

Versioning

Versioning (also called version control) is the process of keeping track of the different versions of a document as it passes through the process of being revised. It serves two key purposes:

- To ensure that it's always obvious which version is the most recent one
- To allow easy identification and retrieval of earlier versions where needed

What you need to do

Some software includes an automatic version control function (some examples are mentioned below), but in many cases the simplest solution is to keep track of versions manually via the filename. When you start editing, use the **Save As** command to create a new copy of the file (with the new name) while leaving the previous version intact. Some people find it helpful to move older versions to a separate sub-folder.

A common convention is to include “v” (for “version”) plus a number in the filename, with the number before the decimal point indicating major revisions, and the number after the decimal point for minor changes. Hence a first draft might be named File v1.0: after some minor editing, a fresh copy might be saved as File v1.1, while more substantial revisions would result in File v2.0. If you're using a program that doesn't permit decimal points in file names, underscores or hyphens can be used instead.

Some people use versions numbers below 1 (v0.1, v0.2, and so forth) to indicate that a work is still in draft form. However, the precise numbers used are to a large extent arbitrary: the key thing is that the sequence is clear.

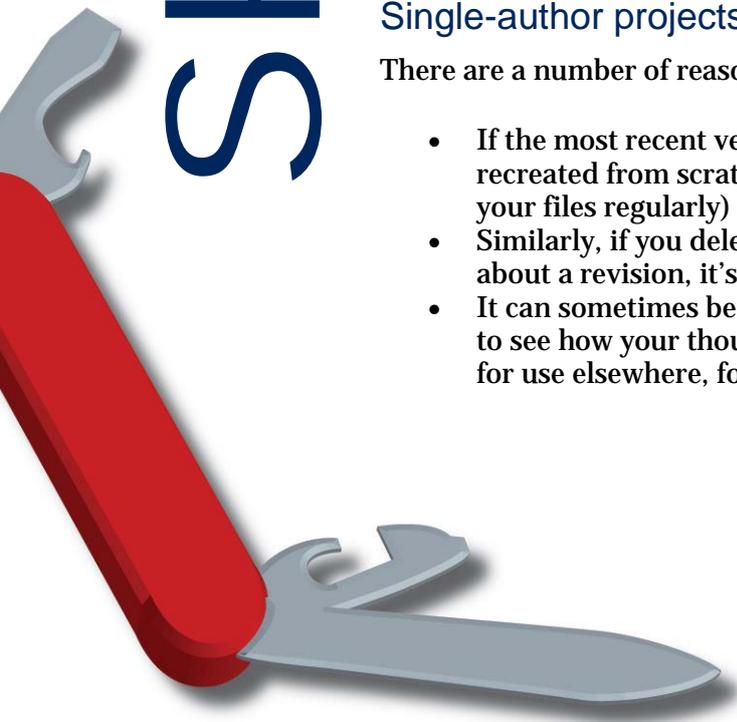
In some cases, it may be helpful to use dates in addition to or instead of version numbers. When doing this, consider putting the date at the beginning of the filename, and using the international standard date notation, YYYY-MM-DD (e.g. 2011-01-21): this makes it easy to sort files into chronological order (alternatively, your operating system will record when the file was last modified, which provides another way of sorting files by date).

Versioning is particularly important in collaborative projects, but serves a useful purpose even if you're working alone.

Single-author projects

There are a number of reasons to keep copies of earlier versions of your own work:

- If the most recent version of a file is lost or corrupted, it doesn't have to be recreated from scratch (to prevent data loss, you should also ensure you back up your files regularly)
- Similarly, if you delete or change content by accident, or change your mind about a revision, it's easy to revert to a previous version
- It can sometimes be useful to refer back to an earlier version of a document – to see how your thoughts developed, or to retrieve an abandoned section or idea for use elsewhere, for example



You don't need to create a new version every time you correct a typo or add a reference, but it's worth keeping track of major revisions.

If you use multiple computers, version numbers will ensure you always know which copy of a file is the most recent one. You may also want to consider using a file syncing service to keep your devices in step with each other. Many file syncing services come with a built-in versioning system.

Collaborative projects

When working in collaboration, it's important that everyone involved in a project is able to identify the most recent version of a document - this helps avoid the frustration of discovering that you've edited a copy that's now out of date. Additionally, if one person makes substantial changes without consulting other team members, it may be useful to be able to have copies of earlier versions available. It's best to agree on a versioning convention early on in the project: in particular, to suggest that whenever someone revises a document, they change the version information in the filename before sending it on to other project members.

In some cases, a simple number or date may not be sufficient. For example, if a document is being sent to multiple people for their comments and suggestions, which will then be collated by one member of the team, it may be more helpful for each person to add their initials to the filename rather than just changing the number.

As an alternative to emailing files to each other, you may wish to consider using a file-sharing service such as GoogleDocs. This allows multiple people to view and edit the same copy of a document, and will automatically keep track of past versions. When you're working on a file, you can even see the edits other people are making in real time.

Document management systems

For more complex projects, you may wish to consider using a document management system. Files are stored on a server to allow access by multiple contributors, and in addition to version control, features typically include the ability to set different permission levels (to control who is able to view or edit particular documents), and to check documents in and out of the collection for editing (to avoid the problem of multiple people trying to make changes at once).

