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PHP sessions: where they live, and why users get logged out

PHP Errors & Logs

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PHP sessions: where they live, and why users get logged out

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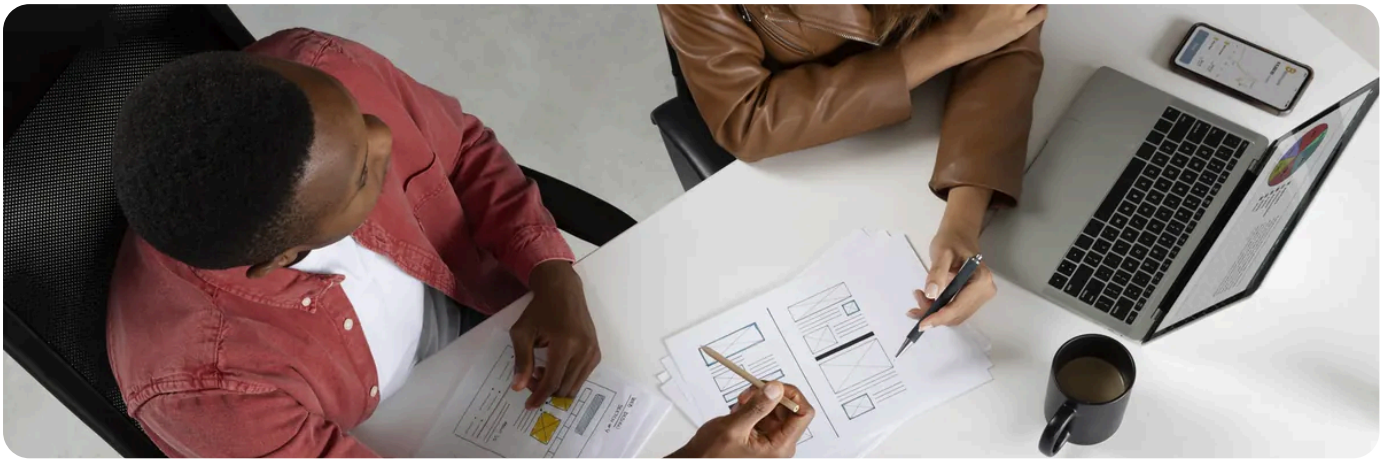

A PHP session is a **small file on the server**, tied to the visitor by a cookie (the `PHPSESSID`). That is where the application keeps who is logged in, what is in the basket, and so on. When a user is "logged out for no reason", one of two things happened: the file disappeared, or the cookie stopped arriving.

The causes, from most to least common

Cause	How to recognise it	What to do
A short lifetime	Logs out after a few idle minutes, but not in the middle of a task.	PHP clears session files idle for longer than `session.gc_maxlifetime`, which by default is short. Raise it, and match the cookie's lifetime in the application itself.
The PHP version changed	Everybody was logged out at once, a single time.	Normal: each PHP version keeps its sessions in its own folder. It does not happen again.
www and no www, or http and https	Logged in on one address and logged out on the other.	A cookie belongs to one address. Pick one and redirect the other. See **.htaccess for PHP projects**.
A cache serving logged-in pages	One user sees another's name, or is "logged out" only on some pages.	The page cache (a plugin's or a CDN's) must exclude logged-in pages.
PHP cannot write the session	A "Failed to write session data" warning, or sessions that never stick.	The account's space ran out, or the sessions folder lacks permission. Check the space in cPanel.

Cause	How to recognise it	What to do
session_start() too late	The “headers already sent” warning appears and the cookie is never sent.	`session_start()` must run before any text goes out, including spaces before `<?php`. It is a bug in the code.

Giving your application a sessions folder of its own

This is only worth it if you need a different lifetime from the rest, or want sessions out of the default place. It is not needed day to day.

1. In the File Manager, create a folder **outside the public folder**, for example `/home/YOURACCOUNT/sessions`, and give it permission `700`.
2. In the application’s folder, add the lines below to the `.user.ini`. See **where to set each value**.
3. Wait a few minutes, log in to the site and check that a new file appeared in the folder.

```
session.save_path = "/home/YOURACCOUNT/sessions"
session.gc_maxlifetime = 7200
```

The second value is in seconds and is an example.

Do not put the sessions folder inside public_html.
A session file is a key to the front door: whoever can read it can act as that user.

“Keep me logged in” is an application feature
, not a PHP one. It normally sets a second, long-lived cookie. If the application does not offer it, raising `gc_maxlifetime` as high as you like does not help: the session cookie dies when the browser closes.

NEED A HAND?

Users are still being logged out and you have been through the table? Tell us the address and the time it happened.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- php.ini and .user.ini: where to set a value
- Where the PHP error log is
- .htaccess for PHP projects: friendly URLs and redirects
- Changing your PHP version without breaking the site

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