

Working with Files and Folders In Microsoft Windows XP

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Using Files under Microsoft Windows XP

Files are how information is stored on a computer, and they can hold a variety of information, from documents, to pictures, to even audio and video which has been recorded. Some files also hold instructions which tell the computer how to run programs.

In Microsoft Windows, the name of a file is divided into two sections. The first section allows you to have a description for the file, the second section allows Windows to tell what type of file it is and how it should be opened.

Files are divided into two basic sections



File Name - The file name is the first portion of a file, used to describe the contents of the file or the purpose the file if it is a program file. So for example if we created a document file we may give it a name of 'Financial Review for 2004' as this describes the documents contents for anyone else or when we are looking for the file again in the future.

The name of your file can be up to 255 characters in length, but there are some characters such as / \ ? * which cannot be used in the file name as they are reserved for use by Windows.

A program file on the other hand can be called something like 'setup', as this describes it as being a setup or installation program. Program files often have short and simple file names.

File Extension – While the file name tells you what's in the file, the file extension tells Windows what type of file it is and lets Windows look up a list of software it has to find out which program it needs to use to open the file. Without a file extension, Windows doesn't know what type of file it is and it won't be able to open the file.

File extensions are always the last part of the file name, and are usually made up by three letters which immediately follow the last full stop in a file name. File names in Windows can contain many full stops throughout the name, but there should always be a final full stop followed by the combination of letters which designate the file extension.

It is important to remember that a file extension tells Windows what type of file it is, not what program Windows should use to open it. It is up to Windows to decide what program to open the file type with, as Windows contains a list of programs it has installed, and this can differ from one computer to another.

So where our example file 'Microsoft Word Document.doc' ends in a .doc extension indicating that it is a Microsoft Word document, someone else may have a different program such as OpenOffice.org or StaOffice installed which Windows will use to open the .doc Microsoft Word type files.

If a computer does not have any software installed which is able to open a particular type of file, Windows will display a selection window asking you to choose which program you wish to try and use to open the file. Often in this scenario you will need to purchase software to work with that type of document, or possibly download some software for free off the Internet which can open that type of file.

Some common file extensions

.exe, .com, .bat, .dll, .sys	Are common files used by Windows to run programs
.bmp, .gif, .jpg, .tiff, .png	Are common photo and image files
.doc, .xls, .mdb, .pub	Are file types commonly created by Microsoft Office
.txt, .rtf, .pdf	Are types of files which are commonly used for documentation

Using Folders under Microsoft Windows XP

Folders, also known as directories, are containers used for organising the files on your computer, and normally hold files to do with a particular purpose or program.

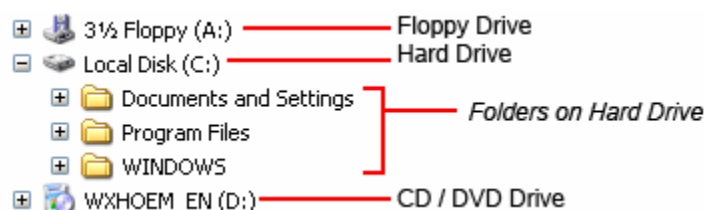
It's important to note though that folders are also capable of containing sub folders. Sub folders hold further files which are related to those located in the main folder, but require further separation from the main group of files. A good example of this would be if we were to have a main folder called 'Financial Reports', and then create sub folders for every year such as '2004', '2005'. Thus we can separate our files based on the year they are related to and not just leave all files in the main folder.

Drive letters, and why they are important to folders

Traditionally all folders and files have been kept in one place, and that was under what is called as a drive letter. Drive letters are displayed as letters followed by a colon in Windows, and the most common drive letter you will encounter is the C: drive. The C: drive is the first hard drive in your computer and this is normally where Windows will install all its files.

There are two other drive letters which you will commonly see, and these are the A: drive which used for floppy disks, and the D: drive which is used for CD or DVD discs. Both A: and B: are reserved for floppy drives, but B: is rarely used these days as computers normally have just one floppy disk drive.

CD-Rom or DVD drives are different to floppy disks as they share drive letters with hard drives, so for every hard drive and CD/DVD drive in a computer, each will have it's own letter starting in order from C:.



As most computers just have one hard drive and a single CD or DVD drive, you will normally find that only C: and D: are present, C: being the hard drive, and D: being the CD or DVD drive. But computers which have more than one hard drive or CD/DVD drive may have extra drive letters. Each additional drive that installed into a computer will increase the amount of drive letters, with CD/DVD drives normally coming last in the alphabetical order.

As an example, we might have a computer with two hard drives. This computer will still have a C: and a D: drive, but the D: drive is now another hard drive like C:, and not a CD/DVD drive. Our CD/DVD drive which would normally be D: is now the next available drive letter of E:.

People who work on office computers may also find that they have what are called network drives. Network drives are special drives which point to a shared area on another computer. The aim of a network drive is to allow workers to share files between each other. It is common for network drives to skip a number of letters and use a drive letter later in the alphabetical progression such as M:. Network drives are similar to hard drives in that you can normally save your files to a network drive the same way you would to your C: drive.

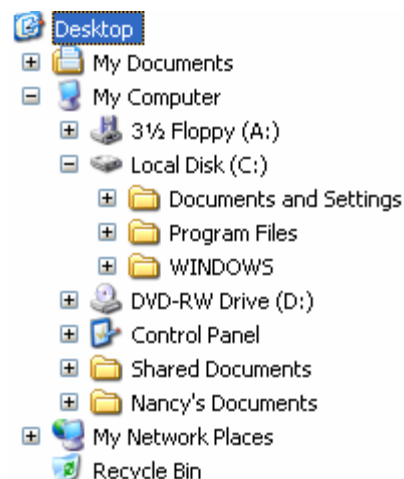
The important thing to remember when dealing with drives, is that each drive is a separate area in which you can create and store your folders and files. This makes a difference when you are trying to find your files later on. If you have two drives available, i.e. C: and D:, you may need to look in both drives if you forget where you saved a file, much the same as having two separate draws in a filing cabinet.

Important folders which are already present on your computer

When Microsoft Windows XP is installed it creates a number of folders to hold files it copies onto the hard disk of the computer. These folders created by Windows XP are the same for all computers running Windows XP.

Older versions of Windows simply created files and folders under your C: drive and allowed you to make your own files and folders where ever you like. Newer versions of Microsoft Windows have now evolved and contain special folders and shortcuts to assist you in keeping your files and folder organised and easy to find, and try to prevent you from saving your files into locations you probably shouldn't be.

The picture on the right shows the default layout of a computer system running Microsoft Windows XP, as viewed through Windows Explorer.



This layout shows our drive letters as well as special folders such as the 'My Documents' and 'Shared Documents' folders. Also note that Windows may also list My Documents by the users name, in this case 'Nancy's Documents'.

The three folders Windows XP will create on your C drive are 'Documents and Settings', 'Program Files', and 'Windows'.

The Program Files folder is where any programs you install will be stored, and it is not intended for saving your files, in fact Windows will present you with a warning if you try to browse into the Program Files folder to save any new files.

The Windows folder holds all the files for running Windows XP, and it too is not intended for files to be saved, and will also warn you if you try to browse into the Windows folder to save any new files.

The Documents and Settings folder is the location where files and settings are saved for every user who uses the computer. There is a folder under Documents and Settings for every user who has a login account on the computer, and this is where all there information is kept.

Under each users folder there are further folders containing files and settings for that user, including their My Documents folder and their Desktop folder.

My Computer

Now we need to make mention here while we still have our picture above to look at. You will notice that our drives and folders are listed in a tree fashion. Each folder or tree branch has a + symbol to its left, and clicking on this + symbol will actually display the folders located underneath it and so on.

One aspect with the newer version of Windows which catches most new users out at one point or another is the fact that drive letters and folders are now located under the My Computer icon. Previously drive letters would have been located as the first in the list and could always be seen when you try to find and open a file from within a program.

Quite often though if you are looking to open a file which you saved previously, you may be presented with a shorter list than that displayed above, and this list will look like the picture shown on the right.



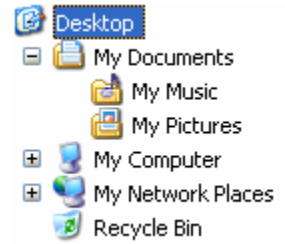
The thing to always remember here is that all drive letters are now located under the My Computer icon. So if we were to click the + symbol on the left of the My Computer icon in our picture here to the right, we would then see a list which looks like that shown in the picture previously above. And from there we can find our drives and folders we are looking for.

You will notice though that the My Documents folder is still listed at the top above the My Computer icon, and this is so you can always easily find the files you save in your My Documents folder.

My Documents & Shared Documents

Windows XP now focuses most of your activities around the My Documents folder. This My Documents folder is actually a shortcut to a folder on the C: drive located under your user folder in the Documents and Settings folder.

The My Documents folder also hosts a couple of other special sub folders called 'My Pictures' and 'My Music', which are to encourage you to keep your pictures and music organised away from just the root of your My Documents folder, and are recognised as such by programs.



It's strongly recommended that you save your files under your My Documents folder, as it is the easiest location to find them, and most programs you will use will look first in My Documents to find any files you create. It's also recommended that you create folders to better organise your files, and we will shortly cover how to do that.

As Windows XP is an operating system designed to allow multiple people to use it, everyone can have their own login which allows them to have unique settings as well as their own My Documents folder.

Each user's My Documents folder is protected from other users, so unless every user is an administrator user, they will not be able to see the files in someone else's My Documents folder. This is where the 'Shared Documents' folder comes in. The Shared Documents folder is another special shortcut to an area on the C: drive which everyone is allowed to use, so any files placed in the Shared Documents folder can be accessed by any other person who uses that computer.

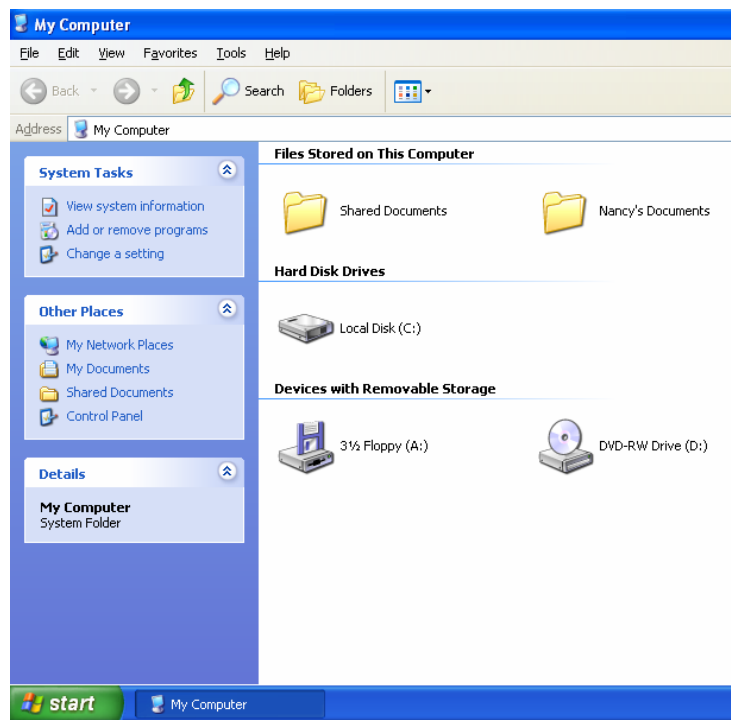
Navigating Folders

The main tool in Windows XP for navigating files and folders is called Windows Explorer. There are two common ways which users can access Windows Explorer and this is via the My Computer in the Start Menu (or desktop if it is enabled), or via the Windows Explorer shortcut in the start menu. There is a key difference between each method, and will affect how you will navigate through files and folders.

By using the My Computer icon, you will be able to navigate the folders in a step by step fashion, very similar to that used by Apple Macintosh computers.



Opening My Computer from the Start Menu

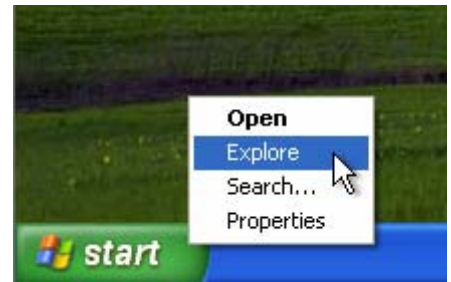


View of drives and folders in My Computer view

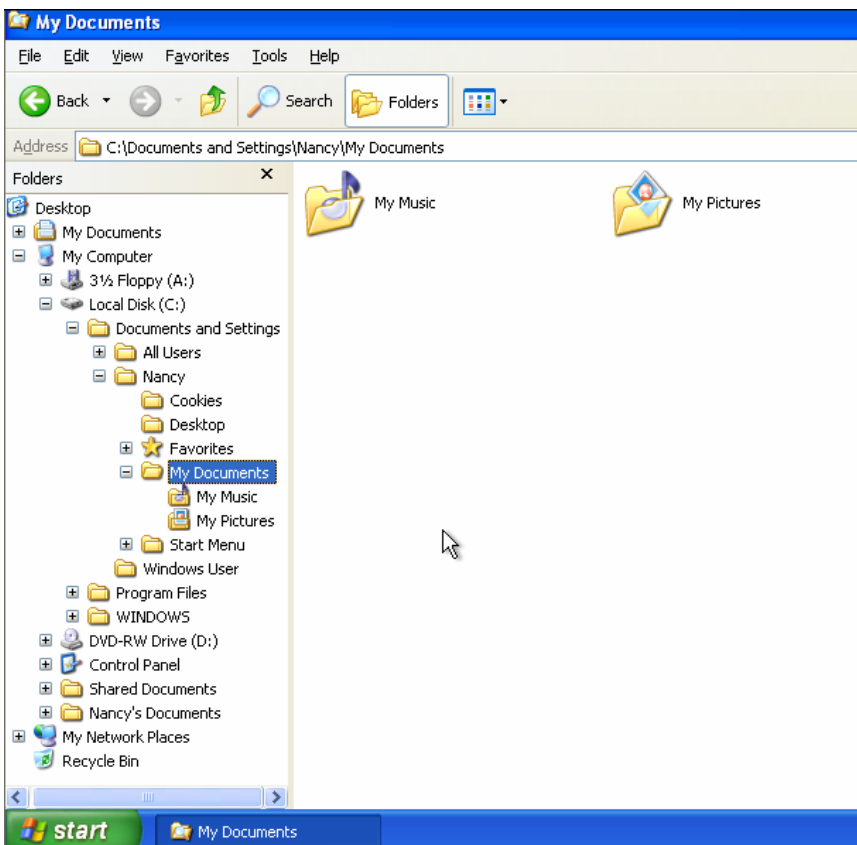
To get a better overview of your folders and files, using the Windows Explorer shortcut will provide you with a browsing window which shows files and folders on the right hand side and an index of their locations on the left, making it very quick to browse through folders and also quickly see and jump to other folder locations and drives.



Opening Windows Explorer from the Start Menu
All Programs -> Accessories -> Windows Explorer



Shortcut for Windows Explorer
1. Click once with the right mouse button on the Start button.
2. Select Explore from the menu.



View of drives and folders in Windows Explorer view

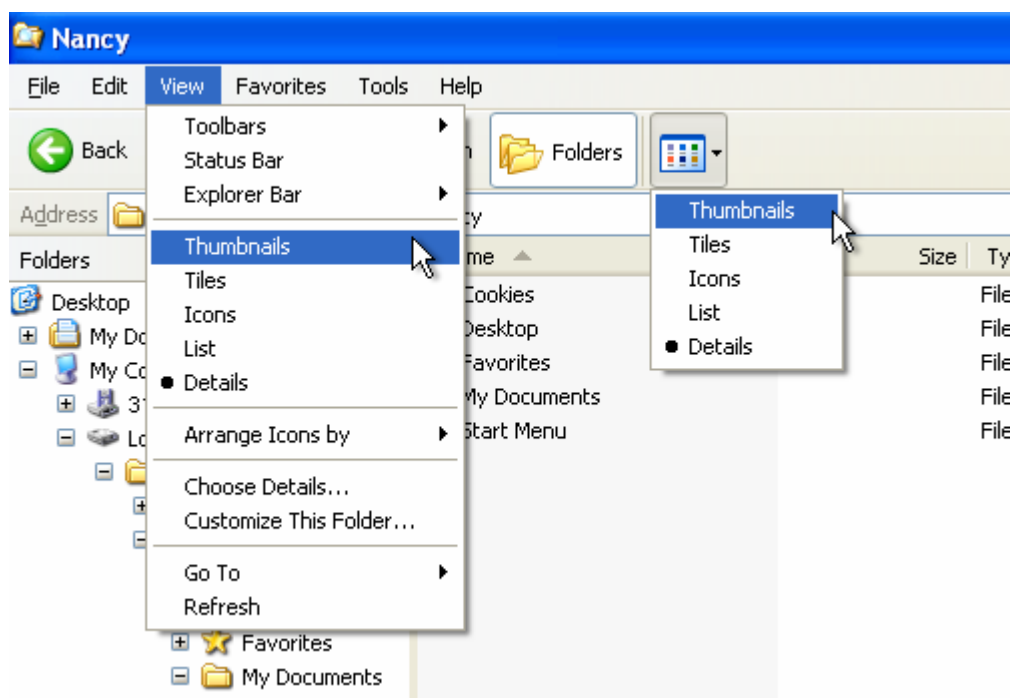
Altering your view on files and folders

When using Windows Explorer there are a number of options available to you which will enhance the way in which you can work with your files and folders.

View Options

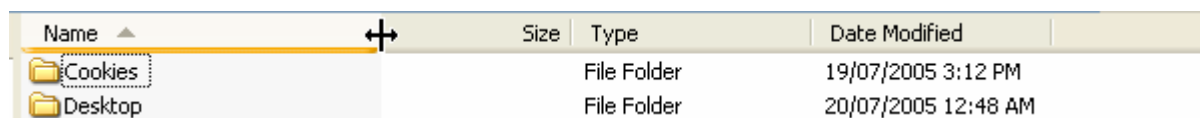
The view options will offer you the ability to show your files and folders in large and small sized icons, and even show small preview thumbnails if your folder has any pictures in it. The view options will also give you the ability to display a detailed view of information for the type of files which are being shown, and when they were created or last modified. You can then actually sort your list of files according to the newest files.

To change the view on a folder, you can use either the view icon, or the view menu. Both are located at the top of the Windows Explorer or My Computer window. When selected they will offer you the options to choose from Thumbnails, Tiles, Icons, List and Details view.

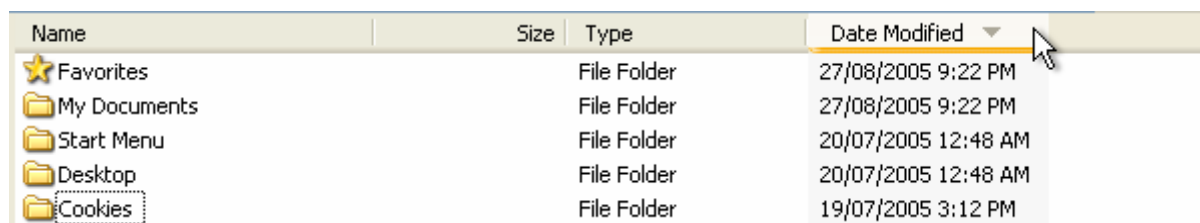


Windows Explorer showing both the view selection menu and the icon list open.

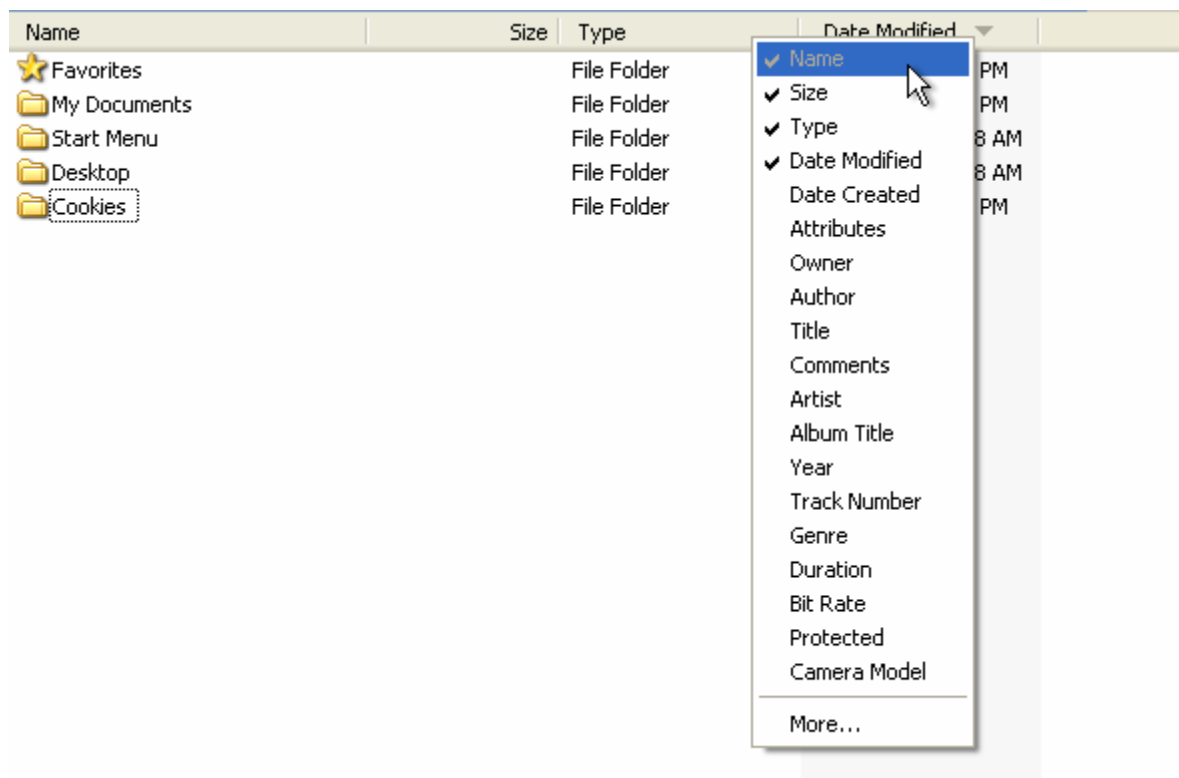
When in details view, file information is displayed in columns. These columns can be adjusted by using your mouse to drag the divider mark between each column left or right to suit your desired width.



You can change the order which files are listed by clicking on a column heading, each click will change from ascending and descending, indicated by the direction of the arrow marker in the heading.



You can also add or remove columns when in details view, allowing you to display additional information about the files that are being displayed. Columns can be adjusted by right clicking on any column heading and adding a tick next to the columns you wish to display, or removing the tick from the columns you no longer wish to display.

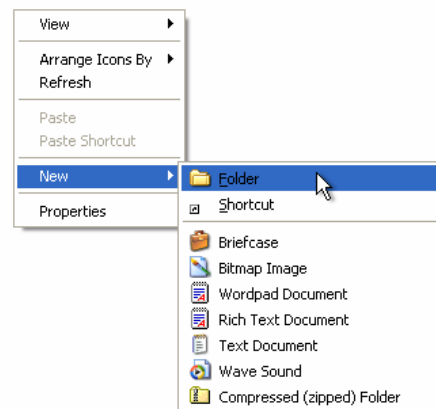


Creating New Folders

You can create new folders in Windows Explorer by right clicking once in a white area where you wish to create a new folder and then choosing New, and Folder.

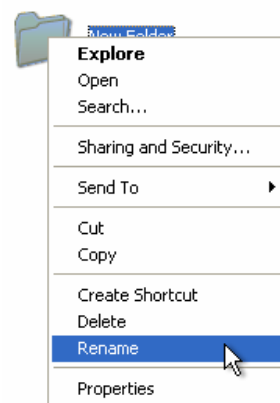
A folder will appear called New Folder and be in rename mode. At this point you can type in a name for your new folder and press enter.

If you accidentally click somewhere you may need to manually rename the new folder from New Folder to what you wish to call it as outlined below.



Renaming Files and Folders

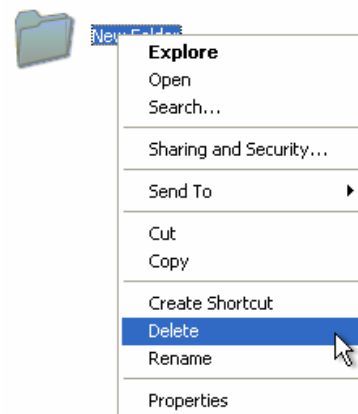
To rename a file or a folder, right click on the file or folder you wish to rename and then choose Rename from the menu. The file will then be put into rename mode where you can enter a new name or edit the existing name.



Deleting Files and Folders

To delete a file or a folder, right click on the file or folder you wish to delete and choose Delete from the menu. You will be asked whether you are sure you wish to delete the file or folder and you may select yes if you are sure.

Be sure to remember that if you delete a folder, any files or others folders which might be contained in that folder will also be deleted. If you do not wish to delete them, then you can use the following steps to move them to another location first.



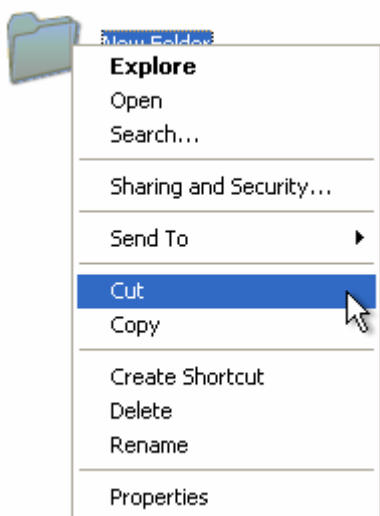
Moving or Copying Files and Folders

Moving and copying files or folders is a two step process, the first step is different depending on whether you wish to copy or move the file or folder, the second step is the same for both copy or move.

To copy a file or folder, right click on the file or folder and select Copy from the menu.

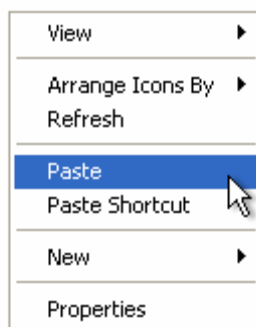
To move a file or folder, right click on the file or folder and select Cut from the menu.

You will now need to go to the folder where you wish to copy or move the file or folder to. Right click in a white area of the destination folder and choose Paste from the menu. Your file or folder will now be copied or moved.



Step 1.

Right click on the file or folder.
Select Cut to Move, or Copy.

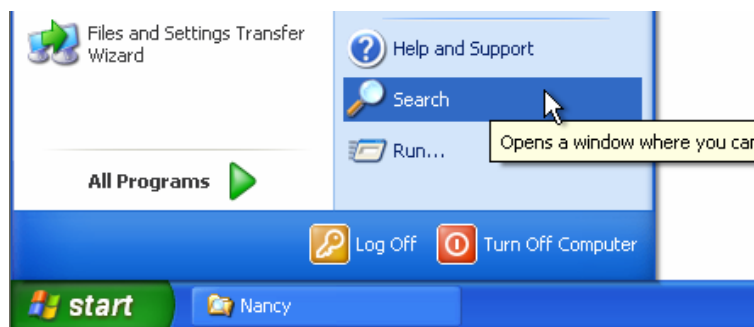


Step 2.

Browse to the destination folder.
Right click in an empty area and select Paste.

Searching for files and folders

Every now and then you might find that you know you have created or saved a file or folder, but you cannot for the life of you find where it is on your computer anymore. This is where the search feature of Windows XP comes in handy. The search feature is located under the Start Menu.



When you select search, a new window appears from which you are able to select which type of search you wish to perform. To search for files or folders we need to select 'All files and folders'. There are two other options for search pictures, music and video, as well as documents, these can help if you are searching for these types of files only, but as we will cover you can do the same search for these documents and others once you understand the file extensions used by the files.

By default when you select to search for All files and folders, you will be presented with the options displayed in the picture to the right.

The 'look in' field is where Windows will search for the details you are looking for. By default it will search all hard disks in the computer, but if you wish to search just a particular folder which will make the search must faster, then you can change this option and use the Browse option to choose a folder you wish to search in.

Searches will by default search the hard drive or folder which is selected, plus all folders that are located under them.

The first field titled 'All or part of the file name' can be used to search for a phrase or word you know was present in the name of the file you are looking for.

If you don't know what the file was named, but know what type of file it was, you can search for files ending in that particular file extension.

For instance, if we created a word document, but have forgotten what we called the file, we can search the hard disk for any word document files by entering *.doc in the top search field.

The * symbol is a wildcard which means that it can match anything. By placing a * before .doc we are asking Windows to search for any file which ends in .doc, which will be word documents. We can then look through the list of results to see if we recognise any files it finds.

As with Windows Explorer, you can adjust the details view so it displays the information you can then sort the results with. This is helpful if you have a lot of results from a search, as you can then sort the results by date and look at the results which are only in the date range you are searching for.

The second field searches for a word or phrase inside files. This is best used in combination with the first field to further limit the results you receive. For example if we are searching for *.doc but do know that the word December is inside the file, we can enter December in the second field along with *.doc in the first field. This will show all word documents with the word December in them.

