

How-To Geek



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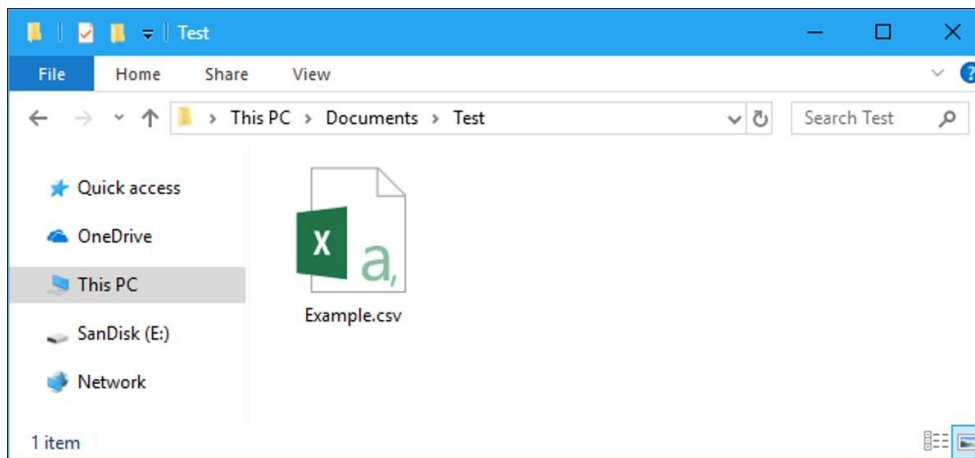
What Is a C

n It?



CHRIS HOFFMAN [@chrisbhoffman](#)

APR 17, 2018, 9:00 AM EDT | 3 MIN READ



A Comma Separated Values (CSV) file is a plain text file that contains a list of data. These files are often used for exchanging data between different applications. For example, databases and contact managers often support CSV files.

These files may sometimes be called Character Separated Values or Comma Delimited files. They mostly use the comma character to separate (or delimit) data, but sometimes use other characters, like semicolons. The idea is that you can export complex data from one application to a CSV file, and then import the data in that CSV file into another application.

The Structure of a CSV File

A CSV file has a fairly simple structure. It's a list of data separated by commas. For example, let's say you have a few contacts in a contact

manager, and you export
containing text like this

Name,Email,Phone N

Bob Smith,bob@exa

Mike Jones,mike@e

Avenue



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That's all a CSV file really is. They can be more complicated than that, and can contain thousands of lines, more entries on each line, or long strings of text. Some CSV files may not even have the headers at the top, and some may use quotation marks to surround each bit of data, but that's the basic format.

That simplicity is a feature. CSV files are designed to be a way to easily export data and import it into other programs. The resulting data is human-readable and can be easily viewed with a text editor like Notepad or a spreadsheet program like Microsoft Excel.

How to View a CSV File in a Text Editor

To view the contents of a CSV file in Notepad, right-click it in File Explorer or Windows Explorer, and then select the "Edit" command.

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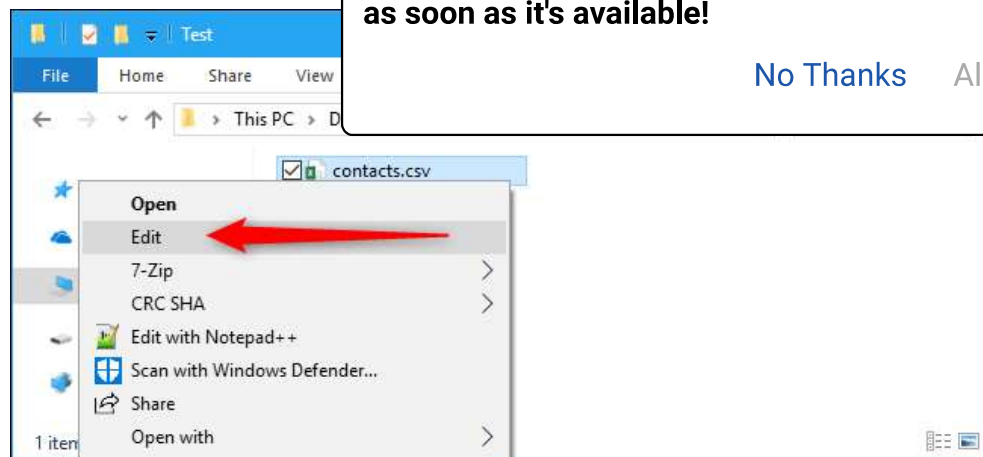
Notepad may have trouble opening this file. In this case, we recommend using a text editor like [Notepad++](#). After installing it, right-click the file and select "Notepad++" command.



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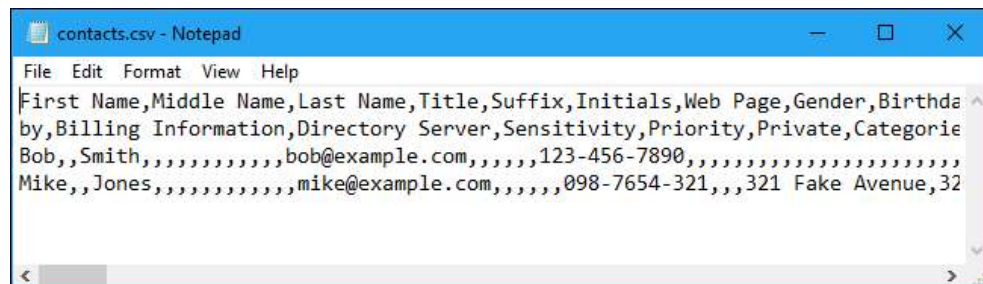
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You'll see the plaintext list of data in the CSV file. For example, if the CSV file was exported from a contacts program, you'd see information about each contact here, with the contact's details sorted onto a new line. If it was exported from [a password manager like LastPass](#), you'd see different website login entries on their own line here.

In Notepad, the "Word Wrap" feature can make the data harder to read. Click Format > Word Wrap to disable it and make each line of data stay on its own line for improved readability. You'll need to scroll horizontally to read the full lines.



How to Open a CSV File in a Spreadsheet Program

You can also open CSV files in Excel, which makes them easier to read. For files installed on your computer, you can open it in Excel by default. To open a CSV file, click the CSV file and select "Open with Excel".



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If you don't have Excel, you could upload the file to a service like [Google Sheets](#) or install a free office suite like [LibreOffice Calc](#) to view it.

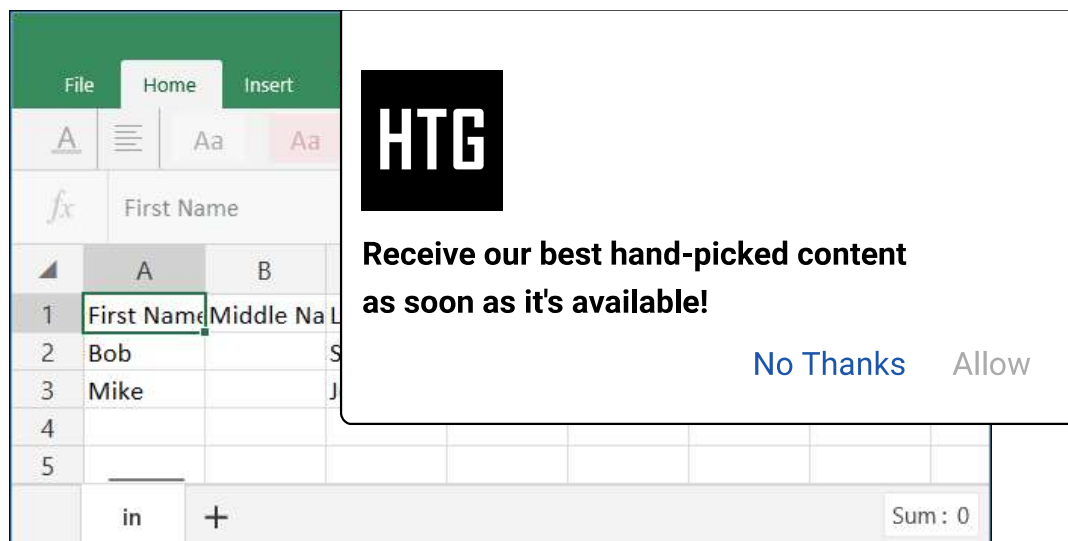
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Excel and other spreadsheet programs present the contents of a .CSV file as if it were a spreadsheet, sorting it into columns.



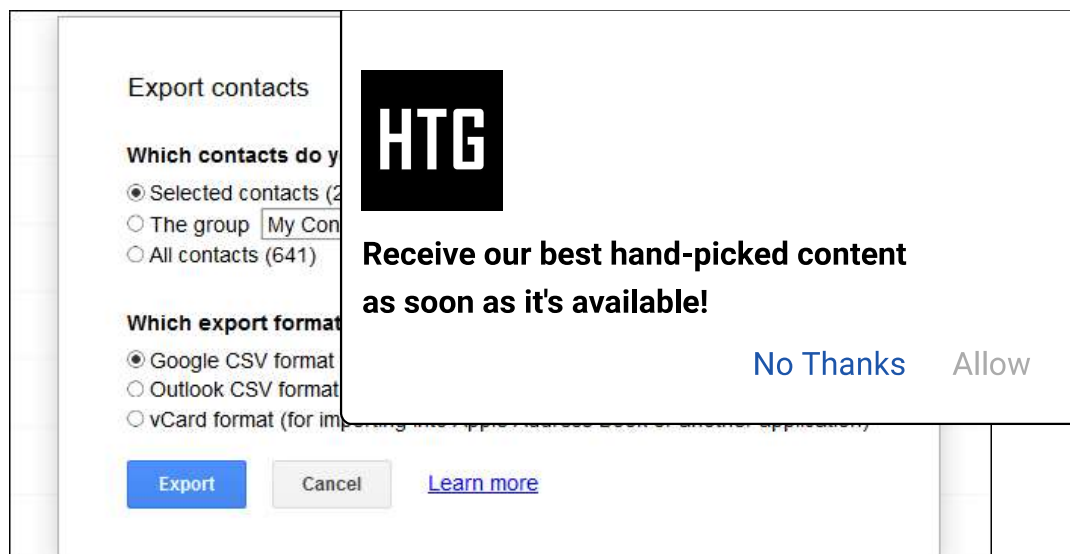
RELATED: [How to Export a CSV file from MySQL Command Line](#)

How to Import a CSV File Into an Application

If you just want to view the contents of a CSV file or work with it as a spreadsheet, that's all you need to do. However, many CSV files are made for importing into other programs. You might export your contacts from Google Contacts, your saved passwords from LastPass, or a large amount of data from a database program. You can even [export CSV from MySQL on the command line](#). The resulting CSV files can then be imported into applications that support that type of data.

Depending on the application from which you're exporting data, you may need to select an appropriate CSV format for the target application. For example, Google Contacts can export contacts in either Google CSV (for Google Contacts) or Outlook CSV (for Microsoft Outlook) formats. Either way, you get a CSV file containing the data, but it's organized in a slightly different way.

In an appropriate application, look for the "Import" or "Import CSV" option, which lets you select the CSV file to import. For example, in Microsoft Outlook, you can click File > Open & Export > Import/Export > Import From Another Program or File > Comma Separated Values to import contacts from a CSV file.



CSV files are something most people never need to bother with. But, if you've ever needed to get information out of one application and into another, that's what they're there for.



CHRIS HOFFMAN

Chris Hoffman is Editor-in-Chief of How-To Geek. He's written about technology for over a decade and was a PCWorld columnist for two years. Chris has written for *The New York Times* and *Reader's*

Digest, been interviewed as a technology expert on TV stations like Miami's NBC 6, and had his work covered by news outlets like the BBC. Since 2011, Chris has written over 2,000 articles that have been read nearly one billion times---and that's just here at How-To Geek.

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