



Use Spotlight to manage projects and organise research

There's more to Spotlight than its menu icon and search windows. Extra attributes, comments and Automator integration give you greater power.

Spotlight is the part of Mac OS X that keeps track of files, so you can easily retrieve them without digging through months' or even years' worth of accumulated clutter. It indexes files, keeps a record of file names and even the contents of many common file types so you can search for things that only appear in their content.

It also monitors attributes that are specific to certain file types, such as the aperture setting, focal length and exposure of a photo, whether an image has an alpha channel and the source of a file, which is a handy way to filter a cluttered Downloads folder.

There are two ways to start searching for something from the Desktop. Press Cmd-Space and the Spotlight menu will open. Type what you're looking for and Spotlight performs the broadest search, matching files and other items by their name and content, so expect to see a mix of documents and items that you normally only see inside certain types of applications, such as calendar items in iCal. The Spotlight menu is intelligent enough to recognise Boolean (AND, OR) operators.

Alternatively, open a Spotlight window by pressing Cmd-Alt-Space. Each row you add to the top of the right pane (by clicking the '+' button) adds a new criterion against which items are compared. This allows you to rein in the results by looking at specific file types, creation dates and other attributes.

In fact, you can also do this from the Spotlight menu, although you'll need to know the complex syntax used to focus more tightly on attributes such as the kind of items for which you're looking and their various other attributes. However, while you can get away with the minimum of effort just by saving your files in formats that Spotlight recognises, a little bit more work with Finder labels, good use of extended file attributes and easily overlooked Spotlight comments can make finding files even easier further down the line.



Alan Stonebridge spends his working life in front of Macs – and they've taken over his free time, too.

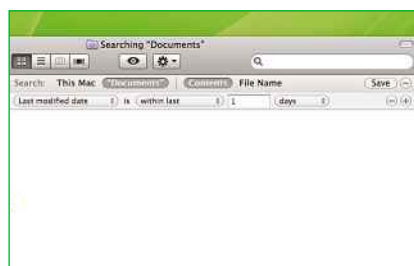
Spotlight comments

Spotlight comments are important in achieving an ideal: that you shouldn't have to worry too much about how files are organised on your hard drive, or at least you shouldn't need to devise a complex structure of folders for storing items. There are, of course, good reasons to do that, such as packaging up files to send to other people. Equally, you should be able to save a file into your Documents folder and retrieve it after many months just by recalling a few details about its contents or keywords that indicate the file's purpose.

For some reason, Apple has neglected to add a Spotlight comments field to Mac OS X's standard Save dialog. Instead, it expects you to use the Finder's Get Info window to add them. Spotlight comments are a great way to add keywords to file formats over which you have little control. For example, video files produced by an application that doesn't let you add keywords, and other types whose contents Spotlight can't read.

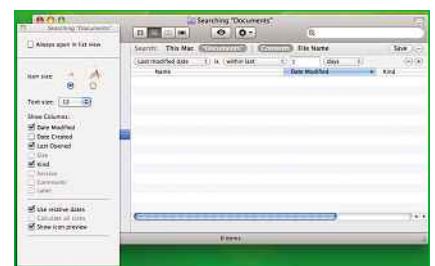


Adding comments after saving a file



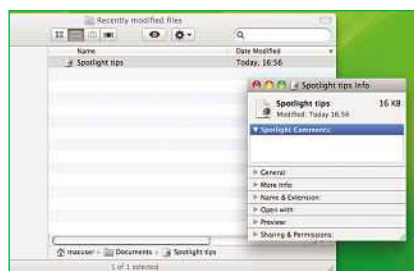
1. Create a Smart Folder

You can work around Apple's strange omission with a Smart Folder. Find your Documents folder and open it, then press Cmd-F to start a search. Set the search options to only look inside the Documents folder, then add one criteria, as shown above, which looks for files that have been modified in the last day.



2. Reorder the files

So that the most recently changed file appears first in this folder, switch to list view (Cmd-2), open the view options (Cmd-J) and add the Date Modified column. Return to the Finder window and sort that column by clicking its header until the files are listed in the desired order.

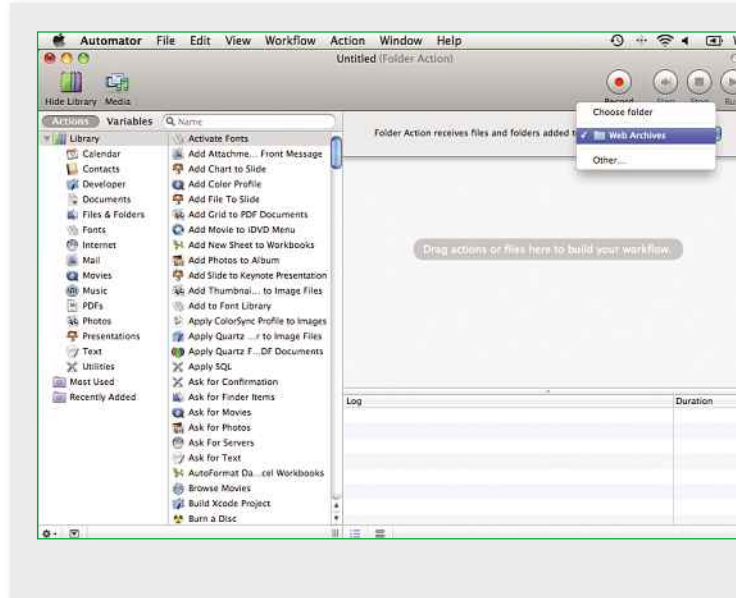


3. Quick access from the Dock

Save this Smart Folder in your user folder, then find it and drag it into the right side of the Dock. Now, when you've saved a file for the first time, you only need to click the Smart Folder in the Dock, select the first file listed and open the Get Info window to add Spotlight comments to help you find it later.

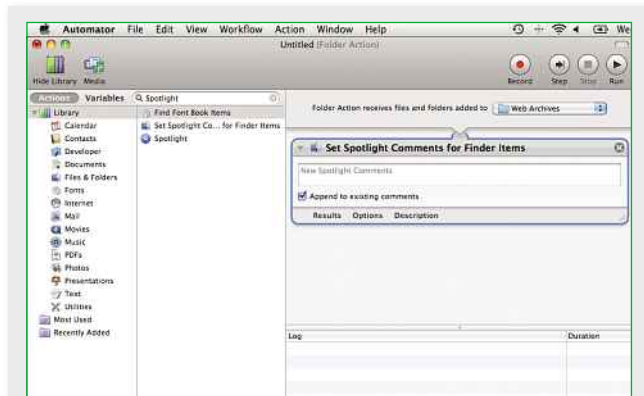
An Automator alternative

Another option, which might work better if you only want to add comments to certain types of files that you store in a particular location, is to create a Folder Action. One might be Web Archives, saved from Safari, which you might use to store research material for later rather than immediate use. Spotlight comments become invaluable for finding the relevant pages without having to dig through folders. Better still, one saved page might be relevant to more than one project. Spotlight comes into its own when searching a disorganised collection of files rather than through folders. Good use of comments means relevant results will turn up however they're organised on your hard drive.



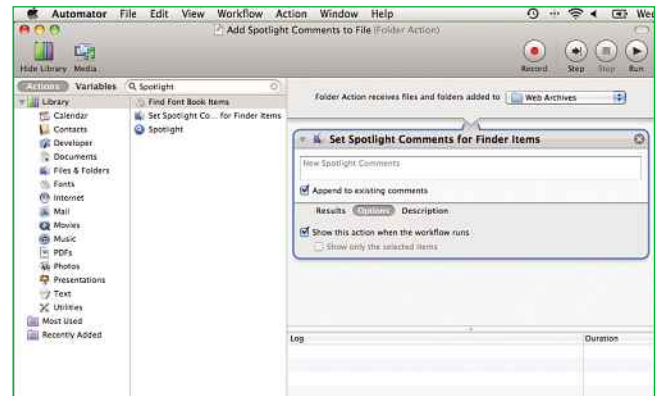
1. Make a Folder Action

Start by creating a folder, which you'll use to save these files. We've called ours Web Archives. Next, open Automator and create a Folder Action workflow. At the top of this, choose the folder you just created.



2. Ask for Spotlight comments

In the action library on the left, make sure the top item (Library) is selected, then type Spotlight into the search field. One of the actions that appears is called Set Spotlight Comments for Finder Items. Drag it into the workflow.



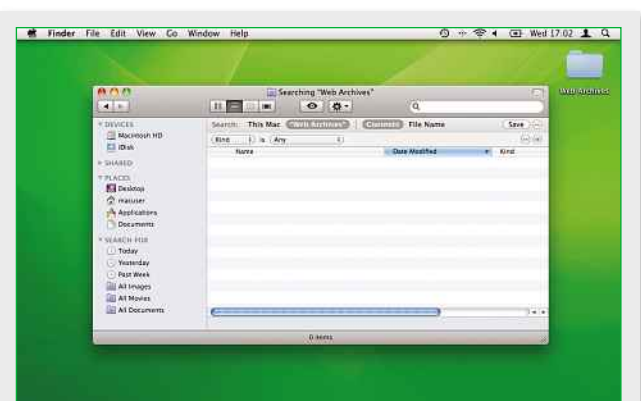
3. Ensure the dialog pops up

Make sure the option that appends new comments to existing ones is ticked. Leave the box for comments empty; you'll add new ones when you save a file. This is the only action you need, but by default it won't display a dialog to ask for Spotlight comments. Click Options and tick the one that shows the action when the workflow runs. Choose File > Save and call this action Add Spotlight Comments to File.



4. Set comments after saving a file

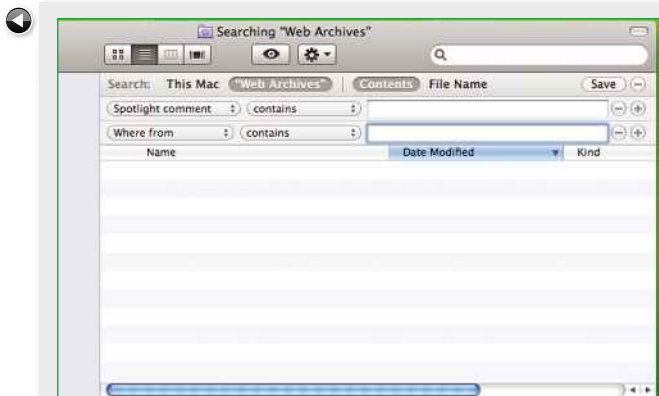
If you're following our example of saving web pages, open Safari, browse to a page and choose File > Save As. Change the format to Web Archive and put it in the folder you created in Step 1. It may take a few seconds after saving the page for the folder action to kick in and display a dialog.



5. Recover files with a Smart Folder

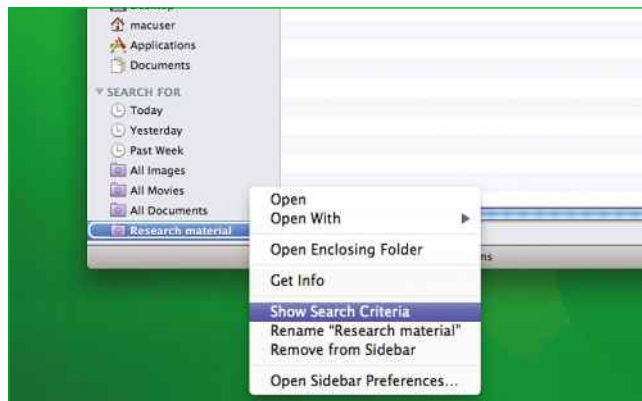
To search your saved pages later, open the Web Archives folder and press Cmd-F to start. In the search bar, restrict the scope of the search to this folder, rather than your whole Mac.





6. Set up a basic criteria

Add a condition that searches the Spotlight comment attribute for archives that contain some text, but don't type anything in the box that specifies what it should look for. Optionally, add another row that looks at the 'Where from' attribute. Again, set it to match items that contain text but leave the final box blank.



7. Switch to list view

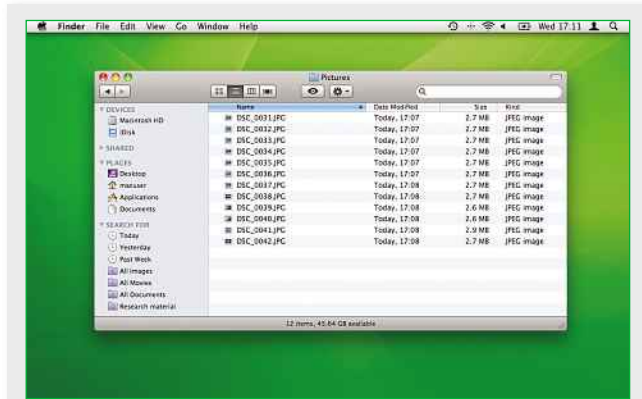
Save this Smart Folder to the Finder's sidebar. In future, when you're trying to find pages you've saved for research, select the folder in the sidebar, then right-click it, choose Show Search Criteria and fill out the boxes you left empty. You can adapt this technique to folders that store other kinds of files you might need at some point in the future.

Use labels as a search tool as well as a visual reminder



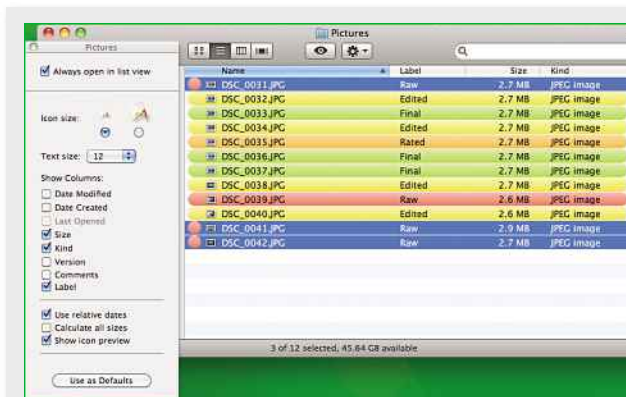
1. Assign names to labels

Labelling files with a colour in the Finder is a simple yet effective way to keep on track of what projects need additional work. Come up with a set of seven or fewer labels that fit in with the various stages that your work goes through. Assign these meanings to the colour labels in the Finder's preferences under the Labels tab.



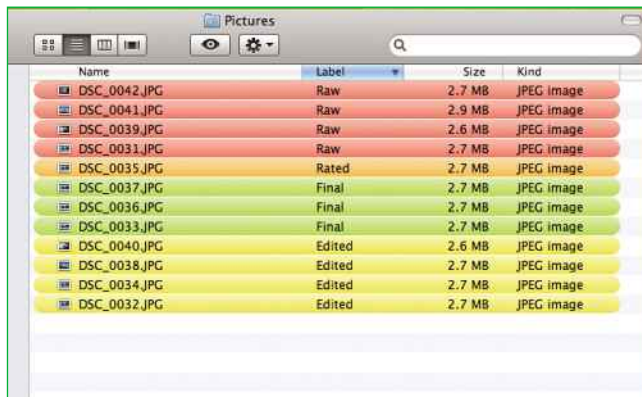
2. Switch to list view

This might not make sense when you're working in icon view, yet since you're unlikely to keep the preferences open as a key, list view (Cmd-2) is invaluable. By default, files are only coloured, but you might want a written reminder of what those colours mean.



3. See labels as words

Select View > Show View Options (or press Cmd-J) and turn on the label column. It will appear near the right of the visible columns, but you can make it more prominent by dragging the column heading to place it further towards the file name.



4. Sort labels to view workload progress

The reason colour labels are so helpful in list view is that you can sort a whole folder. If you're working on a project that's made up of InDesign documents, word processor files or photographs that need to be processed before printing, you can sort the label field to keep track of what still needs doing by grouping everything by colour.