Here's where it gets confusing: The most common way to access a shared folder is to assign a drive letter to it. Suppose that a server has a shared folder named Marketing. You can assign drive letter *M* to this shared folder. Then you access the Marketing folder as drive `M:`. The `M:` drive is then called a *network drive* because it uses the network to access data in a shared folder. Assigning a drive letter to a shared folder is *mapping a drive.*

Shared folders can be set up with restrictions on how you can use them. For example, you may be granted full access to some shared folders so that you can copy files to or from them, delete files on them, or create or remove folders on them. On other shared folders, your access may be limited in certain ways. For example, you may be able to copy files to or from the shared folder but not delete files, edit files, or create new folders. You may also be asked to enter a password before you can access a protected folder. The amount of disk space you're allowed to use on a shared folder may also be limited. For more information about file-sharing restrictions, see Chapter 13.

In addition to accessing shared folders that reside on other people's computers, you can designate your computer as a server to enable other network users to access folders that you share. To find out how to share folders on your computer with other network users, see Chapter 4.

Four Good Uses for a Shared Folder

After you know which shared network folders are available, you may wonder what you're supposed to do with them. This section describes four good uses for a network folder.

Store files that everybody needs

A shared network folder is a good place to store files that more than one user needs to access. Without a network, you have to store a copy of the file on everyone's computer, and you have to worry about keeping the copies synchronized (which you can't do, no matter how hard you try). Or you can keep the file on a disk and pass it around. Or you can keep the file on one computer and play Musical Chairs; whenever someone needs to use the file, he goes to the computer that contains the file.

On a network, you can keep one copy of the file in a shared folder on the network, and everyone can access it.