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# Cord Cutting

for  
**dummies**<sup>®</sup>  
A Wiley Brand



Overhaul your TV options  
to fit your budget

Add streaming devices  
to your home

Upgrade your Wi-Fi  
for better streaming

**Paul McFedries**

*Author of Amazon Fire TV  
For Dummies*



# Cord Cutting

by Paul McFedries

for  
**dummies**  
A Wiley Brand

## **Cord Cutting For Dummies®**

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# Introduction

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*William the Conqueror, it is said, began by eating a mouthful of English sand.*

— SALMAN RUSHDIE

As I write this, more than 40 million people in the United States alone have cut the cord and banished the cable company from their lives. What we have here, beyond any doubt, is a genuine phenomenon. We're witnessing a kind of cord-cutting frenzy as people of all ages, all regions, and all walks of life thumb their noses at traditional cable and opt, instead, for the freedom of a cable-less lifestyle.

If you're looking to join this movement, I have some good news right off the bat: Unlike William the Conqueror, you don't need to eat a mouthful of sand to get started. Ah, I hear you ask, but where *do* I start? If you have even a passing familiarity with watching TV without cable, you know that it's a sprawling, labyrinthine, and constantly changing topic. So many shows! So many channels! So many services! So many devices! Where, indeed, do you start?

I'm glad you asked, because that's exactly where *Cord Cutting For Dummies* comes in. I've traveled the entire cord-cutting landscape from east to west and from north to south. I've connected the devices, subscribed to the services, and installed the apps. The result is the book you're holding (physically or virtually).

## ***About This Book***

*Cord Cutting For Dummies* shows you not only how to get the cable company out of your life but also what to

do after that. This book takes you on a tour of all the main (and a few minor) ways to watch TV without cable.

In [Part 1](#), you learn lots of good reasons why you should cut the cord (plus a few sensible reasons why going cordless might *not* be a good idea for you) and you get a step-by-step plan for going cord-free.

In [Part 2](#), you get your post-cord life off to a free and easy start by learning all about over-the-air TV, where you get high-quality channels free (yep, that's right: *free*). You learn how over-the-air TV works, what equipment you need, and how to set everything up.

In [Part 3](#), you dive into streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu. You learn about streaming media players and smart TVs, and how to get your Internet access ready for streaming. You then check out a bunch of free and paid streaming services.

Finally, in [Part 4](#), you learn ten ways to save money after you've cut the cord and ten tips for troubleshooting streaming problems.

The chapters present their info and techniques in readily digestible, bite-size chunks, so you can certainly graze your way through this book.

## ***Foolish Assumptions***

*Cord Cutting For Dummies* is for people who are new (or relatively new) to cord cutting. This doesn't mean, however, that the book is suitable for everyone. I've made a few assumptions about what is necessary if you want to flourish in a cable-free world. Here they are:

- » You know how to connect devices to your TV.
- » You have an Internet connection and a Wi-Fi network.

- » You can use a web browser to navigate to a particular website given that site's address.
- » You know the basics of launching and using mobile device apps.

That's about it, really. Cord cutting is a big topic, but it's not one that requires a huge amount of technical literacy. And what literacy you *do* need I explain as we go along.

## *Icons Used in This Book*

Like other books in the *Dummies* series, this book uses icons, or little margin pictures, to flag info.



REMEMBER

This icon marks text that contains info that's useful or important enough that you'd do well to store the text somewhere safe in your memory for later recall.



TECHNICAL  
STUFF

This icon extra information that either is a bit on the advanced side or goes into heroic, often obscure detail about the topic at hand. Do you need to read it? Not at all. Does that make the text a waste of page real estate? I don't think so, because the information is useful for folks interested in delving into the minutiae of cord cutting. If that's not you, ignore away.



TIP

This icon marks text that contains a shortcut or an easier way to do things, which I hope will make your life — or, at least, the data analysis portion of your life — more efficient.



WARNING

This icon marks text that contains a friendly but insistent reminder to avoid doing something. You have been warned.

## ***Beyond the Book***

To locate this book's cheat sheet, go to [www.dummies.com](http://www.dummies.com) and search for *Cord Cutting For Dummies*. See the cheat sheet for some recommended streaming media services for kids' programming, sports, and news.

## ***Where to Go from Here***

This book consists of a couple of hundred pages. Do I expect you to read every word on every page? Yes, I do. Just kidding! No, of course I don't. Entire sections — heck, maybe even entire chapters — might contain information that's not relevant to you.

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the King of Hearts tells Alice that she should, "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop." But you don't have to follow his advice here.

However, if you're just getting started down the cord-cutting road — particularly if you're not sure you even *want* to cut the cord — no problem: I'm here to help. To



get your cord-cutting education off to a solid start, I highly recommend that you start with [Chapter 1](#) to find out if you really do want to go cable-free. If you do, continue with [Chapter 2](#) to find out how it's done. From there, you can travel to the post-cable territory of [Chapters 3](#) and beyond.

If you have some experience with cord cutting or you have a special interest or question, see the table of contents or the index to find out where I cover that topic, and then turn to that page.

Either way, happy cord cutting!

## **Part 1**

# **Some Cord-Cutting Basics**

## **IN THIS PART ...**

Discover some excellent reasons why you should — or maybe shouldn't — cut the cable TV cord.

Follow a step-by-step guide to cutting the cord.

# Chapter 1

## Why Cut the Cord?

---

### IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Having fun dissing the cable company
  - » Seeing if cutting the cord is right for you
  - » Understanding the benefits of cutting the cord
  - » Touring a world without cable
- 

You can get a TV signal into your home these days in many ways, but most methods involve running some kind of cord into your home and then into a device. That device might be a TV, a set-top box, or even a cable modem.

So far, so obvious. My point here is to bring your attention to the cord itself, which carries this book's symbolic load. Why? Because a new and growing legion of people are using their cable TV cord as a symbol for protest.

Who are these people? The *cord shavers* (also called *cord trimmers*) take steps to reduce their cable TV bill. The *cord avoiders* look for online alternatives to paying for cable TV offerings. Next are the *cord haters*, who really dislike paying for cable TV. All these people look on in envy at the *cord nevers*, people who have never had a cable TV account.

The cord shavers, cord avoiders, and cord haters can't be cord nevers, but they can certainly become *cord cutters*. Those are people who metaphorically snip their cable TV cord by non-metaphorically canceling their cable TV

subscription and looking for televised entertainment elsewhere.

If you find your blood pressure getting dangerously high each time you pay your cable TV bill, you might be ready to become a cord cutter. To make sure, this chapter talks about why you might want to go the cord-cutting route (and a little bit about why you might not).

## ***What's So Bad about Cable? (Let Me Count the Ways)***

Every year, various media organizations publish articles with titles along the lines of “The Ten Most Hated Companies” or “The Twenty Worst Companies.” A wide variety of industries is represented, from airlines to social media companies to banking institutions. The lists change year to year, but you can always count on at least one or more cable companies making the list.

Let's face it: Many of us *really* dislike our cable provider. What about you? How do you feel about the company that brings cable TV into your home?

Okay, you're reading a book about cord cutting, so I have to assume that you're at least peeved at your cable company. Or maybe a bit miffed. But however you feel, you might need coaxing before you go any further. Sure, I understand: Cutting the cord is a big step. To help you make your decision, this section details ten solid reasons why you might want to cancel your cable subscription and join the ranks of cord cutters.

### ***Cable TV is expensive***

Aside from essential utilities (heat, electricity, water, phone) and expenses such as groceries and a car payment, most of your regular monthly payments probably don't amount to that much money. Five dollars here, ten dollars there, twenty dollars somewhere else. Then your monthly cable bill comes due and, by contrast, it's probably a whopper: Depending on your channels, packages, equipment, and bundles, you can easily be paying a hundred, two hundred, even three hundred dollars or more — a *month!*

As much as you might enjoy the cable company's offerings, that cable bill qualifies as an extravagance. Now, as you soon see, money isn't the only reason to cut yourself free from cable, but for most would-be cord cutters, it's the reason that gets people thinking there has to be a better (and cheaper) way.

### ***You still get bombarded by commercials***

You pay your budget-busting cable bill and now you're stressed and angry. What's the antidote? You know: Watch a little TV. But when you turn on the set, chances are the first thing you see is a commercial. Then another one. And another. Sure, you're a savvy TV pro, so you know where to find the mute button on your remote.

But still: Doesn't it rankle? You pay a queen's ransom for (apparently) the privilege of watching TV, only to be subjected to endless come-ons for hemorrhoid remedies and car insurance. That's just wrong.

### ***You probably watch only a teensy fraction of what you pay for***

The Bruce Springsteen song “57 Channels (and Nothin' On)” was released way back in 1992, but it's still

relevant today. Except now it's closer to 557 channels. However many channels come with your cable package, it's a safe bet that you find a depressingly vast majority of them unwatchable so they are therefore unwatched.

Sure, you have your favorite stations, but how many do you watch regularly? A dozen? Maybe a couple dozen? That still leaves hundreds of channels gathering dust. Even worse: You're paying for those dust-covered channels. Why would anyone do that?

### ***Bundles are (usually) bad***

The standard way to save money when it comes to the cable company is to invest in a *bundle*: a collection of cable company services that includes not only cable TV but also Internet access, a home phone, a cellular plan, or some combination of these and other offerings. Instead of paying for each service by itself, you bundle them for a substantial discount.

That makes sense, but there's a fly in the bundle ointment: Almost always, at least one of the bundled services will be *terrible*. It might have cheap — or even used! — equipment, spotty service, minimal features, or (all too often) all of the above. Even though you save money with a second-rate service, you shouldn't have to live like that.

### ***Long-term (read: loyal) customers pay more, not less***

If you're a regular customer at your local coffee shop, every now and then the manager might slip you a free coffee or muffin. If you buy lots of clothes at a local independent retailer, the owner might give you a discount on a larger purchase. What these small businesses understand is the value of customer loyalty: It pays in the long term to keep regular customers happy.

Your cable company understands this, too, right? Hah, don't make me laugh! In fact, your cable provider probably does the opposite. That is, they probably offer discounted subscriptions to new customers, while charging substantially higher prices to long-term subscribers. It's madness, but welcome to the wacky world of the cable company!



REMEMBER

If you plan on sticking with your cable subscription, at least for a while, you can almost certainly negotiate a lower price. Call the cable company, complain about how high your monthly bill has become, and then threaten to either switch to another provider (assuming there is one where you live) or cancel your subscription. It might take some perseverance on your part and a session with someone in the Customer Retention department, but you'll get there.

## ***You're getting nicked-and-dimed***

If you've ever been brave (or foolhardy) enough to examine the details of your cable bill, chances are you came away even angrier than you were going in. It's not just the sheer size of the final total that stresses everyone out, but the long list of incidental and hidden fees and surcharges that are standard-issue line items in every cable bill. These fees go by various names:

- » Network access fee
- » Broadcast TV fee
- » HD technology fee
- » Regional sports surcharge
- » Terminal fee



## » Franchise fee

The list goes on and on and includes lots of regulatory fees mandated by the government, which the cable company is happy to pass on to you as so-called *pass-through fees*. These fees and surcharges easily cost you hundreds of dollars a year. Boo!

### ***You're dealing with a near-monopoly***

Mom-and-pop shops in the cable business don't exist because cable requires huge infrastructure investments. That's fine, but with recent consolidations in the industry, the gargantuan just keep getting gargantuan-er. The result is that even large markets have few options for cable TV providers, and small markets might have just a single company “vying” for their business.

This lack of competition is bad news for you. It keeps cable prices high, encourages cable companies to charge — and increase — hidden fees (as I describe in the preceding section), and gives cable behemoths zero incentive to provide decent customer service and technical support (travesties that I talk about in the next two sections).

### ***Customer service is pretty much non-existent***

Earlier I mention that cable companies always show up in lists of the worst or most hated companies. As this section shows, there are lots of reason why that's so. However, one of main complaints you see in surveys of customer (dis)satisfaction is terrible customer service.

You know what I'm talking about, right? Does anyone ever look forward to calling the cable company? Having such a call on your to-do list is likely to elicit feelings of dread and anxiety because the poor souls who work in a

cable company's customer service department aren't allowed to be human beings. Instead, they're browbeaten into giving rote answers that never deviate from a management-approved script.

And if you get even a little frustrated or upset at the runaround you're getting, there's an excellent chance the rep will put you on hold forever and then simply disconnect the call!



TIP

You can see for yourself how bad cable company customer service is by taking a look at the American Customer Satisfaction Index for Subscription Television Services at [www.theacsi.org/index.php?option=com:content&view=article&id=147&catid=&Itemid=212&i=Subscription+Television+Service](http://www.theacsi.org/index.php?option=com:content&view=article&id=147&catid=&Itemid=212&i=Subscription+Television+Service).

## ***Technical support is a pain in the you-know-what***

Calling the cable company's technical support department is no better an experience than the customer service nightmare I moaned about in the preceding section. First, you have to wait on hold for a very long time. Second, the “technician” (note the sarcastic quotes there) will ask about your problem, and then spend a *very* long time going through an infuriatingly banal and wrong-headed flowchart-slash-script in an attempt to find a “solution” (more sarcastic quotes).

That approach *never* works, so now the rep will book you an appointment with an actual technician. Alas, the next available appointment is in two weeks (if you're lucky) and, yes, you'll have to take half a day off work. Oh, and it will set you back \$50, \$75, or even \$100 just for the technician to show up.

## ***Those darned contracts!***

As I mention, you can often negotiate a lower cable bill by putting together a bundle of services, packages of content, or both. But there's usually a catch, actually *two* catches: You have to sign a contract (usually for two years) and the discount applies only for the first year! So you're stuck paying a higher price for the rest of the contract, unless you agree to pay an exorbitant termination fee to opt out. Grrr.



**WARNING**

After signing the contract, you'll receive a confirmation, usually by email. Double-check — no *triple*-check — the order to make sure you're getting what you asked for and what was promised to you. Cable company sales reps work on commission and will often simply modify orders — while betting that you won't notice — if doing so benefits them.

## ***Some Reasons Why Cutting the Cord Might Not Be for You***

This book is about cutting the cord, but I might as well admit early on that there's no perfect solution to going cable-free. My thesis here is that, for most people, saying goodbye to the cable company is a net win. However, a few aspects of cutting the cord fall on the “cons” side of any “pros versus cons” analysis, and one or more of those could be a deal-breaker for you. Let's see.

## ***Your savings might be less than you hoped***

Everyone goes into the cord-cutting adventure with big dreams of saving a ton of money every month. And those savings *are* possible, especially if you embrace free and almost-free services. However, most of the good content sits on the other side of a paid subscription.

You can still save lots of cash if you're prudent with your subscriptions. Unfortunately, many families find that they keep adding new services (particularly for popular content such as Disney, HBO, news, and live sports) and their monthly TV-watching costs rise accordingly.



**REMEMBER** You can use lots of tricks and techniques to save money after you cut the cord. I talk about a bunch of these in [Chapter 10](#).

## ***You might still have to deal with channel bundles***

Most of us hate channel bundles because to subscribe to the one channel you want, you also have to get a fistful of channels that you wouldn't force your worst enemy to watch. So now it feels like you're paying the bundle fee for just a single channel. Cue the steam coming out of your ears.

Bundles aren't an issue with subscriptions such as Netflix, where one price gets you access to everything on the service. Unfortunately, far too many streaming services embrace the bundle model and surround premium content (such as HBO) with dreck.

## ***You might still see commercials***

For lots of would-be cord cutters, the real incentive is not cost savings but a commercial-free viewing experience. The good news is that most streaming services are on board with the commonsense notion that you shouldn't see commercials if you pay a subscription for the service. Sweet bliss!

However, some free streaming services *do* show commercials, because they have to pay their bills somehow. And, after all, seeing the odd commercial is a small price to pay for a free service.



**WARNING** Alas, just because a streaming service doesn't currently show commercials, it doesn't follow that the service will always be ad-free. For example, Netflix, which is currently commercial-free, has run tests in which they show commercials between TV show episodes.

## ***TV watching will become more complex for you***

You can bad-mouth cable companies all you want (and I know you do), but they do have one genuinely good feature: simplicity. Sure, you pay a ton of money each month, but in exchange you get all your channels and apps and more in a single package with a single interface.

Once you cut the cord, that simplicity will probably become a thing of the past. I say “probably” because it *is* possible to create simple cord-free experiences where, say, you watch only live TV or you subscribe to only a single streaming service. But you're more likely to end up with multiple subscriptions on multiple services. That means paying multiple bills, configuring multiple

accounts, and learning multiple app interfaces. And you also run smack into a very modern problem: trying to remember which streaming service offers which content!

I wish I could tell you that the cord-free experience is getting simpler, but the opposite is happening. Media companies are falling all over themselves to launch their own streaming services. Whereas a few years ago you might have been able to count the number of streaming services using the fingers of one hand, the way things are going you'll soon need the fingers of every member of your extended family.

## ***You'll use way more Internet bandwidth — and perhaps pay for the privilege***

Streaming media comes to you via the Internet, where it's distributed through Wi-Fi to your various devices. You don't normally give it a second thought, but perhaps you should. Why? Because media streams such as movies, TV shows, and music stuff huge amounts of data into the pipe that delivers the Internet to your home. If your Internet service provider (ISP) puts a limit on your monthly bandwidth, blowing through that cap because you binge-watched *Better Call Saul* may cost you a ton of money.



**REMEMBER** If you have an ISP plan that offers unlimited bandwidth (lucky you!), you don't have to worry about any of this because there's no ceiling to go through.