

How to Avoid “Conflicted Copies” when Using Dropbox?

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Dropbox (<http://www.dropbox.com>) is a very useful tool for collaborative work on computer files.¹ However, if several people work on files in a common Dropbox folder, it is very likely that two or more people have opened the same file at the same time. If a file is changed on one computer, while it is opened at another computer, one gets a “conflicted copy” of the file. This usually requires that one manually transfers the changes made in the “conflicted copy” to the original file, which is annoying and a waste of time. Based on a brief suggestion given at one of Dropbox’s help pages (<https://www.dropbox.com/en/help/36>), I have created these guideline (with a brief example) that should help to avoid “conflicted copies”. In order to be effective, you need to follow these guidelines *every time* when you *open* a file in a Dropbox folder—even if you just want to look at the file and you do not intend to edit or change it.

1. Make sure that your Dropbox folder is “synced” (e.g. indicated by a green ‘hook’ at the Dropbox symbol in the “system tray.”)
2. Check whether a subfolder named “inUse” (or similar) exists in the Dropbox (sub)folder, in which the file is located that you want to open. If a subfolder named “inUse” (or similar) does *not* exist, create it. Example: you want to open the file `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/ols.doc` and check if the folder `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/inUse` exists and you create this folder if it does not exist.
3. Move (*not copy*) the file that you want to open into the subfolder “inUse” (or similar). Example: you move the file `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/ols.doc` to `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/inUse/ols.doc`
4. Make sure that your Dropbox folder is “synced” (e.g. indicated by a green ‘hook’ at the Dropbox symbol in the “system tray.”)
5. Open the file in the subfolder “inUse” (or similar), edit it (if you want), and save it (if you have changed anything). Example: you open, edit, and save the file `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/inUse/ols.doc`
6. Close the file. Example: close the file `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/inUse/ols.doc`
7. Move (*not copy*) the file from the subfolder “inUse” (or similar) to the parent folder (i.e. its original (sub)folder). Example: you move the file `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/inUse/ols.doc` back to `~/Dropbox/ProjectA/Model/ols.doc`
8. Make sure that your Dropbox folder is “synced” (e.g. indicated by a green ‘hook’ at the Dropbox symbol in the “system tray.”)

Thus, if a file is in a subfolder named “inUse” (or similar), you know that somebody else is currently working on the file so that you have to wait until he/she is finished and has moved the file back to its original (sub)folder. If all follow these guidelines and the file is in its original (sub)folder, you know that nobody else is currently working on the file so that you can follow these guidelines to work on the file. Feedback on these guidelines is highly appreciated.

¹I prefer to use a version control system, such as Apache Subversion (<http://subversion.apache.org/>) or git (<https://git-scm.com/>) for collaborative work on computer files. However, when working on non-text files (e.g. MS-Office files, files in OpenDocument format, photo/image files), it may be more suitable to use Dropbox for collaborative work on these files.