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Read a Whole File in One Line: The IOUtils Cookbook (1/2)

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Here's a line of Delphi almost every one of us has typed:

```
if FileExists(FileName) then
  // ...
```

It works. It has worked since the last century. There is nothing wrong with it. But somewhere along the way — quietly, without a fanfare that reached most of us — the RTL grew a *second* way to ask that question:

```
if TFile.Exists(FileName) then
  // ...
```

Same answer. Different unit. And that second unit — `System.IOUtils` — is one of the most quietly useful corners of the modern Delphi RTL that a great many working Delphi developers have simply never opened. It has been there since **Delphi 2010**. It reads a whole text file in *one line*. It lists a directory in *one call*. It builds paths that behave correctly on Windows, macOS, Linux, iOS, and Android without you touching a single backslash. And — a detail I want to make a real point of in this series — the things you call it through are **records, not classes**.

There is no `Create`, no `Free`, no `try/finally`.

This is a two-part, show-me-the-code cookbook. Every recipe is the plain old `SysUtils` way you already know, set side by side with the `IOUtils` way — so you can decide, task by task, which one fits. Part 1 is about the design (why records?) and about **files**: reading, writing, copying, moving, deleting, and inspecting them. Part 2 takes on directories and paths. By the end of this part you'll be reaching for `TFile` without thinking about it.

First, the thing nobody told you: these are records

Open `System.IOUtils` and look at the three names that matter. Here is how the RTL actually declares them — copied from the interface section of `System.IOUtils.pas` (© Embarcadero, shipped with RAD Studio):

```
TDirectory = record
  // ...
end;

TPath = record
  // ...
end;

TFile = record
  // ...
end;
```

Not `class`. `record`**.** That one keyword changes everything about how you use them, so it's worth pausing on.

A Delphi record#Records) is a value type. Unlike a class, you never allocate it on the heap and you never free it. And since Delphi 2009 gave records the ability to hold methods, a record can carry a whole toolbox of functions. `IOUtils` takes that idea to its logical end: every single method on `TFile`, `TDirectory`, and `TPath` is declared `class ... static` — meaning it belongs to the *type*, not to any instance. Here's a representative slice, again straight from the source:

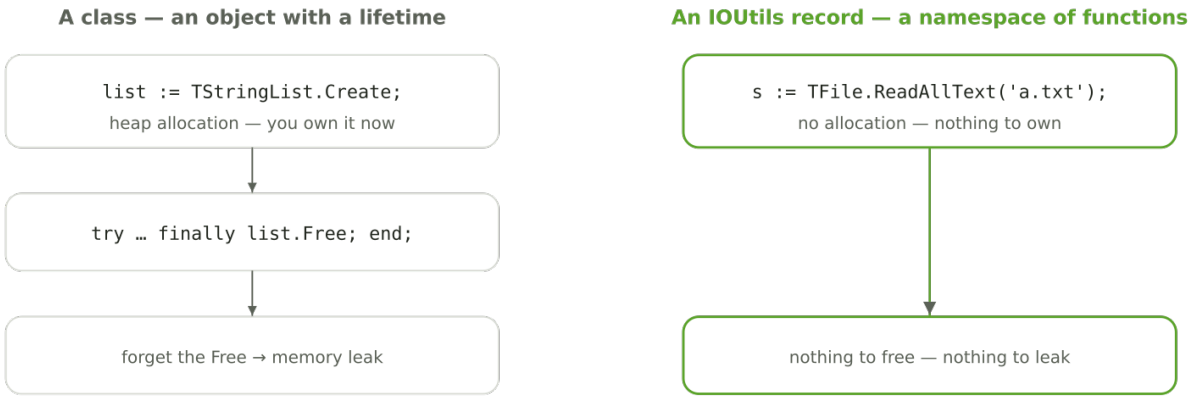
```
TFile = record
public
  class function Exists(const Path: string; FollowLink: Boolean = True): Boolean; inline; static;
  class function ReadAllText(const Path: string): string; overload; inline; static;
  class procedure WriteAllText(const Path, Contents: string); overload; static;
  class procedure Copy(const SourceFileName, DestFileName: string); overload; inline; static;
  // ... dozens more, all class ... static
end;
```

The practical upshot: **you never create a `TFile`.** You call methods *on the type name itself*, exactly like a namespace of free functions.

```
// You do NOT do this — there is nothing to instantiate:
//   var F := TFile.Create;   // this is something else entirely (see the warning below)
//   F.Exists(...);

// You just call through the type:
if TFile.Exists('data.json') then
  Writeln('found it');
```

Let me draw the contrast that makes this click, because it's the whole reason the design is pleasant to use.



A class you instantiate and must free; an IOUtils record you just call through

The left column is the familiar object dance: allocate, guard with `try/finally`, free. The right column is what `IOUtils` gives you for the common cases — a call that returns a value and leaves nothing behind for you to clean up. That's the ergonomic payoff of the record design, and it's why the rest of this cookbook reads so cleanly.

> **One genuinely confusing exception: TFile.Create**
>
> `TFile` *does* have a method named `Create` — but it does **not** create a `TFile`. It's a factory that returns a brand-new, empty `TFileStream` on disk (`class function Create(const Path: string): TFileStream; static;`). That returned stream **is** an object you own and must `Free`. So the rule holds — you never instantiate the record — but don't let the name fool you: `TFile.Create('new.bin')` makes a file, not a file-helper.

The honest version of the headline

I opened with `FileExists` vs. `TFile.Exists`, and I owe you the truth about what's really going on under the hood, because the flix house rule is that we don't oversell. If you read the implementation of `TFile.Exists` in the RTL source, here is the entire body:

```
class function TFile.Exists(const Path: string; FollowLink: Boolean = True): Boolean;
begin
  Result := FileExists(Path, FollowLink);
end;
```

It calls `FileExists`. `TFile.Exists` is not a smarter, faster, or more capable existence check — it's a thin, uniform façade over the same RTL primitive. So if all you ever do is check whether a file exists, `FileExists` is perfectly fine and there is no reason to feel behind for using it.

The value of `IOUtils` is not any single method beating its `SysUtils` cousin. It's **coherence**: one unit, one naming convention, one mental model that spans files, directories, and paths across every platform Delphi targets — modeled deliberately on .NET's `System.IO` so the shapes feel familiar. That's the real reason to learn it. Now let's earn that claim recipe by recipe.

Recipe: read an entire text file

This is the one that converts people. Reading a text file the classic way means picking a container, creating it, loading into it, and freeing it:

```
var
  Lines: TStringList;
  Text: string;
begin
  Lines := TStringList.Create;
  try
    Lines.LoadFromFile('config.ini');
    Text := Lines.Text;
  finally
    Lines.Free;
  end;
end;
```

The `IOUtils` way is a single expression that returns the file's contents as a string — no container, no `try/finally`:

```
var
  Text: string;
begin
  Text := TFile.ReadAllText('config.ini');
end;
```

`ReadAllText` has an overload that takes a `TEncoding` if you need to force one; with no encoding argument it detects a byte-order mark and falls back to the default. Two sibling methods round out the reading family:

- `TFile.ReadAllLines('log.txt')` returns a `TArray<string>` — one element per line, ideal for `for … in`.
- `TFile.ReadAllBytes('image.png')` returns a `TBytes` — the whole file as raw bytes, perfect for binary content.

> **When *not* to read it all at once**
>
> `ReadAllText`/`ReadAllBytes` load the entire file into memory. That's exactly what you want for a config file or a small document, and exactly what you *don't* want for a multi-gigabyte log. For large or streaming reads,
>
> `TFile.OpenText` returns a `TStreamReader` and `TFile.OpenRead` returns a `TFileStream` — both objects you own and free, letting you process the file a chunk or a line at a time.

Recipe: write, append, and create a text file

Writing mirrors reading. The classic approach again borrows a `TStringList`:

```
var
  Lines: TStringList;
begin
  Lines := TStringList.Create;
  try
    Lines.Text := 'Hello, world!';
    Lines.SaveToFile('greeting.txt');
  finally
    Lines.Free;
  end;
end;
```

With `IOUtils` it's one call, and it creates the file (or overwrites it) for you:

```
TFile.WriteAllText('greeting.txt', 'Hello, world!');
```

The whole write/append family is symmetric with the read family, which is the point — once you know one, you know them all:

```
TFile.WriteAllText('out.txt', SomeString);          // create/overwrite from a string
TFile.WriteAllLines('out.txt', ArrayOfStrings);     // create/overwrite from TArray<string>
TFile.WriteAllBytes('out.bin', SomeBytes);          // create/overwrite from TBytes
TFile.AppendAllText('log.txt', 'another line'#13#10); // add to the end, creating if absent
```

If you'd rather stream text out yourself, `TFile.CreateText` returns a fresh `TStreamWriter` (an object you free), and `TFile.AppendText` returns one positioned at the end of an existing file.

Recipe: copy, move, and delete a file

Here the `IOUtils` names are simply clearer than the `SysUtils` ones — and clarity is worth something when a colleague reads your code six months from now. Compare:

Task	SysUtils	IOUtils
Copy a file	`CopyFile(PChar(Src), PChar(Dst), False)` *(Windows API)*	`TFile.Copy(Src, Dst)`
Move / rename	`RenameFile(Src, Dst)`	`TFile.Move(Src, Dst)`
Delete	`DeleteFile(FileName)`	`TFile.Delete(FileName)`

The `IOUtils` versions read like the sentence you'd say out loud. `TFile.Copy` has an overload with an `Overwrite: Boolean` flag; by default it refuses to clobber an existing destination, which is a safer default than the raw Windows `CopyFile`. Note one deliberate difference in temperament, though.

> **They fail loudly — and that's usually what you want**
>
> `SysUtils.DeleteFile` returns a `Boolean` you can quietly ignore; `TFile.Delete` raises an exception if it can't do the job. That's not a flaw, it's a philosophy: `IOUtils` follows the .NET model of *throwing on failure* rather than returning a status code, so a problem surfaces immediately instead of hiding behind an unchecked result. Wrap file operations in `try/except` where failure is expected (a locked file, a missing path) and let the exception propagate where it isn't.

Recipe: inspect a file — size, timestamps, attributes

This is where `IOUtils` genuinely saves you from fiddly platform code. Getting a file's size the old way means either opening a stream or calling Windows APIs; `TFile.GetSize` returns an `Int64` directly:

```
var
  Bytes: Int64;
begin
  Bytes := TFile.GetSize('bigfile.dat');   // -1 if the file can't be read
end;
```

Timestamps come in a matched set of getters and setters, each with a local-time and a UTC variant — no `FileAge`, no `FindFirst` record to pick apart:

```
Created  := TFile.GetCreationTime('report.pdf');
Written  := TFile.GetLastWriteTime('report.pdf');
Accessed := TFile.GetLastAccessTime('report.pdf');
// UTC siblings: GetCreationTimeUtc, GetLastWriteTimeUtc, GetLastAccessTimeUtc
// and the matching SetXxx / SetXxxUtc procedures
```

Attributes come back as a `TFileAttributes` set, which is far more pleasant than bit-twiddling an integer of flags:

```
if TFileAttribute.faReadOnly in TFile.GetAttributes('locked.txt') then
  Writeln('read-only');
```

There's a cross-platform subtlety worth knowing here, and it's a good example of the whole unit's design showing through.

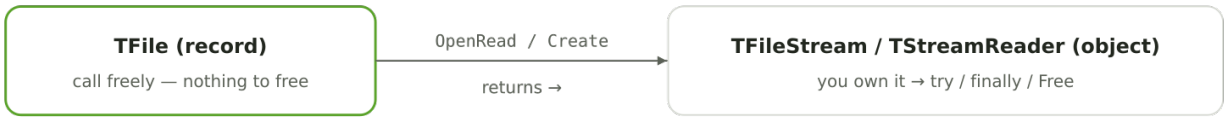
> **TFileAttribute is platform-specific by design**
>
> The `TFileAttribute` enum is **not the same set on every OS** — the RTL declares two different versions.
>
> On Windows you get the familiar `faReadOnly, faHidden, faSystem, faArchive, …`; on POSIX (macOS, Linux, mobile) you instead get Unix-style entries like `faOwnerRead, faGroupWrite, faOthersExecute, faSymLink, …`. The type is even marked `platform` in the source, so the compiler will hint if you use it in cross-platform code. This is honest engineering: the RTL doesn't pretend Windows ACLs and Unix permission bits are the same thing. If your code must compile everywhere, gate attribute logic behind `{$IFDEF MSWINDOWS}` / `{$IFDEF POSIX}` and use the entries that exist on each side.

Recipe: open a file as a stream, the modern way

Sometimes you do need a real stream — to hand to a parser, a JSON reader, or a network component. `TFile` gives you clean factories for that, and this is the one place the object rules come back, so let's be explicit about ownership.

```
var
  Stream: TFileStream;
begin
  Stream := TFile.OpenRead('data.bin');   // returns an object YOU own
  try
    // ... read from Stream ...
  finally
    Stream.Free;                          // your responsibility now
  end;
end;
```

`TFile.OpenRead`, `TFile.OpenWrite`, and the flexible `TFile.Open(Path, Mode, Access, Share)` all return a `TFileStream` you must free — because a stream, unlike the record, genuinely has a lifetime. The mental model stays consistent with everything in this blog: *records are value-typed helpers you never free; the objects they hand back are yours.* If you want the deep treatment of object and stream ownership, my interfaces post and Dalija Prasnikar's Delphi Memory Management both go further than I can here.



The rule of thumb: the record is free to call; the objects it returns are yours to free

The picture is the entire ownership story in one glance: everything left of the arrow is call-and-forget; everything right of it is yours to clean up.

A fair word on the alternatives

Because this is a Delphi-centric post, house rules say I name the wider landscape honestly. If you work across ecosystems, the shape of `IOUtils` will feel familiar for a reason: it was modeled on .NET's `System.IO`, whose `File`, `Directory`, and `Path` classes it mirrors almost method-for-method. Node.js developers reach for `node:fs` (`fs.readFileSync`, `fs.promises`), Python developers for the elegant object-oriented `pathlib` and the venerable `os`/`shutil` pair. Each of these is excellent in its own home. What `IOUtils` gives the Delphi developer is that same one-liner convenience *natively compiled*, in the language you already ship — no runtime, no interpreter, the same binary on five platforms. Reach for whichever lives where your code lives; if your code is Delphi, this is the tool that was hiding in your RTL all along.

Where Part 1 leaves you

We set out to show that modern Delphi has a cleaner, cross-platform vocabulary for file work than many of us ever learned — and to be honest about exactly how far that claim reaches. Here's what actually holds:

- `System.IOUtils` gives you `TFile`, `TDirectory`, and `TPath` — **records, not classes.** You call methods on the type name; you never `Create` or `Free` them. (The one trap: `TFile.Create` returns a *stream* you do own.)
- For files, `TFile` turns multi-line ceremonies into single expressions: `ReadAllText`, `WriteAllText`, `Copy`, `Move`, `Delete`, `GetSize`, `GetLastWriteTime`, `GetAttributes`.
- The convenience is real, but the magic is *coherence*, not raw power — `TFile.Exists` literally calls `FileExists`. Use `IOUtils` for a uniform, cross-platform API, not because the old functions are broken.
- When a method hands back a `TFileStream` or `TStreamReader`, that object is yours to free. The record isn't.

> Modern Delphi didn't replace `FileExists`. It gave `FileExists` a whole family — one coherent, cross-platform record API for everything you do with the file system.

Part 2 takes the same recipe-driven approach to **directories** (`TDirectory` — create, list, walk, copy trees) and **paths** (`TPath` — combining, splitting, and the genuinely indispensable cross-platform folder locations like `GetDocumentsPath`), and closes with a complete, one-page reference to every record and method in the unit. If you write files, you'll want the directory and path tools that go with them. See you there.

> **The series: the IOUtils cookbook**

> Two parts, recipe by recipe: 1. Files: read, write, copy, inspect **— you are here** 2. Directories, paths, and the full reference — listing folders, building paths, and every method in one place

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