How to use OneDrive in Windows 10 to sync and share files

Microsoft's cloud storage service, OneDrive, can back up your personal and work files online. It's built into Windows 10. With it you can sync files on your Windows 10 PC to the cloud and to your other Windows PCs, smartphone or tablet (with the OneDrive app for Android or iOS installed on either). It can even sync your cloud files to your Mac (via the OneDrive desktop app).

It's handy for collaboration, too. You can share files in your OneDrive with anyone by sending them a web link.

Here are the essentials for using Microsoft OneDrive in Windows 10.

[Further reading: Windows 10 cheat sheet]

Getting started

There are two ways to sign in to OneDrive in Windows 10. When you sign in to your Windows 10 PC with a Microsoft user account, OneDrive is already activated by default. (If you have a free webmail account on Outlook.com, then you already have a Microsoft user account. If not, you can sign up for one for free.)

If you don't want to sign in to Windows 10 with a Microsoft user account, you can sign in to OneDrive separately with your Microsoft user account. Right-click the OneDrive icon (it looks like clouds) in the notification area

on the taskbar, select Settings, go to the "Account" tab, and click the "Add an account" button.
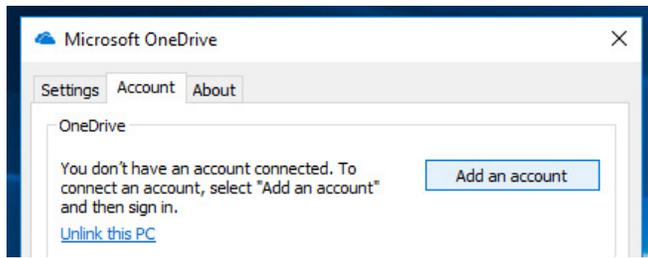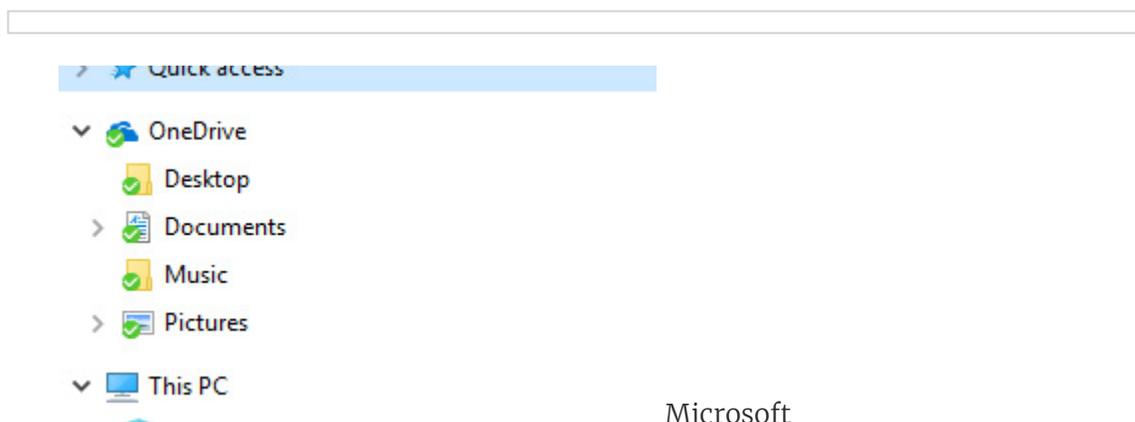

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A panel will open. Type in the email address and password of your Microsoft user account.

Individuals get 5GB of OneDrive storage for free. Pay $2 monthly and you'll get 50GB. Files that you upload can be no larger than 10GB. There are also two business plans: $60/user/year for 1TB, and $120/user/year for unlimited storage; the file size limit is bumped up to 15GB. OneDrive is also included with any Office 365 subscription. (See all OneDrive plans.)

Storing and syncing files via File Explorer

The primary way you'll use OneDrive in Windows 10 is through File Explorer. When you open File Explorer, OneDrive appears in the navigation pane on the left. You can put your files in it by dragging and dropping them from another location or by saving your documents, images or other files to it from most Windows applications.
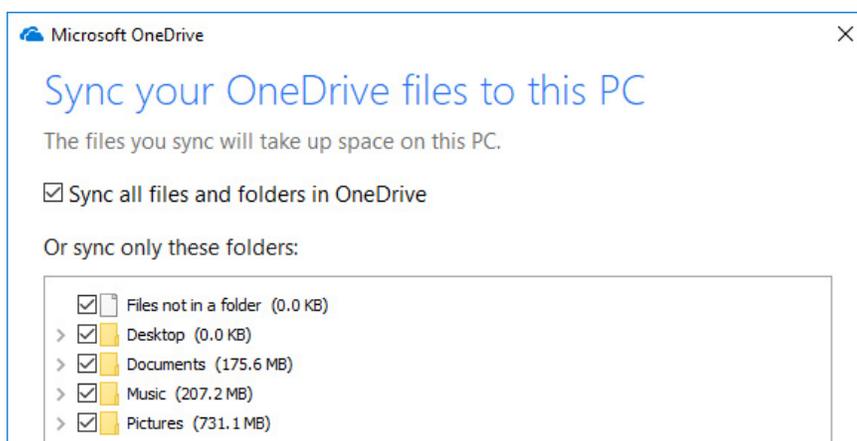

Microsoft

Whenever you put a file or folder in the OneDrive directory on your PC, a copy is automatically uploaded (synced) to the cloud. If you delete a file or folder from your OneDrive on your PC, it's deleted from the cloud as well.

If you change and save a file in OneDrive on your PC, the new version replaces the older version stored in the cloud, too. If you're offline when you make changes, the newer version of the file will be uploaded to the cloud next time you connect to the internet.

Turning off syncing for a folder

By default, all OneDrive files and folders sync to the cloud automatically. To change that, right-click the OneDrive icon in the notification area of the taskbar. From the menu panel that opens, click Settings. From the next panel that opens, click the Account tab and click the "Choose folders" button. In the screen that appears, uncheck any folder to stop syncing.
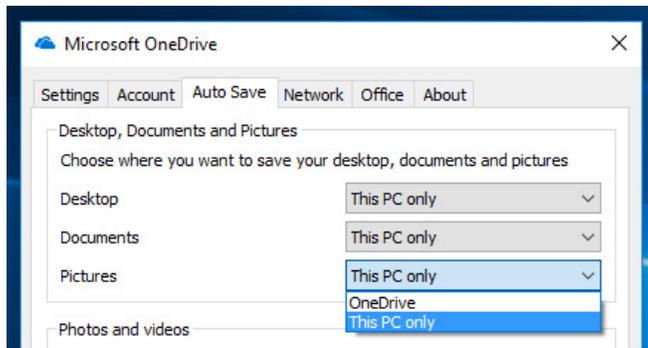
Microsoft

Desktop, Documents and Pictures folders

This may sound strange and confusing. OneDrive has its own folders named Desktop, Documents and Pictures. These are entirely separate from the folders with the same names on your PC's hard drive. When you're signed in to OneDrive, Windows uses those OneDrive folders as the default save location for certain types for files. For example, .docx files will be saved to the Documents folder in your OneDrive instead of the Documents folder on your hard drive.

You can change this so that Windows will save files to the original Desktop, Documents and Pictures folders on your PC (which will not sync to your OneDrive). Right-click the OneDrive icon in the notification area on the taskbar, click Settings and go to the Auto Save tab. Then click the input box

by Desktop, Documents or Pictures and choose "This PC only" from the drop-down.

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In File Explorer, if you delete one of these three folders on your OneDrive, then its corresponding drop-down on the above Auto Save tab will revert to "This PC only."

OneDrive Files On-Demand

The [Windows 10 Fall Creators Update](#), released in October 2017, added a function to OneDrive called Files On-Demand. When it's turned on, OneDrive won't forcibly download files stored in the cloud to whatever Windows 10 PC you're using. Instead, you can select files separately to be downloaded. And you can upload files to the cloud but have them removed from the hard drive of the Windows 10 PC you're using.

By default, Files On-Demand is turned on in PCs running the Windows 10 Fall Creators Update. To turn it off, right-click the OneDrive icon in the notification area of the taskbar, click Settings from the menu panel, click the Settings tab, and then uncheck "Save space and download files as you use them" under Files On-Demand.
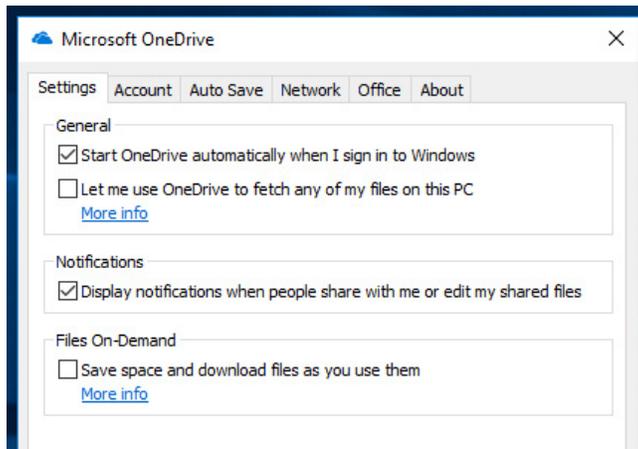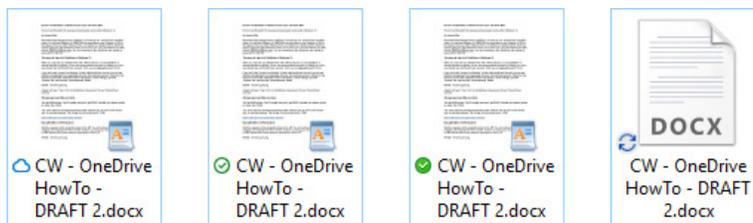
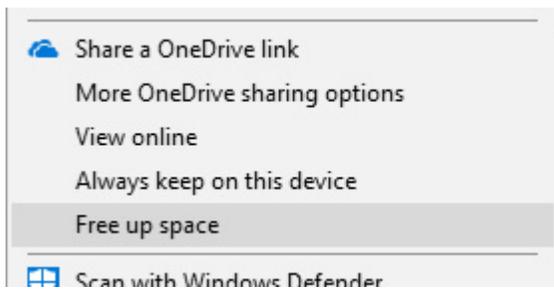Microsoft

Sync status of your files

In File Explorer, OneDrive denotes the sync status of your files with small icons next to the filenames.

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Shown from left to right in the image above:

- A cloud icon next to a filename or folder means it is not actually on your PC. It's only in the cloud.
- A file or folder that is synced (on your PC's hard drive and in the cloud) is denoted by a green checkmark on a white circle.
- If you right-click a file or folder and from the pop-up menu click "Always keep on this device," the status icon by it will change to a white checkmark on a green circle. (Note that if you have Files On-Demand turned off, this is the status icon that will be by all of your synced files and folders in your OneDrive.)
- When a file is uploading to the cloud or downloading from the cloud to the OneDrive directory on your PC, the icon by its filename will have two blue arrows animating in a circular motion.

Microsoft

To remove a file from your computer's hard drive but keep it in the cloud, right-click the file and from the pop-up menu click "Free up space."

To view a log of recent syncs, click the OneDrive icon on the notification area of the taskbar. This opens a panel listing files that have been added, deleted, moved or renamed in your OneDrive.
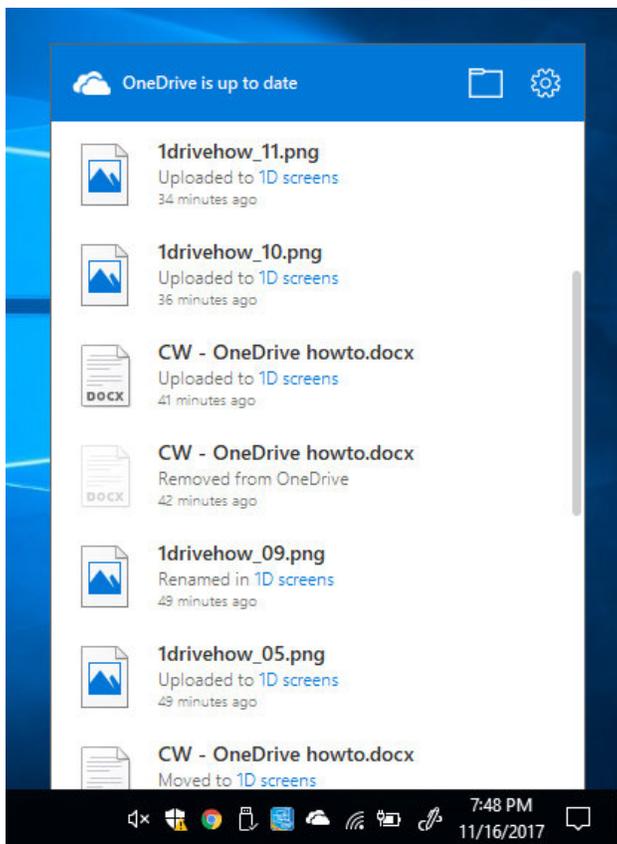
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Sharing OneDrive files

To share a file or folder with others from File Explorer, right-click the file or folder and click "Share a OneDrive link" from the menu. This generates a link to the selected file or folder in the cloud and copies the link to your computer's clipboard. As with any ordinary web link, you can paste it in an email, instant message, document, etc.
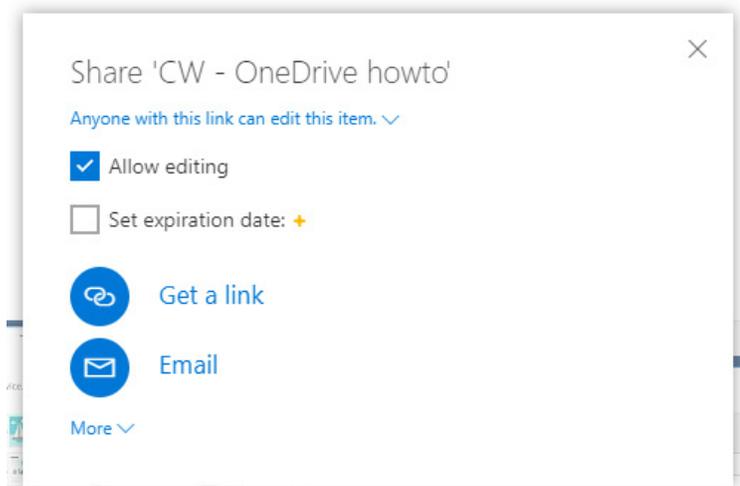
Microsoft
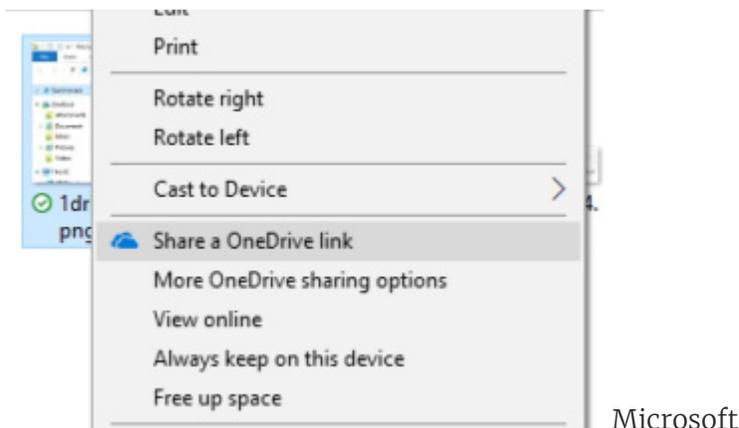
Note that anyone who has this link can view or download a copy of your file and can forward the link to others.

You can restrict your linked file so only one or a few people have access to it. And if you pay for a OneDrive plan with more storage space, you can also set an expiration date so the link will no longer allow anyone to view or download the linked file after that date. But to do either of these things, you have to access your OneDrive on the web. (We hope that a future update to OneDrive will let us change sharing permissions right from File Explorer.)

Right-click the file or folder, and in the menu that opens, click "More OneDrive sharing options." This launches your PC's default web browser and connects to OneDrive on the web.

Setting restrictions on share links via OneDrive on the web

You'll be prompted to log in to your Microsoft user account (the one that you use for OneDrive). This will open the web interface for your OneDrive. Click the Share button at the upper-left to open the Share panel. (If you're already signed in, you'll be taken to this Share panel immediately when you right-click on a OneDrive file or folder in the File Explorer and select "More OneDrive sharing options.")
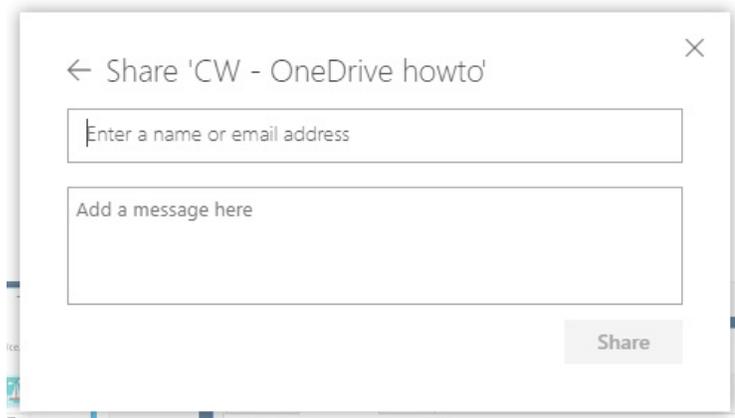
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Checking "Allow editing" lets people you're sharing the link with edit the file. (For example, if it is a document, then the person viewing it can edit it with the online version of Microsoft Word.) Warning: when somebody else edits the file online, those changes get synced to the copy in OneDrive on your PC's hard drive.

If you've subscribed to a paid plan, you can click "Set expiration date" to enter a date when you want the share link to be deactivated.

After you've made your selections, you have two options. "Get a link" will copy a link to the file or folder to your PC's clipboard. Note that this link is publicly accessible when you share it.

To restrict the link to specific people, click "Email." This opens a panel in which you can type in an email address for each person you want to be able to access the link. You can enter more than one email address. Click the Share button and an email will be sent containing the link to your file or folder that can only be opened by the recipient.
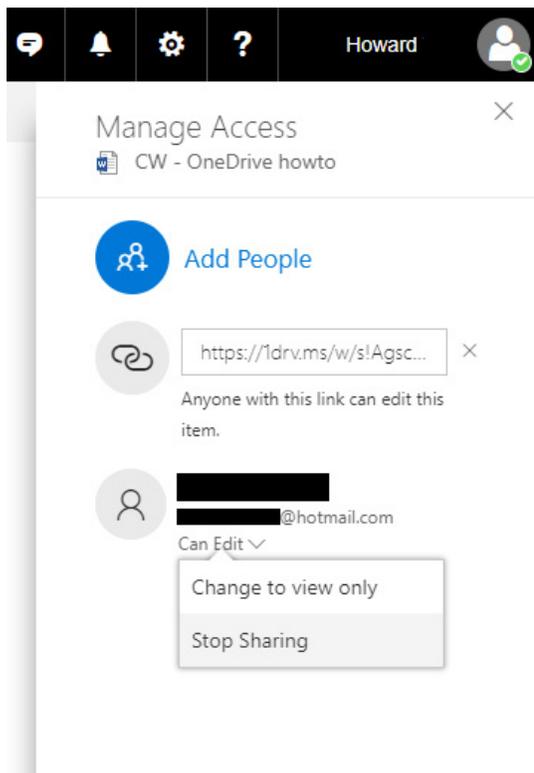
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Stopping share links via OneDrive on the web

To stop sharing a file or folder, or to change the user-editing status (both of these can only be done through the OneDrive website), right-click on the file or folder and select "Details" listed at the bottom of the menu panel that opens. A sidebar will open along the right side in the browser window showing the item's sharing status.
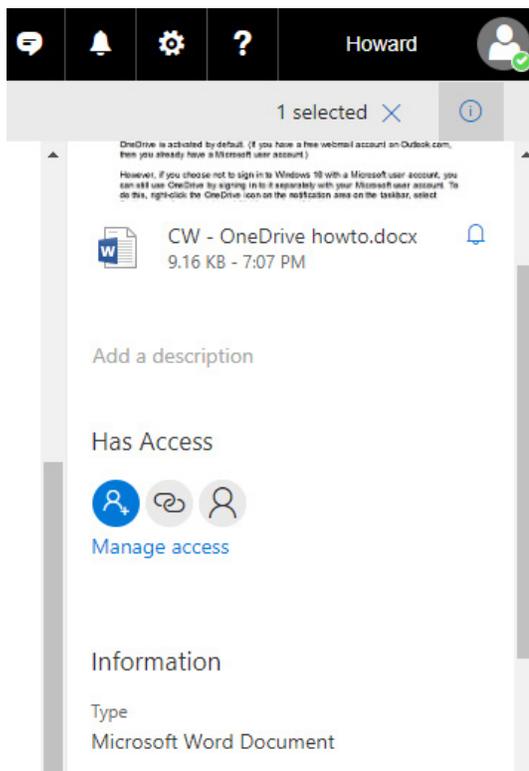
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Click the "Manage access" link, which will open another panel.

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To stop sharing with the public, click the "X" to the right of the web link.

To change the editing status of a shared file or folder with a recipient, or to stop sharing it with them, click "Can Edit" (or "Can View" if it says this instead). This opens a small panel to let you change either permission.

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