

# We Can Put an End to Word Attachments

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Don't you just hate receiving Word documents in email messages? Word attachments are annoying, but worse than that, they impede people from switching to free software. Maybe we can stop this practice with a simple collective effort. All we have to do is ask each person who sends us a Word file to reconsider that way of doing things.

Most computer users use Microsoft Word. That is unfortunate for them, since Word is proprietary software, denying its users the freedom to study, change, copy, and redistribute it. And because Microsoft changes the Word file format with each release, its users are locked into a system that compels them to buy each upgrade whether they want a change or not. They may even find, several years from now, that the Word documents they are writing this year can no longer be read with the version of Word they use then.

But it hurts us, too, when they assume we use Word and send us (or demand that we send them) documents in Word format. Some people publish or post documents in Word format. Some organizations will only accept files in Word format: someone I know was unable to apply for a job because resumes had to be Word files. Even governments sometimes impose Word format on the public, which is truly outrageous.

For us users of free operating systems, receiving

Word documents is an inconvenience. But the worst impact of sending Word format is on people who might switch to free systems: they hesitate because they feel they must have Word available to read the Word files they receive. The practice of using the secret Word format for interchange impedes the growth of our community and the spread of freedom. While we notice the occasional annoyance of receiving a Word document, this steady and persistent harm to our community usually doesn't come to our attention. But it is happening all the time.

Many GNU users who receive Word documents try to find ways to handle with them. You can manage to find the somewhat obfuscated ASCII text in the file by skimming through it. There is free software now that can read some subset of Word documents. The format is secret and has not been entirely decoded; as long as Microsoft keeps changing the format, we can't expect these programs to be perfect.

If you think of the document you received as an isolated event, it is natural to try to cope with it on your own. But when you recognize it as an instance of a pernicious systematic practice, it calls for a different approach. Managing to read the file is treating a symptom of a chronic illness. To cure the illness, we must convince people not to send or post Word documents.

For about a year, I've made a practice of responding to Word attachments with a polite message explaining why the practice of sending Word files is a bad thing, and asking the person to resend the material in a nonsecret format. This is a lot less work than trying to read the somewhat obfuscated ASCII text in the Word file. And I find that people usually understand the issue, and many say they will not send Word files to others any more.

If we all do this, we will have a much larger effect. People who disregard one polite request may change their practice when they receive multiple polite requests from various people. We may be able to give "don't send Word format" the status of netiquette, if we start systematically raising the issue with everyone who sends us Word files.

To make this effort efficient, you will probably want to develop a canned reply that you can quickly send each time it is necessary. I've included two examples: the version I have been using recently, followed by a new version that teaches a Word user how to convert to other useful formats.

You can use these replies verbatim if you like, or you can personalize them or write your own. By all means construct a reply that fits your ideas and your personality — if the replies are personal and not all alike, that will make the campaign more effective.

These replies are meant for individuals who send Word files. When you encounter an organization that imposes use of Word format, that calls for a different sort of reply; there you can raise issues of fairness that would not apply to an individual's actions.

With our numbers, simply by asking, we can make a difference.

### Example 1.

*You sent the attachment in Microsoft Word format, a secret proprietary format, so I cannot read it. If you send me the plain text, HTML, or PDF, then I could read it.*

*Sending people documents in Word format has bad effects, because that practice puts pressure on them to use Microsoft software. In effect, you become a buttress of the Microsoft monopoly. This specific problem is a major obstacle to the broader adoption of GNU/Linux. Would you please reconsider the use of Word format for communication with other people?*

### Example 2.

*You sent the attachment in Microsoft Word format, a secret proprietary format, so it is hard for me to read. If you send me plain text, HTML, or PDF, then I will read it.*

*Distributing documents in Word format is bad for you and for others. You can't be sure what they will look like if someone views them with a different version of Word; they may not work at all.*

*Receiving Word attachments is bad for you because they can carry viruses (see <http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/venc/data/acro.html>). Sending Word attachments is bad for you, because a Word document normally includes hidden information about the author, enabling those in the know to pry into the author's activities (maybe yours). Text that you think you deleted may still be embarrassingly present. See [http://www.microsystems.com/Shares\\_Well.htm](http://www.microsystems.com/Shares_Well.htm) for more info.*

*But above all, sending people Word documents puts pressure on them to use Microsoft software and*

*helps to deny them any other choice. In effect, you become a buttress of the Microsoft monopoly. This pressure is a major obstacle to the broader adoption of free software. Would you please reconsider the use of Word format for communication with other people?*

*To convert the file to HTML is simple. Open the document, click on File, then Save As, and in the Save As Type strip box at the bottom of the box, choose HTML Document or Web Page. Then choose Save. You can then attach the new HTML document instead of your Word document. Note that Word changes in inconsistent ways — if you see slightly different menu item names, please try them.*

*To convert to plain text is almost the same — instead of HTML Document, choose Text Only or Text Document as the Save As Type.*

Here's another approach, suggested by Bob Chas-sell. It requires that you edit it for the specific example, and it presumes you have a way to extract the contents and see how long they are.

### Example 3.

*I am puzzled. Why did you choose to send me 876,377 bytes in your recent message when the content is only 27,133 bytes?*

*You sent me five files in the non-standard, bloated .doc format that is Microsoft's secret, rather than in the international, public, and more efficient format of plain text.*

*Microsoft can (and did recently in Kenya and Brazil) have local police enforce laws that prohibit students from studying the code, prohibit entrepreneurs starting new companies, and prohibit professionals offering their services. Please don't give them your support.*

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February, 26, 2002 — Eben Moglen, General Counsel to the Free Software Foundation (FSF), will testify as an expert witness in the **Progress Software Corporation vs. MySQL AB** case currently pending in United States District Court in Massachusetts.

We at FSM are paying attention to this lawsuit, and we will have a detailed report on this conflict in the upcoming issue.

— FSM