How do I remove files from the command line?

Q: How do I remove files from the command line?

- How do I remove files in Mac OS X using command line commands?
- How do I remove files from a shell prompt on a Unix system?
- How do I remove files from the Windows command shell?

Context

This article talks about using command line commands to remove files under Mac OS X, Unix, and Windows. It also talks a little about the risks entailed therein.

Answer



A quick summary of the risks
Most graphical desktops these days provide a safety net when deleting files or folders, such as the Trash or Recycle Bin. These safety nets are usually bypassed when removing files using the command line. In many cases the file is immediately and irretrievably deleted. In others the file can possibly be retrieved, but only with great difficulty and special tools.

- Use command line commands with caution, especially when removing or moving files
- Be especially careful when using them as an administrator or as the root user
- Be especially careful when working with system files or files not in your user home directory
- Always keep a recent and complete backup of your system

On Mac OS X

- To bring up a command line / command prompt under Mac OS X launch the **Terminal** application located in the Utilities folder inside your Applications folder
- The table below lists command line commands to remove files and folders

Command	What happens	Comments
`rm -i filename`	Removes file `filename` after confirmation	The `-i` is optional but recommended as it asks you to confirm before removing the file}
`rmdir foldername`	Remove the **empty** folder `foldername`	No confirmation needed, but only works if the folder is already empty
`rm -i -r foldername`	Removes the folder `foldername` and all of its contents	Again the `-i` is optional, recommended, but in this case annoying, especially if there are a lot of items in the folder. You will be asked to confirm each item separately.

- For more information look at the `man` (manual) pages for these commands
- To bring up the man pages for rm or rmdir use:

```
man rm
man rmdir
```

On Unix/Linux

- Steps to bring up a command prompt in a terminal window on a Unix or Linux system vary; look for and launch something called Terminal, XTerm, or similar
- The table below lists basic command line commands to remove files and folders

Command	What happens	Comments
`rm -i filename`	Removes file `filename` after confirmation	The `-i` is optional but recommended as it asks you to confirm before removing the file}
`rmdir directoryname`	Remove the **empty** directory `directoryname`	No confirmation needed, but only works if the directory is already empty
`rm -i -r directoryname`	Removes the directory `directoryname` and all of its contents	Again the `-i` is optional, recommended, but in this case annoying, especially if there are a lot of items in the directory. You will be asked to confirm each item separately.

- For more information look at the `man` (manual) pages for these commands
- To bring up the man pages for rm or rmdir use:

```
man rm
man rmdir
```

On Windows

- To open the Windows command line shell select the **Run** item from the **Start** menu
- In the box that opens asking you what to run, enter "`cmd`"
- A window with a command prompt will open

If there is no **Run** item in your **Start** menu but there is a search box you can type into when you open your **Start** menu (the default in Windows Vista) you can type "`cmd`" directly into the search box and press Return to launch a window with a command prompt.

- The table below lists basic command line commands to remove files and folders

Command	What happens	Comments
`del filename`	Deletes the file `filename`	Does not prompt for confirmation
`del directoryname`	Deletes all files inside directory `directoryname`	Asks for confirmation
`rmdir directoryname`	Deletes the empty directory `directoryname`	Does not prompt for confirmation

See also

- Why should I use "delete" instead of "rm"?
- How do I delete files?