Using Microsoft Outlook® Data Files

Microsoft Outlook Data Files (ODF) are used for storing correspondence received via Microsoft Outlook. Essentially, an ODF is a folder, just like any other you might create within your mailbox. The primary advantages to using an ODF as opposed to a folder in your mailbox are that the ODF may be stored apart from the rest of your mailbox (which means Microsoft Exchange Server® does not have to account for it) and you have the capability to open and close an ODF at will.

I've been using ODFs for a while now and find they're quite flexible. For example, when I started a new project, I'd create an ODF for that project, and all correspondence for that project was automatically routed to that ODF (either I'd manually move them or I'd create rules to move data upon receipt). Then at the end of the project, I'd simply close the ODF. An ODF will remain open until you close it; by that I mean that when you close Outlook and open it later, the ODF will open with it.

Part of the flexibility of the ODFs is that you can burn them to other media for storage. Note, however, that some types of media won't allow you to open an ODF directly from them. Because ODFs require read and write access, ODFs that are copied or moved to read-only media (e.g., burned to a CD) must be copied back onto a writable medium (e.g., a hard drive) before you can access it. So you can burn an ODF to a CD or DVD instead of having it take up hard drive space. If you need to access it later, just copy it back over and open it in Outlook. Pretty simple.

Create an ODF

To create an ODF, select Tools -> Options, and click on the Mail Setup tab. A section of the form about halfway down addresses Data Files. Click the "Data Files…" button.
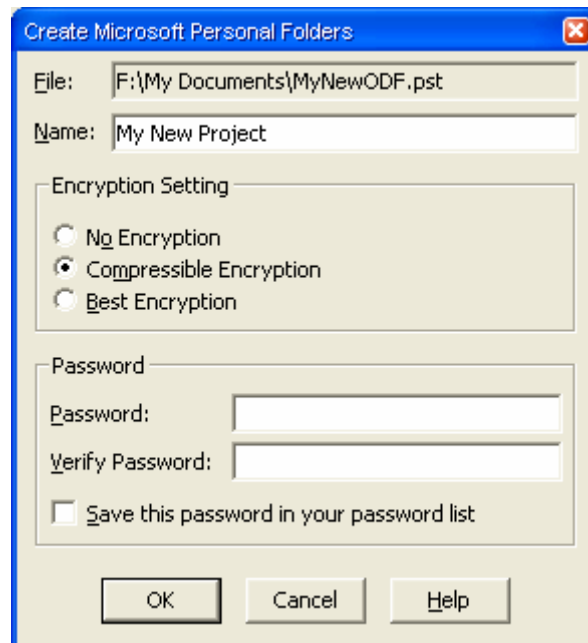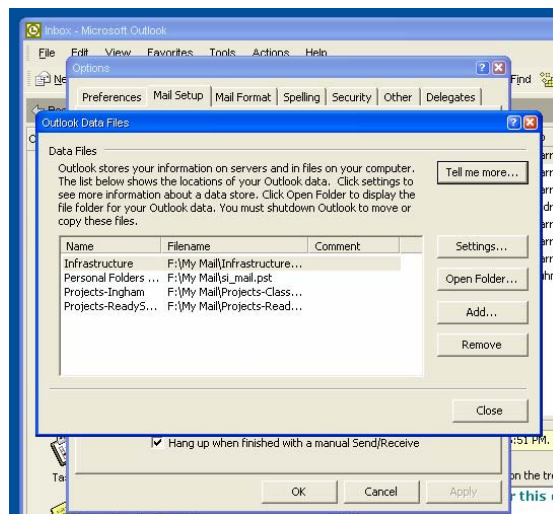
To add a new ODF, click the "Add…" button on the form. You'll be presented with a new form called "New Outlook Data File". In the Types of Storage field, you should see "Personal Folders File (.pst) highlighted. Click "OK" here.

Next, you'll see a form called "Create or Open Outlook Data File". This is how you show Outlook where you want your new ODF to live. Surf to the location where you want the file to reside, and name the file. Be sure to use the .pst extension. Click "OK".

You'll see a new form called "Create Microsoft Personal Folders". You'll see the path and name of the file you just created grayed out in a textbox called "File:". There's a textbox below that called "Name:". Type the name you want Outlook to refer to the ODF – like a folder name -- here. (If you leave "Personal Folders" filled in (default), then when you attach to the ODF, you'll see a new folder in Outlook called "Personal Folders.") For example, if you're going to use your new ODF to house correspondence for the DCA project, you might consider naming it "Projects-DCA" or just "DCA".

In the example below, I gave it the name "My New Project".

If you'd like, you can assign the file a password, but I think that every time you attach or maybe even access the contents of the file, you may be asked for this password. I tend to leave it blank.

When you're ready, click the OK button. The form will disappear and you'll be returned to the "Outlook Data Files" form. Your new ODF will appear highlighted in the list.
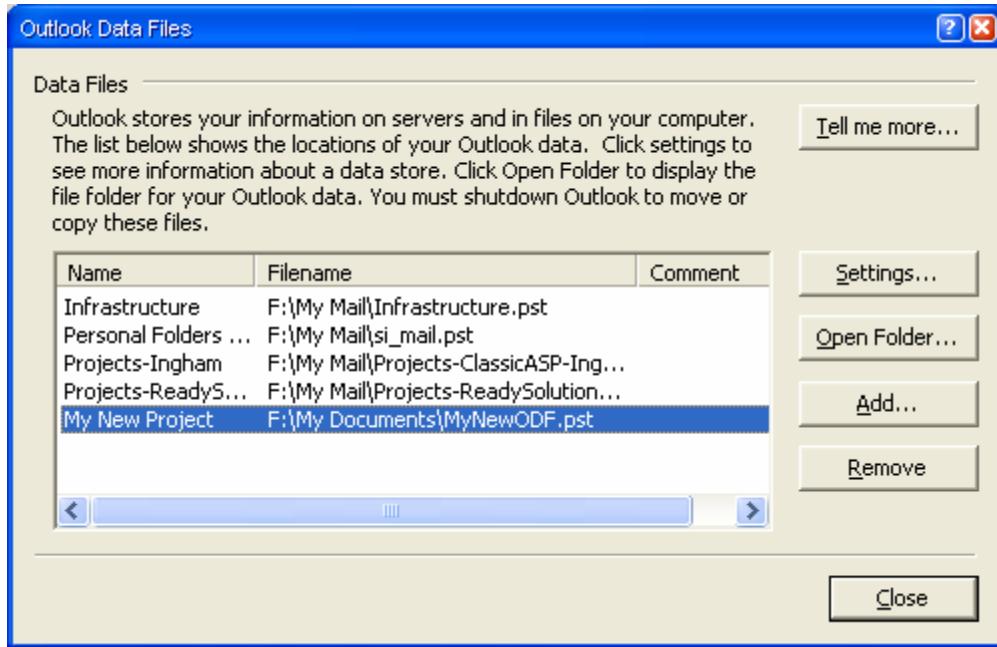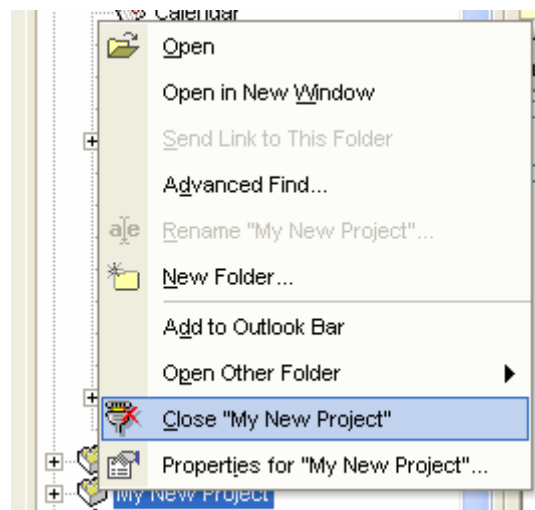
Click the "Close" button to return to the Options form, then click "OK" to return to Outlook. Your new ODF will appear in the Folder List (it opens the ODF for you).

Now all that's left to do is set it up just like you would any other folder in Outlook. That's all there is to it!
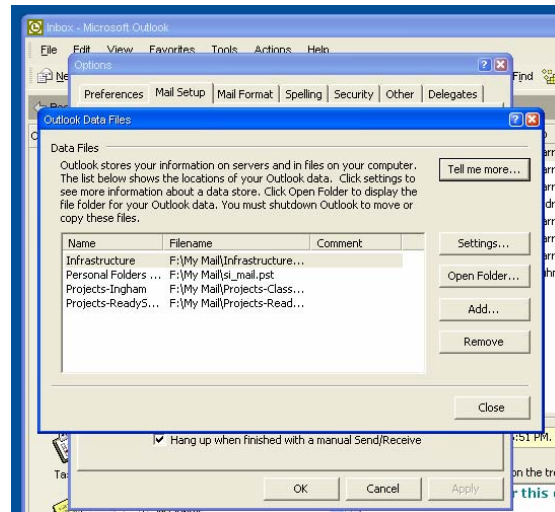
Closing an ODF

To close an ODF, right-click the file from your Folder List in Outlook and select "Close".

The file will disappear from your Folder List.

Opening an ODF

To open an ODF, in Outlook, go to Tools -> Options, and click on the Mail Setup tab. A section of the form about halfway down addresses Data Files. Click the "Data Files…" button.

If you don't see it in the list, click on the "Add…" button and browse to find your ODF. The file will have a .pst extension. Surf to the file and double-click on it. This will open up a new form, called "Personal Folders". Inside the form, you'll see all the data – including the folder name – filled in for you.
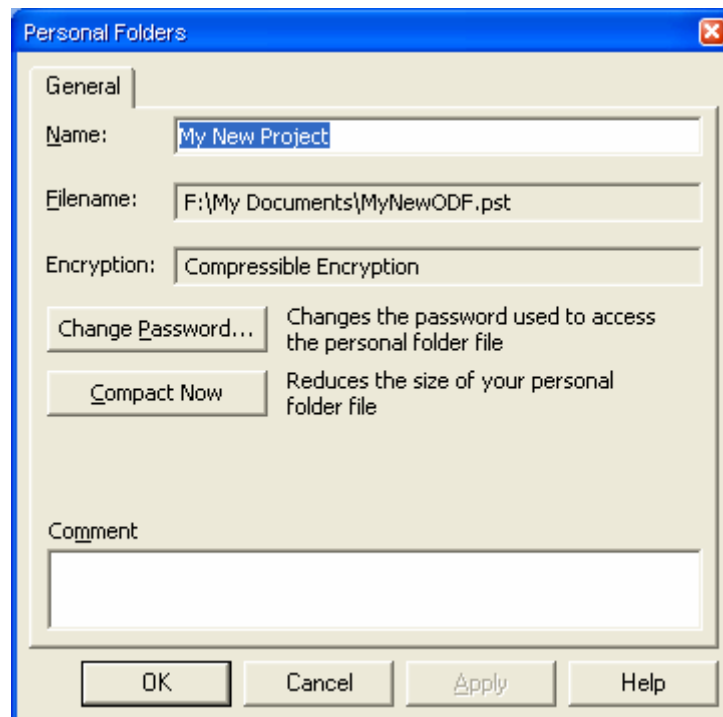
From here, just click the "OK" button. The form will disappear and you'll be returned to the "Outlook Data Files" form. Your ODF will appear highlighted in the list.
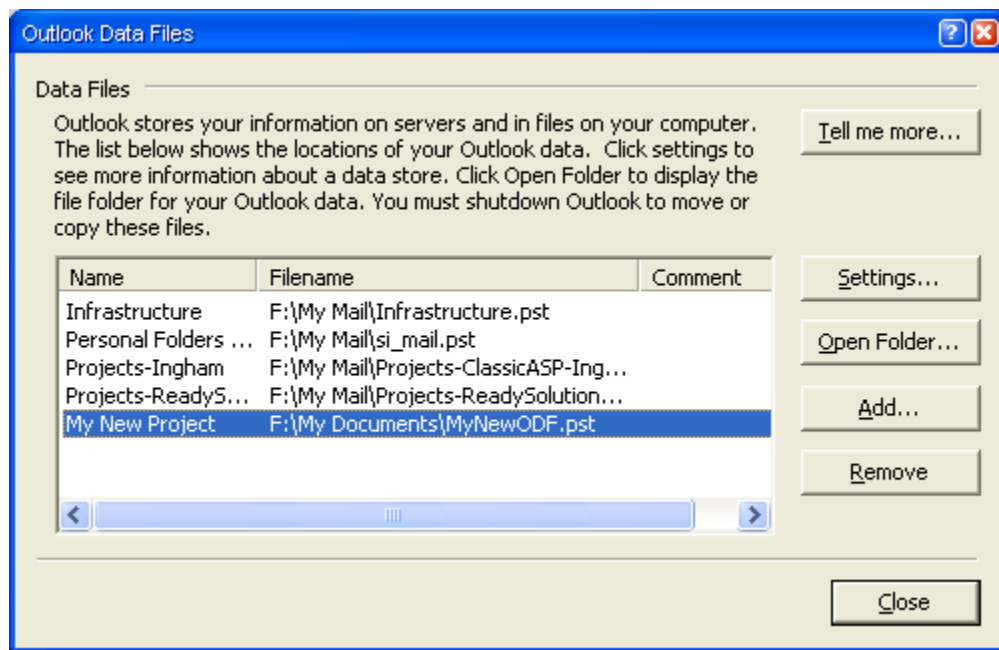
Click the "Close" button to return to the Options form, then click "OK" to return to Outlook. Your ODF will appear in the Folder List (it opens the ODF for you).

That's all there is to it!