Types of Web Files - Common File Types and File Extensions

What Do All Those File Types Mean?

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When learning what it takes to build a Web page, you'll come across many different types of files. Even though most Web pages are run on Unix Web servers which, like Macs, don't require file extensions, filename extensions are the most common way to differentiate between files. Once you see a file name and extension, you know what type of file that is, how the Web server uses it, and how you can access it.

The Common File Types

The most common files on Web servers are:

* Web pages
* Images
* Scripts

Web Pages

There are two extensions that are standard for Web pages:

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.html
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.htm
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There is really no difference between these two extensions.

.html
.html was the original extension for HTML pages on Unix Web hosting machines. It references any file that is, well, HTML (or XHTML).

.htm
.htm was created by Windows/DOS because of it's requirement for 3 character extensions. It also references HTML (and XHTML) files, and can be used on any Web server, regardless of OS.

index.htm and index.html
This is the default page in a directory on most Web servers. If you want someone to go to your Web page, but you don't want them to have to type a file name, you should name the first page index.html. For example http://webdesign.about.com/index.htm[1] will go to the same place as http://webdesign.about.com/[2]. Some Web servers call this page "default.htm" and you can change the filename if you have access to the server configuration.

Images

Most Web browsers can accommodate 2 types of Web images directly in the browser, and the third type (PNG) is gaining a lot more support. Note, there are other image formats that some browsers support, but these three types are the most common.

.gif
The GIF file is the CompuServe image format and is best used for images with flat colors. It offers the ability to "index" colors on your images to make sure that they contain only Web safe colors or a small palette of colors and (with flat colored images) make the images smaller.

.jpg
The JPG or JPEG file format is meant for photographic images. If an image has photographic qualities, ie. no expanses of flat color, it is well suited to being a jpg file. Photographs that are saved as JPG files will generally be smaller than the same file saved in a GIF format.

.png
The PNG or Portable Network Graphic is a graphic file format made for the Web. It has better compression, color, and transparency than GIF files. PNG files don't necessarily have to have the .png extension, but that's how you'll most often see them.

Scripts

Scripts are files that activate dynamic actions on Web sites. There are many types of scripts. These are just a few that are fairly common on Web sites.

.cgi
CGI stands for Common Gateway Interface. A .cgi file is a file that will run on the Web server and interact with the Web user. CGI files can be written with many different programming languages, like Perl, C, Tcl, and others. A CGI file does not have to have the .cgi extension, you might also see them in /cgi-bin directories on Web sites.

.pl
This indicates a Perl file. Many Web servers will run a .pl file as a CGI.

.js
A .js file is a JavaScript file. You can load your JavaScript files into the Web page itself, or you can write it in an external file and load it from there. If you write your JavaScript into the Web page you won't see the .js extension, as it will be part of the .html file.

.java or .class
While you probably won't come across a .java or .class file on a Web page, these files are often used to generate Java applets for Web pages.

There are many other types of script and program files as well that you might see on Web pages.

.asp
A .asp file indicates that the Web page is an Active Server Page. ASP provides scripting, macros, and include files to a Web site. It also provides database connectivity and much more. More about ASP.

.cfm and .cfml
These file types indicate that the file is a ColdFusion file. ColdFusion is a powerful server-side content management tool that brings macros, scripting, and more to your Web pages. More about ColdFusion.

.shtm and .shtml
This file type indicates an HTML file that should be viewed with the SSI interpreter. SSI stands for Server Side Includes. These allow you to include one Web page inside another, and add macro-like actions to your Web sites. More about SSI.

.php and .php3
This indicates a PHP run Web page. PHP is a Web scripting program that brings scripting, macros, and includes to your Web site. More about PHP.