

What are File Extensions? And Why You Should Care!

Dave Palmer

I'm sure you've seen filenames like agenda.doc or notes.pdf. The three letters on the end of a filename are called the "extension" of the filename and usually indicate the format of the file.

The format of the file, in turn, indicates which programs can open and edit the file, or what the file does. For example, .doc is a word processing format opened by Microsoft Word, and .xls is a format used by Microsoft Excel.

In fact, an extension may use from one to four characters, although three is most common.

Why you should care: Sometimes programmers hide the type of content inside a file with fake extensions. On the Internet and when looking at electronic mail attachments, you may come across files with multiple extensions, like:

readme.txt.exe

The final extension (the .exe) is the actual extension of the file. The .txt is NOT the file's extension.

Thus, if you were to double-click this masquerading file, instead of getting a text document opened with Notepad, you might run a program that would install a dangerous computer virus that could do damage to your system.

Be VERY WARY of any file containing more than one extension! Although not true 100% of the time, some of the files with multiple extensions were written to fool people into causing problems.