

# DOS ERROR MESSAGES

**D**OS provides myriad error messages to indicate problems or issues that we should be aware of. Unfortunately, DOS error messages are cryptic at best, and there is precious little documentation to explain the causes of these errors (and even less help in correcting these errors). The following list provides a general index of DOS error messages, explains the potential causes of the error, and offers some practical solutions.



The exact wording of these errors may vary slightly between DOS versions, and not all errors may be reported in all DOS versions.

**Abort, Retry, Fail** There are several causes for this message, but they all mean that there's a problem with the disk (floppy or hard) DOS/Windows is trying to access. The drive is not reading a disk in the drive that you've instructed DOS/Windows to check. First, see that you typed the correct drive letter in the command line and that the disk is in the correct drive (if you have more than one floppy drive). Next, check that the disk is fully inserted into the drive (label side up) and that the drive door is closed properly. Then press *R* to retry. This message also could mean the disk you're using is damaged. Try the disk in a different drive or try a different disk.

**Access Denied** You just tried to change a file that is: (1) on a write-protected disk, (2) locked, or (3) a read-only file. *Write-protected* disks can be read but not written to (for example, some commercial software is write-protected). A *locked file* is one that can't be altered in a common way (such as adding or deleting data, moving the file, or changing the name of the file). A *read-only file* is one to which a programmer has added a command so that users may only *view* the information or is one that resides in read-only memory (ROM). There's usually a good reason why you aren't being allowed to change the file. You may need to change the attributes of the file before you're allowed to modify it.

**Bad Command Or File Name** DOS/Windows didn't recognize the command you just typed or can't find a file you referred to in the command line entry. The most likely problem is that you misspelled either the command or the file name. Another possibility is that you haven't established the right path to a file. Recheck the location of the file and be sure to enter the path correctly when you retype the command. Finally, it may be possible that the version of DOS/Windows you're running doesn't recognize this command. You'll need to see if your version has an equivalent command, and you may need to update the DOS/Windows version.

**Bad Or Missing Command Interpreter** This means DOS can't find COMMAND.COM, and your CONFIG.SYS file doesn't have a SHELL statement telling DOS where to look for

COMMAND.COM. Your COMMAND.COM file may have been damaged or deleted, or your SHELL command was removed from the CONFIG.SYS file. It may also be that the wrong version of COMMAND.COM is copied to the disk. Your hard drive may also be damaged (or infected with a virus), preventing DOS from accessing the DOS directory. Boot from an emergency bootable disk that contains the *same\_version* of COMMAND.COM that should be on the hard drive, then copy the COMMAND.COM file to the root directory of your hard drive, and reboot. You may wish to add a SHELL statement to the CONFIG.SYS file indicating the exact location of the COMMAND.COM file. You may also wish to reinstall DOS (or Windows 95/98) outright.

**Bad Or Missing File Name** A command in your CONFIG.SYS file is entered incorrectly. You should get this message only if you recently changed something in this file. Go back and check to be sure you typed the recent addition or changes correctly. If you have not made changes to the file, the file(s) being referred to in CONFIG.SYS may be corrupt or deleted. Verify that any files referred to in CONFIG.SYS are present.



Any time you make a change to your CONFIG.SYS or AUTOEXEC.BAT file, make a backup copy of the original file(s) prior to making the changes.

**Cannot Find A Device File That May Be Needed To Run Windows** The error also goes on to say; “Make sure that the PATH line in your AUTOEXEC.BAT points to the directory that contains the file and that it exists on your hard disk. If the file does not exist, try running Setup to install it or remove any references in your SYSTEM.INI file. C:\directory\filename. Press a key to continue”. While this message does tell you what to do to fix the problem, it is still largely unclear. It means a given file that may or may not be necessary to run Windows isn’t where DOS thinks it should be.

The offending file is listed in the second to last sentence of the error message, and the path given is the location where DOS *expected* to find the file. It may be a file that was installed with an application you’ve since removed (when you remove an application from your system, a reference to a file from that program often remains in your SYSTEM.INI file). You may be able to simply press a key to continue and experience no difficulty. To be sure you don’t encounter a more serious problem, however, you’ll want to either install the offending file in the location DOS specified, point DOS to the real location of the file, or remove mention of the file from your SYSTEM.INI file so DOS won’t try to look for it anymore.

**Cannot Find System Files** This message appears when you try to make a bootable disk, but DOS can’t find the necessary system files. Make sure that you’re in the directory containing these files (which is usually your C:\ *root directory*). Switch drives and/or directories if necessary, then try making the system disk again.

**Directory Already Exists** You’ve tried to create a directory with the same name as one that already exists. Just choose a different name for the new directory, or use the existing directory if it’s appropriate.

**Disk Full** This message appears during a copy operation when the destination disk is full. Remove some unneeded files from the disk to make room for the full copy to fit, or use another disk to receive the additional files.

**Drive A: Does Not Exist** This message can be caused by a dirty disk drive (the disk cannot be read). Get a disk drive cleaner kit and follow its instructions to clean the drive. If this doesn’t solve the problem, you may have a bad floppy disk drive or floppy disk controller.

**Duplicate File Name Or File(S) Not Found** This message occurs when you try to use the REN command to rename a file. It means that either you're trying to rename the file using a name that is already in use, or the file you want to rename couldn't be found. Check your spelling and check whether the new name is already in use in the directory. Then try the REN command again, typing carefully and using a new name.

**Existing Format Differs From That Specified** If you're reformatting a disk to a different capacity, you actually want to see this message. It means you're doing the right thing; however, you'll need to tell DOS that it's OK to continue. The reason to reformat a disk to a different capacity is to make it match the capacity of the drive. You can use a low-capacity disk in a high-capacity drive, but not the other way around. It's best to match the capacity of the disk to the maximum drive capacity.

**File Cannot Be Copied Onto Itself** This message probably means you forgot to give a destination location for a file you're trying to copy. Type the COPY command again (being sure to include the destination). If you're unsure how to use the COPY command correctly, type **help copy** and press ENTER for more information.

**File Creation Error** This means one of two things; either you're trying to create a file with the same name as an existing file, or the disk you're using is write-protected. Check the tab on the disk to be sure it isn't in the write-protected position. If it isn't, try using a different file name. If neither of these solutions works, try using another disk with the new file name.

**File Exists** You're trying to name your new file with a file name already in use. Choose another name. If you're unsure what names you've used before, use the DIR command to check out the files in the current directory.

**File Not Found** You've typed a file name in a command incorrectly, the file doesn't exist, or the file is in a location other than the one you specified. Check for accuracy and enter the command again.

**Formatting While Copying** This is one of the DOS messages that's more informational. It's telling you the disk you're using needs to be formatted in order to hold the information you're copying to it. You should be aware, however, that formatting a disk takes longer while copying than if you're just formatting it.

**Help Not Available For This Command** Either you've asked for help with a command or utility program for which there is no help in the version of DOS you're running, or you've typed the command incorrectly.

**Incorrect DOS Version** The program you're trying to run has found a version of COMMAND.COM other than the one it expected. You probably upgraded DOS versions at some point and now have more than one version of some DOS files on your system (and the program found an older or newer one than it wanted). You may need to reinstall DOS or Windows 95/98 to fix this problem.

**Insert System Disk** This just means you need to insert your bootable disk into a disk drive—usually when installing or repartitioning a hard drive.

**Insufficient Disk Space** You don't have enough room on your hard drive or floppy disk to complete the command. Use another disk or delete/compress some files to make more space available.

**Insufficient Memory** This message means that you don't have enough memory (RAM) available to complete the command. Remove any unnecessary terminate-and-stay-resident (TSR) programs and try

the command again. TSRs (also known as “memory-resident programs”) remain loaded in memory even when they’re not running so they can be quickly activated for specific tasks while you’re running other applications. If you’re relying on a swap file on your hard drive to “emulate” RAM, you may have a shortage of drive space, or there may be some other problem with the swap file.

**Invalid Date/Invalid Time** You’ve used an improper format for a date/time. To check the proper format, use the DATE/TIME command. Make note of the correct format and try again.

**Invalid Directory** DOS/Windows can’t find the directory you specified. Either you typed the directory’s name incorrectly, or it doesn’t exist (at least not on the drive you specified). Check your typing and the location of the directory—it may be that it’s in a subdirectory.

**Invalid Drive In Search Path** This means that you probably have made a hardware change and haven’t updated the PATH command in your AUTOEXEC.BAT file to reflect the drives that are now in your computer. Update the PATH command and try again.

**Invalid Drive Specification** DOS/Windows can’t find the drive you tried to switch to. Either you made a typing error (asking your computer to find a drive that doesn’t exist), or the drive you asked for is not working. If you get this message when trying to switch to your hard drive, the drive may be suffering from corrupted partition information, or the drive may be defective.

**Invalid Filename** DOS/Windows can’t find the file you’re looking for. Check the name and location of the file and try again (be sure to check your typing). Be sure to include any underscores, dashes, periods, and other valid file name characters.

**Invalid Media Type** The disk you’re trying to use is defective, or not formatted properly for the particular floppy drive. Reformat the floppy disk or try a different one.

**Invalid Parameter** You’ve entered a command parameter incorrectly. A *parameter* is something you add to the end of a command to tell it what to operate on (also called a “command line switch”). For example, in the command; **dir a:**, the “a:” tells DOS you want a list of the contents of the A: drive, regardless of which drive you’re currently in. Check the format of the command and re-enter it. The other possibility is that you’re using a parameter not part of the utility program you’re trying to use.

**Non-system Disk or Disk Error. Replace and Strike Any Key** Before computers had hard drives, the operating system was stored on a disk called the “system diskette,” “bootable diskette,” or “DOS disk.” That disk was kept in the A: drive where the computer would look for it when it was started. Although operating systems are now on the hard drive, most computers *still* look at the disk drive before checking the hard drive. If they don’t find anything in the A: drive, they check the hard drive, usually the C: drive. If they find a non-system disk in the A: drive, you’ll get this message. The most common reason for this message is that you forgot to remove a disk from the A: drive when you last used it. Remove the disk and strike any key to continue. Another possibility is that you have a computer (probably an old one) that boots from a system disk. In that case, this message means you need to put a bootable disk in the A: drive and continue.

The remaining scenario is a bit more serious. If neither of the above situations applies to you, the first step is to get a DOS system disk and try booting the computer from it. This should get you to an A:\> prompt. At the A:\> prompt, type **C:** and press ENTER. If you get a C:\> prompt, the drive is running but your operating system is lost. Type; **CD DOS** at the prompt and press ENTER, then type **sys c:** and press ENTER again. That should replace the operating system. On the other hand, if you get a message saying;

“Invalid drive specification” when you try to switch to the C: drive, your hard drive is not working properly. The drive will have to be replaced.

**Out Of Memory** This means a program can’t complete its task because you don’t have enough free memory. Close some other running programs and try again. If there are no other programs running, you may need to add memory to your computer. Before buying more memory, you may want to try EMM386 (a driver included with DOS 6.0 that provides expanded memory) or a memory manager such as Quarterdeck’s QEMM. These tools can move some drivers and TSRs into the Upper Memory Area (UMA) and free some additional conventional memory.

**Path Not Found** A *path* is the set of directions you give DOS/Windows to tell it how to find something. For example, the path C:\DOS\EDIT.HLP tells DOS to find the file EDIT.HLP in the DOS directory on your C: drive. If you get this message, DOS couldn’t find the path you entered. Check your typing and re-enter the path carefully. If that doesn’t work, it means the path doesn’t exist.

**Proceed With Format (Y/N)?** This message means you will lose any information that is on the disk when you format it. Press Y to continue with the format if you’re *sure* you won’t lose any important information, or N to stop the process if you want to check the contents of the disk before formatting it.

**Read Error** DOS has found a problem with a sector of your disk. There was either damage during the formatting process or a fault in one of the sectors. Run ScanDisk (version 6.2 or newer) to find the bad spot and rescue as much data as possible. If the error occurs on a floppy disk, you should reformat or discard the disk.

**Stack Overflow—System Halted** Reboot your system and edit your CONFIG.SYS file so the value of stacks= is increased to 10 or more, then try again.

**Syntax Error** You’ve either made a typing error in a command or used terminology DOS doesn’t recognize (or at least your version of DOS). Check your typing for accuracy and try again.

**Terminate Batch Job (Y/N)?** Either you’ve interrupted a batch file in progress, or the batch file is incomplete or incorrect. If you didn’t mean to interrupt the batch job, press N to let DOS return to work. If the batch file is defective, press Y to return to the DOS prompt.

**This Disk Cannot Be Unformatted** UNFORMAT is a command that can sometimes save data if you accidentally format a disk containing data you didn’t mean to eliminate. Depending on the type of format you performed and on whether you’ve written new data to the location of the data you’re seeking to recover, UNFORMAT may or may not work. If it does not, try again—if you get the same message, your data is irretrievable.

**Too Many Open Files** You’ve tried to open too many files at one time. Open your CONFIG.SYS file and increase the number of files specified in the Files= command. Restart your system and try again. You should now be able to have more files open at a time.

**Write-Protect Error** You’ve tried to format a disk that is write-protected. Remove the write protection from the disk and try again.