Flattening PDFs for Application Submission and Commons Uploads

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The application submission process and many reporting mechanisms in eRA Commons, such as Request for Additional Materials (RAM), Just-in-Time (JIT), Research Performance Progress Report (RPPR), and more, require documents to be uploaded. For data integrity and storage efficiency reasons, eRA requires certain submitted documents to be flattened PDFs. If you attempt to upload a PDF and get an error message telling you to "ensure all files are flattened PDFs," then you need to flatten the PDF prior to upload.

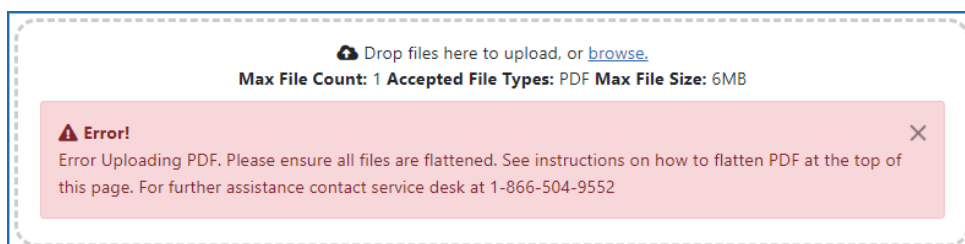**NOTE:** These steps could change, based on changes to Apple Mac or Windows software.

Figure 1: Error stating "Error Uploading PDF. Please ensure all files are flattened…" when a multi-layered PDF is uploaded in RPPR

PDFs that have fillable fields, electronic signatures, or text boxes or images inserted become layered, with each of these elements representing a layer. A flattened PDF is a file in which all the layers are merged into one flat layer, and the PDF can no longer be edited. By following the instructions below, you are exporting the layered PDF to a virtual printer and saving it as a simple (flattened) PDF.

What Files Are Required to Be Flattened Prior to Upload into eRA Commons or as Part of the Application Process?

All files, including those uploaded as part of the application process, can be flattened at any time as long as they are flattened prior to uploading.

- Application attachments with fillable fields or electronic signatures
- Just-in-Time files
- RPPR files
- Request for Additional Materials files (through an action link in Status)

How Can I Tell if a PDF Is Flattened?

- One way to determine if the PDF is NOT flattened is to open the PDF in a web browser and look for fillable (editable) fields. A PDF with editable text fields is NOT flattened.
- Use the PDF reader's "highlight" feature to highlight some text that you see onscreen. If you cannot highlight any text, the PDF is likely flattened.

Windows PC: Flattening a PDF

If you are working with Windows, and if the document you need to upload is already a PDF, but is not flattened:

1. Open the PDF in a web browser, such as Microsoft Edge or Google Chrome.
2. Click the Print icon (🖶 or 🖶)
3. In the **Printer*** dropdown, select **Microsoft Print to PDF** and complete the print by clicking the **Print** button and specifying a file name and location. (*field is named **Destination** in Google Chrome browser.)
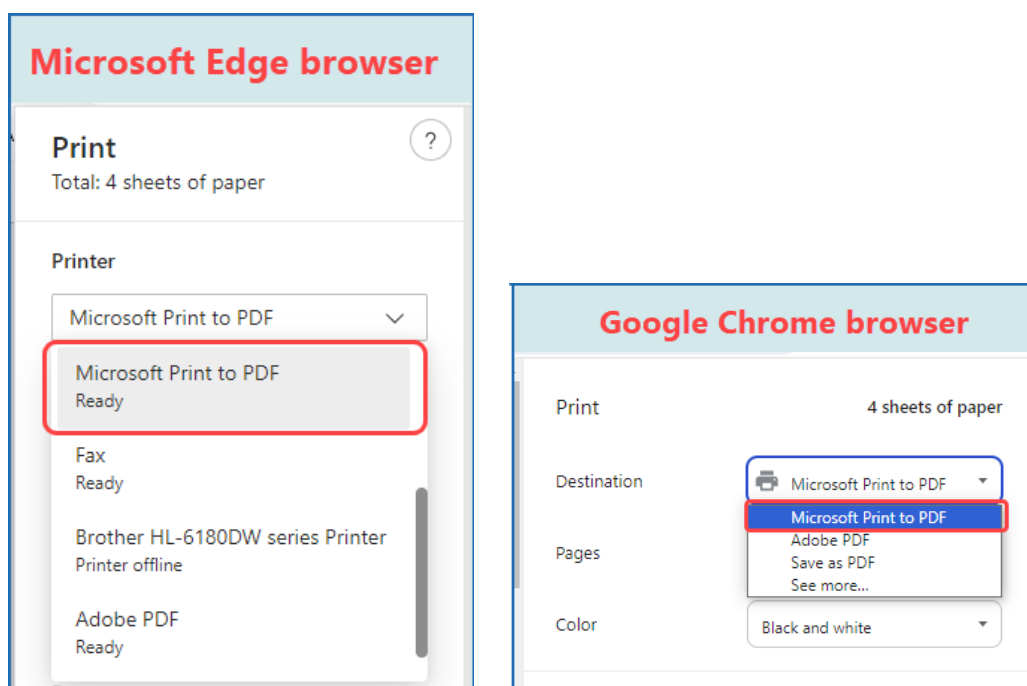

Figure 2: *Partial views of print dialogs for Microsoft Edge browser and Google Chrome browser, showing **Microsoft Print to PDF** in the Printer or Destination fields*

The resulting file is a flattened PDF.

NOTE: If you have Adobe Reader or Adobe Acrobat, you can open it in that product and choose **Print**, but select **Adobe PDF** instead of **Microsoft Print to PDF** as the printer.

Windows PC: Saving Another File Type as a Flattened PDF

If you are working with Windows, and if the file is not yet a PDF—for example, if it is a Microsoft Word or Excel file—then do the following to convert it to a PDF. Details of how to print vary by application.

1. Open the file in its native application.
2. Select the **Print** menu option (location varies—located under the **File** menu for Microsoft apps).
3. Select **Microsoft Print to PDF** and complete the print by clicking the **Print** button and specifying a file name and location.
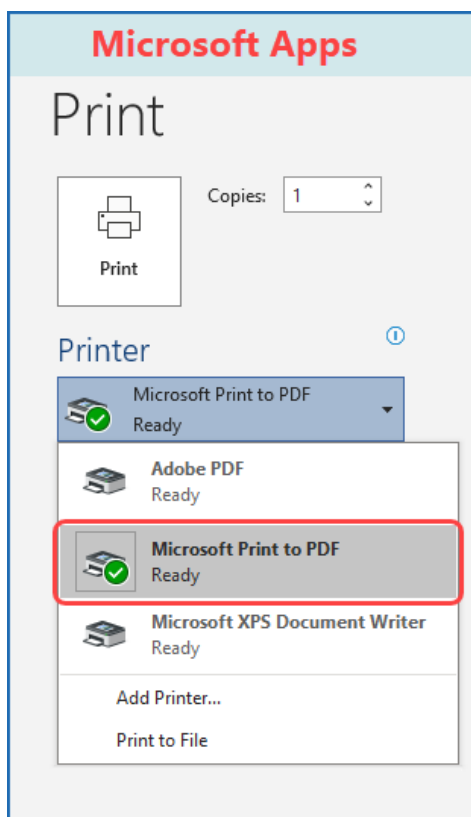

Figure 3: *Partial view of print dialog for Microsoft desktop applications, showing* **Microsoft Print to PDF** *in the Printer field*

The resulting file is a flattened PDF.

Apple Mac Computer: Flattening a PDF

If you are working in MacOS, and if you need to flatten a PDF:

1. Open the PDF in the Preview app.

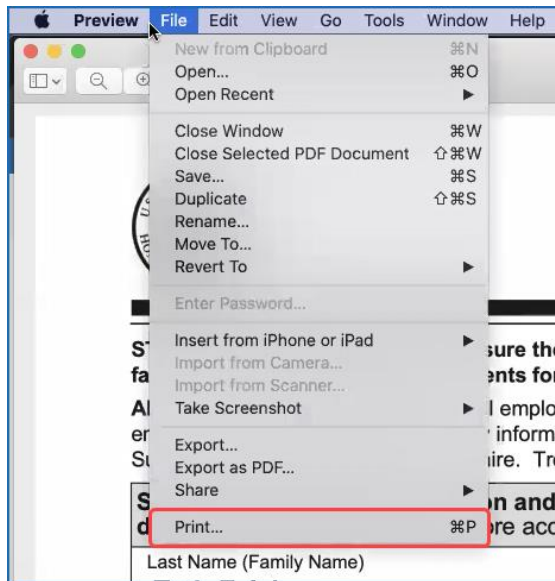   **NOTE:** For help on the MacOS Preview app, see the [MacOS Preview User Guide](#).

   Figure 4: *File menu in MacOS Preview app showing **Print** option*

2. Select **Print** from the **File** menu.
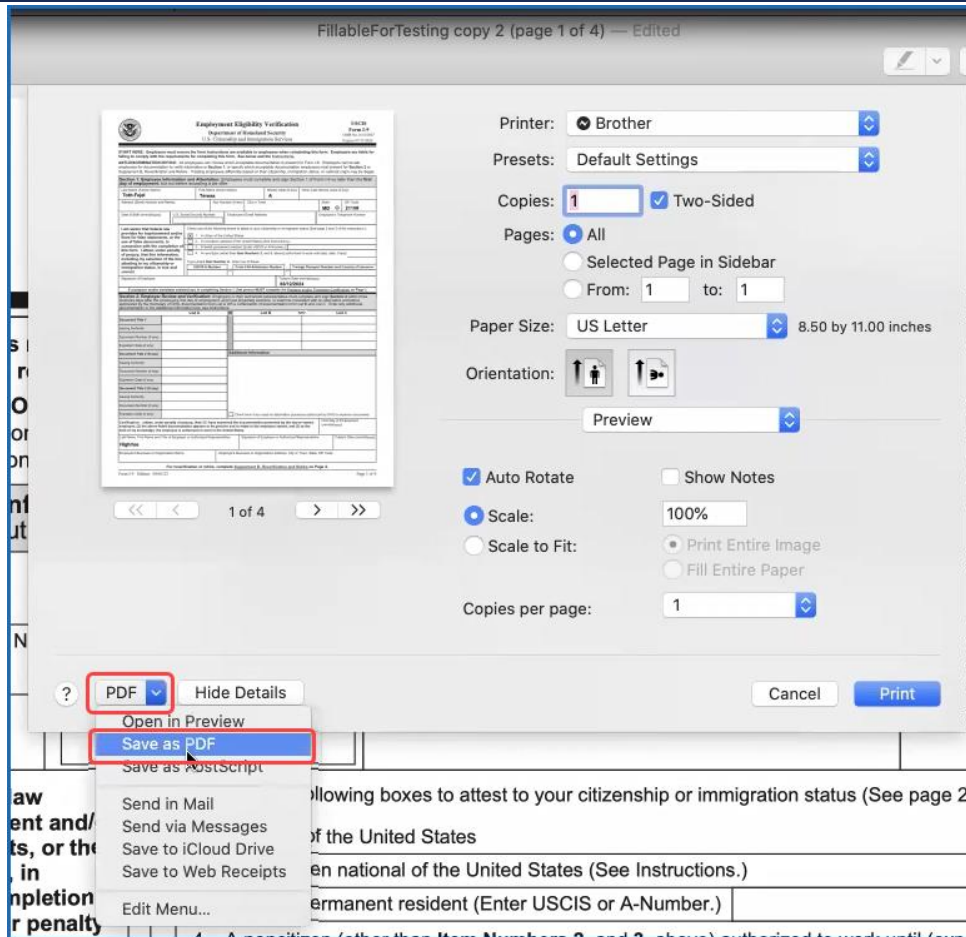
   The Print dialog appears.

Figure 5: *Print dialog in MacOS Preview app, showing the **PDF** dropdown with **Save as PDF** option*

3. Click the **PDF** dropdown in the Print dialog, then select **Save as PDF**.
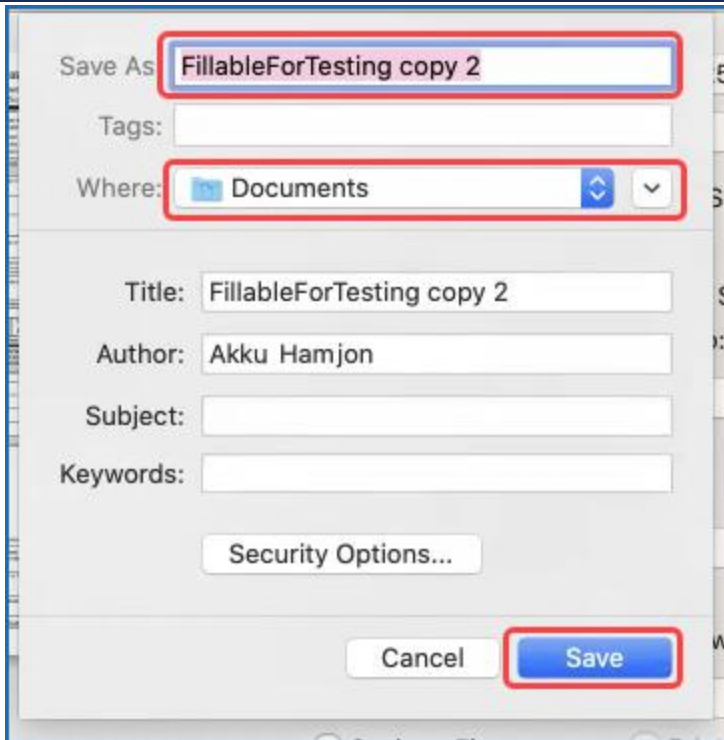
   A Save As dialog appears.

*Figure 6: Save As dialog where you specify file name, location, and click **Save***

4. Specify the file name, location, and click **Save**.

The resulting file is a flattened PDF.