Erasing Your iPhone

Prepare Your Old iPhone for Trade-in, Sale, or Gifting to Anyone
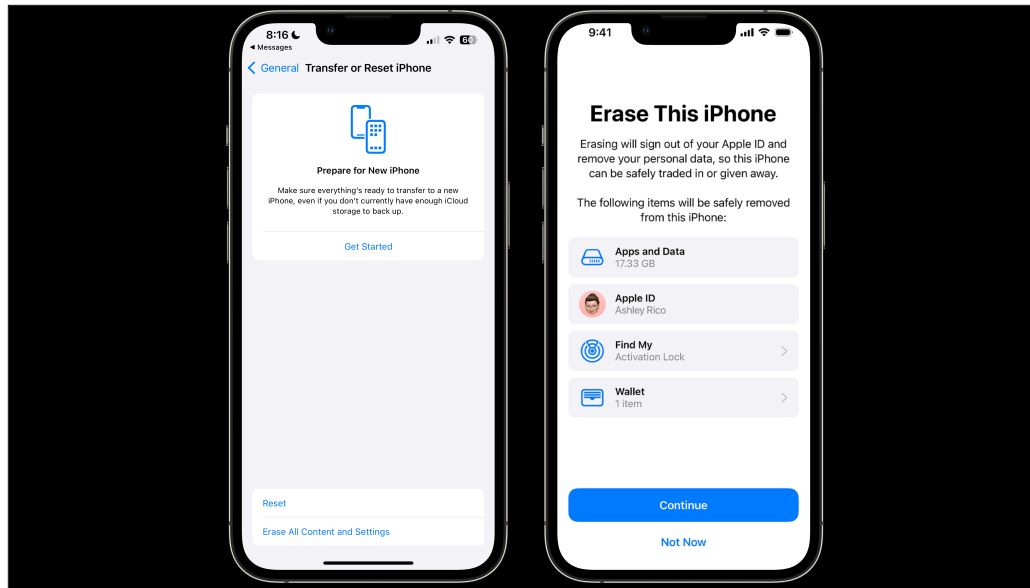
September 2024

Most iPhone users reach a time when they intend to replace their existing iPhone with a newer one. The release of the iPhone 16 series this month makes a time when many millions of iPhone users will be getting ready for their new phone — most of them for the first time in several years.

Once the new phone has been put into use, the old one is traded-in to Apple or a cellular carrier, sold, gifted to a friend or relative, tossed into a drawer, or handed off to an E-waste recycler, possibly even Apple. Do not assume that even Apple will fully reset your old iPhone if you trade it in! Apple has been known to fail to remove personal information from "factory refurbished" used iPhones and new purchase returns.

However, if the old phone hasn't been properly erased & removed from your Apple Account (ID), it might still provide anyone who handles it with the data it had when you were using it, including your email, Apple Account, Wallet details with credit cards, etc. — you get the idea — everything anyone would need to mess up your digital life in a big way, including identity theft and access to your online accounts including finances.

What steps do you need to take to erase all of your stuff from your old iPhone, and leave it in a safe state for someone else to take possession of it?

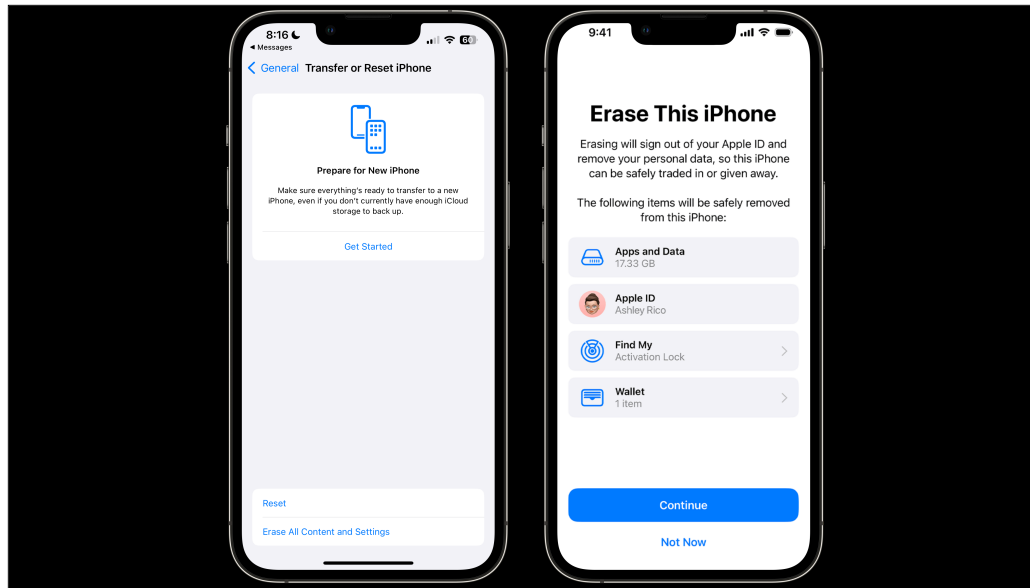Apple has built most of this process into the Settings App of the iPhone.

1. First, be sure you have backed up the iPhone to iCloud (and to a computer if you have one). There are other guides on how to do that before you continue with erasing your old iPhone.
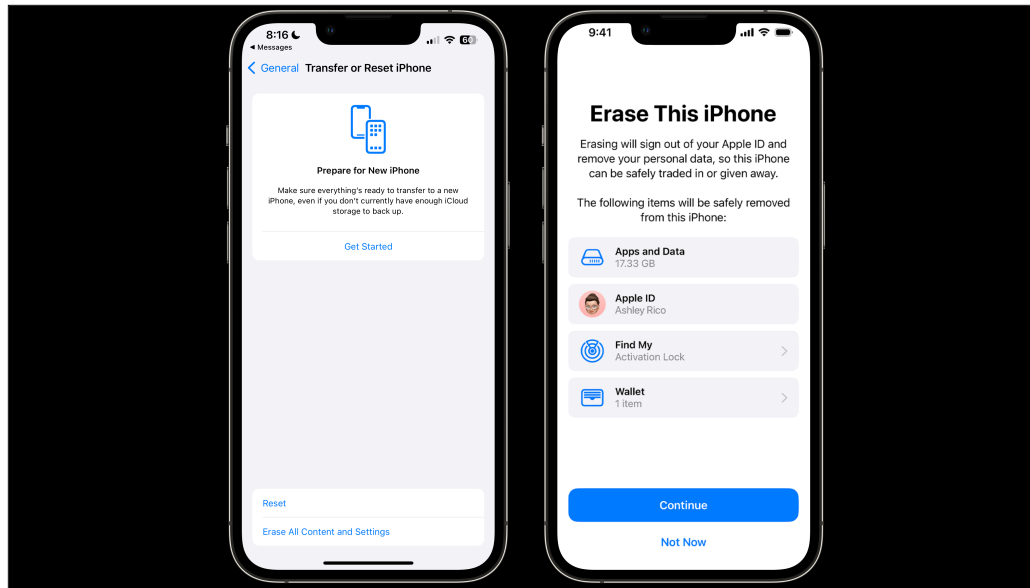
iPhones from the series 13 and before all had a physical SIM tray in the side of the iPhone below the power button on the right side. Even some newer models sold or intended for use outside the US still had physical SIM trays. If your iPhone has a SIM tray, whether or not you think you ever used it, open it and make sure there is no physical SIM card in the tray. Put the tray back in after making sure it is now empty. A physical SIM left in your old iPhone could let someone take over your accounts and Contacts. It might even help them to clone your new iPhone.

iPhones with eSIM-only have been sold in the USA and some other countries, but be very careful to check that, if your iPhone has a SIM tray, it is empty before you abandon it to whoever next has your old iPhone.

2. If you have turned on any extra security such as ScreenTime Restrictions or Stolen Device Protection on the phone, you will need to go into the appropriate Settings and disable those.
3. Then go to Settings > General > Transfer or Reset iPhone. (Note, this may not be available to you while other restrictions or protections are enabled.)

On the Transfer or Reset iPhone screen, do NOT select the Get Started button near the top. It is intended for transferring your stuff to a new iPhone, and you should have already accomplished that BEFORE erasing your old iPhone. (We're discussing erasing here, not the transfer process.)

4. Instead, choose the Erase All Content and Settings at the end of the screen to get to the Erase This iPhone screen. This process should erase all of your personally-installed Apps and all App data, remove the device from your Apple Account (ID), deactivate Find My on the device, and remove all cards, payment info, and ID from your Wallet App.

This may take a few minutes.

When it has completed, the iPhone will shutdown or restart.

5. When it next starts up, it should show a Welcome or Hello screen and greet you as though the iPhone is new and ready to be used for the first time, just like when you bought it.

If, instead of the Welcome or Hello screen, it shows the lock screen requesting a passcode, or opens directly to the Home Screen with apps, the iPhone was NOT properly reset, and you need to go through this process again to remove your data and apps as well as your passcode lock and Apple Account (ID) information.

When it restarts with a new Hello screen to welcome a new user, it's ready to go — after checking any SIM tray and your Apple Account (ID).

Apple Support on Preparing an old iPhone for the future:

- Turn Off Find My on your devices
  https://support.apple.com/guide/icloud/remove-devices-and-items-from-find-my-mmdc23b125f6/icloud

- Before You Sell, Give Away, or Trade Your iPhone
  https://support.apple.com/en-ca/109511

- About Stolen Device Protection for iPhone
  https://support.apple.com/en-us/120340

- How to Factory Reset your iPhone
  https://support.apple.com/en-us/108931

Each of the underlined topic lines on this screen opens the appropriate page in Apple's Support documents to turn off Find My, steps to take before you hand off your old iPhone, Stolen Device Protection settings, and doing a full Factory Reset of your iPhone.

Checklist for preparing your iPhone to leave your personal control

1. Be sure you are storing Contacts & Messages on iCloud

2. Backup your device with iCloud Backup

3. Backup your device to your computer (if you have one)

4. Complete any setup & transfer from your old iPhone to your new one

5. Turn OFF any protections & restrictions in the iPhone's Settings

6. Remove any Physical SIM from the SIM tray, and check that it's empty.

7. Use the Settings to erase and factory reset the iPhone at Settings > General > Transfer or Reset iPhone > Erase All Content and Settings > Erase This iPhone

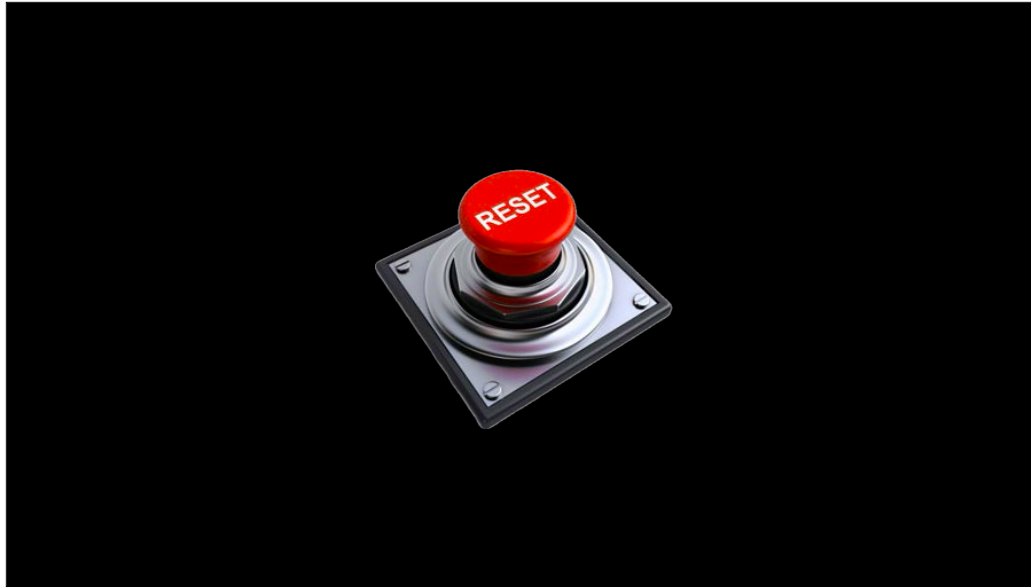Checklist for preparing your iPhone to leave your personal control
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5. Turn OFF any protections & restrictions in the iPhone's Settings
6. Remove any Physical SIM from the SIM tray, and double-check that it's empty.
7. Use the Settings to erase and factory reset the iPhone at Settings > General > Transfer or Reset iPhone > Erase All Content and Settings > Erase This iPhone

Checklist — continued

8. Be sure the old iPhone's startup screen shows a new user Welcome or Hello screen

9. Go a different computing device, and check your Apple Account to be sure that the old iPhone is no longer on you Account.

10. If the old phone is no longer on your account and the old phone shows a new-user startup screen, you're good to go with handing the device off to wherever it goes next.

- If, however, it still shows on your Apple Account (ID), you need to start over.

- You can also use your Apple Account on another device to remove the older iPhone from the Account, but it's far safer to be sure the iPhone was really Reset.

Checklist — continued
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- If, however, it still shows on your Apple Account (ID), you need to start over.
- You could also use your Apple Account on another device to remove the older iPhone from your Apple Account, but it's far safer to be sure the iPhone was really Reset.

Don't let your old iPhone languish in a drawer or be handed off to someone else unless you have done a full factory reset and verified that it is no longer linked to you, your phone number, or your Apple Account (ID).

✦ S.Huston — September 2024