

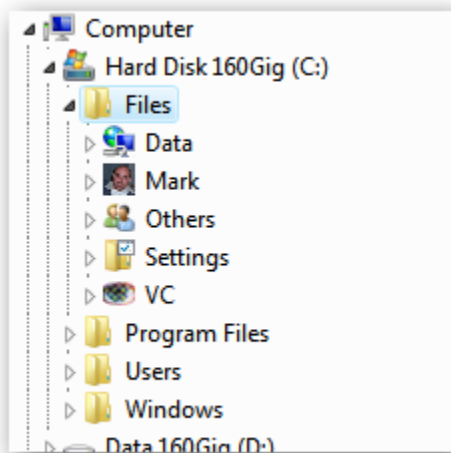
40 Best Tips on Getting Organized

Tip #1. Choose Your Organization System Carefully

The reason that most people are not organized is that it takes *time*. And the *first* thing that takes time is deciding upon a system of organization. This is always a matter of personal preference, and is *not* something that a geek on a website can tell you. You should always choose your own system, based on how your own brain is organized (which makes the assumption that your brain is, in fact, organized).

We can't instruct you, but we *can* make suggestions:

- You may want to start off with a system based on the users of the computer. i.e. “My Files”, “My Wife’s Files”, “My Son’s Files”, etc. Inside “My Files”, you might then break it down into “Personal” and “Business”. You may then realize that there are overlaps. For example, everyone may want to share access to the music library, or the photos from the school play. So you may create another folder called “Family”, for the “common” files.
- You may decide that the highest-level breakdown of your files is based on the “source” of each file. In other words, who created the files. You could have “Files created by ME (business or personal)”, “Files created by people I know (family, friends, etc)”, and finally “Files created by the rest of the world (MP3 music files, downloaded or ripped movies or TV shows, software installation files, gorgeous desktop wallpaper images you’ve collected, etc).” This system happens to be the one I use myself. See below:



Mark is for files created by me

VC is for files created by my company (Virtual Creations)

Others is for files created by my friends and family

Data is the rest of the world

Also, **Settings** is where I store the configuration files and other program data files for my installed software (more on this in tip #34, below).

- Each folder will present its own particular set of requirements for further *sub*-organization. For example, you may decide to organize your music collection into sub-folders based on the artist's name, while your *digital photos* might get organized based on the date they were taken. It can be different for every sub-folder!
- Another strategy would be based on "currentness". Files you have yet to open and look at live in one folder. Ones that have been looked at but not yet filed live in another place. Current, active projects live in yet another place. All other files (your "archive", if you like) would live in a fourth folder. (And of course, within that last folder you'd need to create a further sub-system based on one of the previous bullet points).

Put some thought into this - changing it when it proves incomplete can be a big hassle! Before you go to the trouble of implementing any system you come up with, examine a wide cross-section of the files you own and see if they will all be able to find a nice logical place to sit within your system.

Tip #2. When You Decide on Your System, *Stick to It!*

There's nothing more pointless than going to all the trouble of creating a system and filing all your files, and then whenever you create, receive or download a *new* file, you simply dump it onto your Desktop. You need to be disciplined - forever! Every new file you get, *spend those extra few seconds to file it where it belongs!* Otherwise, in just a month or two, you'll be worse off than before - half your files will be organized and half will be disorganized - *and you won't know which is which!*

Tip #3. Choose the Root Folder of Your Structure Carefully

Every data file (document, photo, music file, etc) that you create, own or is important to you, no matter where it came from, should be found within *one single folder*, and that one single folder should be located at the root of your C: drive (as a sub-folder of C:\). In other words, do *not* base your folder structure in standard folders like "My Documents". If you do, then you're leaving it up to the operating system engineers to decide what folder structure is best for you. And every operating system has a different system! In Windows 7 your files are found in **C:\Users\YourName**, whilst on Windows XP it was **C:\Documents and Settings\YourName\My Documents**. In UNIX systems it's often **/home/YourName**.

These standard default folders tend to fill up with junk files and folders that are not at all important to you. "My Documents" is the worst offender. Every second piece of software you install, it seems, likes to create its own folder in the "My Documents" folder. These folders usually don't fit within your organizational structure, so don't use them! In fact, don't even use the "My Documents" folder at all. Allow it to fill up with junk, and then simply ignore it. It sounds heretical, but: Don't ever visit your "My Documents" folder! Remove your icons/links to "My Documents" and replace them with links to the folders *you* created and *you* care about!

Create your own file system from scratch! Probably the best place to put it would be on your **D:** drive - if you have one. This way, all *your* files live on one drive, while all the operating system and software component files live on the C: drive - simply and elegantly separated. The benefits

of that are profound. Not only are there obvious organizational benefits (see tip #10, below), but when it comes to migrate your data to a new computer, you can (sometimes) simply unplug your D: drive and plug it in as the D: drive of your new computer (this implies that the D: drive is actually a separate physical disk, and not a partition on the same disk as C:). You also get a slight speed improvement (again, only if your C: and D: drives are on separate physical disks).

Warning: From tip #12, below, you will see that it's actually a good idea to have exactly the same file system structure - including the drive it's filed on - on *all* of the computers you own. So if you decide to use the **D:** drive as the storage system for your own files, make sure you are able to use the D: drive on *all* the computers you own. If you can't ensure that, then you can still use a clever geeky trick to store your files on the **D:** drive, but still access them all via the **C:** drive (see tip #17, below).

If you only have one hard disk (**C:**), then create a dedicated folder that will contain *all* your files - something like **C:\Files**. The name of the folder is not important, but make it a single, brief word.

There are several reasons for this:

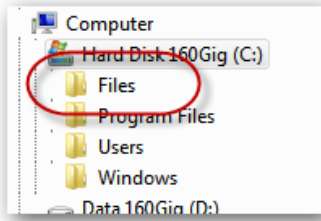
- When creating a backup regime, it's easy to decide what files should be backed up - they're all in the one folder!
- If you ever decide to trade in your computer for a new one, you know exactly which files to migrate
- You will always know where to begin a search for any file
- If you synchronize files with other computers, it makes your synchronization routines very simple. It also causes all your shortcuts to continue to work on the other machines (more about this in tip #24, below).

Once you've decided where your files should go, then put *all* your files in there - *Everything!* Completely disregard the standard, default folders that are created for you by the operating system ("My Music", "My Pictures", etc). In fact, you can actually relocate many of those folders into your own structure (more about that below, in tip #6).

The more completely you get all your data files (documents, photos, music, etc) *and* all your configuration settings into that one folder, then the easier it will be to perform all of the above tasks.

Once this has been done, and all *your* files live in *one* folder, all the *other* folders in C:\ can be thought of as "operating system" folders, and therefore of little day-to-day interest for us.

Here's a screenshot of a nicely organized C: drive, where all user files are located within the **\Files** folder:



Tip #4. Use Sub-Folders

This would be our simplest and most obvious tip. It almost goes without saying. Any organizational system you decide upon (see tip #1) will require that you create sub-folders for your files. Get used to creating folders on a regular basis.

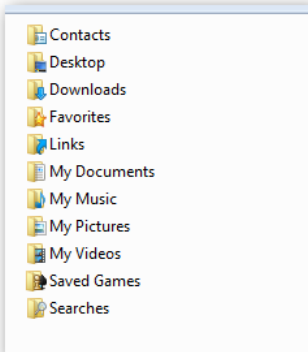
Tip #5. Don't be Shy About Depth

Create as many levels of sub-folders as you need. Don't be scared to do so. Every time you notice an opportunity to group a set of related files into a sub-folder, do so. Examples might include: All the MP3s from one music CD, all the photos from one holiday, or all the documents from one client.

It's perfectly okay to put files into a folder called **C:\Files\Me\From Others\Services\WestCo Bank\Statements\2009**. That's only seven levels deep. Ten levels is not uncommon. Of course, it's possible to take this too far. If you notice yourself creating a sub-folder to hold only one file, then you've probably become a little over-zealous. On the other hand, if you simply create a structure with only two levels (for example **C:\Files\Work**) then you really haven't achieved any level of organization at all (unless you own only six files!). Your "Work" folder will have become a dumping ground, just like your Desktop was, with most likely hundreds of files in it.

Tip #6. Move the Standard User Folders into Your Own Folder Structure

Most operating systems, including Windows, create a set of standard folders for each of its users. These folders then become the default location for files such as documents, music files, digital photos and downloaded Internet files. In Windows 7, the full list is shown below:



Some of these folders you may never use nor care about (for example, the **Favorites** folder, if you're not using Internet Explorer as your browser). Those ones you can leave where they are. But you may be using some of the other folders to store files that are important to you. Even if you're *not* using them, Windows will still often treat them as the default storage location for many types of files. When you go to save a standard file type, it can become annoying to be automatically prompted to save it in a folder that's not part of your own file structure.

But there's a simple solution: Move the folders you care about into your own folder structure! If you do, then the next time you go to save a file of the corresponding type, Windows will prompt you to save it in the new, moved location.

Moving the folders is easy. Simply drag-and-drop them to the new location. Here's a screenshot of the default **My Music** folder being moved to my custom personal folder (**Mark**):



Tip #7. Name Files and Folders Intelligently

This is another one that almost goes without saying, but we'll say it anyway: Do *not* allow files to be created that have meaningless names like **Document1.doc**, or folders called **New Folder (2)**. Take that extra 20 seconds and come up with a meaningful name for the file/folder - one that accurately divulges its contents without repeating the entire contents in the name.

Tip #8. Watch Out for Long Filenames

Another way to tell if you have not yet created enough depth to your folder hierarchy is that your files often require really long names. If you need to call a file **Johnson Sales Figures March 2009.xls** (which might happen to live in the same folder as **Abercrombie Budget Report 2008.xls**), then you might want to create some sub-folders so that the first file could be simply called **March.xls**, and living in the **Clients\Johnson\Sales Figures\2009** folder.

A well-placed file needs only a brief filename!

Tip #9. Use Shortcuts! Everywhere!

This is probably the single most useful and important tip we can offer. A shortcut allows a file to be in two places at once.

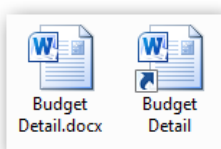
Why would you want that? Well, the file and folder structure of every popular operating system on the market today is *hierarchical*. This means that all objects (files and folders) always live within exactly one parent folder. It's a bit like a tree. A tree has branches (folders) and leaves (files). Each leaf, and each branch, is supported by exactly one parent branch, all the way back to the root of the tree (which, incidentally, is exactly why C:\ is called the "root folder" of the C: drive).

That hard disks are structured this way may seem obvious and even necessary, but it's only one way of organizing data. There are others: Relational databases, for example, organize structured data entirely differently. The main limitation of hierarchical filing structures is that a file can only ever be in one branch of the tree - in only one folder - at a time. Why is this a problem? Well, there are two main reasons why this limitation is a problem for computer users:

1. The "correct" place for a file, according to our organizational rationale, is very often a very *inconvenient* place for that file to be located. Just because it's correctly filed doesn't mean it's easy to get to. Your file may be "correctly" buried six levels deep in your sub-folder structure, but you may need regular and speedy access to this file every day. You could always move it to a more convenient location, but that would mean that you would need to re-file back to its "correct" location every time you'd finished working on it. Most unsatisfactory.
2. A file may simply "belong" in two or more different locations within your file structure. For example, say you're an accountant and you have just completed the 2009 tax return for John Smith. It might make sense to you to call this file **2009 Tax Return.doc** and file it under **Clients\John Smith**. But it may also be important to you to have the 2009 tax returns from all your clients together in the one place. So you might also want to call the file **John Smith.doc** and file it under **Tax Returns\2009**. The problem is, in a purely hierarchical filing system, you can't put it in both places. Grrrrr!

Fortunately, Windows (and most other operating systems) offers a way for you to do exactly that: It's called a "shortcut" (also known as an "alias" on Macs and a "symbolic link" on UNIX systems). Shortcuts allow a file to exist in one place, and *an icon that represents the file* to be created and put anywhere else you please. In fact, you can create a dozen such icons and scatter them all over your hard disk. Double-clicking on one of these icons/shortcuts opens up the original file, just as if you had double-clicked on the original file itself.

Consider the following two icons:



The one on the left is the actual Word document, while the one on the right is a shortcut that *represents* the Word document. Double-clicking on either icon will open the same file. There are two main visual differences between the icons:

1. The shortcut will have a small arrow in the lower-left-hand corner (on Windows, anyway)
2. The shortcut is allowed to have a name that does not include the file extension (the “.docx” part, in this case)

You can delete the shortcut at any time without losing any actual data. The original is still intact. All you lose is the ability to get to that data from wherever the shortcut was.

So why are shortcuts so great? Because they allow us to easily overcome the main limitation of hierarchical file systems, and put a file in two (or more) places at the same time. You will *always* have files that don't play nice with your organizational rationale, and can't be filed in only one place. They demand to exist in two places. Shortcuts allow this! Furthermore, they allow you to collect your most often-opened files and folders together in one spot for convenient access. The cool part is that the original files stay where they are, safe forever in their perfectly organized location.

So your collection of most often-opened files can - and *should* - become a collection of *shortcuts!*

If you're still not convinced of the utility of shortcuts, consider the following well-known areas of a typical Windows computer:

- The Start Menu (and all the programs that live within it)
- The Quick Launch bar (or the Superbar in Windows 7)
- The “Favorite folders” area in the top-left corner of the Windows Explorer window (in Windows Vista or Windows 7)
- Your Internet Explorer Favorites or Firefox Bookmarks

Each item in each of these areas is a shortcut! Each of those areas exist for one purpose only: For convenience - to provide you with a collection of the files and folders you access most often.

It should be easy to see by now that shortcuts are designed for one single purpose: *To make accessing your files more convenient.* Each time you double-click on a shortcut, you are saved the hassle of locating the file (or folder, or program, or drive, or control panel icon) that it represents.

Shortcuts allow us to invent a golden rule of file and folder organization:

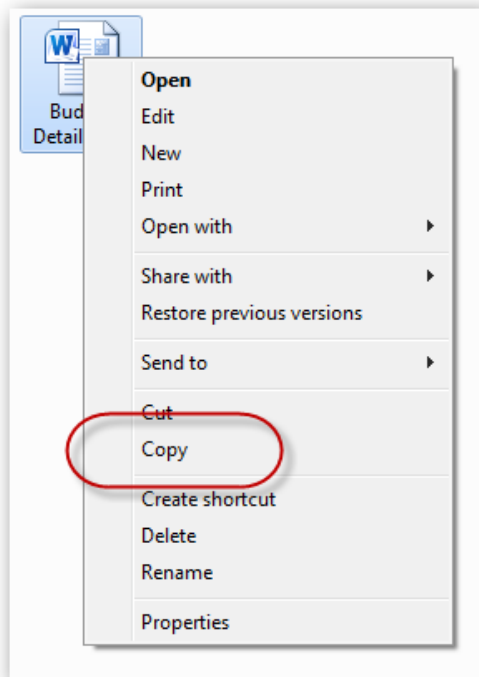
“Only ever have one copy of a file - never have two copies of the same file. Use a shortcut instead”

(this rule doesn't apply to copies created for backup purposes, of course!)

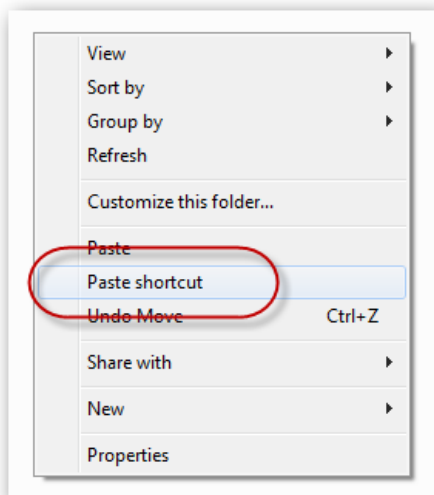
There are also lesser rules, like “don’t move a file into your work area - create a shortcut there instead”, and “any time you find yourself frustrated with how long it takes to locate a file, create a shortcut to it and place that shortcut in a convenient location.”

So how to we create these massively useful shortcuts? There are two main ways:

1. “Copy” the original file or folder (click on it and type **Ctrl-C**, or right-click on it and select **Copy**):

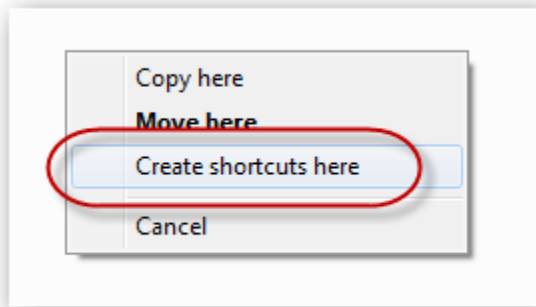


Then right-click in an empty area of the destination folder (the place where you want the shortcut to go) and select **Paste shortcut**:



2. Right-drag (drag with the right mouse button) the file from the source folder to the destination folder. When you let go of the mouse button at the destination folder, a menu

pops up:



Select **Create shortcuts here**.

Note that when shortcuts are created, they are often named something like **Shortcut to Budget Detail.doc** (windows XP) or **Budget Detail - Shortcut.doc** (Windows 7). If you don't like those extra words, you can easily rename the shortcuts after they're created, or you can configure Windows to never insert the extra words in the first place (see our [article on how to do this](#)).

And of course, you can create shortcuts to folders too, not just to files!

Bottom line:

Whenever you have a file that you'd like to access from somewhere else (whether it's convenience you're after, or because the file simply belongs in two places), create a shortcut to the original file in the new location.

Tip #10. Separate Application Files from Data Files

Any digital organization guru will drum this rule into you. Application files are the components of the software you've installed (e.g. Microsoft Word, Adobe Photoshop or Internet Explorer). Data files are the files that you've created for yourself using that software (e.g. Word Documents, digital photos, emails or playlists).

Software gets installed, uninstalled and upgraded all the time. Hopefully you always have the original installation media (or downloaded set-up file) kept somewhere safe, and can thus reinstall your software at any time. This means that the software component files are of little importance. Whereas the files you have created with that software is, by definition, important. It's a good rule to always separate unimportant files from important files.

So when your software prompts you to save a file you've just created, take a moment and check out where it's suggesting that you save the file. If it's suggesting that you save the file into the same folder as the software itself, then definitely don't follow that suggestion. File it in your *own* folder! In fact, see if you can find the program's configuration option that determines where files are saved by default (if it has one), and change it.

Tip #11. Organize Files Based on *Purpose*, *Not* on File Type

If you have, for example a folder called **Work\Clients\Johnson**, and within that folder you have two sub-folders, **Word Documents** and **Spreadsheets** (in other words, you're separating ".doc" files from ".xls" files), then chances are that you're not optimally organized. It makes little sense to organize your files based on the program that created them. Instead, create your sub-folders based on the *purpose* of the file. For example, it would make more sense to create sub-folders called **Correspondence** and **Financials**. It may well be that all the files in a given sub-folder are of the same file-type, but this should be more of a coincidence and less of a design feature of your organization system.

Tip #12. Maintain the Same Folder Structure on All Your Computers

In other words, whatever organizational system you create, apply it to every computer that you can. There are several benefits to this:

- There's less to remember. No matter where you are, you always know where to look for your files
- If you copy or synchronize files from one computer to another, then setting up the synchronization job becomes very simple
- Shortcuts can be copied or moved from one computer to another with ease (assuming the original files are also copied/moved). There's no need to find the target of the shortcut all over again on the second computer
- Ditto for linked files (e.g Word documents that link to data in a separate Excel file), playlists, and *any* files that reference the exact file locations of other files.

This applies even to the drive that your files are stored on. If your files are stored on **C:** on one computer, make sure they're stored on **C:** on *all* your computers. Otherwise all your shortcuts, playlists and linked files will stop working!

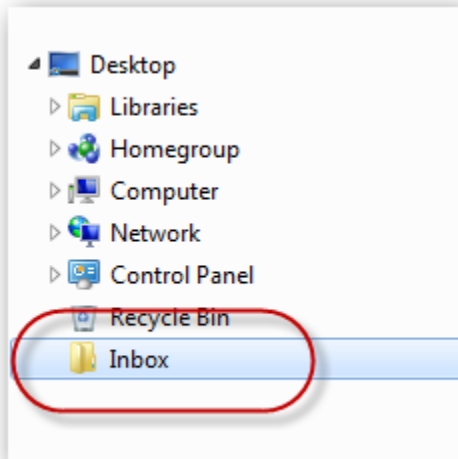
Tip #13. Create an "Inbox" Folder

Create yourself a folder where you store all files that you're currently working on, or that you haven't gotten around to filing yet. You can think of this folder as your "to-do" list. You can call it "Inbox" (making it the same metaphor as your email system), or "Work", or "To-Do", or "Scratch", or whatever name makes sense to you. It doesn't matter what you call it - just make sure you have one!

Once you have finished working on a file, you then move it from the "Inbox" to its correct location within your organizational structure.

You may want to use your Desktop as this "Inbox" folder. Rightly or wrongly, most people do. It's not a bad place to put such files, but be careful: If you *do* decide that your Desktop represents your "to-do" list, then make sure that no other files find their way there. In other words, make sure that your "Inbox", wherever it is, Desktop or otherwise, is kept free of junk - stray files that don't belong there.

So where should you put this folder, which, almost by definition, lives *outside* the structure of the rest of your filing system? Well, first and foremost, it has to be somewhere *handy*. This will be one of your most-visited folders, so convenience is key. Putting it on the Desktop is a great option - especially if you don't have any other folders on your Desktop: the folder then becomes supremely easy to find in Windows Explorer:



You would then create shortcuts to this folder in convenient spots all over your computer (“Favorite Links”, “Quick Launch”, etc).

Tip #14. Ensure You have Only One “Inbox” Folder

Once you've created your “Inbox” folder, don't use any other folder location as your “to-do list”. Throw *every* incoming or created file into the Inbox folder as you create/receive it. This keeps the rest of your computer pristine and free of randomly created or downloaded junk. The last thing you want to be doing is checking multiple folders to see all your current tasks and projects. Gather them all together into one folder.

Here are some tips to help ensure you only have one Inbox:

- Set the default “save” location of all your programs to this folder.
- Set the default “download” location for your browser to this folder.
- If this folder is *not* your desktop (recommended) then also see if you can make a point of not putting “to-do” files on your desktop. This keeps your desktop uncluttered and Zen-like:



(the **Inbox** folder is in the bottom-right corner)

Tip #15. Be Vigilant about Clearing Your “Inbox” Folder

This is one of the keys to staying organized. If you let your “Inbox” overflow (i.e. allow there to be more than, say, 30 files or folders in there), then you’re probably going to start feeling like you’re overwhelmed: You’re not keeping up with your to-do list. Once your Inbox gets beyond a certain point (around 30 files, studies have shown), then you’ll simply start to avoid it. You may continue to put files in there, but you’ll be scared to look at it, fearing the “out of control” feeling that all overworked, chaotic or just plain disorganized people regularly feel.

So, here’s what you can do:

- Visit your Inbox/to-do folder *regularly* (at least five times per day).
- Scan the folder regularly for files that you have completed working on and are ready for filing. File them immediately.
- Make it a source of pride to keep the number of files in this folder as small as possible. If you value peace of mind, then make the emptiness of this folder one of your highest (computer) priorities
- If you know that a particular file has been in the folder for more than, say, six weeks, then admit that you’re not actually going to get around to processing it, and move it to its final resting place.

Tip #16. File Everything Immediately, and Use *Shortcuts* for Your Active Projects

As soon as you create, receive or download a new file, store it away in its “correct” folder *immediately*. Then, whenever you need to work on it (possibly straight away), create a shortcut to it in your “Inbox” (“to-do”) folder or your desktop. That way, all your files are always in their “correct” locations, yet you still have immediate, convenient access to your current, active files. When you finish working on a file, simply delete the shortcut.

Ideally, your “Inbox” folder - and your Desktop - should contain no actual files or folders. They should simply contain *shortcuts*.

Tip #17. Use *Directory Symbolic Links (or Junctions)* to Maintain One Unified Folder Structure

Using this tip, we can get around a potential hiccup that we can run into when creating our organizational structure - the issue of having more than one drive on our computer (C:, D:, etc). We might have files we need to store on the D: drive for space reasons, and yet want to base our organized folder structure on the C: drive (or vice-versa).

Your chosen organizational structure may dictate that all your files must be accessed from the **C:** drive (for example, the root folder of all your files may be something like **C:\Files**). And yet you may still have a **D:** drive and wish to take advantage of the hundreds of spare Gigabytes that it offers. Did you know that it’s actually possible to store your files on the D: drive and yet access them as if they were on the C: drive? And no, we’re not talking about shortcuts here (although the concept is very similar).

By using the shell command **mklink**, you can essentially take a folder that lives on *one* drive and create an alias for it on a *different* drive (you can do lots more than that with **mklink** - for a full rundown on this programs capabilities, see [our dedicated article](#)). These aliases are called *directory symbolic links* (and used to be known as *junctions*). You can think of them as “virtual” folders. They function exactly like regular folders, except they’re physically located somewhere else.

For example, you may decide that your entire **D:** drive contains your complete organizational file structure, but that you need to reference all those files as if they were on the **C:** drive, under **C:\Files**. If that was the case you could create **C:\Files** as a directory symbolic link - a link to **D:**, as follows:

```
mklink /d c:\files d:\
```

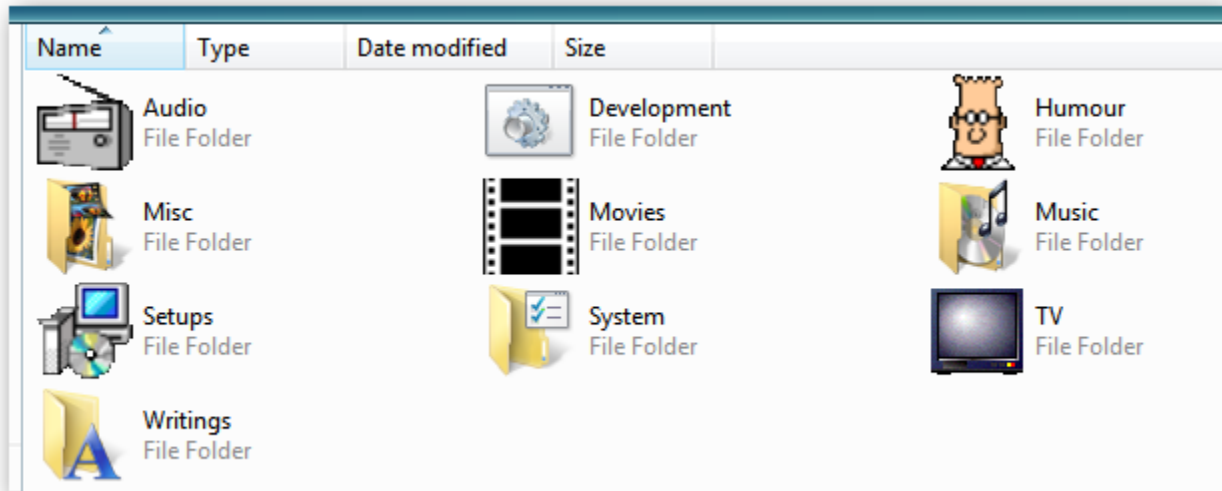
Or it may be that the only files you wish to store on the **D:** drive are your movie collection. You could locate all your movie files in the root of your **D:** drive, and then link it to **C:\Files\Media\Movies**, as follows:

```
mklink /d c:\files\media\movies d:\
```

(Needless to say, you must run these commands from a command prompt - click the Start button, type **cmd** and press **Enter**)

Tip #18. Customize Your Folder Icons

This is not strictly speaking an *organizational* tip, but having unique icons for each folder *does* allow you to more quickly visually identify which folder is which, and thus saves you time when you're finding files. An example is below (from my folder that contains all files downloaded from the Internet):



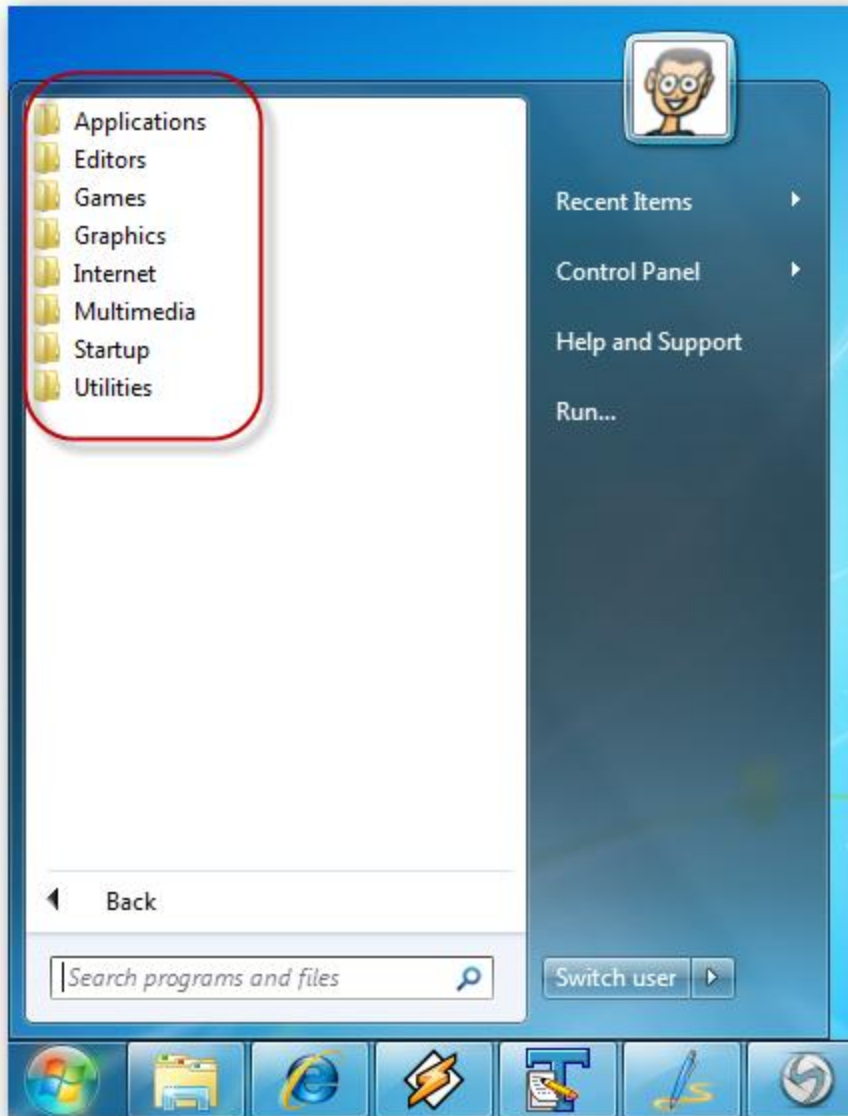
To learn how to change your folder icons, please refer to [our dedicated article on the subject](#).

Tip #19. Tidy Your Start Menu

The Windows Start Menu is usually one of the messiest parts of any Windows computer. Every program you install seems to adopt a completely different approach to placing icons in this menu. Some simply put a single program icon. Others create a folder based on the name of the software. And others create a folder based on the name of the software manufacturer. It's chaos, and can make it hard to find the software you want to run.

Thankfully we can avoid this chaos with useful operating system features like Quick Launch, the Superbar or pinned start menu items.

Even so, it would make a lot of sense to get into the guts of the Start Menu itself and give it a good once-over. All you really need to decide is how you're going to organize your applications. A structure based on the purpose of the application is an obvious candidate. Below is an example of one such structure:

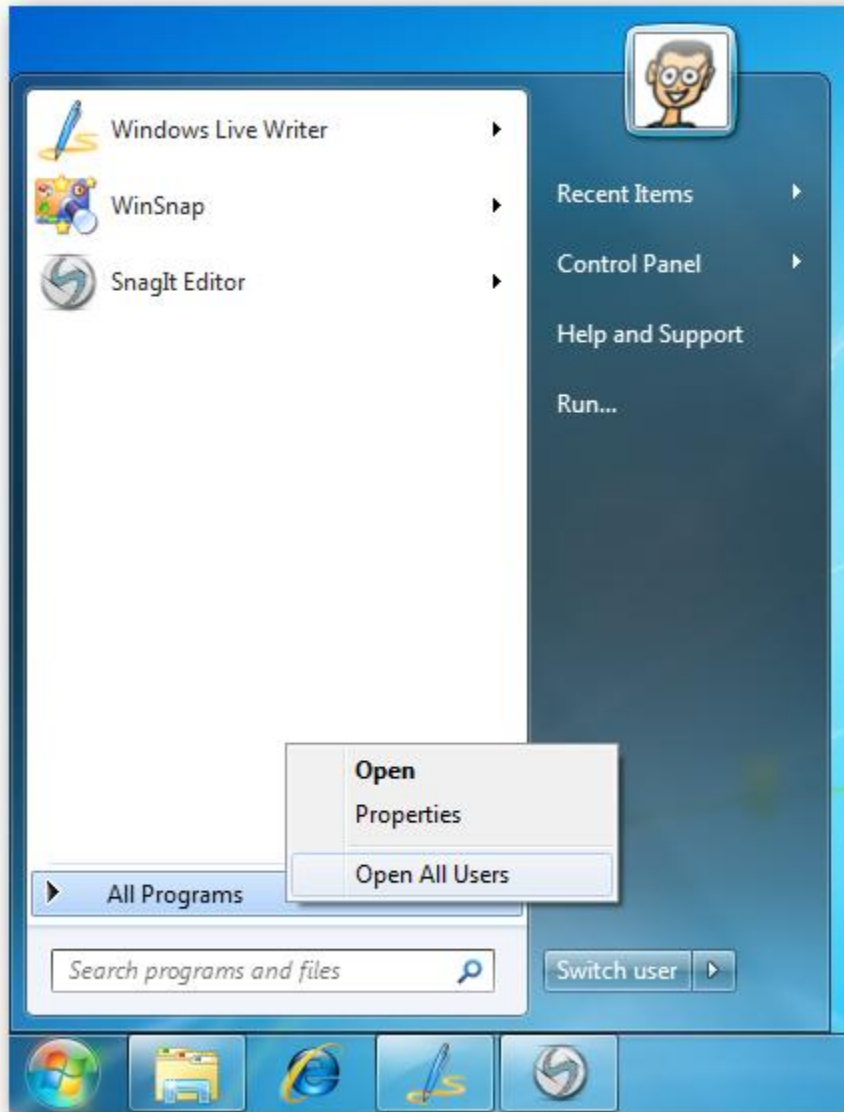


In this structure, **Utilities** means software whose job it is to keep the computer itself running smoothly (configuration tools, backup software, Zip programs, etc). **Applications** refers to any productivity software that doesn't fit under the headings **Multimedia**, **Graphics**, **Internet**, etc.

In case you're not aware, every icon in your Start Menu is a *shortcut* and can be manipulated like any other shortcut (copied, moved, deleted, etc).

With the Windows Start Menu (all version of Windows), Microsoft has decided that there be *two* parallel folder structures to store your Start Menu shortcuts. One for *you* (the logged-in user of the computer) and one for *all users* of the computer. Having two parallel structures can often be redundant: If you are the only user of the computer, then having two parallel structures is *totally* redundant. Even if you have several users that regularly log into the computer, most of your installed software will need to be made available to all users, and should thus be moved out of the "just you" version of the Start Menu and into the "all users" area.

To take control of your Start Menu, so you can start organizing it, you'll need to know how to access the actual folders and shortcut files that make up the Start Menu (both versions of it). To find these folders and files, click the **Start** button and then right-click on the **All Programs** text (Windows XP users should right-click on the **Start** button itself):



The **Open** option refers to the “just you” version of the Start Menu, while the **Open All Users** option refers to the “all users” version. Click on the one you want to organize.

A Windows Explorer window then opens with your chosen version of the Start Menu selected. From there it's easy. Double-click on the **Programs** folder and you'll see all your folders and shortcuts. Now you can delete/rename/move until it's just the way you want it.

Note: When you're reorganizing your Start Menu, you may want to have *two* Explorer windows open at the same time - one showing the "just you" version and one showing the "all users" version. You can drag-and-drop between the windows.

Tip #20. Keep Your Start Menu Tidy

Once you have a perfectly organized Start Menu, try to be a little vigilant about keeping it that way. Every time you install a new piece of software, the icons that get created will almost certainly violate your organizational structure.

So to keep your Start Menu pristine and organized, make sure you do the following whenever you install a new piece of software:

- Check whether the software was installed into the "just you" area of the Start Menu, or the "all users" area, and then move it to the correct area.
- Remove all the unnecessary icons (like the "Read me" icon, the "Help" icon (you can always open the help from within the software itself when it's running), the "Uninstall" icon, the link(s) to the manufacturer's website, etc)
- Rename the main icon(s) of the software to something brief that makes sense to you. For example, you might like to rename **Microsoft Office Word 2010** to simply **Word**
- Move the icon(s) into the correct folder based on your Start Menu organizational structure

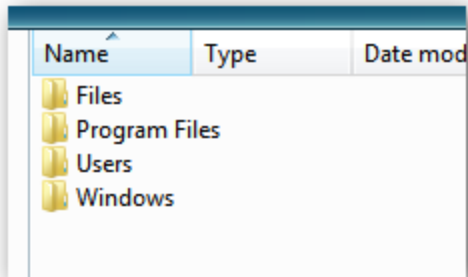
And don't forget: when you *uninstall* a piece of software, the software's uninstall routine is no longer going to be able to remove the software's icon from the Start Menu (because you moved and/or renamed it), so you'll need to remove that icon manually.

Tip #21. Tidy C:

The root of your C: drive (**C:**) is a common dumping ground for files and folders - both by the users of your computer and by the software that you install on your computer. It can become a mess.

There's almost no software these days that requires itself to be installed in **C:**. 99% of the time it can and should be installed into **C:\Program Files**. And as for your own files, well, it's clear that they can (and almost always should) be stored somewhere else.

In an ideal world, your **C:** folder should look like this (on Windows 7):



Note that there are some system files and folders in **C:** that are usually and deliberately “hidden” (such as the Windows virtual memory file **pagefile.sys**, the boot loader file **bootmgr**, and the **System Volume Information** folder). Hiding these files and folders is a good idea, as they need to stay where they are and are almost never needed to be opened or even seen by you, the user. Hiding them prevents you from accidentally messing with them, and enhances your sense of order and well-being when you look at your C: drive folder.

Tip #22. Tidy Your Desktop

The Desktop is probably the most abused part of a Windows computer (from an organization point of view). It usually serves as a dumping ground for all incoming files, as well as holding icons to oft-used applications, plus some regularly opened files and folders. It often ends up becoming an uncontrolled mess. See if you can avoid this. Here’s why...

- Application icons (Word, Internet Explorer, etc) are often found on the Desktop, but it’s unlikely that this is the optimum place for them. The “Quick Launch” bar (or the Superbar in Windows 7) is always visible and so represents a perfect location to put your icons. You’ll only be able to see the icons on your Desktop when all your programs are minimized. It might be time to get your application icons off your desktop...
- You may have decided that the Inbox/To-do folder on your computer (see tip #13, above) should be your Desktop. If so, then enough said. Simply be vigilant about clearing it and preventing it from being polluted by junk files (see tip #15, above). On the other hand, if your Desktop is *not* acting as your “Inbox” folder, then there’s no reason for it to have *any* data files or folders on it at all, except perhaps a couple of shortcuts to often-opened files and folders (either ongoing or current projects). Everything else should be moved to your “Inbox” folder.

In an ideal world, it might look like this:



Tip #23. Move Permanent Items on Your Desktop Away from the Top-Left Corner

When files/folders are dragged onto your desktop in a Windows Explorer window, or when shortcuts are created on your Desktop from Internet Explorer, those icons are always placed in the top-left corner - or as close as they can get. If you have other files, folders or shortcuts that you keep on the Desktop *permanently*, then it's a good idea to separate these permanent icons from the transient ones, so that you can quickly identify which ones the transients are. An easy way to do this is to move all your permanent icons to the *right-hand side* of your Desktop. That should keep them separated from incoming items.

Tip #24. Synchronize

If you have more than one computer, you'll almost certainly want to share files between them. If the computers are permanently attached to the same local network, then there's no need to store multiple copies of any one file or folder - shortcuts will suffice. However, if the computers are *not* always on the same network, then you will at some point need to copy files between them. For files that need to permanently live on both computers, the ideal way to do this is to *synchronize* the files, as opposed to simply copying them.

We only have room here to write a brief summary of synchronization, not a full article. In short, there are several different types of synchronization:

1. Where the contents of one folder are accessible anywhere, such as with [Dropbox](#)
2. Where the contents of any number of folders are accessible anywhere, such as with [Windows Live Mesh](#)

3. Where *any* files or folders from anywhere on your computer are synchronized with exactly one other computer, such as with the Windows “Briefcase”, [Microsoft SyncToy](#), or (much more powerful, yet still free) [SyncBack](#) from 2BrightSparks. This only works when both computers are on the same local network, at least temporarily.

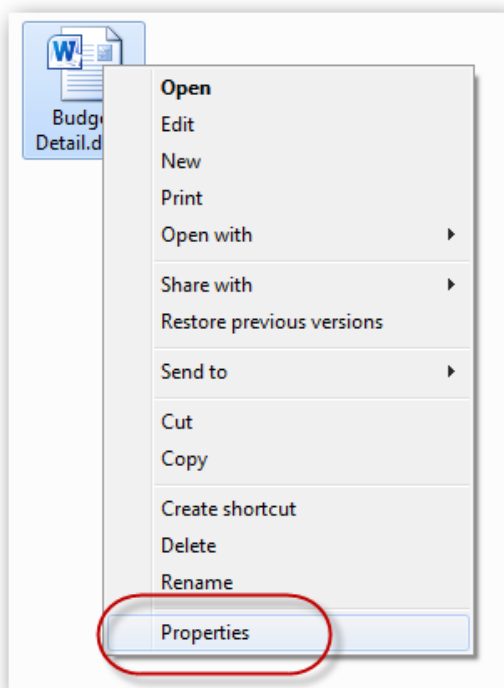
A great advantage of synchronization solutions is that once you’ve got it configured the way you want it, then the sync process happens automatically, every time. Click a button (or schedule it to happen automatically) and all your files are automatically put where they’re supposed to be.

If you maintain the same file and folder structure on both computers, then you can also sync files depend upon the correct location of *other* files, like shortcuts, playlists and office documents that link to *other* office documents, and the synchronized files still work on the other computer!

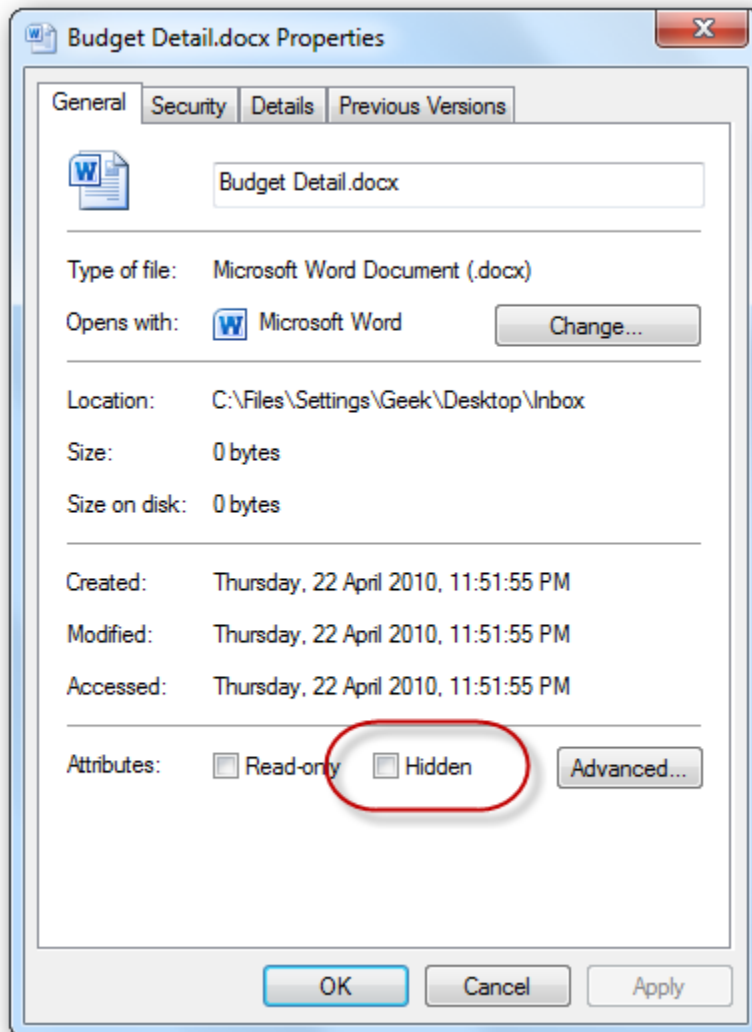
Tip #25. Hide Files You Never Need to See

If you have your files well organized, you will often be able to tell if a file is out of place just by glancing at the contents of a folder (for example, it should be pretty obvious if you look in a folder that contains all the MP3s from one music CD and see a Word document in there). This is a good thing - it allows you to determine if there are files out of place with a quick glance. Yet sometimes there are files in a folder that *seem* out of place but actually need to be there, such as the “folder art” JPEGs in music folders, and various files in the root of the C: drive. If such files never need to be opened by you, then a good idea is to simply hide them. Then, the next time you glance at the folder, you won’t have to remember whether that file was supposed to be there or not, because you won’t see it at all!

To hide a file, simply right-click on it and choose **Properties**:



Then simply tick the **Hidden** tick-box:



Tip #26. Keep Every Setup File

These days most software is downloaded from the Internet. Whenever you download a piece of software, *keep it*. You'll never know when you need to reinstall the software.

Further, keep with it an Internet shortcut that links back to the website where you originally downloaded it, in case you ever need to check for updates.

See tip #33 below for a full description of the excellence of organizing your setup files.

Tip #27. Try to Minimize the Number of Folders that Contain Both Files and Sub-folders

Some of the folders in your organizational structure will contain only files. Others will contain only sub-folders. And you will also have some folders that contain both files *and* sub-folders.

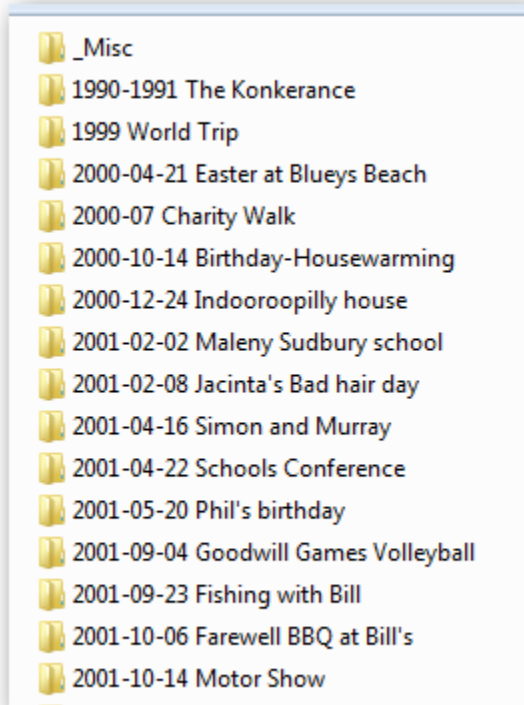
You will notice slight improvements in how long it takes you to locate a file if you try to avoid this third type of folder. It's not always possible, of course - you'll always have *some* of these folders, but see if you can avoid it.

One way of doing this is to take all the leftover files that didn't end up getting stored in a sub-folder and create a special "Miscellaneous" or "Other" folder for them.

Tip #28. Starting a Filename with an Underscore Brings it to the Top of a List

Further to the previous tip, if you name that "Miscellaneous" or "Other" folder in such a way that its name begins with an underscore "_", then it will appear at the top of the list of files/folders.

The screenshot below is an example of this. Each folder in the list contains a set of digital photos. The folder at the top of the list, **_Misc**, contains random photos that didn't deserve their own dedicated folder:



Tip #29. Clean Up those CD-ROMs and (shudder!) Floppy Disks

Have you got a pile of CD-ROMs stacked on a shelf of your office? Old photos, or files you archived off onto CD-ROM (or even worse, floppy disks!) because you didn't have enough disk space at the time? In the meantime have you upgraded your computer and now have 500 Gigabytes of space you don't know what to do with? If so, isn't it time you tidied up that stack of disks and filed them into your gorgeous new folder structure?

So what are you waiting for? Bite the bullet, copy them all back onto your computer, file them in their appropriate folders, and then back the whole lot up onto a shiny new 1000Gig external hard drive!

Useful Folders to Create

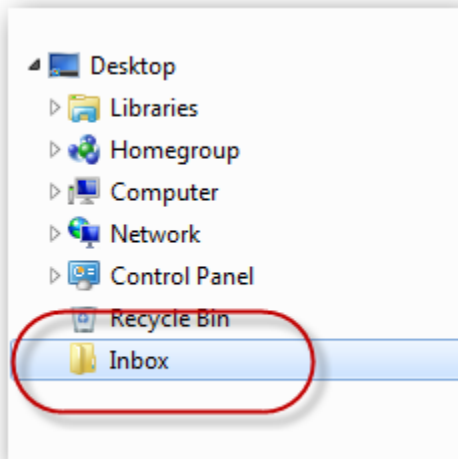
This next section suggests some useful folders that you might want to create within your folder structure. I've personally found them to be indispensable.

The first three are all about *convenience* - handy folders to create and then put somewhere that you can always access instantly. For each one, it's not so important where the actual folder is located, but it's *very* important where you put the *shortcut(s)* to the folder. You might want to locate the shortcuts:

- On your Desktop
- In your "Quick Launch" area (or pinned to your Windows 7 Superbar)
- In your Windows Explorer "Favorite Links" area

Tip #30. Create an "Inbox" ("To-Do") Folder

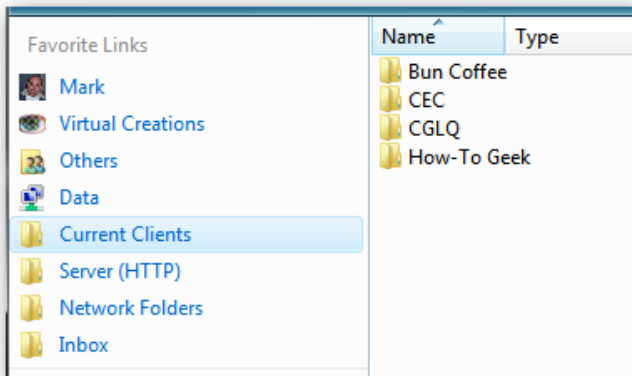
This has already been mentioned in depth (see tip #13), but we wanted to reiterate its importance here. This folder contains all the recently created, received or downloaded files that you have not yet had a chance to file away properly, and it also may contain files that you have yet to process. In effect, it becomes a sort of "to-do list". It doesn't have to be called "Inbox" - you can call it whatever you want.



Tip #31. Create a Folder where Your Current Projects are Collected

Rather than going hunting for them all the time, or dumping them all on your desktop, create a special folder where you put links (or work folders) for each of the projects you're currently working on.

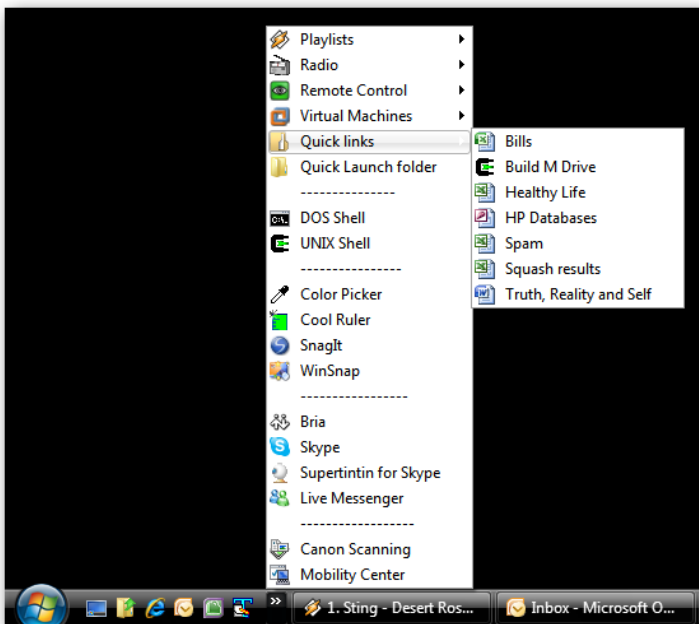
You can locate this folder in your “Inbox” folder, on your desktop, or anywhere at all - just so long as there’s a way of getting to it quickly, such as putting a link to it in Windows Explorer’s “Favorite Links” area:



Tip #32. Create a Folder for Files and Folders that You Regularly Open

You will always have a few files that you open regularly, whether it be a spreadsheet of your current accounts, or a favorite playlist. These are not necessarily “current projects”, rather they’re simply files that you always find yourself opening. Typically such files would be located on your desktop (or even better, *shortcuts* to those files). Why not collect all such shortcuts together and put them in their own special folder?

As with the “Current Projects” folder (above), you would want to locate that folder somewhere convenient. Below is an example of a folder called “Quick links”, with about seven files (shortcuts) in it, that is accessible through the Windows Quick Launch bar:



See tip #37 below for a full explanation of the power of the Quick Launch bar.

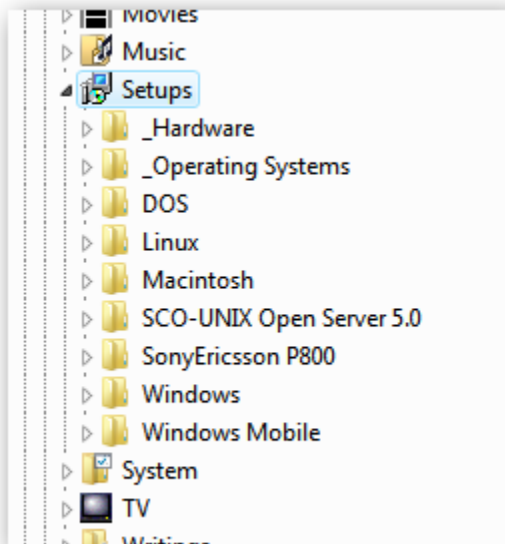
Tip #33. Create a “Set-ups” Folder

A typical computer has dozens of applications installed on it. For each piece of software, there are often many different pieces of information you need to keep track of, including:

- The original installation setup file(s). This can be anything from a simple 100Kb setup.exe file you downloaded from a website, all the way up to a 4Gig ISO file that you copied from a DVD-ROM that you purchased.
- The home page of the software manufacturer (in case you need to look up something on their support pages, their forum or their online help)
- The page containing the download link for your actual file (in case you need to re-download it, or download an upgraded version)
- The serial number
- Your proof-of-purchase documentation
- Any other template files, plug-ins, themes, etc that also need to get installed

For each piece of software, it's a great idea to gather all of these files together and put them in a single folder. The folder can be the name of the software (plus possibly a very brief description of what it's for - in case you can't remember what the software does based in its name). Then you would gather all of these folders together into one place, and call it something like “Software” or “Setups”.

If you have enough of these folders (I have several hundred, being a geek, collected over 20 years), then you may want to further categorize them. My own categorization structure is based on “platform” (operating system):



The last seven folders each represents one platform/operating system, while **_Operating Systems** contains set-up files for installing the operating systems themselves. **_Hardware** contains ROMs for hardware I own, such as routers.

Within the **Windows** folder (above), you can see the beginnings of the vast library of software I've compiled over the years:

Name	Type	Date modified	Size
1-Calc (everything calculator)			
1Click DVD to Divx Avi			
1st SMTP Server			
Accessibility Toolbar (IE Developers toolbar)			
Acronis True Image (hard disk imaging)			
Across Lite (crosswords)			
ActivePerl (web scripting)			
AD Search&Replace (text)			
Ad-aware (spyware removal)			
AddWeb (website promoter)			
Adobe Acrobat			
Adobe Audition (CoolEdit) (audio editing)			
Adobe Creative Suite			
Adobe Illustrator (graphic design)			
Adobe Photoshop (image editing)			
Adobe Photoshop Elements (image editing)			
Adobe Premiere Elements (video editing)			
Advanced Launcher (tray menu)			
Alcohol 120% (RAW CD copying)			
AlfaClock (Tray clock replacement)			
All My Movies (movie catalog)			
Allway Sync (folder synchronisation)			
Amazing Slow Downer (audio editor)			
AMCAP (Video capture)			
AM-Deadlink (bookmark validation)			
Apache (web server)			
ASAP Utilities (Excel Add-in)			
ATO software (for BAS, etc)			
Atomic Alarm Clock			
Audiograbber (CD ripping)			
Auto Gordian Knot (DVD to AVI)			
AutoPlay (for data CDs)			
Autoroute SMTP (SMTP switcher)			
AVG (anti-virus)			
Avi2Dvd (AVI to ISO)			
AVI Joiner (merge video files)			
AVS Video Tools (video conversion and capture)			
BCWipe (wipe free space & permanently erase files)			
Beyond Compare (file & folder compare)			
BitComet (BitTorrent client)			
BitTorrent (P2P file sharing)			
BootXP (custom boot screen)			
BPALogin (Telstra cable DHCP)			
Bria (VoIP softphone)			
Bulletproof FTP Server			
BurnQuick (CD writing)			
Cakewalk (MIDI composing)			
Camtasia (screen cam)			
Capsa (Network Monitor)			
CDRWin (CDR utilities)			
Cisco VPN client (remote network security)			
Citrix Client (Windows terminal client)			

An example of a typical application folder looks like this:

Name	Type	Date modified	Size
Download	Internet Shortcut	3/05/2006 6:44pm	1 KB
Home page	Internet Shortcut	14/09/2009 8:28pm	1 KB
WinZip Pro v14.5 serial number.txt	Text Document	15/04/2010 3:19pm	1 KB
WinZip Pro v14.5.exe	Application	13/04/2010 8:14pm	14,162 KB

Tip #34. Have a “Settings” Folder

We all know that our documents are important. So are our photos and music files. We save all of these files into folders, and then locate them afterwards and double-click on them to open them. But there are many files that are important to us that can't be saved into folders, and then searched for and double-clicked later on. These files certainly contain important information that we need, but are often created internally by an application, and saved wherever that application feels is appropriate.

A good example of this is the "PST" file that Outlook creates for us and uses to store all our emails, contacts, appointments and so forth. Another example would be the collection of Bookmarks that Firefox stores on your behalf.

And yet another example would be the customized settings and configuration files of our all our software. Granted, most Windows programs store their configuration in the Registry, but there are still many programs that use configuration files to store their settings.

Imagine if you lost all of the above files! And yet, when people are backing up their computers, they typically only back up the files they know about - those that are stored in the "My Documents" folder, etc. If they had a hard disk failure or their computer was lost or stolen, their backup files would not include some of the most vital files they owned. Also, when migrating to a new computer, it's vital to ensure that these files make the journey.

It can be a very useful idea to create yourself a folder to store all your "settings" - files that are important to you but which you never actually search for by name and double-click on to open them. Otherwise, next time you go to set up a new computer just the way you want it, you'll need to spend hours recreating the configuration of your previous computer!

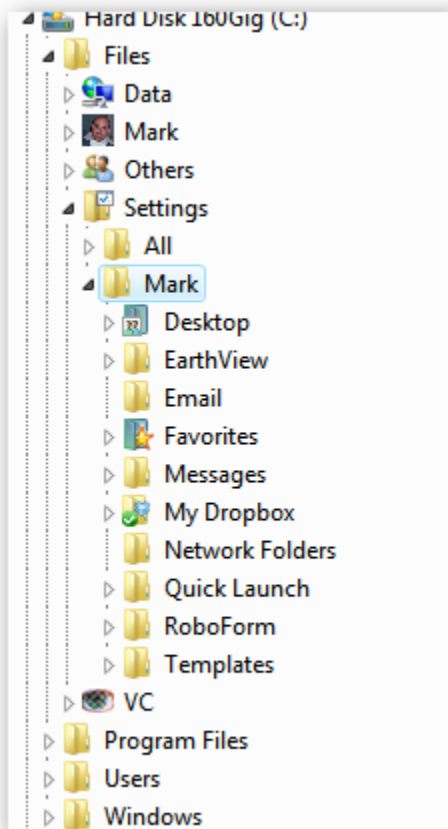
So how to we get our important files into this folder? Well, we have a few options:

- Some programs (such as Outlook and its PST files) allow you to place these files wherever you want. If you delve into the program's options, you will find a setting somewhere that controls the location of the important settings files (or "personal storage" - PST - when it comes to Outlook)
- Some programs do not allow you to change such locations in any easy way, but if you get into the Registry, you can sometimes find a registry key that refers to the location of the file(s). Simply move the file into your Settings folder and adjust the registry key to refer to the new location.
- Some programs stubbornly refuse to allow their settings files to be placed anywhere other than where they stipulate. When faced with programs like these, you have three choices: (1) You can ignore those files, (2) You can *copy* the files into your Settings folder (let's face it - settings don't change very often), or (3) you can use synchronization software, such as the Windows Briefcase, to make synchronized copies of all your files in your Settings folder. All you then have to do is to remember to run your sync software periodically (perhaps just before you run your backup software!).

There are some other things you may decide to locate inside this new "Settings" folder:

- Exports of registry keys (from the many applications that store their configurations in the Registry). This is useful for backup purposes or for migrating to a new computer
- Notes you've made about all the specific customizations you have made to a particular piece of software (so that you'll know how to do it all again on your *next* computer)
- Shortcuts to webpages that detail how to tweak certain aspects of your operating system or applications so they are just the way you like them (such as how to remove the words "Shortcut to" from the beginning of newly created shortcuts). In other words, you'd want to create shortcuts to half the pages on the How-To Geek website!

Here's an example of a "Settings" folder:



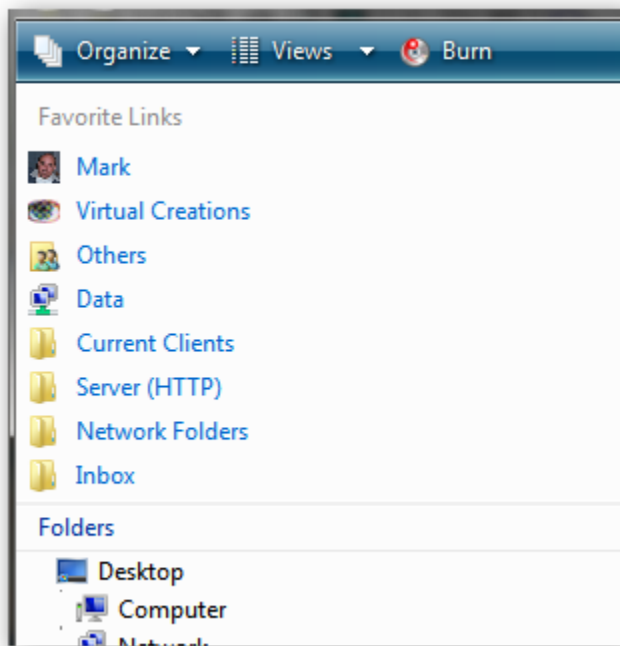
Windows Features that Help with Organization

This section details some of the features of Microsoft Windows that are a boon to anyone hoping to stay optimally organized.

Tip #35. Use the "Favorite Links" Area to Access Oft-Used Folders

Once you've created your great new filing system, work out which folders you access most regularly, or which serve as great starting points for locating the rest of the files in your folder

structure, and then put links to those folders in your “Favorite Links” area of the left-hand side of the Windows Explorer window (simply called “Favorites” in Windows 7):



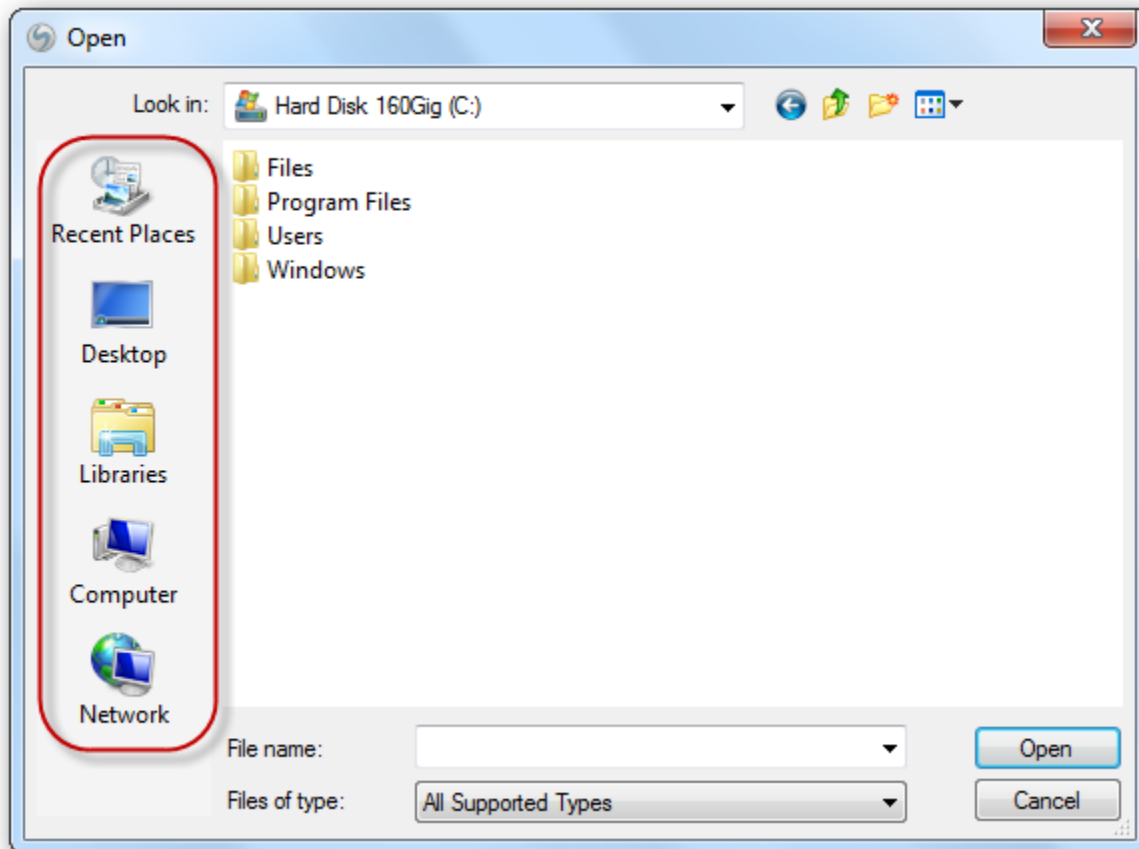
Some ideas for folders you might want to add there include:

- Your “Inbox” folder (or whatever you’ve called it) - *most* important!
- The base of your filing structure (e.g. **C:\Files**)
- A folder containing shortcuts to often-accessed folders on other computers around the network (shown above as **Network Folders**)
- A folder containing shortcuts to your current projects (unless that folder is in your “Inbox” folder)

Getting folders into this area is very simple - just locate the folder you’re interested in and drag it there!

Tip #36. Customize the Places Bar in the File/Open and File/Save Boxes

Consider the screenshot below:



The highlighted icons (collectively known as the “Places Bar”) can be customized to refer to any folder location you want, allowing instant access to any part of your organizational structure.

Note: These **File/Open** and **File/Save** boxes have been superseded by new versions that use the Windows Vista/Windows 7 “Favorite Links”, but the older versions (shown above) are still used by a surprisingly large number of applications.

The easiest way to customize these icons is to use the Group Policy Editor, but not everyone has access to this program. If you do, open it up and navigate to:

User Configuration > Administrative Templates > Windows Components > Windows Explorer > Common Open File Dialog

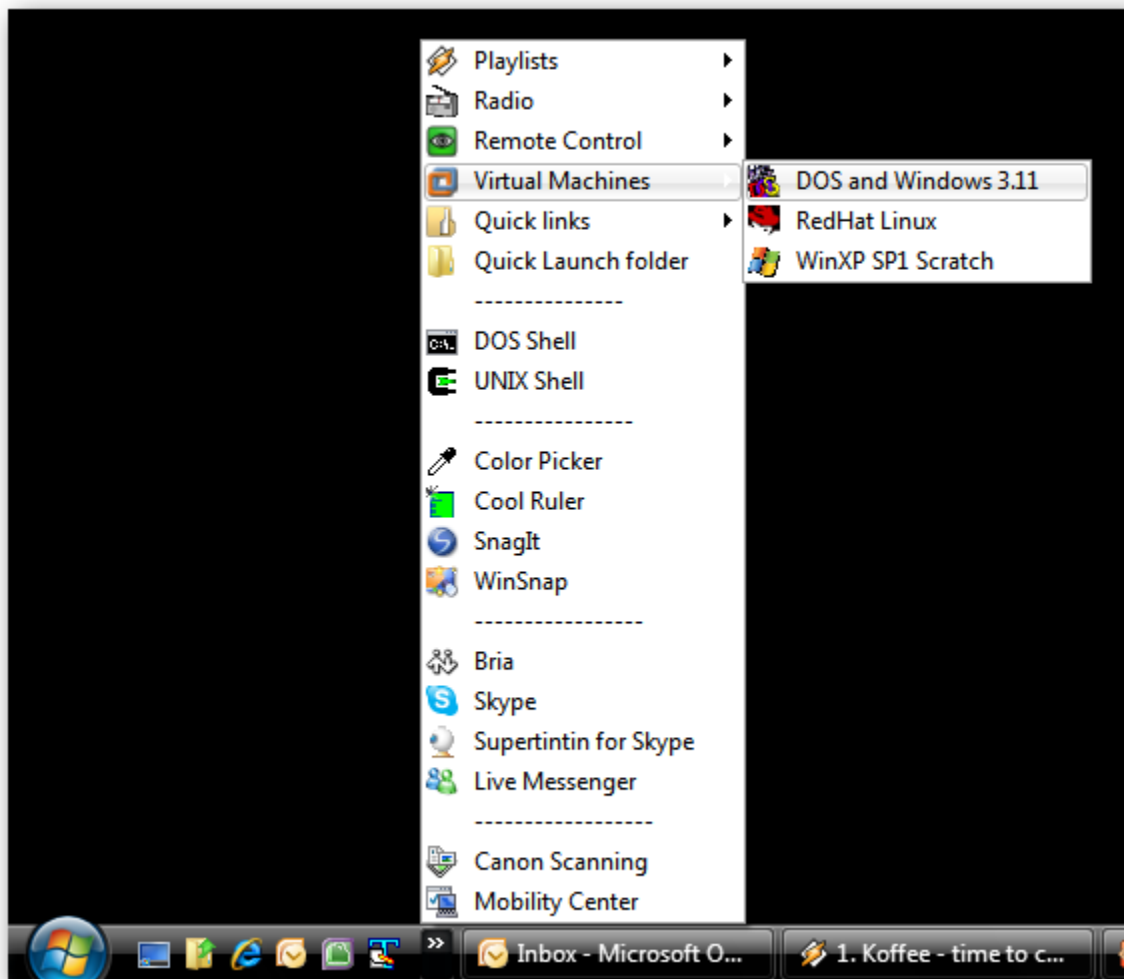
If you don't have access to the Group Policy Editor, then you'll need to get into the Registry. Navigate to:

HKEY_CURRENT_USER \ Software \ Microsoft \ Windows \ CurrentVersion \ Policies \ comdlg32 \ Placesbar

It should then be easy to make the desired changes. Log off and log on again to allow the changes to take effect.

Tip #37. Use the Quick Launch Bar as a Application and File Launcher

That Quick Launch bar (to the right of the Start button) is a lot more useful than people give it credit for. Most people simply have half a dozen icons in it, and use it to start just those programs. But it can actually be used to instantly access just about anything in your filing system:

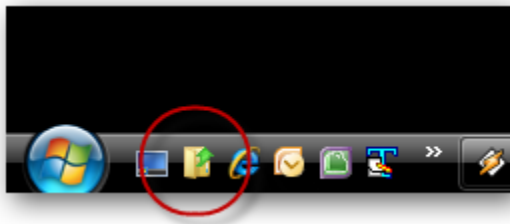


For complete instructions on how to set this up, visit our [dedicated article on this topic](#).

Tip #38. Put a Shortcut to Windows Explorer into Your Quick Launch Bar

This is only necessary in Windows Vista and Windows XP. The Microsoft boffins finally got wise and added it to the Windows 7 Superbar by default.

Windows Explorer - the program used for managing your files and folders - is one of the most useful programs in Windows. Anyone who considers themselves serious about being organized needs instant access to this program at any time. A great place to create a shortcut to this program is in the Windows XP and Windows Vista “Quick Launch” bar:

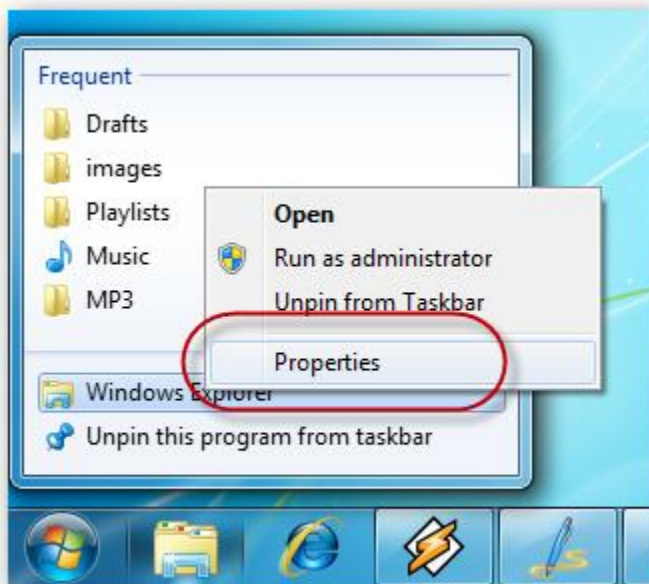


To get it there, locate it in your Start Menu (usually under “Accessories”) and then right-drag it down into your Quick Launch bar (and create a *copy*).

Tip #39. Customize the Starting Folder for Your Windows 7 Explorer Superbar Icon

If you’re on Windows 7, your Superbar will include a Windows Explorer icon. Clicking on the icon will launch Windows Explorer (of course), and will start you off in your “Libraries” folder. Libraries may be fine as a starting point, but if you have created yourself an “Inbox” folder, then it would probably make more sense to start off in this folder every time you launch Windows Explorer.

To change this default/starting folder location, then first right-click the Explorer icon in the Superbar, and then right-click **Properties**:

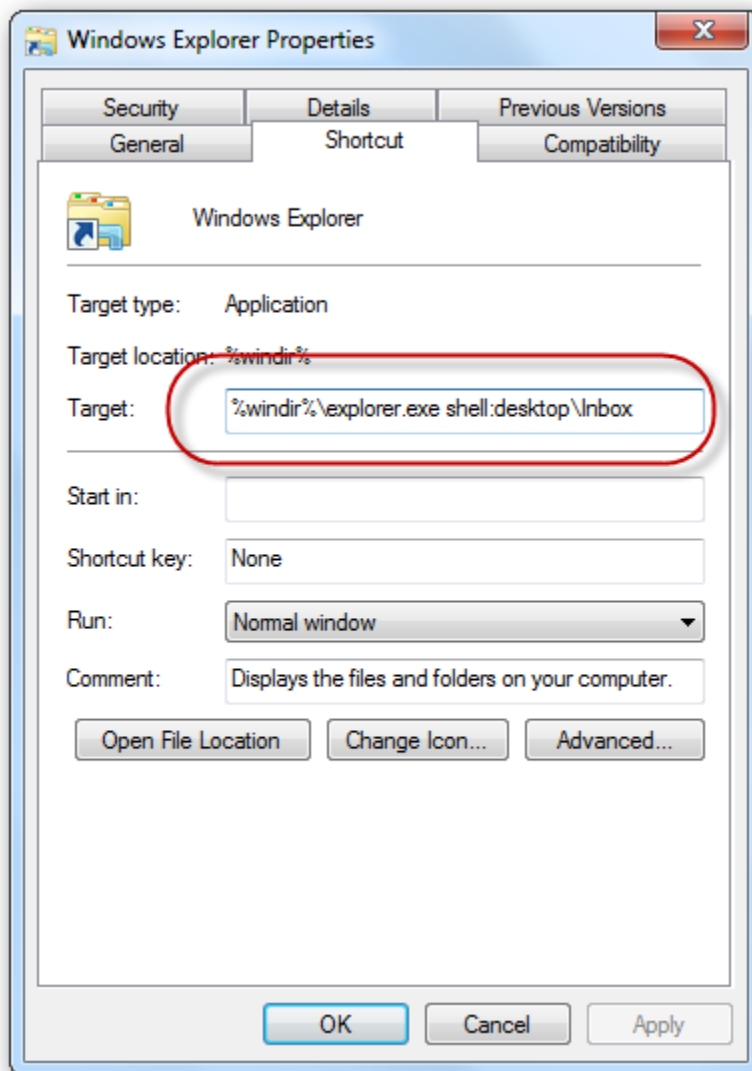


Then, in **Target** field of the **Windows Explorer Properties** box that appears, type **%windir%\explorer.exe** followed by the path of the folder you wish to start in. For example:

%windir%\explorer.exe C:\Files

If that folder happened to be on the Desktop (and called, say, “Inbox”), then you would use the following cleverness:

%windir%\explorer.exe shell:desktop\Inbox



Then click **OK** and test it out.

Tip #40. Ummmmm....

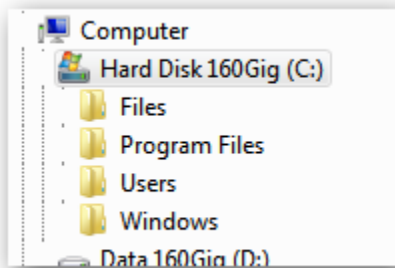
No, that's it. I can't think of another one. That's all of the tips I can come up with. I only created this one because 40 is such a nice round number...

Case Study - An Organized PC

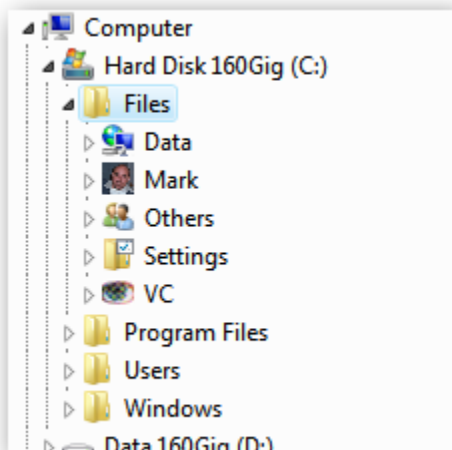
To finish off the article, I have included a few screenshots of my (main) computer (running Vista). The aim here is twofold:

1. To give you a sense of what it looks like when the above, sometimes abstract, tips are applied to a real-life computer, and
2. To offer some ideas about folders and structure that you may want to steal to use on your own PC.

Let's start with the **C:** drive itself. Very minimal. All my files are contained within **C:\Files**. I'll confine the rest of the case study to this folder:



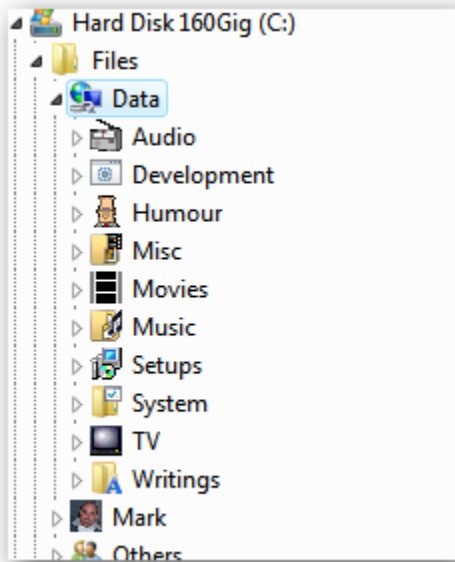
That folder contains the following:



- **Mark:** My personal files
- **VC:** My business (Virtual Creations, Australia)
- **Others** contains files created by friends and family

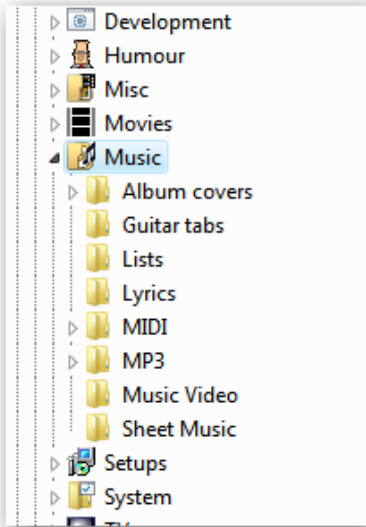
- **Data** contains files from the rest of the world (can be thought of as “public” files, usually downloaded from the Net)
- **Settings** is described above in tip #34

The **Data** folder contains the following sub-folders:



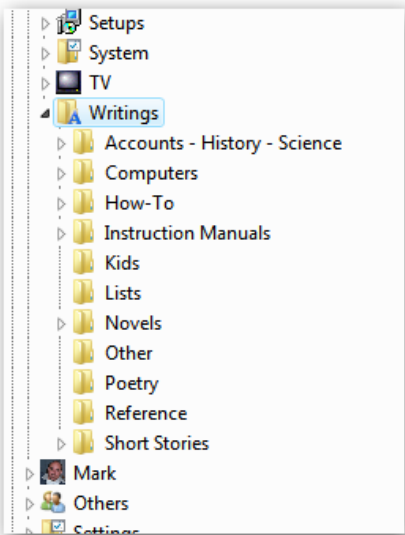
- **Audio:** Radio plays, audio books, podcasts, etc
- **Development:** Programmer and developer resources, sample source code, etc (see below)
- **Humour:** Jokes, funnies (those emails that we all receive)
- **Movies:** Downloaded and ripped movies (all legal, of course!), their scripts, DVD covers, etc.
- **Music:** (see below)
- **Setups:** Installation files for software (explained in full in tip #33)
- **System:** (see below)
- **TV:** Downloaded TV shows
- **Writings:** Books, instruction manuals, etc (see below)

The **Music** folder contains the following sub-folders:



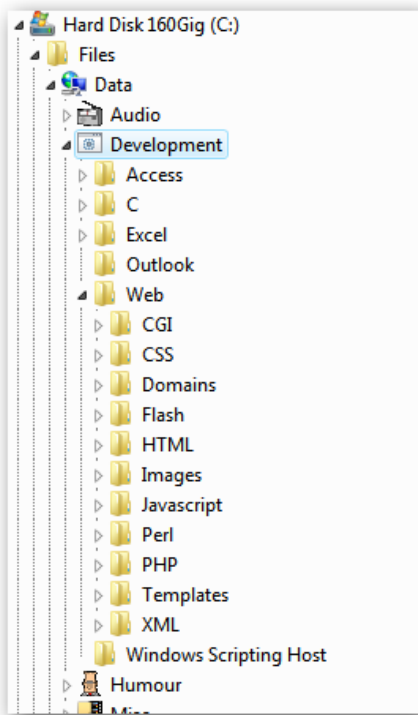
- **Album covers:** JPEG scans
- **Guitar tabs:** Text files of guitar sheet music
- **Lists:** e.g. “Top 1000 songs of all time”
- **Lyrics:** Text files
- **MIDI:** Electronic music files
- **MP3** (representing 99% of the **Music** folder): MP3s, either ripped from CDs or downloaded, sorted by artist/album name
- **Music Video:** Video clips
- **Sheet Music:** usually PDFs

The **Data\Writings** folder contains the following sub-folders:



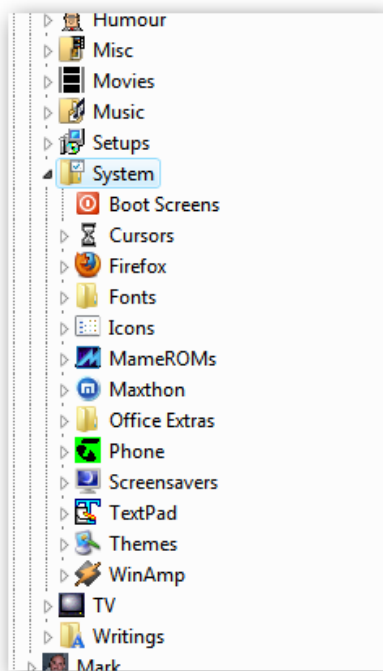
(all pretty self-explanatory)

The **Data\Development** folder contains the following sub-folders:



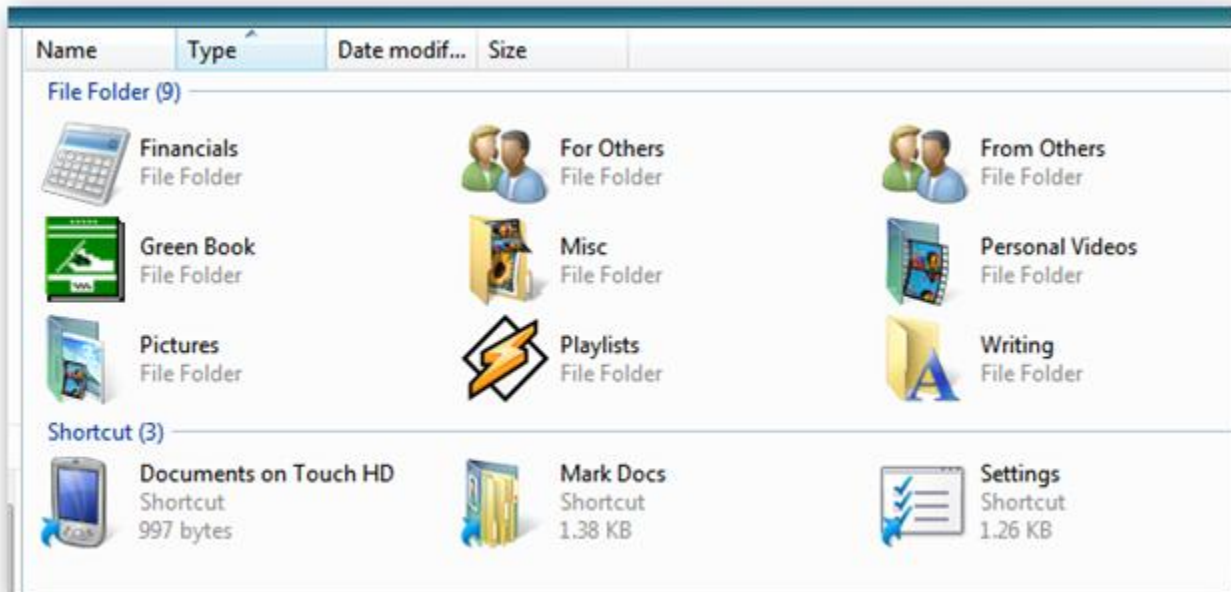
Again, all pretty self-explanatory (if you're a geek)

The **Data\System** folder contains the following sub-folders:



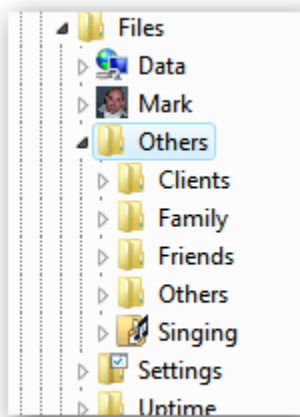
These are usually themes, plug-ins and other downloadable program-specific resources.

The **Mark** folder contains the following sub-folders:

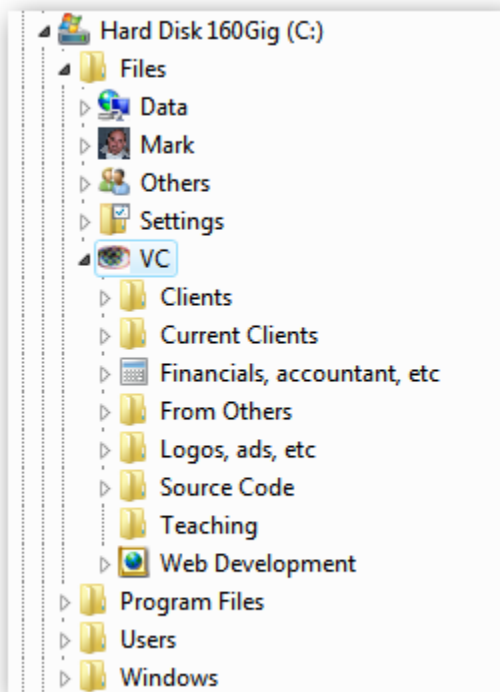


- **From Others:** Usually letters that other people (friends, family, etc) have written to me
- **For Others:** Letters and other things I have created for other people
- **Green Book:** *None of your business*
- **Playlists:** M3U files that I have compiled of my favorite songs (plus one M3U playlist file for every album I own)
- **Writing:** Fiction, philosophy and other musings of mine
- **Mark Docs:** Shortcut to **C:\Users\Mark**
- **Settings:** Shortcut to **C:\Files\Settings\Mark**

The **Others** folder contains the following sub-folders:



The VC (Virtual Creations, my business - I develop websites) folder contains the following sub-folders:



And again, all of those are pretty self-explanatory.