

File Organization in Windows

Before we get started, let's address a few key terms.

- A “file” is a term for any piece of digital data created by a program (or the operating system). Any object you might save on your computer, such as a Word document, an email, or a picture, is a file. Any time you save something, you're creating a file. A file's name has two parts: the label and the extension. The label (or name) of the file can be anything you choose; when you save a document, you can give it any name you like. The extension is a three-character code at the end of the file's name that tells the operating system what type of file that object is. Each program has its own extension. For instance, a Word document's extension is “.doc”.
- A “folder” is a virtual storage container. You could compare a folder to a suitcase or a box or anything else, but they're called folders. If you had every file on your computer in one place, it would be nearly impossible to find anything. Folders are available to let you organize your computer. You can, obviously, put files inside a folder – you can also put folders inside other folders (called subfolders). There's no limit to how many “layers” of folders within folders you can have, should you choose to do so.

The File Tree

Windows assigns a letter to each physical storage device attached to your computer (such as hard drives, CD drives, etc...). By default, your hard drive is labeled “C”. If you go to the My Computer window, you'll see all the drives attached to your machine, and their label. If you open (double-click) your hard drive, you can see the folders within it. Each of these folders has many sub-folders within it (for instance, Documents and Settings or Program Files).

The easiest way to understand the file organization structure is to visualize a family-tree like chart, with the hard drive (in most cases, C) at the top, with the folders inside of that drive under it, and the sub-folders under them, and so on.

In any folder, there's a button on the toolbar near the top of the window with a symbol of a folder with an up-facing arrow. This takes you up one “level” in the file tree.

Creating and Using Folders

You can create a new folder almost anywhere (i.e., on your desktop, inside your My Documents folder, anywhere on your hard drive, etc...) by right-clicking a blank area, then clicking New > Folder. A new folder is created with the name “New Folder” highlighted – because the name is automatically highlighted, you can simply type a name for the folder, and it will overwrite the default name. Hit Enter to finalize the name. Once you've created a folder, you can move files into it by clicking-and-dragging or copy-and-pasting.

Note that if you're already inside a folder, and want to create a subfolder inside that folder, you can click the File menu, then New > Folder. This does the same thing as right-clicking a blank area and clicking New > Folder.

The “Save As” Window

In any program, when you save a file (File > Save or Ctrl + S on the keyboard), you get a familiar window. Though it looks complicated, this window asks you three simple questions: Where do you want to save this file, what do you want to call it, and what type of file would you like it to be?

The box at the top of the Save As window marked “Save In:” lets you choose where to put the document. You can choose from a list of common locations (such as the Desktop, My Documents folder, etc...). Click the down-facing arrow at the right side of the Save In box to open the drop-down menu and select a location.

Once you’ve chosen a spot from the list (such as My Documents), all the items in that location are displayed in the big field in the middle of the Save As window. Here, you can double-click a folder to go inside of it, which allows you to save the document into that folder. In this middle pane of the Save As window, you can also create new folders (just as usual, by right-clicking, then New > Folder) to save your documents inside of.

Down at the bottom of the Save As window there are two fields; File Name and Save as Type. These fields allow you to name the file and choose what type of document to save it as.

For the file name, you can type in any name you want, excluding certain special characters such as slashes. Simply click your cursor into the File Name box – the default name is automatically highlighted, so you can immediately type a new name. Hit Enter or click Save to finalize and save the document.

For the file type, the options will be different for every program (as each program has its own file types). Usually, you’ll want to use the default file type, but it depends on what program you’re using and what type of document you’re saving. For instance, if you were saving a Word document, you can save it in many formats (the default Word format, several formats for older versions of Word [these would be used if you wanted to send this Word document to a friend with an older version of Word], Rich Text Format, plain text, and more).

Note, the only reason you’d need to use any file type other than the default, is if you were going to be sharing that file with other people using different software or different types of computers. For instance, if you were going to send a newsletter to lots of people, who could presumably be using many different types of computers and different programs, you’d want to use a universal format such as Rich Text Format (RTF) that could be opened by everyone.

You might ask, “Why not use such a universal format all the time?”. The answer is that formats such as RTF take up more space than other formats, such as DOC.

Finding Files

Finding misplaced files can be a challenge, but Windows gives you several tools to help. Most programs provide a list of the last few documents you’ve opened on the File menu. You can also use the Windows Search tool (On the right side of the Start menu) to find lost files. Use the options on the left to adjust your search criteria. You can search for the name of a file, a few words in a document, and more. You can also tell the computer where you want it to look, or have it search everywhere. Finally, you can enable the Recent Documents List to show the last 10 documents you’ve opened (see our lesson on Customizing Windows).