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Spaces, accents and symbols in links and file names: URL encoding without broken links

Support & Account

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The short answer: an address can only carry a limited set of characters. Everything else (a space, an accented letter, many symbols) travels as % followed by two hexadecimal digits: this is **percent-encoding**. A space becomes %20 ; an "é" becomes %C3%A9 (its two bytes in UTF-8). The browser does this for you and shows the readable version in the bar, which is why problems only appear when the link is copied into an e-mail, a chat, some code, or when the name belongs to a file. And some symbols have a job in the address (? # & / % +): in a file name, they break the link.

The characters that cause trouble

Character and encoding	What happens if it is left as is
Space: %20 (or + in form parameters)	The link is cut at the space when pasted into an e-mail or a chat. "price list.pdf" arrives as "price".
Accented letters: é becomes %C3%A9	Usually fine in the browser, but fails in older programs, some e-mail clients and when the name was saved in another encoding: accents turning into strange symbols .
Hash: # becomes %23	Everything after it is treated as a fragment and never reaches the server: "invoice#12.pdf" gives a 404.
Question mark: ? becomes %3F	The rest of the name is read as a query string.
Ampersand: & becomes %26	Inside a value, it splits the parameter in two.
Plus: + becomes %2B	In the query string many programs read "+" as a space (PHP does, when it fills \$_GET).
Percent: % becomes %25	A stray "%" confuses decoding.

➞ Names and links that do not break

- 1 **Name files before uploading them:** lower case, no accents, hyphens instead of spaces, only letters, digits, hyphens and the dot before the extension. "Price List (final).pdf" becomes `price-list-final.pdf`. The same goes for images: **alt text and file names for images**.
- 2 **Renaming a file that is already linked breaks the old link.** Update the links pointing to it, or redirect the old name to the new one: **301 redirects**.
- 3 **Test the link outside the browser:** paste it into a plain-text message and open it in a private window. If it is cut at a space, an accent or a "#", it is the encoding.
- 4 **If you write code, encode each value, not the whole address.** In PHP, `rawurlencode()` for a piece of the path and `http_build_query()` (or `urlencode()`) for parameters. In JavaScript, `encodeURIComponent()` for a value and `encodeURIComponent()` for an address that is already put together.
- 5 **Do not encode twice.** If a link shows `%2520`, the "%" of a `%20` was encoded again. Fix it where the link is generated (the code, the plugin, the spreadsheet), not by renaming the file.
- 6 **Two files that look like the same name and the site finds only one?** The same accented letter can be stored in two ways (a single character, or the letter plus a separate accent mark), depending on the system the file was created on. They look identical and are not. One more reason to keep accents out of file names.

! On Linux servers, the name counts letter by letter.
 "Photo.JPG" and "photo.jpg" are different files, and a name with a space or an accent that worked on your computer may give a 404 on the site. If an image or a PDF stopped opening after you uploaded it, compare the name in File Manager with the one in the link: **error 404 on a page that should exist**.

💡 Accents in a domain name are a different mechanism
 (the domain is converted to a form starting with `xn--`), with rules of their own: **accents and special characters in domain names**.

🔧 NEED A HAND?

A file is on the site and the link does not open it? Send us the exact link and the file name as it appears in File Manager.

 **Open a support ticket** ➞

SEE ALSO

The parts of a web address: scheme, domain, port, path, query and fragment



Alt text and file names for images: what to write, and what to avoid



Accents turning into strange symbols on your site: UTF-8 from file to database



Accents and special characters in domain names: what is allowed, and what to do instead



Error 404 on a page that should exist: the causes, in order



What a good page URL looks like, and how to change a bad one safely



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