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Computing Harmony: How To Seamlessly Blend Windows and OS X

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1. Introduction

PCs and Macs – Living Together More Than Ever

It's no secret that Apple has experienced success over the last decade, and although much of that has come from the iPhone and iPad, the Mac division is going gangbusters as well. The release of Lion has, according to some sources, [allowed OS X to reach double-digit market share numbers](#). Others disagree, stating that market share is lower – but don't disagree that the numbers have been consistently rising.

Whatever the case, the robust sales of MacBook and iMac means that a number of people are choosing to use a Mac as at least one of their computers. What it doesn't mean, however, is that these households are being taken over by Apple entirely. [According to a 2009 report by NPD](#), 85% of Mac owners also have a PC at home. And those who don't almost certainly have a PC at work.

Unfortunately, PCs and Macs don't always play nicely out of the box, which can be frustrating. That doesn't have to be the case, however. If you know the right tricks – most of which are simple and free – you can easily manage both under the same roof.



The Switch to Intel – Improving Compatibility Ever Since

At the beginning of the decade, compatibility between PCs and Macs was a real mess. Part of the reason for this, besides the use of different operating systems, was the use of different processors. PCs have long used x86 processors from Intel and AMD, but Apple continued to hold on to the aging PowerPC architecture.

That changed in 2005, however, and compatibility between the two operating systems has improved ever since. It has become much easier to run either operating system on hardware of your choice. Microsoft released an OS X version of Office, finally giving Mac owners a no-compromise way to open those pesky .docx files. And more developers than ever before offer software for both operating systems.

If current trends continue, this improvement in compatibility won't stop. While Apple products grow in popularity, Microsoft remains absolutely entrenched in the enterprise space, and in the homes of most consumers. In addition to this, increasing reliance on cloud services for storage and app data should enhance compatibility for all devices.

OS Versions Covered

Before we dive into the guide, it's necessary to do some housekeeping and talk about the versions of each operating system we will be discussing.

All of the examples you find here are applicable to Windows 7 and Mac OS X Lion. Many of the tricks will also work in Windows Vista and Mac OS X Snow Leopard, and some of them will work in even older versions of each operating system.



We can't practically provide information about every version of Windows and every version of OS X, as both operating systems have undergone significant changes over time. If you have an older version, you will still find this guide helpful, but you may have to look up additional sources of information to figure out certain topics. In addition, some recommended software solutions may not work on your computer.

2. File and Software Compatibility

Windows PCs and Macs now use very similar hardware. They can run on the same processors, store data on the same hard drives, and use some of the same video cards. Yet the way they store data remains different.

Windows currently uses a file system called New Technology File System, more commonly known by the acronym NTFS. It replaced FAT as the file system used by Windows as of Windows 2000 and has stuck around ever since, though some revisions have been introduced over time. Before that, NTFS was used by Windows NT.

Apple, on the other hand, uses HFS Plus. Introduced as part of Mac OS 8.1, it's been part of Apple's operating systems ever since and there so far have been no indications that will change. This file system can also be used by the iPod.

Unfortunately, these file systems are not compatible. As of Mac OS X 10.3, it is possible for Apple computers to read files from an NTFS formatted drive, but not write. Snow Leopard includes [unofficial NTFS read/write support that can be enabled by the user through the Terminal](#), but it's been known to cause instability.

If you're on a PC and trying to work with a drive formatted on a Mac, the situation is even worse. Windows cannot read or write files stored on a drive formatted by HFS Plus. Mac computers using Boot Camp are an exception, thanks to a special driver installed by Apple as part of Boot Camp setup, but even then it's only possible to read from HFS Plus.

Creating a Drive That is PC/Mac Compatible

So, if NTFS and HFS Plus don't play nice, what's the solution?

[FAT32](#). This old file system, introduced in 1980 by Microsoft, is read/write compatible with both Windows and OS X. If you need to read and write files to a drive from computers with either operating system, formatting that drive in FAT32 will solve your woes.

However, [Windows 7 will not let you format a drive with the FAT32 file system](#) if that drive (or the partition on that drive you're trying to format) exceeds 32GB. To get around this, you can use a free utility called [Fat32Formatter](#). Apple doesn't impose this limit, so you can format a drive of any size using Disk Utility.

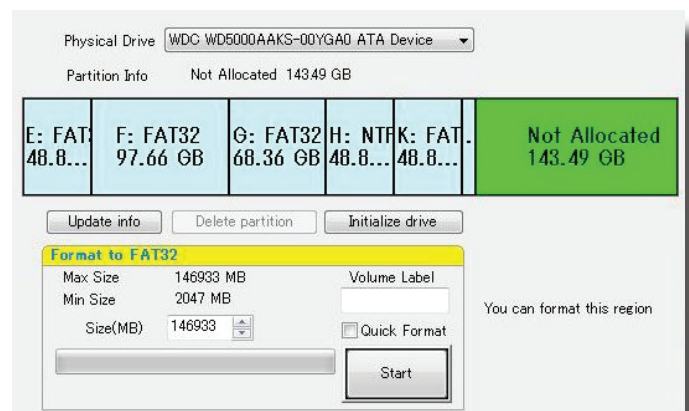
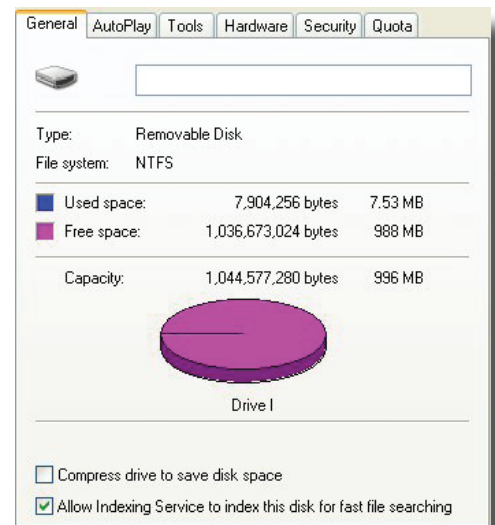
Now, you might be wondering – why wouldn't I want to format *all* of my drives with FAT32? Well, the reason is simple – both Windows 7 and Mac OS X will not install to a drive formatted with FAT32. Critical functions of both operating systems rely on features that are a part of their respective file systems, so while both can read and write to FAT32, neither will install to a FAT32 disk or partition.

Another serious issue is FAT32's file size limitation of 4GB or smaller, which is a consequence of the system's design. If you work with very large files, this will be a major roadblock.

Also, FAT32 is just slow.

Software Solutions to File System Problems

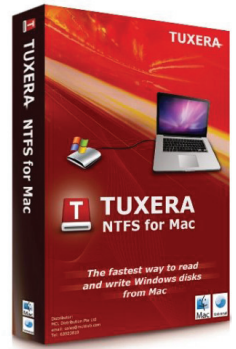
For most people, formatting an external drive that is to be shared by a PC and a Mac is a simple solution. The shared drive will likely only store media files and backups, and no excessively large files, so the limitations of FAT32 are not an issue.



But what if you're not most people? What if you need to be able to directly read/write from NTFS to HFS Plus or vice versa?

Mac users will want to check out [Tuxera NTFS for Mac](#). The software is commercial, and while you can enjoy a 15 day trial to see if you like how it works, you'll have to pay 25 euros for the software after that. Alternatively, you can purchase [NTFS for Mac OS X](#) from Paragon Software, which at \$19.95 has a clear price advantage.

Paragon Software also offers [HFS+ for Windows](#), which again costs \$19.95 and offers read/write support for the HFS+ format to Windows 7 as well as Vista and XP. Another option for Windows users is [Mediafour's MacDrive 9](#), which is priced at \$49.99. A five-day trial is offered.



Software Is Still Isolated

Although it does require a little effort, moving files between [external drives](#), Macs and PCs is a problem that can be solved. It's even easier if you rely on networking, as we will discuss in chapter 5 of this guide.

Software, however, is still a quagmire. With few exceptions, all currently available software is compatible with only one operating system or the other. This is true even if the software is available for both platforms. In other words, most software demands that you purchase individual Mac and PC versions, even if the functionality of the software is identical on both platforms.

For example: if you purchase Microsoft Office 2010 for Windows you cannot install it in OS X. You'll need to purchase Office 2011 for Mac as well.

There are some exceptions. One of the most notable is Steam, the gaming platform from Valve. Some games available are compatible with both Mac and PC, and when you buy such a title, you usually receive both versions.



Are Boot Camp And Virtualization A Solution To Software Issues?

Since 2006, Apple has offered a piece of software on the Mac called Boot Camp. It's a multi-boot utility that includes support for installing Windows on a Mac computer by partitioning off part of the hard drive and formatting it in the required NTFS file format. Though I could go into the installation process, it'd be rather pointless, [as Apple already offers extensive installation guides](#) for Mac running OS X Lion and Snow Leopard.

Boot Camp isn't the only option for installing Windows on a Mac. [Virtualization](#), which is the process of emulating separate computer hardware using a single computer, can actually be more effective than Boot Camp because it's possible to enter Windows without rebooting. Both [VMware Fusion](#) and [Parallels](#) are capable of this, but you will have to hand over cash for both.

It's also possible to run Mac OS X on a Windows computer using VMware, but the implementation is far more complex, and only certain PCs will be compatible. For instructions, check out the [OSx86 Project's wiki](#). Alternatively, you can try to build a [Hackintosh](#).



No matter what you try, however, dual-booting and virtualization are not great solutions to software issues for households that own both PCs and Macs. They are primarily geared towards people who own *only* a PC or a Mac, but want to be able to run both Windows and OS X. Using virtualization and/or dual-booting as a means of circumventing software compatibility can be complex, time-consuming and expensive (if you do everything legally, as you'll need to buy a copy of Windows for your Mac, and a copy of OS X for your Windows machine).

3. Sync and Cloud Services Compatibility

If you're looking to routinely transfer files between a Windows PC and a Mac, formatting a drive in FAT32 can do the trick. However, as you may have noticed in the previous chapter, there's a lot of catches and the end result could be a bit awkward to use and, if you don't have a nice external drive already, could cost you a fair chunk of change.

Services and tools that can sync your files or provide cloud storage are one answer. They work well because the place you are storing your files to be used on both your Windows PC and your Mac is format neutral. You can transfer files between a PC and Mac all day long without ever knowing what the acronyms NTFS or HFS+ stand for.

What's the catch? In most cases, it's capacity. Compared to hard drives, the storage capacity on a cloud storage service is usually small. The price of using these services can also become expensive over time, because you often have to pay a monthly service fee.

But these disadvantages don't apply to all sync and cloud services generally. Let's have a look at some that work the best, and the price (if any) you must pay for them.

The Best Ways To Sync Windows And OS X [Windows Live Mesh 2011](#)

For years, Microsoft has offered a sync service that is completely free. It was called Windows Live Sync, and has now been renamed Windows Live Mesh 2011.

It's an often overlooked service that Ars Technica called "frustratingly bad." Some of the points of its detractors are well taken. Of all the services here, it is the hardest to use, because the interface is a strange combination of software installed on the PC you would like to sync and a web-based interface on Microsoft's Windows Live.

Yet I still recommend that users check it out. Why? Because it is free, and places no limits on what you can sync. It is able to do this because, when in sync mode, data is transferred *directly* between the two computers that are syncing. The sync can take place as long as both computers are turned on and connected to the Internet. There is also a cloud storage portion to the service, and it offers 5GB of storage free.

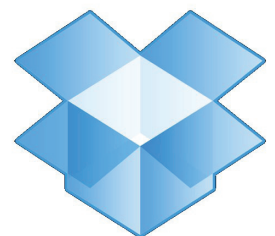
If you do not want to pay, and you want to transfer large volumes of data, this may be your only viable option. And yes, despite the name, it is available for both Windows and OS X.

[Dropbox](#)

Dropbox provides a software client that installed on your PC or Mac. Once installed, a new Dropbox folder appears on your computer that, unlike normal folders, is connected to your cloud storage. Files dropped into the folder on one PC are available on all PCs connected to your account, or you can access the files through the Dropbox website.

Dropbox is popular because it's simple and effective. Many people and sites use it, including MakeUseOf, to share files. It's available for not only Windows and Mac, but also Linux, iOS, Android and BlackBerry.

The downside? If you play by the rules, you have to pay. A basic account has just 2GB of space and the 50GB/100GB plans are \$9.99/\$19.99 a month. However, [you can access extra storage by sending invites to friends](#), up to 8GB on a free account. You can also try to get around the space limitation by using [Dropboxen](#), which lets you access multiple Dropbox accounts at once on a single computer.



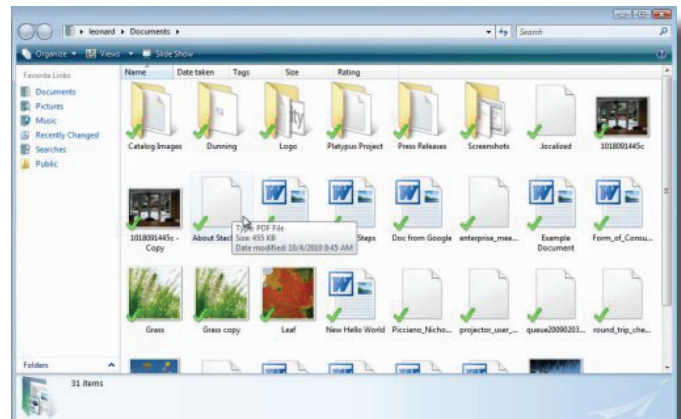
Synccplicity Personal

An alternative to Dropbox, Synccplicity also offers automatic syncing of files among multiple platforms, and also offers a 2GB free storage limit. Unlike Dropbox, you're only allowed to sync between two computers and mobile devices for free, which may be an issue if you wanted to sync a Windows PC, a Mac *and* your mobile.

While Dropbox places a focus on its special folder, Synccplicity boasts that it works with your file structure. When you set it up, you can decide what is synced and what is not. This may be more convenient, but it also can make managing your synced files a bit more tedious.

This service offers integration with Google Docs. When you save documents on your computers using Synccplicity, they can (if you choose) be saved to Google Docs as well. If you are mainly concerned about syncing office files or personal writing and financial documents, this feature will be very helpful.

Should you decide you need more storage, you can purchase 50GB for \$15/month. This also lets you sync up to five devices.

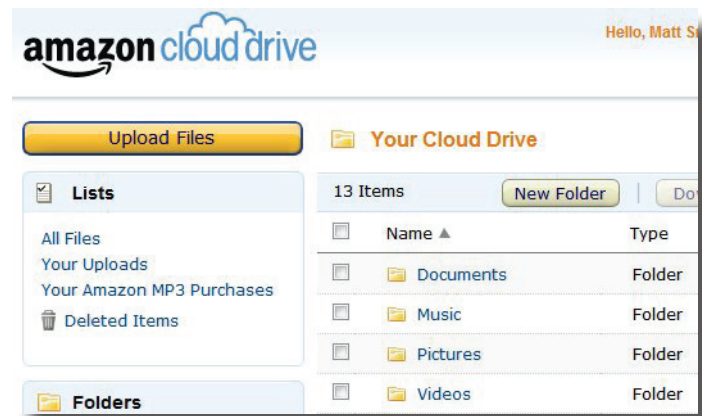


Amazon Cloud Drive

If simple storage is all you're looking for, Amazon Cloud Drive is worth a look. You receive unlimited access from any computer, and since the interface is *only* web-based, there are no compatibility issues to worry about.

The downside? It's not a sync service. So you're responsible for putting your files in the storage and taking them out again. Forgot to do so, and now you're away from home with your MacBook Pro while you have files stranded on your Windows desktop? You're out of luck.

For users who don't travel far or often, this doesn't matter, and the quick setup and simplicity of this service will be alluring.



Other Services Worth Considering

Personally, I think most readers of this guide will find one of the four services listed above to be suitable. Windows Live Sync offers unlimited transfer, Dropbox and Synccplicity offer ease-of-use while retaining sync features, and Amazon Cloud Drive is an easy web-based solution.

Still, you might want to look beyond these options, for one reason or another. Here are a few more choices that are known to work on both Windows and OS X.

iDriveSync Basic

Another Dropbox-alike, but this one offers a free storage limit of 5GB, and an unlimited storage Pro plan for \$4.95 per month. The software isn't up to Dropbox's standards, but you certainly receive more storage for your buck.

MozyHome

Now positioning itself as a backup service, MozyHome offers automatic cloud sync and 125GB of storage for up to 3 computers at a price of \$9.99 a month. That certainly beats Dropbox's paid service value.

SugarSync

This service offers 5GB of free storage, mobile app support, and a variety of competitively priced plans. There doesn't appear to be a limit on the number of devices you can use with the free account.

[SyncMate](#)

Like Windows Live Mesh, this software is able to sync multiple devices without imposing monthly charges or storage limits. The downside? You have to purchase the software, which is \$39.95 (a free version is available, but its functionality is extremely limited).

A Note On Thumbs And Stores

Sometimes when you are syncing folders on Windows and Mac computers, you will come across files called .DS_Store and Thumbs.db. These are files created by default in folders by OS X and Windows, respectively. Normally they are hidden, but if automatically transferred as part of a sync, they'll become visible in their new home as they are no longer part of the file system.

You can do with them what you will. Deleting them is not a problem, as they serve no purpose once transferred to another operating system via syncing. Depending on the sync solution you choose, it may be possible to automatically exclude them.

4. Smartphone Compatibility

Smartphones are increasingly becoming extensions of our computers, carrying much of the same content. It's possible to manually place your documents, photos, and movies on a mobile device for enjoyment and use on the go. Or you can use some of the sync services listed above, because many of them offer mobile apps.

As phones and computers become more integrated, however, users begin to worry about if their phone and computer will work well together. Will my iPhone work with my Mac, but not my PC? Will my Android work with my PC, but not with my Mac?

Using Android With A Mac

When you buy an [Android device](#), you have to tie it to a Google account including Gmail. For some Mac users, this will seem like a pain in the butt, but it is a step that you will want to take because [Gmail](#) on Android works better than any other mail option. Still, if you want to use existing email, you can set it up using the standard Mail app. You can also try a third-party email app from the Android market.

Your Mac's contacts and calendar can be synced with your Google account using built-in features, which will in turn sync with your Android phone. As such, syncing Android with your Mac means syncing your Mac with Google.

Doing so is simple. In [Address Book](#) on your Mac, open preferences, go to Accounts, and select your local contacts account. You should find a "Synchronize with Google" option, which when selected prompts you for your Google credentials. A similar option is available in [iCal](#). Go to preferences, then Accounts, and click the "+" symbol. Leave the new account type at Automatic, and then put in your Google login information. It will automatically be detected as a Google account and the calendar will be synced accordingly. Finally, you may want to sync your iTunes. The best solution for this is an Android app called [DoubleTwist](#), desktop software that effectively operates as iTunes for Android. It can sync with iTunes and best of all, it's free. However, if you want to take synchronization another step further, you can buy AirSync for DoubleTwist, which enables the ability to sync your Android phone over Wi-Fi. If you frequently use iTunes, I highly recommend this enhancement. It's only \$4.99.



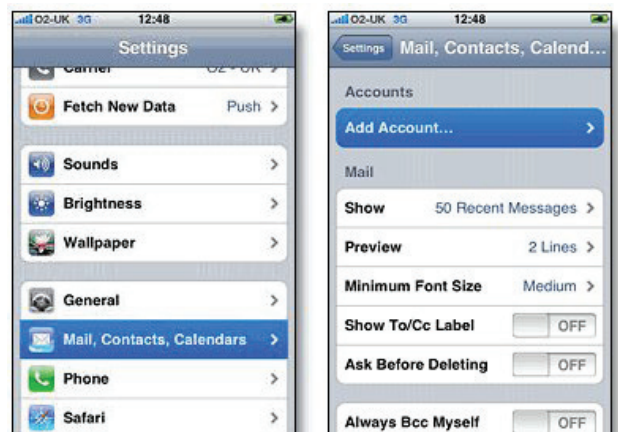
Of course, you don't have to use a sync app if you don't want to. An Android device can mount to a Mac as a disk drive, and music files can be transferred straight to the phone. If they're already [tagged with metadata](#), that will be available on your Android as well. This makes for easy sorting.

Using The iPhone With Windows

When it comes to syncing content, the iPhone is very easy to use with Windows because iTunes is available for Windows, and it can sync with your iPhone (or iPad) just as easily as it would sync with iTunes on a Mac. You don't even need to connect your iPhone because Wi-Fi sync is supported, though you do need to connect your iPhone at least once to initially set up the sync.

In addition, iTunes can be used as a bridge for syncing a wide variety of other information that may be on your Windows computer including contact data and calendar data. A full list of software that Apple offers sync support for can be found on [Apple's help page](#).

If you use Google's services instead of Microsoft software on your Windows PC, which is common, it's possible to use them on your iPhone as well. Google offers a wide variety of apps for iOS devices. There is also [Google Sync](#), which allows for syncing of Gmail, calendar and contact data with your iPhone.



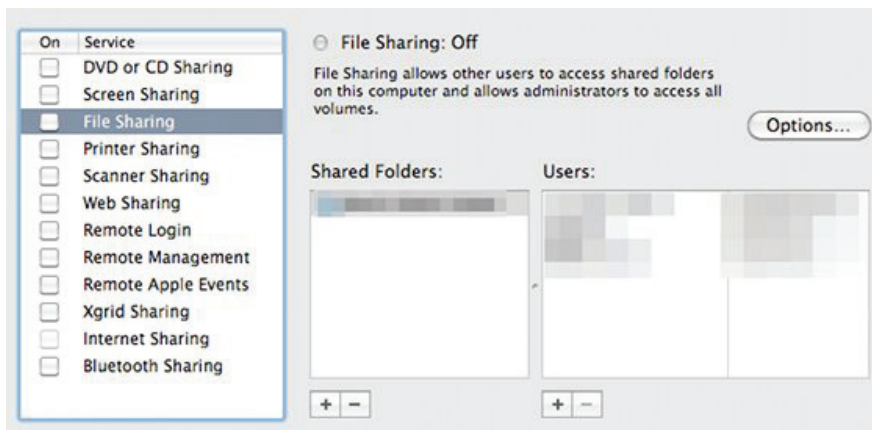
5. Network Compatibility

If you have a [wireless network](#) in your home, using it to [connect your Windows and Mac computers](#) can be the easiest solution. It bypasses many of the file system problems and allows for direction transfer of files, without the hassle of connecting, disconnecting, and then re-connecting an external flash drive or hard drive.

Sharing Files Between Macs And PCs Over A Network

Windows and Mac computers have the ability to identify each other and transfer files over a network. To do this, however, you have to set up each computer properly.

On your Windows 7 computer, you need to make sure that network sharing is enabled. This can be done by opening the Network and Sharing Center in the Control Panel, then going to “Choose homegroup and sharing options.” Open “Advanced sharing settings.” Turn on network discovery, turn on file and printer sharing, and turn on public folder sharing.

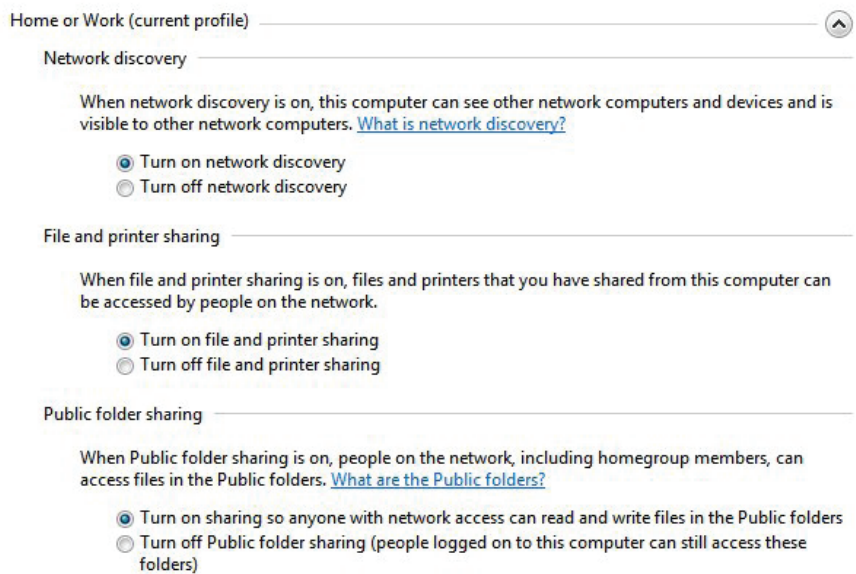


On your Mac you will need to open System Preferences, open the Sharing menu, and then go to File Sharing. Click Options and make sure that “Share Files and Folders using SMB” is checked, as well as the individual account(s) that you want to share with Windows. Finally, you’ll want to make sure that read and write access is available for sharing with your Mac account.

After you perform these steps, your Windows and Mac computers should be able to see each other and exchange files. Your Mac computer will appear in the Network section of Windows, and your Windows computer will appear in the default Finder view on your Mac. If your Windows and Mac computers use password protected accounts, you will need to enter your login information in order to gain access to shared folders.

Change sharing options for different network profiles

Windows creates a separate network profile for each network you use. You can choose specific options for each profile.



If you run into problems, make sure that encryption of file transfers is de-selected on your Windows PC, as this may cause trouble. You may also need to enter your Windows workgroup name on your Mac by going to System Preferences and then opening to the Network menu. Click on your currently open network connection and then click on the Advanced button in the lower right. Select the WINS tab, and then enter the workgroup name. This will usually resolve network connection issues.

Using Network Attached Storage (NAS)

One of the best solutions for storing files on any home network is [network attached storage](#) (NAS). For consumers, NAS can be summed up best as a hard drive or drives with network connectivity (via Ethernet and/or Wi-Fi). This means that files can be stored in drives that multiple devices can connect to simultaneously. Though NAS usually incorporates rudimentary processing elements for the purpose of file storage, it’s not a computer because it can’t run

programs.

What's great about buying and using a NAS is that most such devices can be used with Windows and Mac computer out of the box, or can be formatted into FAT32 to allow for compatibility with both operating systems. And since the storage is connected via a network rather than USB, simultaneous connections are possible. You could, for example, drop a file into your NAS from your Windows PC, and it will instantly appear for a Mac to acquire. Or you can simply keep the files on the NAS and open files directly from it.

Note that while many products are both Windows and Mac compatible, you should also confirm this by reading the manufacturer's specifications before making a purchase. Look for products that allow simultaneous Windows and Mac connections. If you are looking at used NAS products, I also suggest that you confirm their compatibility with current versions of Windows and OS X, because some older options don't have proper support and will require a firmware update to work, if any firmware update is available at all.

In Windows, the NAS will appear in the Network location in Windows Explorer. Under OS X, the NAS will appear in Finder as an individual entry. Connecting NAS is nearly plug-and-play, but you may need to set up a login/password for it, or perform an initial setup to configure a few settings. This is usually done via a web browser – instructions will be provided by the manufacturer. If you run in to a problem during setup, try posting on [MakeUseOf Answers](#), where other users might be familiar with the issue you've encountered.



Wireless Printers

As [Wi-Fi routers](#) become more ubiquitous in homes, printers are becoming more likely to take advantage of the convenience wireless networking presents. Just as a NAS can use a router connection or Wi-Fi to provide storage for multiple home devices, a printer can use Wi-Fi to provide printing capability to multiple computers. Printers as inexpensive as \$40 now offer wireless networking support, so it's likely you'll end up with a wireless printer the next time you buy one if you don't have one already.



Dell 1355cnw Multifunction Color LED Printer

[More Details](#)

Max Duty Cycle: Up to 30,000 pages/month
Dimensions/Weight: 16.1" x 14.9" x 13.3" / 34.1 lbs
Max Resolution: 600 x 600 dpi
Max Speed: Up to 15 ppm (Monochrome); Up to 12 ppm (Color)



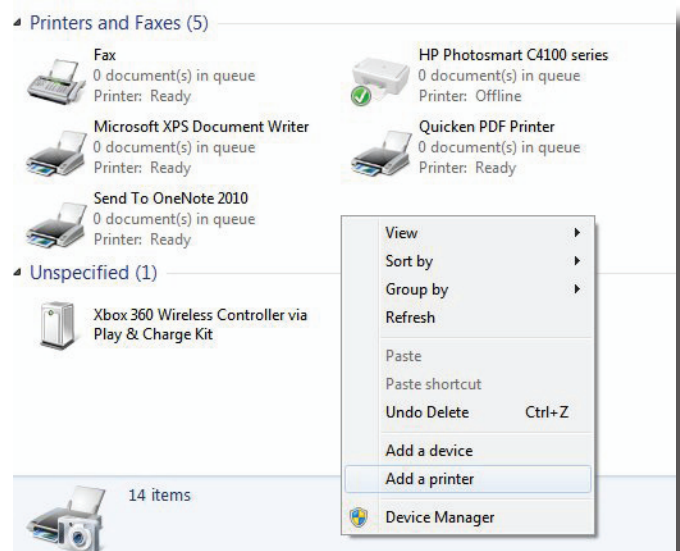
As you might expect, virtually all printers support Windows 7. Mac support is also common – the top five best-selling wireless printers all support Mac OS X. Many don't list Lion support yet, but in my experience any printer that worked with Snow Leopard will work with Lion.

If you are using a printer via wireless only (that is, you are not going to be using it via wired connection to any computer) setting it up is just a matter of following the steps for each respective operating system. In Windows 7, this is done by going to Devices and Printers, right-clicking an empty space in Windows Explorer, and then clicking Add Printer. You then choose the "Add a network, wireless or Bluetooth printer" option and follow the wizard's steps.

Setup with OS X is performed by going to System Preferences, clicking Print & Scan, and then clicking the "+" icon to enter the setup wizard, which will automatically detect any compatible printers currently on the network. At that point, it's just a matter of selecting the printer and clicking "Add."

Of course, wireless printing can also be accomplished by [connecting a standard printer to a computer connected to a wireless router](#) and then turning on printer sharing. If your printer is connected via a Windows 7 PC, you can potentially print on it via your Mac. To do this, you will need to open the Print & Scan menu in System Preferences and click the "+" as before.

In the window that opens, navigate to the Windows tab. Any Windows workgroups detected by the Mac will be listed. Select the workgroup used by the PC that is connected to



your printer, and then select the PC by its network name. Finally, select the printer and click “Add.” You may be able to auto-select a driver, you may need to provide one, or you may need to use the generic printer driver (which doesn’t always work well, or at all.)

If the printer is connected to your Mac and you’d like to print via a PC, first open System Preferences on your Mac and open the Sharing menu. Enable [Printer Sharing](#) by checking the checkbox next to it, then check the checkbox for the printer you want to share and make sure user access is set to “Everyone” and “Can Print.”

Now you need to [download Bonjour Print Services for Windows](#). Install the software using the wizard and then open it. The shared printer should appear in the Shared Printers list, at which point you can select it and click “Next” to begin the setup wizard.

Throughout all of these steps, you must make sure that your printer is turned on and connected via Wi-Fi or Ethernet/USB, as appropriate. It’s also important to make sure that your Mac has access to your Windows workgroup – refer to the “Sharing Files Between Mac And PCs Over A Network” section of this chapter for more information. If your printer came with an installation disk, you may use it to over-ride some or all of these steps – it’s your choice. Installation disks are sometimes easier, but they also sometimes try to install additional software which you don’t necessarily need.

Conclusion

You Don't Have To Pick A Side

The Mac vs. PC debate, which has gone on for decades now, is a false dichotomy. There's long been an impression that it's either one or the other, and the idea that these two platforms could not play nice together only reinforced that. When Apple's computers used PowerPC processors instead of Intel's products, there was truth to this, but no longer.

Pitfalls do exist. Software compatibility remains an unresolved problem, as many companies continue to sell separate PC and Mac versions of their software, even when it is nearly identical on either platform. Networking can also be a pain, if only because using multiple platforms adds an extra layer of complexity to troubleshooting problems if they occur.

Yet there are also benefits. Each operating system has strengths and weaknesses, and each has its own software available. By owning a Windows PC, you gain access to a common operating system with a plethora of software. By owning a Mac, you can access OS X only software like iMovie and enjoy the multi-touch oriented interface.

In my opinion, the best combination of devices is a Windows desktop PC with a Mac laptop. My opinion on this is formed by the operating systems themselves. Windows's taskbar, as well as features like [Aero Snap](#), work best on computers with large displays. OS X, on the other hand, offers better [battery efficiency](#) and better use of limited display space by offering awesome multi-touch gesture support.

Whatever you choose, don't limit yourself to playing by the rules of fanboys for either camp.

Author's Note: Image in this section credited to Reece Ward. If you like it, [buy the shirt!](#)

Additional Reading

Like any guide, this one attempts to be comprehensive, but it's ultimately impossible to cover every aspect of this subject in a single document. Fortunately, we have an entire website that's devoted to finding clever ways to use computers, including PC and Macs that inhabit the same household.

[6 Ways To Sync Your iPod To Your Computer Without iTunes](#)

[Make Your Windows PC More Mac-Like With maComfort](#)

[Migrate iTunes And WMAs From Windows To Mac](#)

[Share Your Photos Wirelessly Among PCs, Macs & iOS Devices With Cinq](#)

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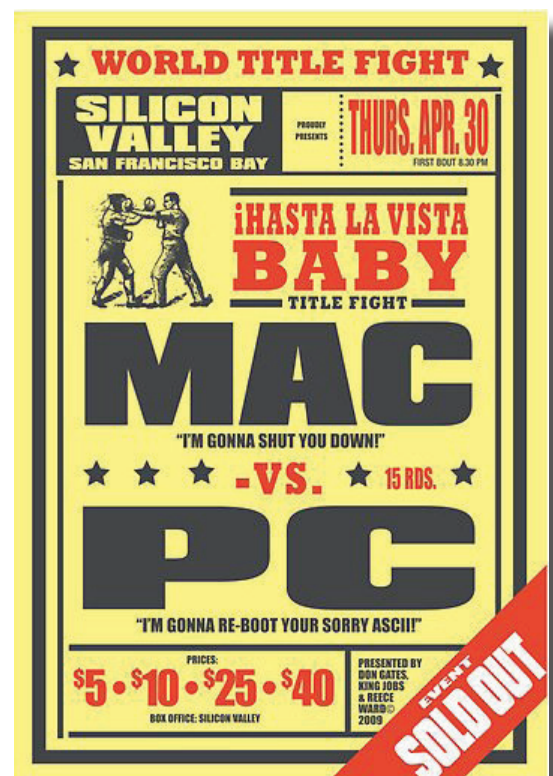
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