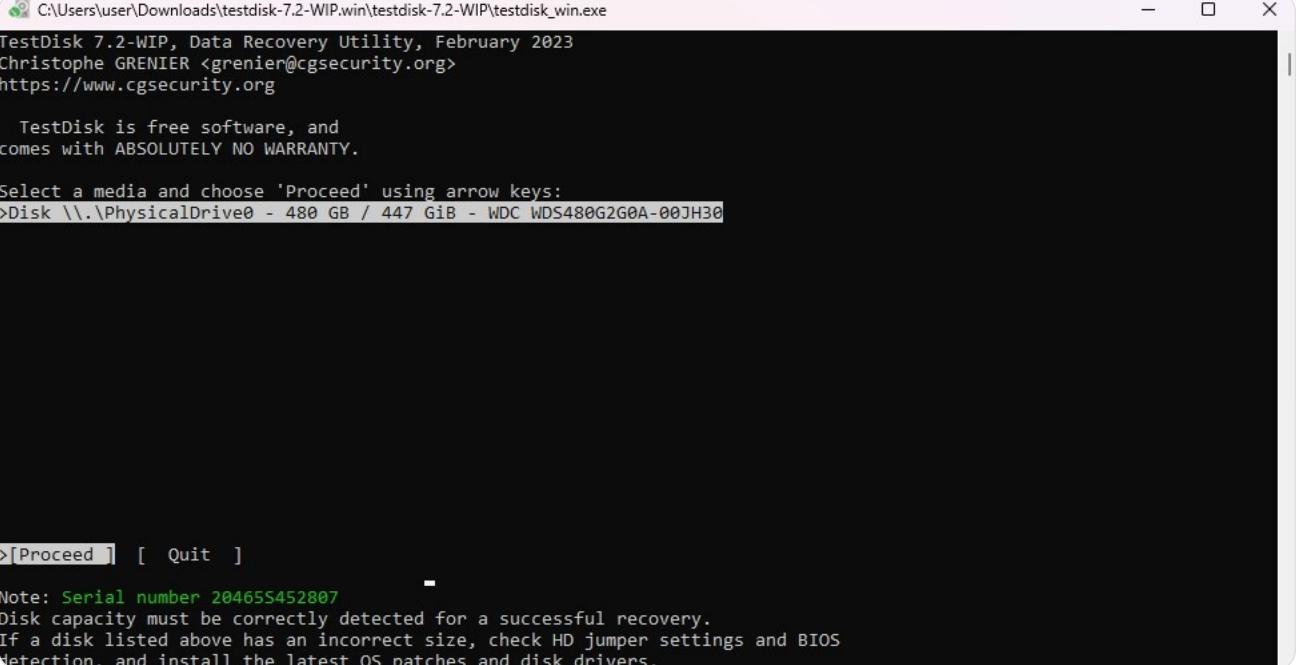
- ① [Download TestDisk](#). It's available as a .zip file that contains a portable version of TestDisk.
- ② Extract the files in the .zip file and double-click on "testdisk_win.exe" to launch the utility.
- ③ Select **Create** to create a new log file.



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- ④ Select the drive that's asking for a format when you try accessing it and press **Enter**.



C:\Users\user\Downloads\testdisk-7.2-WIP.win\testdisk-7.2-WIP\testdisk_win.exe
TestDisk 7.2-WIP, Data Recovery Utility, February 2023
Christophe GRENIER <grenier@cgsecurity.org>
<https://www.cgsecurity.org>

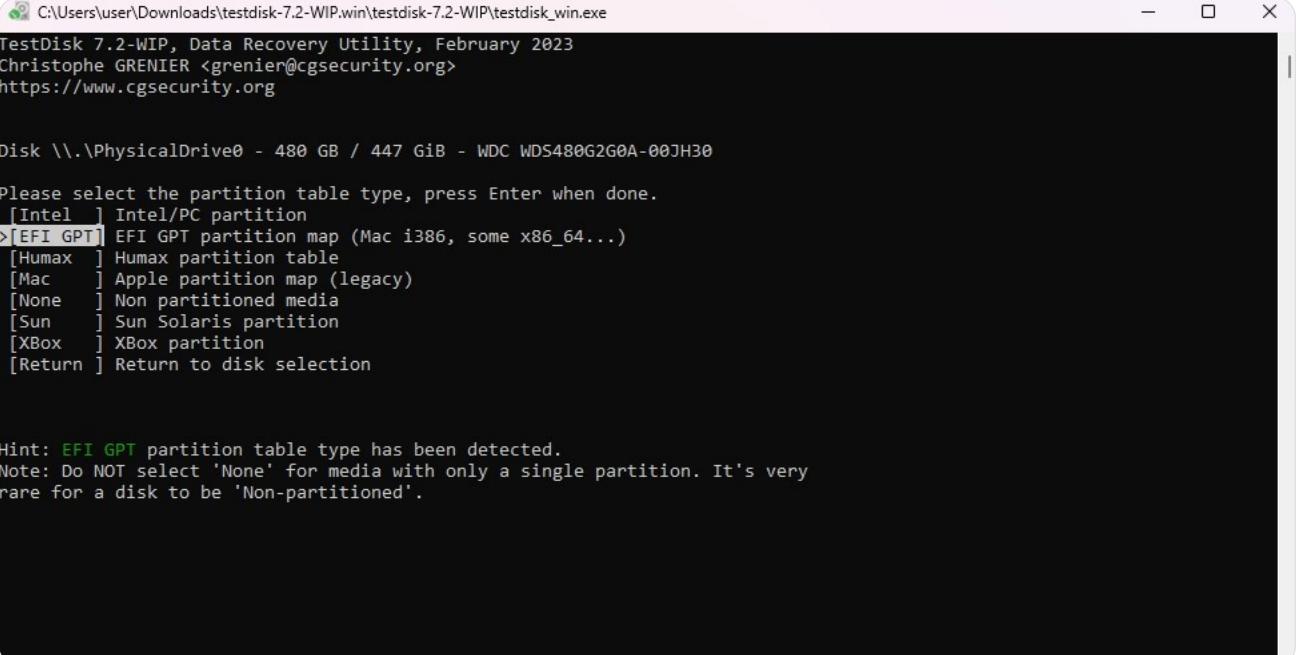
TestDisk is free software, and
comes with ABSOLUTELY NO WARRANTY.

Select a media and choose 'Proceed' using arrow keys:
>Disk \\.\PhysicalDrive0 - 480 GB / 447 GiB - WDC WDS480G2G0A-00JH30

[Proceed] [Quit]

Note: Serial number 204655452807
Disk capacity must be correctly detected for a successful recovery.
If a disk listed above has an incorrect size, check HD jumper settings and BIOS
detection, and install the latest OS patches and disk drivers.

- ⑤ TestDisk will automatically select the partition table type in the next step. Just press **Enter** (unless you disagree with TestDisk's detected partition table type).



C:\Users\user\Downloads\testdisk-7.2-WIP.win\testdisk-7.2-WIP\testdisk_win.exe
TestDisk 7.2-WIP, Data Recovery Utility, February 2023
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<https://www.cgsecurity.org>

Disk \\.\PhysicalDrive0 - 480 GB / 447 GiB - WDC WDS480G2G0A-00JH30

Please select the partition table type, press Enter when done.
[Intel] Intel/PC partition
>[EFI GPT] EFI GPT partition map (Mac i386, some x86_64...)
[Humax] Humax partition table
[Mac] Apple partition map (legacy)
[None] Non partitioned media
[Sun] Sun Solaris partition
[XBox] Xbox partition
[Return] Return to disk selection

Hint: EFI GPT partition table type has been detected.
Note: Do NOT select 'None' for media with only a single partition. It's very
rare for a disk to be 'Non-partitioned'.

- ⑥ Select **Analyze** to analyze the current partition structure and press **Enter**.

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```
CHS 58369 255 63 - sector size=512
>[ Analyse ] Analyse current partition structure and search for lost partitions
[ Advanced ] Filesystem Utils
[ Geometry ] Change disk geometry
[ Options ] Modify options
[ Quit ] Return to disk selection

Note: Correct disk geometry is required for a successful recovery. 'Analyse'
process may give some warnings if it thinks the logical geometry is mismatched.
```

- 7 Press **Enter** again to perform a Quick Search for locating partitions on the hard drive.

```
C:\Users\user\Downloads\testdisk-7.2-WIP.win\testdisk-7.2-WIP\testdisk_win.exe
TestDisk 7.2-WIP, Data Recovery Utility, February 2023
Christophe GRENIER <grenier@cgsecurity.org>
https://www.cgsecurity.org

Disk \\.\PhysicalDrive0 - 480 GB / 447 GiB - CHS 58369 255 63
Current partition structure:

  Partition          Start          End    Size in sectors
  1 P EFI System      2048        206847    204800 [EFI system partition]
No FAT, NTFS, ext2, JFS, Reiser, cramfs or XFS marker
  2 P MS Reserved    206848       239615     32768 [Microsoft reserved partition]
  2 P MS Reserved    206848       239615     32768 [Microsoft reserved partition]
  3 P MS Data         239616     306045580   305805965 [Basic data partition]
  4 P Windows Recovery Env 306046976 307195903     1148928
  5 P MS Data         307197952 614397951 307200000 [Basic data partition] [New Volume]
  6 P MS Data         614397952 937699327 323301376 [Basic data partition] [New Volume]

P=Primary  D=Deleted
>[Quick Search] [ Backup ] Try to locate partitions
```

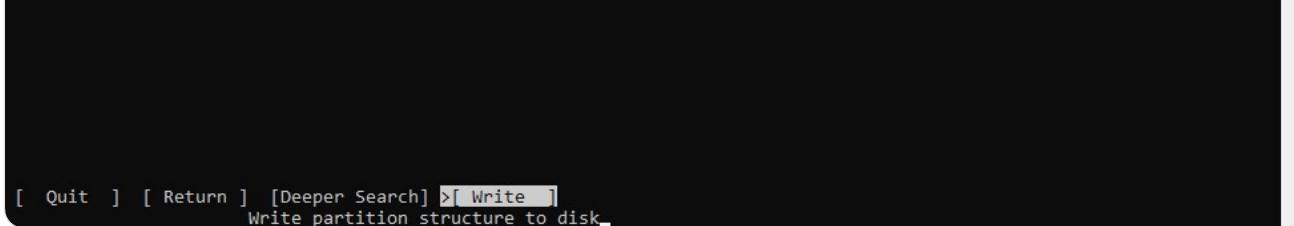
- 8 Once the search is complete, select the appropriate partition (or partitions) and press **Enter**. On the next screen, select **Write** and press **Enter**.

```
C:\Users\user\Downloads\testdisk-7.2-WIP.win\testdisk-7.2-WIP\testdisk_win.exe
TestDisk 7.2-WIP, Data Recovery Utility, February 2023
Christophe GRENIER <grenier@cgsecurity.org>
https://www.cgsecurity.org

Disk \\.\PhysicalDrive0 - 480 GB / 447 GiB - CHS 58369 255 63
  Partition          Start          End    Size in sectors
  1 P EFI System      2048        206847    204800 [EFI System Partition] [NO NAME]
```

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Method 3: Perform Full Format

Performing a full format is quite likely to solve the issue. After all, that's what Windows has been recommending all this while, right?

- Note: Once you perform a full format, you can't **recover data from the formatted hard drive**.

Here's how you can perform a full format on Windows:

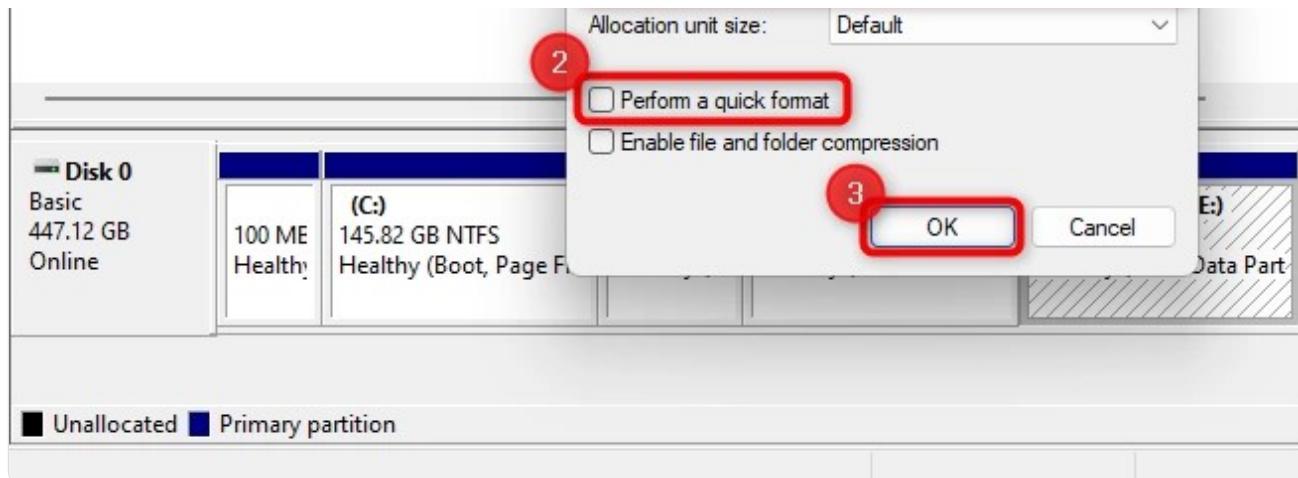
- 1 Launch the Disk Management console by searching for "disk management" in the Start Menu and pressing **Enter**.
- 2 Right-click on the external drive that's asking for a format and select **Format**. The drive might currently appear as a **RAW drive** in several cases.
- 3 Select a filesystem. Typically, you'll want to select exFAT or FAT32. Uncheck the **Perform a quick format** option checked and click **OK**.

The screenshot shows the Windows Disk Management console. The title bar says "Disk Management". The menu bar includes "File", "Action", "View", and "Help". Below the menu is a toolbar with various icons. A table lists the volumes on the disk, including their names, types, file systems, and status.

Volume	Layout	Type	File System	Status	Capacity	Free Spa...	% Free
(C:)	Simple	Basic	NTFS	Healthy (B...)	145.82 GB	84.09 GB	58 %
(Disk 0 partition 1)	Simple	Basic		Healthy (E...)	100 MB	100 MB	100 %
(Disk 0 partition 4)	Simple	Basic		Healthy (R...)	561 MB	561 MB	100 %
New Volume (D:)	Simple	Basic	NTFS	Healthy (R...)	146.48 GB	136.72 GB	93 %

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Once the format is complete, you'll likely be able to access the external drive again.

FAQ

Why does Windows want to format my external hard drive?

Windows might suggest formatting an external hard drive if your hard drive's filesystem has become corrupt, it has bad sectors, has undergone severe physical damage, or has been infected by a virus. If you're encountering this issue, the first step you should take is to recover important data using data recovery software. Once you've recovered the data, you can work on fixing the drive.

How do I fix my external hard drive asking to format?

Before you fix your external hard drive, recover important data using data recovery software from it to ensure it's not lost when you try to fix the drive. Once you've recovered the data, you can use tools like the Windows Error Checking utility, TestDisk, or the Windows formatting utility.

How to fix format disk error without formatting?

You can fix the format disk error without formatting using the Windows Error Checking

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How to fix you need to format the disk before you can use it error?

There are several methods you can try to fix the “you need to format the disk before you can use it” error. The Windows Error Checking utility should be your first line of defense since it’s non-invasive and readily accessible on Windows. If that doesn’t work, consider using a third-party solution like TestDisk. Remember to recover your data before you try fixing the drive with either of these methods.

Conclusion

We’ve heard many people complain saying “my external hard drive says it needs to be formatted.” You can try solving the error using multiple tools like the Windows Error Checking utility, TestDisk, and the formatting utility.

However, it’s important to recover data before trying any of these fixes, so you don’t end up losing any important data in case you damage the drive further when trying to fix it.

Hopefully, the solutions provided in this guide helped you recover data and fix the external drive successfully.

About article

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This article was written by [Arjun Ruparelia](#), a Contributing Writer at Handy Recovery Advisor. It was also verified for technical accuracy by [Andrey Vasilyev](#), our editorial advisor.

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