Working with files and folders

In this article

This article will help you learn how to find, organize, and use files and folders on your computer.

What are files and folders?

A file is very much like a typed document that you might find on someone's desk or in a filing cabinet; it's an item that contains a collection of related information. On a computer, examples of files include text documents, spreadsheets, digital pictures, and even songs. Every picture you take with a digital camera, for example, is a separate file, and a music CD might contain a dozen individual song files.

Your computer represents files with icons. By looking at a file's icon, you can tell at a glance what kind of file it is. Here are some common file icons:
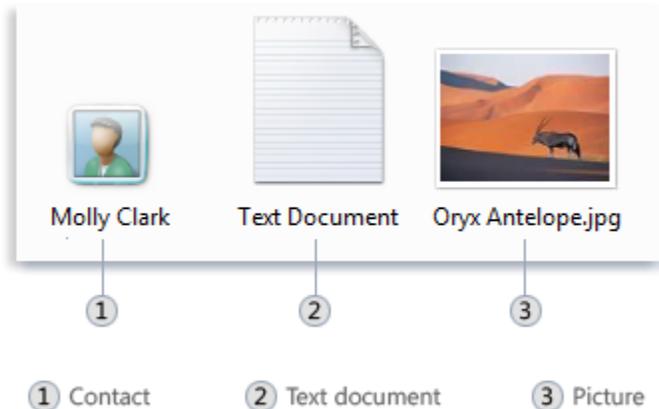
You can tell what kind of file an icon represents by its appearance

A *folder* is little more than a container in which you can store files. If you put thousands of paper files on someone's desk, it would be virtually impossible to find any particular one when you needed it. That's why people often store paper files in folders inside a filing cabinet. Arranging files into logical groups makes it easy to locate any particular file.

Folders on your computer work exactly the same way. This is what a typical folder icon looks like:
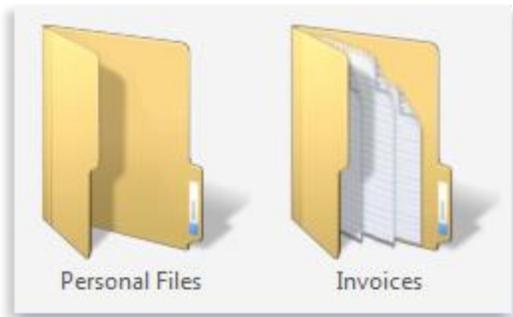
An empty folder (left); a folder containing files (right)

Not only do folders hold files, but they also can hold other folders. A folder within a folder is usually called a *subfolder*. You can create any number of subfolders, and each can hold any number of files and additional subfolders.

How Windows organizes your files and folders

When it comes to getting organized, you don't need to start from scratch. Windows comes with a handful of common folders that you can use as anchors to begin organizing your files. Here's a list of some of the most common folders you can store your files and folders in:

- **Documents**. Use this folder to store your word-processing files, spreadsheets, presentations, and other business-oriented files.

- **Pictures**. Use this folder to store all of your digital pictures, whether you get them from your camera, scanner, or in e-mail from other people.

- **Music**. Use this folder to store all of your digital music, such as songs that you copy from an audio CD or download from the Internet.

- **Videos**. Use this folder to store your videos, such as clips from your digital camera, camcorder, or video files that you download from the Internet.

- **Downloads**. Use this folder to store files and programs that you download from the web.

There are many ways to find these folders. The easiest method is to open the personal folder, which gathers all of your common folders in one place. The personal folder isn't actually called "personal"—it's labeled with the user name that you used to log on to the computer. To open it, click the **Start** button , and then click your user name at the top of the Start menu's right pane.
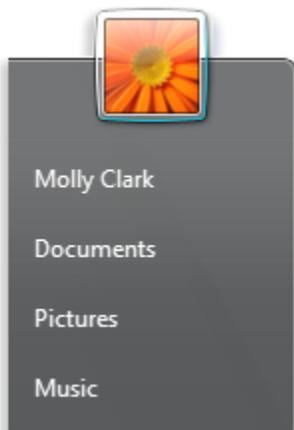

You can open common folders from the Start menu

You can also find the Documents, Pictures, and Music folders in the Start menu, just below your personal folder.

Remember that you can create subfolders inside any of these folders to help you better organize your files. In the Pictures folder, for example, you might create subfolders to organize pictures by date, by event, by the names of people in the pictures, or by any other scheme that helps you work more efficiently.

Understanding the parts of a folder

When you open a folder on the desktop, a folder window appears. In addition to showing the contents of the folder, a folder window has a variety of parts that are designed to help you navigate around Windows or work with files and folders more easily. Here is a typical folder and each of its parts:
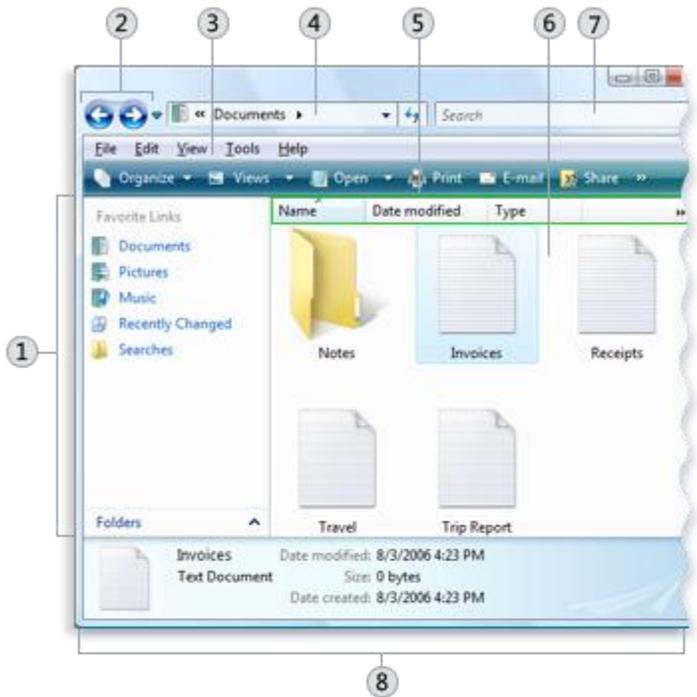
(1) Navigation pane   (5) Headings

(2) Forward and back buttons   (6) File list

(3) Toolbar   (7) The Search box

(4) Address bar   (8) Details pane

The Documents folder

| Folder part	What it's useful for
Address bar	Use the Address bar to navigate to a different folder without closing the current folder window. For more information, see Navigate using the Address bar.
Back and Forward buttons	Use the Back and Forward buttons to navigate to other folders you have already opened without closing the current window. These buttons work in conjunction with the Address bar; after you use the Address bar to change folders, for example, you can use the Back button to return to the original folder.

The Search box	Type a word or phrase in the Search box to look for a file or subfolder stored in the current folder. The search begins as soon as you begin typing, so as you type B, for example, all the files that start with the letter B will appear in the folder's file list. For more information, see Find a file or folder.
Toolbar	The toolbar allows you to perform common tasks, such as changing the appearance of your files and folders, copying files to a CD, or starting a digital picture slide show. The toolbar's buttons change to show only the commands that are useful. For example, if you click a picture file, the toolbar shows different buttons than it would if you clicked a music file.
Navigation pane	Like the Address bar, the Navigation pane lets you change the view to other folders. The Favorite links section makes it easy to change to a common folder or start a search that you previously saved. If you often go to the same folder, you can drag that folder to the Navigation pane to make it one of your own favorite links. For more information, see Working with the Navigation pane.
File list	This is where the contents of the current folder are displayed. If you typed in the Search box to find a file, only the files that match your search will appear. For more information, see Tips for finding files.
Column headings	Use the column headings to change how the files in the file list are organized. You can sort, group, or stack the files in the current view. For more information, see Tips for finding files.
Details pane	The Details pane shows the most common properties associated with the selected file. File properties are information about a file, such as the author, the date you last changed the file, and any descriptive tags you might have added to the file. For more information, see Add tags or other properties to files.
Preview pane	Use the Preview pane to see the contents of many kinds of files. If you select an e-mail message, text file, or picture, for example, you can see its contents without opening it in a program. The Preview pane is not displayed by default in most folders. To see it, click the **Organize** button on the toolbar, click **Layout**, and then click **Preview pane**.

Viewing your files in a folder

When you open a folder and see your files, you might prefer larger (or smaller) icons, or an arrangement that lets you see different kinds of information about each file. To make these kinds of changes, use the Views button in the toolbar.

Each time you click the Views button, the folder window changes the way it displays your file and folder icons, alternating between large icons, a smaller icon view called Tiles, and a view called Details that shows several columns of information about the file.

If you click the arrow next to the Views button, you have even more choices. Drag the slider up or down to fine-tune the size of the file and folder icons. You can see the icons change size as you move the slider.
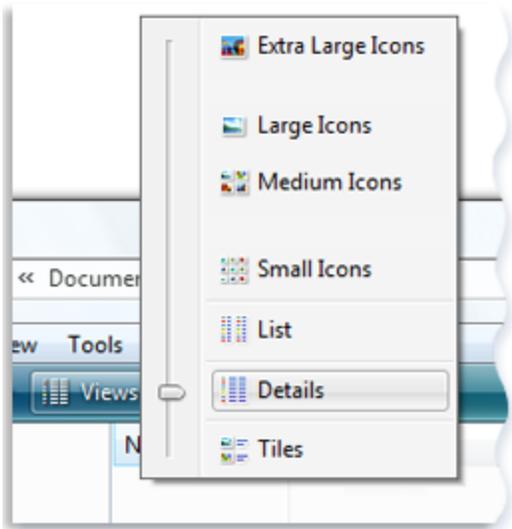
The Views options

Finding your files

When you need to find a particular file, you'll often know that it's located somewhere in a common folder like Documents or Pictures. Unfortunately, actually locating the file you want might mean browsing through hundreds of files and subfolders—not an easy task. To save yourself time and effort, use the Search box to find your file.

The Search box

The Search box is located at the top of every folder. To find a file, open the folder that contains the file you are looking for, click the Search box, and start typing. The Search box filters the current view based on the text that you type. Files are displayed as search results if your search term matches the file's name, tags, or other file properties. Text documents are displayed if the search term occurs in any of the text inside the document. Your search looks in the current folder as well as all subfolders.

If you have no idea where to look for a file, you can expand your search to include the entire computer, not just a single folder. For more information, see Find a file or folder.

Copying and moving files and folders

Occasionally, you might want to change where files are stored on your computer. You might want to move files to a different folder, for example, or copy them to removable media (such as CDs or memory cards) to share with another person.

Most people copy and move files using a method called *drag and drop*. Start by opening the folder that contains the file or folder you want to move. Then open the folder where you want to move it to. Position the folder windows on the desktop so you can see the contents of both of them.

Next, drag the file or folder from the first folder to the second folder. That's all there is to it.

Press and drag   Release
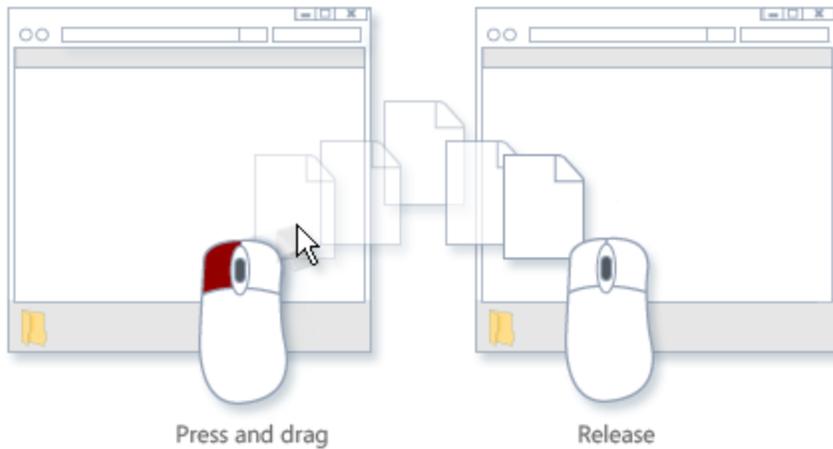
To copy or move a file, drag it from one folder to another

When using the drag-and-drop method, you might notice that sometimes the file or folder is copied, and at other times it is moved. Why is that? If you are dragging an item between folders that are on the same hard drive, then the items are moved so two copies of the same file or folder aren't created on the same hard drive. If you drag the item to a folder that's on a different hard drive (such as a network location, for example) or to removable media like a CD, then the item is copied. That way the file or folder isn't removed from its original location.

For more information about copying and moving files, see Moving and copying files by using the drag-and-drop method.

Creating and deleting files

The most common way to create new files is by using a program. For example, you can create a text document in a word processing program or a movie file in a video editing program.

Some programs create a file when you open them. When you open WordPad, for example, it starts with a blank page. This represents an empty (and unsaved) file. Start typing, and when you are ready to save your work, click **File** in the menu bar and then click **Save As**. In the dialog box that appears, type a file name that will help you find the file again in the future, and then click **Save**.

By default, most programs save files in common folders like Documents, Pictures, and Music, which makes it easy to find the files again next time. For more information on creating new files, see Save a file.

When you no longer need a file, you can remove it from your computer's hard disk to save space and keep your computer from getting cluttered with unwanted files. To delete a file, open the folder that contains the file and then select the file. Press DELETE and then, in the **Delete File** dialog box, click **Yes**.

When you delete a file, it's temporarily stored in the Recycle Bin. Think of the Recycle Bin as a safety folder that allows you to recover files or folders that you deleted accidentally. Occasionally, you should empty the Recycle Bin to reclaim all of the hard disk space being used by your unwanted files. To learn how to empty the Recycle Bin, see Permanently delete files from the Recycle Bin.

Opening an existing file

To open a file, double-click it. The file will open in the program that you used to create or edit it. If it's a text file, for example, it will open in your word-processing program.

That's not always the case, though. Double-clicking a digital picture, for example, will usually open a picture viewer. To actually edit the picture, you need to use a different program. Right-click the file, click **Open With**, and then click the name of the program that you want to use.