

Revealing File Explorer's hidden treasures

By Michael Lasky | AskWoody.com | 4/1/19

As every Windows user knows, File Explorer is the workhorse utility for managing files and folders — whether they're stored locally, on external drives, or in the cloud.

But sometimes we forget the many ways we can manage File Explorer itself, making it an even more useful tool. Here's a reminder of some simple ways to bend Windows 10's file manager to our will.

File Explorer's basic file/folder interface hasn't significantly changed since the halcyon days of Windows XP — though there has been a steady series of enhancements along the way. The app formerly known as Windows Explorer

acquired Libraries in Win7 — a feature that initially earned a lukewarm reception. (Many of us still haven't tapped the power of Windows libraries.) The Ribbon was added with Win8 — much to the annoyance of many longtime Windows users. And there have been numerous other, less visible, improvements.

But the basic Explorer window *still* sports essentially the same layout. The *Details* view, for example, shows the same default column descriptors: Name, Date modified, Size, and Type (Document, PDF, File folder, and so forth), as shown in Figure 1. (Note: The Ribbon is an overlay; when enabled, it covers the column titles. To show/hide it, click one of the toolbar tabs.)

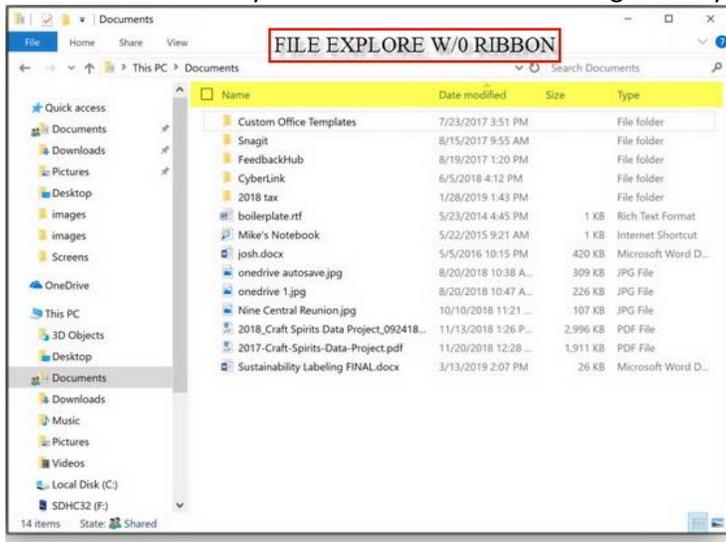
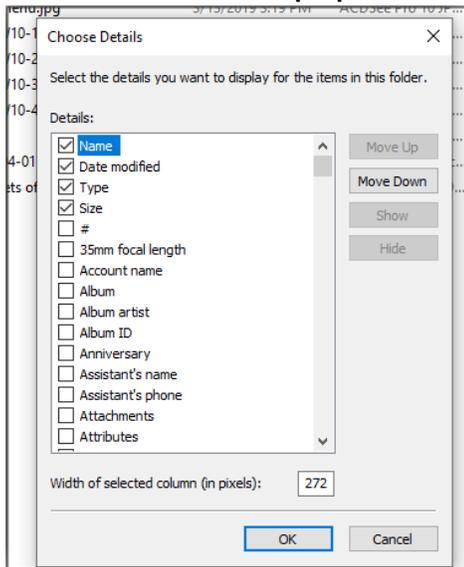


Figure 1. File Explorer's default column types provide basic information.

Want more info about your files? Right-click any of those column titles, and you now have access to hundreds of other column types, thus providing a customizable power-keg (pun intended) of app-specific details. And that's just one of various ways you can tailor File Explorer to your needs. Here are some more.

Filter and customize file properties



We all know that clicking a column title will reverse the sort order, be it alphabetical or numeric. But clicking the down arrow immediately to the right of the title pops up a list of simple filtering tools. You can, for example, quickly set a date range for filtering the *Date modified* column. In the Type column, the drop-down box lets you filter by file extension — e.g., JPEGs and Word documents.

Swinging back to those additional column heads, right-clicking any title pops up a short list of column categories or types. Clicking **More** at the bottom of the list brings up the Details dialog box with a menu of around 300 descriptors. To add new columns in File Explorer, simply put a check mark next to those you want displayed — and leave unchecked those you don't (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. File Explorer makes it easy to select the information it displays about files.

Obviously, most of these column types are application-specific. For example, if you have music files, you might want to add columns for **Length** or [track] # (see Figure 3). Likewise, if it's a folder of screenshots or photos, consider adding **Dimensions**.



Figure 3. Make File Explorer more useful by adding *length* and *track number* for music files.

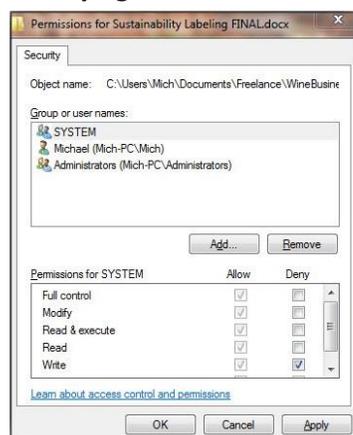
Obviously, neither Length nor Dimension is of any use for a folder of Word and PDF documents. But column types can give you worthwhile information when matched with a folder containing the appropriate type of file — provided that information is contained in a file’s metadata. Just because you add *Video Compression* to a folder of videos doesn’t mean you’ll

necessarily see that information.

Again, you can use the column-management boxes to uncheck columns you don’t need. There’s no point in having the Type column in a folder full of JPEGs. But you can also use the Details box to change the order of columns — or re-order them by simply dragging and dropping them around the title bar.

You most likely know how to resize column widths by grabbing a column’s right edge. But you also have two options in the first column-management box: *Size column to fit* or *Size all columns to fit*. That’s standard Windows: multiple ways to solve the same problem.

Modifying an individual file’s metadata



Information *about* a particular file is contained in its metadata — common stats such as date created, author, permissions, etc. plus information you might not know is kept. There may be times when you want to change, add, or remove elements of the metadata. Some of this information is locked; some isn’t — such as adding additional authors or editing a file’s read/write security settings. You can even clear most of the embedded metadata — removing, for example, personal information before sharing a file.

Customizing a file’s metadata starts by right-clicking a file’s name in File Explorer and selecting Properties from the drop-down menu. The Properties dialog box sports anywhere from four to six tabs, based on file type, but for this discussion, we’re looking at the *Security* and *Details* tabs. Figure 4 shows the former.

Figure 4. If you’re sharing a file, you might want to prevent others from changing it.

Note that managing file permissions is another whole article in itself. A WikiHow [article](#) gives the basics, but — in short — to limit access to a file, you can click Edit in the Security box and then select Add. Enter a new group called something generic such as “Users” to the list, and Windows will automatically limit the group to read-only rights. You can then click the Permissions boxes to give them more or fewer rights.

The Details tab provides more customization, though with some limitations. Moving your cursor down the **Value** column will give you a quick view of what can and can’t be changed. Editable fields will display a box where you can add, change, or remove metadata.

For example, in Figure 5, Joe Schmo contributed to the target document, though well after it was created by Michael Lasky. Via the Values column, I easily added his name to the Authors field — and I removed mine.

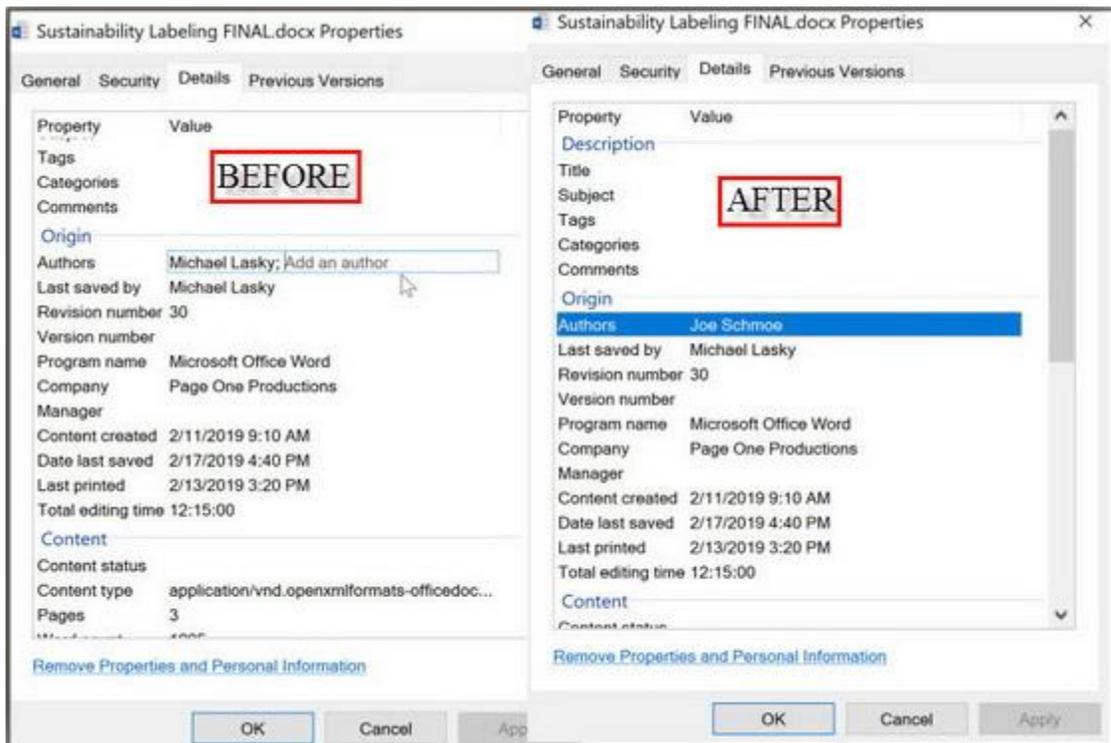


Figure 5. It's easy to change the metadata in any editable field. Here, I changed the name in Authors.

Digging out the details

As mentioned earlier, there are metadata fields you can't change in Details. For example, you can't edit **Date Created** or **Date Modified** — even if your lawyer thinks it might help to change that data before trial. However, there are perfectly legit reasons to change a file's create/modify dates, and some third-party utilities will let you do so. On the other hand, there are no restrictions on adding **Tags**, which are basically notes or subject categories that can group similarly themed documents. The primary reason to use Tags is to produce faster searches. (Reportedly, there are some instances where File Explorer doesn't allow tagging files with AVI, BMP, MPG, or PNG extensions.) Finally, File Explorer offers a more-powerful method for eliminating most — or partially removing some — of a file's metadata. At the bottom of the Details box, click the **Remove properties and personal information** link. The Remove Properties dialog box will appear and offer two choices. The first is the nuclear option: File Explorer makes a copy of the file and clears all properties that can be removed. The second option lets you *selectively* remove properties from the original file. Note that the second choice doesn't always work — you might get an exception error, probably due to some type of hidden permissions violation. If you've been using Windows for a long time, you might have forgotten more than you now remember. Take some time to refresh your working knowledge of Windows' less-obvious tools.