

Store Files Safely, Take Them Wherever You Go, and Easily Share Them with Others!

This article shows you:

- ✓ How the free Dropbox service works
- ✓ How Dropbox copies your files between your devices
- ✓ How to share files and folders with friends and family

With PCs, tablet computers and smartphones at your disposal, you can have Internet access wherever you go. So why should you have to leave all your files at home? By using the free Dropbox service, you can make your files available from any device just by copying them to a special 'Dropbox' folder on your PC. Usefully too, you can share files and even whole folders with other people without having to send large email attachments or put CDs in the post. Read on to learn how to get the best out of Dropbox.



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Dropbox Basics: How It Works

Files exist on only one of your PCs

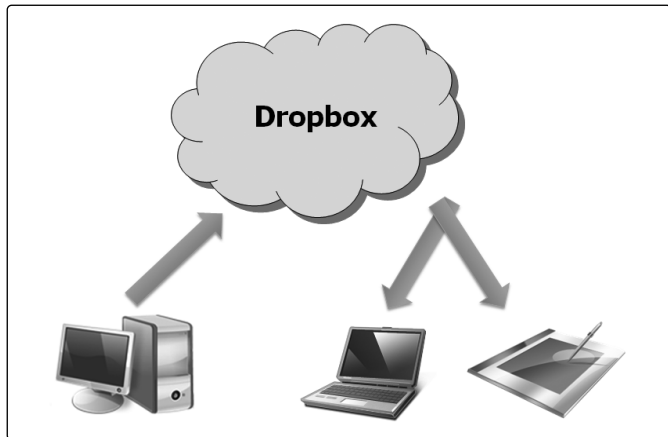
You can copy them by hand...

...but it's not straightforward

The trouble with computers is that all your files are stuck in one place. If you create a document on your main PC, you can't open it on your notebook or tablet – it's not there!

Of course, there are ways around this. If both computers are connected to your home network, you could copy the file from one to the other, or you could do it using a USB flash drive, but it's a bit of a palaver.

And it gets worse: if you later edit the document on your main PC, you have to repeat the process to make sure you have the latest copy on your notebook or tablet. And if you edit the document on one of those portable computers, you have to do the same in reverse so that your main PC has the new version.



Dropbox has the solution. When you sign up for a free account and install the Dropbox software on your PC, a new 'Dropbox' folder is created automatically on your PC. Install the software on your notebook and/or tablet too, and they'll also gain a 'Dropbox' folder.

Now move or save any file into the 'Dropbox' folder on any of these computers, and the Dropbox software will automatically copy it to the same folder on your other computers. And if you make changes to the file on one of your PCs, Dropbox will copy the new version to your other computers to replace the old.

All this is handled by means of the Internet. When you sign up for your free account, Dropbox gives you 2 GB of storage space on its Internet server – enough for around 400 digital photos or thousands of ordinary word-processor documents and spreadsheets. The files you store in the 'Dropbox' folder on your PC are automatically copied to your private space on the Dropbox server using your Internet connection. The Dropbox software on your other computers watches for any changes to your files on the server and downloads any new or changed files to those computers. The result is that all your computers have the same files in their 'Dropbox' folders, and copies of those files are also stored in your private space on the Dropbox server.

The same files are also stored privately online...

So what happens if you add a new file to your 'Dropbox' folder on one of your PCs while your other PC is switched off? Quite simply, next time you switch on the other PC and the Dropbox software starts running, it will then look for changes and automatically fetch any new or changed files from the Dropbox server. (That's assuming this PC has Internet access, of course. If it doesn't, this will happen next time you connect it to the Internet.)



What are the benefits of using Dropbox?

The first and most obvious benefit is the one we've covered above: the files you need on all your PCs are always there. That's helpful even if your PCs always stay in your home, but it's especially useful if you take a notebook, tablet or

Your vital files always travel with you

smartphone on your travels. As long as the files you need are stored in Dropbox, they're always available.



Even if you don't take any sort of computer with you when you travel, you can still get your hands on your files. As long as you can find a PC with Internet access, you can log into your account at the Dropbox website and see what you've stored there. You may have to download files you want to view or edit (the Dropbox website can display some types of file, but not all), and delete them from the PC when you've finished with them, but at least they're available!

Dropbox has other benefits too, so let's run through them quickly. Later in this article I'll explain how to take advantage of them.

Keep backups
somewhere safe

- **Secure off-site backups:** we all know how important it is to keep backup copies of your irreplaceable files, and that those backups should be stored on a separate disk. But safest of all is to keep them somewhere 'off-site', out of the house, and Dropbox gives you an easy way to do that.

Upload photos
on your travels

- **Backup photos on the move:** as well as software for ordinary PCs, Dropbox offers similar apps for smartphones. After you've taken photos with your smartphone, you can use its Dropbox app to upload the photos to Dropbox – perhaps to ensure they can't be lost or deleted, or in order to delete them from the phone and regain space to take more, or to share them with family and friends.

Send files more
flexibly than
using email

- **Share individual files with other people:** the files you store on Dropbox are private, but if you'd like to share a particular file with some-one else, that's easily done. With a couple of clicks, you can send an email message to someone containing a direct link to the file – even someone who doesn't use Dropbox themselves.

That's a great deal easier than sending files by email or post, and gets around the size limits imposed by email services.

- **Share entire folders:** you can share a whole folder of files with another Dropbox user. As an example, inside your 'Dropbox' folder you might create a new 'Family Tree' folder and place your genealogy research and family photos in it. You can share this folder with your family: provided they also use Dropbox, the folder will appear in their own 'Dropbox' folders, and they can view and (if you allow them) even edit files and add their own files to it.
- **Create and share photo albums:** even if you don't imagine yourself sharing documents, photos are absolutely designed to be shared! Create a 'Holiday Photos' folder and share it with your family before you go, and as you add photos to it, your relatives will be able to keep up with your travels.

Allow others to collaborate on a folder's files

Make photo sharing easy

Everything you choose to 'share' on Dropbox works by invitation: you use the Dropbox website to send an email to particular people inviting them to join a shared folder, to download a particular file or to view a photo album. Only those you specifically invite can do this, and can't access any of your files besides those you invited them to see.

Create an Account and Install the Software

If you like the sound of Dropbox and you'd like to give it a try yourself, the first thing to do is to sign up for a free account and then download and install the Dropbox software. Follow these steps:

Set up your free Dropbox account

1. Start your favourite web browser and visit:
www.dropbox.com/basic.



2. On the web page that opens, click the Sign up for free button. This leads you to a simple form that asks for your first and last names, your email address and a good strong password. Tick the box to indicate you agree to the Dropbox terms and then click the **Create an account** button.



Make sure you really do choose a strong password, this protects your files! It should be at least eight characters in length, using a mixture of numbers, and upper- and lowercase letters, and ideally the odd symbol too.

Choose
'Dropbox Basic'

3. On the next page, ignore the suggestion to try the premium 'Dropbox Plus' and instead click the words **Continue with 2 GB Dropbox Basic plan.** (Later, if you decide you need more than 2 GB of storage space at Dropbox, you'll be able to upgrade to the Plus edition at around £8 per month, but there's no point in committing yourself to any expense at this stage!)

Download
Dropbox...

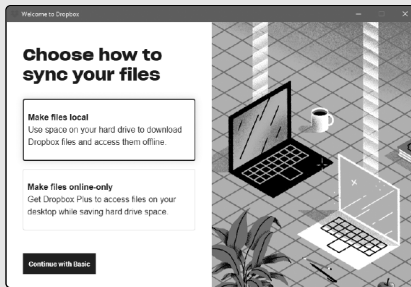
4. On the next page, click the **Download Dropbox** button. This downloads the setup program for Dropbox, a small file named 'DropboxInstaller' which should arrive within a few seconds.

...and install it

5. Find the file you've just downloaded (perhaps by pressing **(Ctrl) + (J)** to see your web browser's Downloads list) and click or double-click it to start the installation.



- Click **Yes** at the security prompt and the installation happens entirely automatically, downloading the Dropbox files and installing the software on your PC. When that's finished, a window will appear confirming that Dropbox has been installed. In this window, click the **Next** button. This leads to the step pictured below: here, click on **Make files local** (since the other option requires the premium Dropbox Plus) and click the **Continue with Basic** button.



- Next you'll see an offer to keep your PC backed up – or at least, your Desktop, Documents and Downloads folders. In other words, besides storing the contents of your 'Dropbox' folder online, Dropbox is offering to do the same with these three folders too. There's certainly a benefit to keeping your Documents folder backed up in this way (although I'm not convinced the same is true of your Desktop and Downloads folders), but is that going to eat up a big chunk of your 2 GB of available space? If you chose to, you could select folders by ticking and unticking the checkboxes beside them and click **Next**, but my suggestion is to skip this for the time being, at least while you get used to Dropbox, by clicking **Not now**, followed by **Continue to Dropbox** in the pop-up.

**Suggestion: click
Not now**

Your Dropbox folder opens

8. Finally, a File Explorer window will open showing your Dropbox folder. This contains just a couple of files: a link to information about 'Dropbox Paper' – a separate feature which probably won't be of interest – and a PDF file named 'Get Started with Dropbox' which you might like to read (but of course I'll run through all the basics over the coming pages).

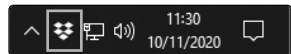


While Dropbox was being installed, a few other things have happened which I'll run through quickly. First, a web page has opened inviting you to install Dropbox on your smartphone: you can enter your mobile number and have a link to the Dropbox app texted to your phone. Second, you've received an email asking you to verify your email address: click the link in that email (which opens a confirmatory page in your browser). Third, a Dropbox shortcut icon has been added to your desktop which you don't really need: feel free to delete that.

Dropbox icon in the tray

Quick points worth knowing about Dropbox

- When Dropbox is running, you'll see its icon in the tray section of the taskbar near the clock. As with all the icons that appear here, you may have to click the little chevron symbol at the left of the tray to reveal it in a pop-up panel. If you'd like this icon to be permanently visible for easier access, you can drag it out of the panel to the main part of the tray.
- Dropbox runs all the time (so the little tray icon should always be there): this is so that it can keep an eye on your Dropbox folder and your Dropbox online storage and ensure that both always contain the same files. If you stop Dropbox, this 'synchronisation' won't happen (on this PC) until you start it again.

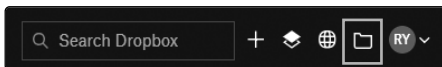


Is Dropbox running?

- If you'd prefer that Dropbox didn't run constantly, you can tell it not to. Click the Dropbox icon to display its own pop-up panel, then click your circled initials in its top-right corner and choose **Preferences**. In the Preferences window that opens, remove the tick beside **Start Dropbox on system startup** and click **OK**, and Dropbox won't start next time Windows starts. If you want to stop Dropbox (now or at any time), click the Dropbox icon, click your circled initials again and choose **Quit**. You can start it again by clicking the **Dropbox** icon on your Start menu (or Start screen in Windows 8.1).
- Whenever you want to open your Dropbox folder, either double-click the Dropbox icon in the tray, or click the icon once and click the **Open Dropbox folder** icon near the top-right of its panel. You can also find your way to it yourself in File Explorer at `C:\Users\[your name]\Dropbox`.

Stop and start Dropbox manually

Quickly open your Dropbox folder



Set up Dropbox on your other devices

As you'll have gathered from earlier pages in this article, Dropbox isn't only for people with two or more computers: there's a value in having your files stored online at Dropbox for backup purposes, and you can access them on any other computer by visiting the Dropbox website and logging into your account.

However, if you do have a notebook PC or a tablet computer that runs a version of Windows, you can set up Dropbox on that PC too. If you do, as I explained earlier, files you place in your Dropbox folder on either PC will be copied automatically to your online Dropbox account and, from there, to the Dropbox folder on your other computer.

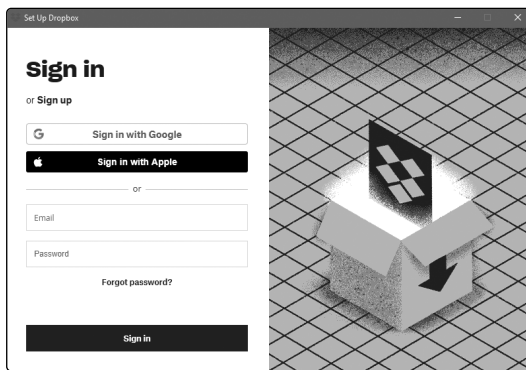
In order to set up Dropbox on another Windows computer, first start any web browser on that computer and then visit

It's useful to have your files stored online

You can set up Dropbox on your other PCs too

Install the software again

www.dropbox.com/download. That immediately starts the download of the Dropbox setup file, and you click or double-click its icon to begin the installation. That all happens much as it did before, with one exception: straight after the installation has finished, an extra step is inserted which asks you to sign in to your Dropbox account on this computer: type the email address and password for your account and click **Sign in**.



Confirm the email enquiry

Soon after doing this, you'll receive an email from Dropbox saying that another computer has just signed into your Dropbox account and wanting to check it was really you. It was, of course, so click the **Yes** button in this message, and then close the confirmatory web page that appears.

Do you have a third PC? If so, you can repeat the steps above on that one as well, and the Dropbox folders on all three computers will be kept synchronised with each other as well as with your private storage space on the Dropbox website.



Do you have a tablet computer or smartphone that runs something other than Windows? If so, there are Dropbox apps available for Android devices and the Apple

iPhone and iPad. In this article, we're concerned with Windows computers, of course, but you can find links to the appropriate page at your device's online App Store by visiting www.dropbox.com/mobile.

Use Dropbox to Copy Files Between Your PCs

Now you're ready to start putting Dropbox to use, and if you're familiar with moving files around on your computer, this will be second nature.

Let's say that in your 'My Documents' folder you have a Word document containing the contact details for all your relatives, friends and colleagues. You'd like this file to be available on all your PCs, as well as from your private space on the Dropbox website (so that you can access it from any PC). You'd also like to be sure that whenever you edit it – to change someone's details or to add a new contact – this new version will be automatically available everywhere. Here's what to do:

1. Make your way to your 'Documents' (or 'My Documents') folder to find that contacts file. When you locate the file, right-click it and choose Cut from the context menu.

By choosing Cut you'll be moving the file from your 'Documents' folder to your 'Dropbox' folder. If you prefer, after right-clicking the file you could choose Copy instead: this way you'd be making a copy of the file in your 'Dropbox' folder. This would obviously mean that this computer would have two copies of the file – one in your 'Documents' folder and one in your 'Dropbox' folder, and that might get confusing!

Add a file to your Dropbox folder



Paste the file into the Dropbox folder

Dropbox automatically synchronises



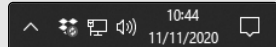
A green tick indicates this has been done

2. Now open your 'Dropbox' folder. You can do this by navigating to C:\Users\[your name]\Dropbox in the current Explorer window, or by following the method given on page 9.
3. Now you're looking at the contents of your 'Dropbox' folder. Right-click a blank white space in the folder and choose Paste. When you do this, Windows will move (or copy) the file you cut or copied in step 1 into this folder.
4. Now Dropbox works its magic. In the bottom-left corner of the file's icon you'll see a circular blue badge containing semi-circular arrows. This indicates that Dropbox has started 'synchronising' this newly-arrived file; in other words, the file is being copied to your private space on the Dropbox website and, from there, to any other computers on which you've installed Dropbox.



This 'synchronisation' may happen very quickly if the file is a small one and/or if your Internet connection is fast, so you may barely have time to notice this blue badge.

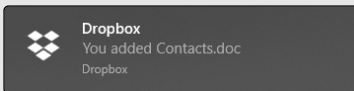
You'll also notice that the little Dropbox icon in the tray gains the same blue badge while new files are being 'synchronised'.



5. Once the file has been synchronised, that blue badge will be replaced with a green one containing a tick: this tells you that the file has now been copied to the Dropbox website and it's currently being copied to any other computers on which you use Dropbox. If you did install Dropbox on another PC which is switched on and connected



to the Internet, open its Dropbox folder and have a look! When the file arrives on that PC, a notification like the one below should also briefly appear, telling you so.



6. Here's something else you might like to try if you have Dropbox on two or more computers. On your second computer, open the file you've just added to Dropbox, edit it in some way and then save it.
7. On your first PC, glance at the same file's icon in your 'Dropbox' folder, or glance at the Dropbox icon in the tray, and you'll briefly see that blue badge indicating that something's happening. Sure enough, if you open that file, you'll see it contains the changes you just made on the second PC. As quickly and simply as that, Dropbox has spotted the change to this document and updated all your copies of it.

Any other change you make in your Dropbox folder on any PC will be synchronised across all of them in the same way. If you rename a file, you'll see its new name on each PC; if you delete a file from the Dropbox folder on any PC (or move a file out of the Dropbox folder and put it somewhere else) it will be removed from all your Dropbox folders.

Although the Dropbox software does clever things with this folder, it's really just like any other folder, and it pays to keep it organised! You can create new folders inside it and use them to keep particular files together (or separate from the rest), making them easy to find. As always, folders you create in your Dropbox folder, and files you place inside them, are reflected across all your PCs and on the Dropbox website.



Send a Single File to Someone

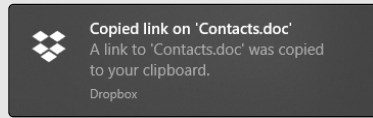
Allow someone to download one of your files



You've placed a file in your Dropbox folder (or, perhaps, in a folder you've created inside your Dropbox folder) and you'd like to let a friend have a copy of the file. Easy – you can send your friend an email message containing a link to the file. Here's how to do it:

Just paste the link into an email message

1. Open your Dropbox folder, then find and right-click the file you want to share. On the context menu that appears, choose **Copy Dropbox link**.
2. Almost instantly, you'll see a notification saying that a link to this file has been copied to your clipboard.



3. Now start your email program, compose an email message to your friend and, at the beginning of a blank line in the message, paste the link from the clipboard by right-clicking and choosing **Paste** or by pressing **(Ctrl) + (V)**. (Be sure to make it clear in the email message that it really is a personal message from you: many email users are rightly suspicious of messages containing links.)
4. When your friend receives the email message, he can click the link and read and/or download the file using links on the web page. Of course, that's all he'll be able to see: the rest of your Dropbox files are private!

Your friend can download the file



An important point to note about sharing a single file is that your own copy of the file is safe and secure, and can't be changed: your friend simply downloads his own copy. That's a little different from what happens when you share a folder, explained below.

Share a Whole Folder with Someone

Earlier I gave the example of sharing all your family history research with members of your family via Dropbox by placing the relevant files in a folder and sharing that folder with them. In this case, the word 'sharing' is a good description of what happens to that folder: your family must also be using Dropbox to access its contents, and you can allow them to add more files to it and edit those that are already there.

Let's see how folder sharing works in practice:

1. Inside your Dropbox folder (on any of your PCs), create a new folder named – for instance – 'Family Tree'.
2. Move or copy your family tree files into this folder. (Again, moving the files into this folder ensures you won't have two copies of the files on your PC, thus avoiding confusion about which are the most up-to-date versions.) Everything you've placed in this 'Family Tree' folder will be synchronised automatically by Dropbox in the usual way, and circled green-and-white ticks over the icons will tell you when this has been done. As always, if you have a second computer, you'll find the same 'Family Tree' folder in the Dropbox folder on that one as well.
3. Now right-click this 'Family Tree' folder and choose **View on Dropbox.com**.
4. Your web browser will open and whisk you to the Dropbox website where you'll be looking at the contents of this 'Family Tree' folder. At the right of the page, click on **Share folder**.
5. Now you'll see a pop-up box like the one pictured on the next page. Beside **To**, type the email address of someone with whom you want to share the folder.

Allow others to view and edit a folder's contents



Add a new folder to Dropbox

Share the folder

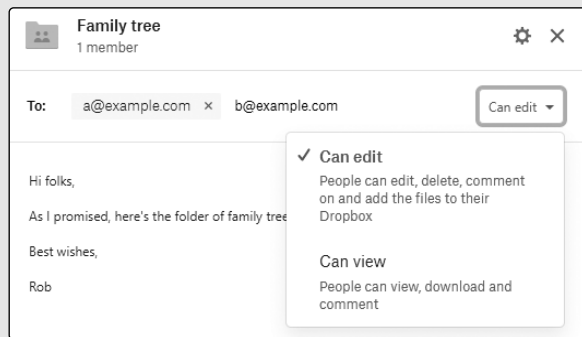
Type contacts' email addresses

Type a personal message

Choose whether contacts can edit your files or not

If you want to share it with more than one person, type a semi-colon (;) at the end of the address and type the next, and so on – for as many people as you like.

6. Below the addresses, type any personal message you like, which your chosen contacts will receive in the email message Dropbox will send to them.
7. Next, do you wish to allow these people to edit the files in this folder (thus editing everyone's copies of them) or simply to view them. Currently you'll see that the text beside the email addresses says **Can edit**, but if you'd prefer to allow your contacts only to view and download the files without being able to change them, click that text and choose **Can view** instead.
8. Finally, click the **Share** button.



The contacts you chose will each receive an email containing your message and a link to your folder. They'll click the link, sign into their Dropbox accounts and see a pop-up invitation to add your folder to their own Dropbox.