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Cannot modify header information, headers already sent: finding the line that caused it

PHP Errors & Logs

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Interweb Angola
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Cannot modify header information, headers already sent: finding the line that caused it

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The full message is “Warning: Cannot modify header information - headers already sent by (output started at /path/file.php:12)”. It means **PHP has already started sending text to the browser, and after that it can no longer change the headers** (redirect, start a session, set a cookie, deliver a file). What matters is inside the brackets: the **file and line where text started coming out**. That is where the culprit is.

Reading the message

Part of the message	What it says
headers already sent by (output started at file:line)	Where text started coming out. **Start here.**
… in another-file.php on line N	Where the code tried to change the header (a `header()`, `session_start()` or `setcookie()`). It is the victim, not the culprit.

The causes, most common first

1. **Spaces or blank lines outside the PHP.** A blank line before `<?php`, or after a final `?>`, is text sent out. It happens a lot in configuration files edited by hand, such as `wp-config.php` or a theme’s `functions.php`. The remedy is to delete the space and, in files that are pure PHP, **stop using the closing `?>`**.

2. **The “BOM”.** Some editors (Notepad, for instance) save the file with three invisible bytes at the start. To catch them, in a Linux Terminal: `grep -rl $'\xEF\xBB\xBF' --include=*.php .`. Save the file again as “UTF-8 without BOM”.

3 **An `echo`, `print` or HTML before the `header()`.** In your own code, move the header change to the top, before any output.

4 **A printed warning or error.** If PHP writes a warning on screen, that text is already output and the later headers fail. Solve the original warning: see **PHP warnings showing on your site: what they are and how to silence them**.

5 **A plugin or a theme.** In WordPress, the message names the plugin's or the theme's file. Deactivate it and see whether it goes away. See **disabling plugins, including when you cannot get in**.

The "trick" that postpones the problem

An `ob_start()` at the top of the code keeps the output in memory and sends it only at the end, so headers can still be changed. It fixes the symptom, **not the cause**, and hides the blank space that is still there. Here PHP ships with `output_buffering` off, so any byte before the header gives the error. Use `ob_start()` as a last resort, in your own code, and not as a fix for a third party's file.

Always edit a copy.
A mistake in a `wp-config.php` or a `functions.php` leaves the site blank. Save a copy of the file before touching it. If the site goes blank, see **a blank page in PHP: how to see the error**.

Redirects and sessions are the usual victims.
"Login does not redirect" or "sessions do not save" often start here. See **PHP sessions: where they live, and why users get logged out**.

NEED A HAND?

Have the message with the file and line and cannot see what is there? Send us the full message and the page address.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **PHP warnings showing on your site: what they are and how to silence them** →
- **PHP sessions: where they live, and why users get logged out** →
- **Where the PHP error log is** →

A blank page in PHP: how to see the error

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