Managing your computer!

For those of you who always struggle to find items on your computer, here are some helpful guidelines to better practice:

- The default option for file-save location in most Windows programs is to My Documents. Using folders in this area to keep *all* your data files together (apart from knowing where to look to find them) is that it is then very easy to back up the whole or part of My Documents. Alternatively, some computers are set up with a partitioned drive (usually D), designated as a Data drive: if that is the case, you can help yourself by going to the Options or Preferences in each of the programs you use and changing the default location for saving to the D drive.

- Create folders within My Documents to identify the different areas of your work, so it is always easy to find them when you want to open or save a file. Each folder then can have subfolders for different files within that area of work (Figure 1). I typically have one, and sometimes two more layers of subfolders under the top one, but rarely more than that (more requires too much clicking to access a particular file, and is often a symptom of poor organisation).

- Do not store folders of data or individual files on your Desktop. Doing so means that they are using up your computer's random access memory resources (RAM) every time you open the computer, thus reducing what is available to your programs as you work. For quick access, right click on the file or folder in your My Documents area, and then select Send to > Desktop (create shortcut). Similarly, for rapid access to a regularly used software program, go to where it is listed in the Start menu > All programs > [program folder], right click on it and either Send to > Desktop (create shortcut), Pin to Start Menu or Pin to Taskbar. (Pinning also gives you rapid access to a list of recently opened documents for that program.)

- Don't ever store data files in with program files. Keeping them apart from program files ensures you won't accidentally delete associated data files if you delete or update the program.

- Create a systematic method (and folder location) for storing back-up files in which the last back up is *not* overwritten by the next one, just in case the file you are writing from has been corrupted in some way (i.e., you want to keep the last known good copy). I back up whatever I am working on at the end of most working sessions, and mark the back-up file by adding the date to the filename, written in international date format (YYMMDD, e.g., 3_Managing data 100820 for this file for today's date of 20th August, 2010). Using this format ensures that the files are automatically sorted in date order, from oldest to most recent. I keep the undated copy as my current working copy, but if you are working between two computers you might want to move and work on the most recent dated copy.

- Use a USB or other external drive for transfer or backing up purposes only. Working on an externally stored file (especially if through a desktop computer) poses a strong risk of corruption if there is a power disruption.
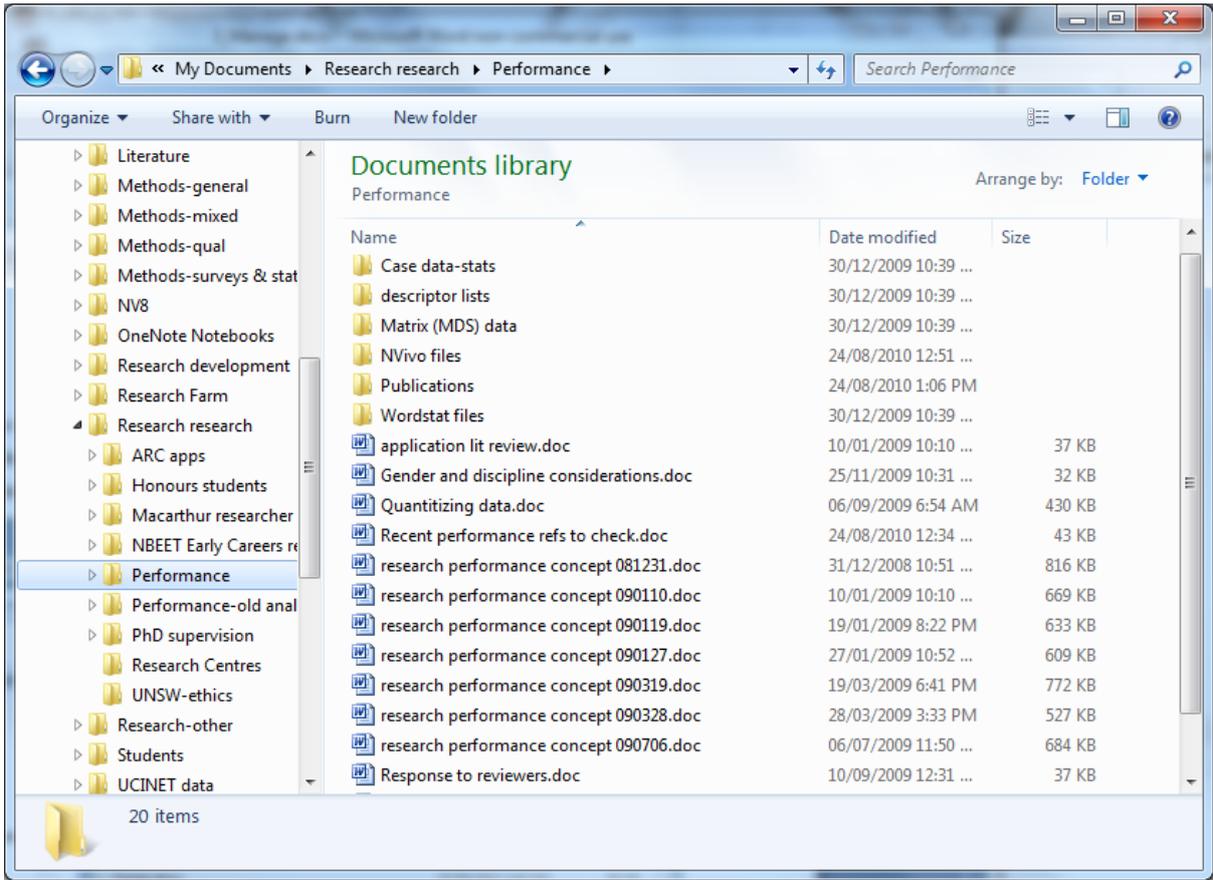
Figure 1 Sample filing system for documents