

Tutorial Tuesday

Putting the Squeeze on Compression

by Scott Holstad

So you've been reading **Daily bLink** diligently and you've found out about all of these wonderful programs and utilities and tools (and so on and so on). You've even found out how to download one of these beauties (typically by clicking on the icon or underlined word representing the program you want). While your computer downloads your new knickknack, you've watched and watched, then gotten up, taken a shower, watched some more, baked cookies, called your Mom, watched again, gone to the mall, taken a nap and returned -- just in time for your computer to **finish** the download -- and that's on a **fast** modem (or do I sound too cynical?). At last -- your groovy new program. Then you click on it and...nothing happens. Except you get an annoying message stating that you can't open it for some inexplicable reason. What's up?

My friend, you need a compression utility. Just what is compression, you ask? One of the online dictionaries I look over from time to time defines it as "the coding of data to save storage space or transmission time." Yeah, whatever. Look, compression simply means crunching one or more files (programs, et cetera) up into a tight little file (like when you sit and bounce on your suitcase to get the darn thing closed before you go on a trip). This makes it easier to send and receive files. A compressed file can be sent over the Internet much faster (and easier) than a file three times as large. (duh!) Thus, the vast majority of files you'll download from the **Net** are compressed. As you're downloading compressed files, you'll need one of the aforementioned **compression utilities** to **uncompress** the files--to restore them to their original state (and size).

Files can be compressed in varying formats (wouldn't want to make it easy for you), so you may need several **compression utilities**. You can tell what format was used to compress a file by looking at its suffix--its ending. The most widely used compression scheme for PCs is the **Zip** standard. Files compressed using Zip end with the ".zip" extension. Numerous utilities exist to help you uncompress zipped files. Without doubt, the most popular such program is PKUNZIP (its sibling, PKZIP, compresses files for you). PKUNZIP is an executable file, which means it's ready to go as soon as you download it. It is, however, a DOS-based program, so you may need to make a few arrangements for it to work as effectively as you prefer. Typically, you'll need to type "pkunzip **filename**" (i.e., "pkunzip doom.zip") while in DOS, and the zipped file will uncompress before your eyes.

You can configure your system so that PKUNZIP will work in Windows just by double-clicking on the file you want unzipped. However, there are some utilities which may simplify things even further for you. WinZip is one of the most popular Windows-based Zip programs, UnZIP95 and Szipw are others.

Macs, of course, use a different compression scheme than PCs. Mac files are most often compressed using a program called StuffIt. Such files end with the ".sit" extension and to unstuff them you need a utility called StuffItExpander. Typically, you can download the program, and it will automatically set itself up to uncompress files (how handy). Other useful Mac utilities are DropStuff and the translator BinHex.

There are more compression extensions than .zip and .sit. Since the Internet was originally UNIX-dominant, UNIX-based compression schemes still abound. (UNIX is an operating system used by many large mainframe computers.) One of the first such programs, "compress" (brilliantly enough), appeared in the mid '70s. "Compressed" files end with a ".z" extension. MacCompress is a Mac program designed to handle

"compress." Gzip, meanwhile, is a newer utility designed to replace "compress." Tar (Tape Archive) is another UNIX utility; not too shockingly, tar files end with the ".tar" suffix. WinTAR is a Windows program for tar while Tar 3.0 is a Mac equivalent. The last major UNIX-based compression scheme we're talking about today is called "gzip." Such files end in ".gz" and, of course, PC and Mac owners need their own programs to uncompress gzipped files. Windows users can simply rely upon WinZip; Mac users can use MacGzip.

There are other compression schemes (for pictures, among other things), but we don't have room to get into that in this piece. If you want to learn more about compression, you might want to visit Compression Pointers. Most of the compressed files you'll come across during your Net travels will fall into one of the camps you've just read about. Of course, we here at EarthLink want to help you out as much as possible, so we've made many cool programs available through our main page: just look at the bottom right-hand corner of the page, and you'll find links that will lead you to PC and Mac compression software.

Compression utilities may seem like an unnecessary annoyance, but remember, without compression, that already-interminable download may have taken twice as long. Get some of these utilities, and you can start downloading to your heart's content. Just make sure you have some time on your hands.



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