

Are You Confused By Dropbox?

Please note, I have written this from the perspective of a Mac user but the Windows experience is much the same. There are lots of other online storage companies. Dropbox was the first and the one I have always used. Feel free to research others! I am not sponsored by Dropbox!

Terminology used in this article:

**Online - something available on the internet*

**Offline - something on your computer or mobile device without having to go online. This is also know as "local".*

**Root - the top-level directory of a file system. The main menu of your computer, if you like.*

Introduction

Are you confused by Dropbox? So was I, so I have written this article to help you....

Let's go back a bit....

Using external hard drives

With your computer, you probably have one or more external hard drives which you either use for storing data (folder and files) or for backing up the contents of your computer.

They're great. My studio is littered with them and I also have a drawer full of others - some still functioning and some broken.

And there's the problem - from time to time these unattractive chunks of plastic, some with power supplies on the ends of spindly leads, some with USB cables, simply decide not to work anymore.

The device that you have entrusted your precious data with lets you down and there's nothing you can do about it.

If you're like me, you probably started off with one to back up your computer to and then you thought "Hang on, if this one goes wrong what would I do?" So you bought another one to back up the back up. And so the cycle begins.

The next problem is that your back-up external drive becomes choked with data and you have to buy another one. Then of course you have to buy another to back *that* one up. You now have a computer and four external drives.

Very soon four becomes eight, eight becomes sixteen - you see where this is heading!

...and then came Dropbox...

Then 2007 came around and Dropbox was invented. Hallelujah!

I was an early adopter and I'm still using it in 2021 which is about to become 2022 as I type this on Christmas Eve. (Yes, I'm one of those sort of people!!)

So what's all the fuss about?

Well, I could quickly see how useful it would be back in 2007 and pretty soon had a free account to try.

I then progressed to a Dropbox Plus paid-for account and very recently, a Professional account.

The problem was, up until recently, I have used it extensively without really taking the time to understand it fully. My chickens came home to roost the other day, however, and I ended up with egg on my face in a big way, largely due to my lack of understanding of this piece of software. So I have taken the trouble to invest some time into learning Dropbox and I thought this might be helpful to you.

So What Is Dropbox?

Ok - let's start at the beginning.

Dropbox, although it works *online, is pretty much the same as an external hard drive for your main computer but it's also so much more. You can use it in three ways:

1) *Offline on the Dropbox app on your computer which, on a Mac, looks just like a normal Finder window.

2) online (www.dropbox.com) - my preferred method.

3) on your mobile device (phone or tablet)

Getting Started

Try a free 2GB account first from www.dropbox.com

The way to start, having installed the software and sorted out your account, is to start putting some precious folders or files into your main Dropbox folder which you can put anywhere you like on your computer - desktop, document folder etc. I have mine in the *root. It really doesn't matter. You can do the same on your mobile device if you install the Dropbox app on your phone or tablet.

These files are still on your computer and depending where you copied them from, they're quite probably somewhere else as well as on your computer. You don't have to copy them to the Dropbox folder - you can simply move them there instead but they're only in your Dropbox folder now. Nothing to worry about.

The Magic Begins...

Now comes the first piece of magic. These files and folders get automatically sent across the internet (as long as you have an internet connection) and copied to your Dropbox folder in the cloud. Of course, it's not really up in the sky but securely stored on a very large bank of hard drives somewhere in San Francisco, US; I think. It might be somewhere else! All I know is, you don't have to worry about it because it's safe. You've effectively backed these files up. No nasty external hard drive that you bought from Amazon to go wrong. Thank goodness. These files and folders are still on your computer as well so you can still see them without going online.

You simply carry on doing this until you've used up the amount of storage you have purchased. This won't take long if you have one of the free 2GB accounts so you will probably end up getting one of the paid-for accounts - currently around £100 per year for the 2TB Plus account and twice that for the Professional account which I now have.

So this is great - you've successfully put some precious data into the Dropbox on your computer and an exact copy of that data is in a safe place a long way from your home unless you happen to live round the corner from Dropbox HQ.

So now what?

Syncing...More magic!

If you change any of the files or folders on your computer, these changes will also happen to the files in the cloud (let's call it that for now) - I mean at Dropbox HQ!

Similarly, if you go online to the Dropbox website and look at your files and folders online (which you can) and change something - guess what? - these changes also take place in the actual Dropbox folder on your computer and on your mobile devices if you're using Dropbox on these. This is called syncing and it's wonderful!

Selective Syncing

Now, let's say, that after a while, you have added so many files to the Dropbox folder on your computer that the internal drive of your computer is starting to fill up. This is bad. I think I once heard that you need to leave 25% of your computer's hard drive free for the computer to operate properly. I don't know if that's true - I'm not a computer expert!

Anyway, let's just say that your poor old computer is groaning under the weight of all those files in your Dropbox folder. Ok - you could trash them but if you do, they'll get trashed in the cloud (online) as well. Disaster! Don't do it!

Luckily, Dropbox paid-for accounts - everything from Plus and above, have something called Selective Syncing, and this is how it's helpful in this situation.

Under the Sync menu of Dropbox (available in Preferences) you can see all of your stuff in your Dropbox. Anything that you untick ("uncheck" as they say in America) will be removed from your computer but still be available online. So you haven't trashed it but it's only available when you go online with your Dropbox. That involves clicking the world symbol by the way, which you can see if you click the Dropbox icon in the menu bar. You can always undo this by re-ticking/checking the file or folder.

The upside of this is that it frees-up valuable space on your computer. The downside is that it's obviously less convenient and slower to go online to access your files and folders.

It's great though. I have a movie folder in my Dropbox that's currently something like 1.5 TB (1500 GB). My computer's hard drive is only 500 GB so you can bet I don't have this folder ticked under Selective Syncing!

Selective Syncing has been around for a while. It's very useful but the problem is you can't see those files that you unticked/unchecked on your computer other than going to the Preferences menu as described above - only online. There is a better way - Smart Sync.

Smart Sync,

Smart Sync is a newer feature and it's er.....
smarter!

You can enable/disable this feature under
Preferences.

It's similar to Selective Syncing but you actually see the names of everything in your online Dropbox on your computer without going to Preferences/ Selective Sync. You can choose for these files or folders to be on-line only (these appear with a grey cloud icon) or "up to date" which means they are physically on your computer as well as online (white tick over a green circle). These files are called "Local".

If a folder in question appears with a green tick over a white circle it means that some files in this folder are online only. So this folder contains a mixture of online and on-your-computer (local) files.

Files or folders which have the grey cloud icon get synced to the online version as soon as you change them to "Local" in the menu or double click them. This causes Dropbox to download the file from your online Dropbox to the Dropbox folder on your computer. They may take a little while to download to your computer depending upon their size. The icon will change from a grey cloud to a white tick over a green circle.

Remember, the on-line file is always the most recent one.

So all is well. You sleep at night secure in the knowledge that your precious files are safe and sound online and even if some horrible person stole your computer or something else nasty happened - you would still have your files safe and sound.

But that's not the only fun to be had with Dropbox and this is where life can get a little complicated.

Stay with me - don't worry, I will explain it!

Sharing - using a link

Let's ignore Dropbox for a moment.

Let's say you have a document on your computer and you want to send it to a friend or family member. Well that's easy right? You just send them an email with that tiny file attached and - job done!

However, supposing you want to send them a 12 GB movie file. Try emailing that!! This is where Dropbox is so brilliant.

Every file or folder in your Dropbox has what's known as an "url" which is short for "Uniform Resource Locator". No of course I didn't know that - I Googled it - I'm not that much of a geek!

This "Uniform Resource Locator" or url is just another way of saying "address". In other words every file or folder on the internet lives in a tiny and unique location and the address for this location is called its "url".

Ok - so what? I hear you say.

Well, actually this is good news because if I know the address (the url) of a file in my Dropbox on the internet I can give it to someone else to see. This is called a link and you can give it to anyone you want - even to someone who doesn't have a Dropbox account.

So what can they do with it?

Well - let's say it's a letter. If they click on it, it will open up on their computer screen and they can choose to download it (if I allow them) and print it out.

If the link is to a movie or a photograph - they can watch the film online or look at the photo. I can choose to make it so the person I send this link to can or can't download it. I can even password protect it. You get the idea. This person does not need a Dropbox account to gain access to these files. That's good because not everyone wants to have one or can be bothered.

Be aware that the person that you send this link to can also pass this link onto someone else.

There's nothing you can do about that except ask them not to. So don't send them all your banking passwords!

In "Settings" you can effectively override the link if you choose to only let people you have invited to share the file or folder see it.

Sharing - to another Dropbox account holder

So, "What's this?" I hear you say and how is that different to giving someone the link to a file or folder you have on Dropbox?

Well, if the "someone" in question has a Dropbox account of their own, this gives you another option. You can now invite that person to share the file or folder and in this way they can put this file or folder in their own Dropbox folder for viewing on or offline.

This is so handy because now this person doesn't have to go on the internet to see your stuff they can have it on their computer. Not only that, but if you give them permission, they can edit the folder or add to it and their edits and additions will be reflected in your original files and folders. This is obviously brilliant for collaborating on a project.

The two options when sharing are "View" or "Edit". You can only choose the "Edit" option when sharing a folder - not a single file.

These are pretty obvious, I think. Don't give people the permission to edit if you don't want anything changed.

In addition, if someone has shared a folder with you, you can drop your own files into as well. For instance, if you have a video performance that you've filmed on your phone and you want me to critique it this would be perfect for this situation.

Rewind

If something does go wrong you can always "Rewind" your Dropbox.

Let me explain.

If you have a Plus account you can go back in time 30 days and re-instate anything that was erased or changed in anyway. With a Professional account (and above) you can go back 180 days. It's just like Time Machine if you're a Mac user.

Limits

Please be aware that Dropbox only allows you 20GB data each day to upload and download stuff if you have a free account - this includes shared files and folders. If you have a Plus or Professional account this jumps to 400 GB a day. You would be surprised to know how quickly you can go through this so make sure that if you have huge files in your Dropbox (like movies) that you don't allow these to be downloaded en-masse. I did, and I paid the price with a 24 hour suspension. If you keep exceeding your limit, these suspensions get longer and longer. You can only disable downloads with a Professional account and above. A Business Advanced account gives you 4TB of data per day for up and down loading. That's ten times more than with a Plus or Professional account.

And that's it!

That's just about all there is to say about Dropbox. There are a few other things you can do with it but that's beyond the scope of this article. There's lots more information on www.dropbox.com

I hope you enjoyed this article. If you have any tips or questions do get in touch with me via my website www.daddylongles.com/contact or directly if you have my email address.