What Data Does Windows 10 Collect From You?

The Creators Update of Windows 10, aka Build 1703, which started rolling out on April 11, 2017, includes changes to the amounts and types of data that Windows 10 collects from your system and transmits to Microsoft. Here is an overview of what you can expect, to help you decide what to allow.

Select from One of Two Options

After the Update, there will be only two options: Basic and Full diagnostic telemetry. The Basic level collects only data that is essential to keeping Windows 10 running smoothly. According to Microsoft's own words:

"Basic device information, quality-related information, app compatibility, and Windows Store. When the level is set to Basic, it also includes the Security level information." It's not clear what "Windows Store" means, but it's probably reasonable for the owner of the store (Microsoft) to collect data about what you download from it.

According to Microsoft, collecting Basic data "helps to identify problems that can occur on a particular device hardware or software configuration. For example, it can help determine if crashes are more frequent on devices with a specific amount of memory or that are running a particular driver version. This helps Microsoft fix operating system or app problems."

Along with the new settings, Microsoft is further reducing the amount of data collected by the basic setting. And they want users to know that regardless of your data collection choices, they will not use the contents of your email, chat, files, or pictures to target ads to you.

Drilling down into specific data that is sent to Microsoft gets overwhelming quickly; a lot of different "fields" or bits of data are collected. But most of the brief explanations of what each bit of data collect means are comprehensible to us laypersons.

One field that may concern the less scrupulous user is "GenuineState - retrieves the ID Value specifying the OS Genuine check." Yes, of course Microsoft wants to know if you have a pirated or hacked copy of Windows 10. If GenuineState equals

"no," the user will get a polite but firm alert and an opportunity to buy a genuine Windows 10 license.

Should You Choose Basic or Full?

You might want to set your Windows 10 system to the Basic level. There's probably no reason to give Microsoft more data than is necessary to do its job of keeping Windows up to date and fixing bugs in it. But if you want to help Microsoft learn more about your computing system and habits, you can turn on the Full level of data sharing. Generally, "Full" includes the Basic Version plus the following:

Software Setup and Inventory data: "Information about apps, drivers, update packages, or OS components installed on the device," and information about what Windows Update has done. It isn't clear whether this is limited to Microsoft software or if it includes all software installed on your device.

Content Consumption data: "diagnostic details about Microsoft applications that provide media consumption functionality (such as Groove Music), and is not intended to capture user viewing, listening or reading habits." This data collection seems to be limited to Microsoft apps, so if you use another company's apps they should not be monitored by Microsoft.

Browsing, Search and Query data: "details about web browsing, search and query activity in the Microsoft browsers and Cortana, and local file searches on the device." Apparently, Microsoft does not receive browsing data from browsers other than Edge and Internet Explorer. Disabling Cortana as much as possible should minimize its snooping and telemetry.

Inking, Typing, and Speech Utterance data: the data collected pertains only to the performance of these Windows 10 functions and does not include the content of what you type, speak, or use a pen to draw/write. Things such as errors in speech recognition or response latency (how long it takes to translate a spoken word into an action) would be included for diagnostic purposes. This category also includes a field that indicates whether it is known that a child (under age 13) is a user of the device.

Licensing and Purchase data: not about Windows 10 itself; that check is made in both the Basic and Full levels. This data concerns licensing and purchases of third-party apps from the Windows Store, including details such as special offers used, price paid, duration of subscription, etc. It seems to be data that Microsoft needs to

give you what you bought for as long as you're entitled to use it, and nothing more. What you do or create with your apps is not shared with Microsoft.

Overall, Microsoft does not seem to be "spying" on users, except when they use Microsoft apps such as browsers, Office, Groove, and so on. Then more data about what you're doing with MS apps will be collected, so if you want to keep such data private you use non-Microsoft alternative, or stick with the Basic level of diagnostic telemetry.

After Build 1703 is installed:

To change your privacy settings in Windows 10, go to Settings -> Privacy. Move the slider next to Diagnostics from Full to Basic, and if you want to go further, you can turn off collection of location, speech recognition, "Tailored experiences" and "Relevant ads."

Microsoft also offers a web-based privacy dashboard. After signing in with your Microsoft account, you can go to account.microsoft.com/privacy to review and clear data such as browsing history, search history, location activity, and Cortana's Notebook – all in one place.