

Basic Word Processing

There are many things you can do with word processing – letters, resumes, research papers, signs, class handouts, ... but the important thing about word processing is that you are creating something that you will print out on paper. Many computer applications are not intended for printing things out on paper. For example, most web pages are not really designed to be printed, and they may not come out looking quite like you envisaged – and that's okay, really, because looking good on paper is not the purpose of a web page. Making things look good on paper is the purpose of word processing.

Because word processing has been around for a long time, many of its common features are standardized – they work the same way, pretty much no matter what software you use. Thus, most of the word processing skills that you learn using OpenOffice will still work if you switch to WordPerfect, MS Works, or something else.

The Cursor & the Pointer:

On a word processing screen, there are two key points of interest: the *cursor* and the *mouse pointer* (sometimes called *the mouse cursor* or *the pointer*). The cursor relates to the keyboard as the pointer relates to the mouse: whatever you do with the mouse buttons takes place where the pointer is pointing, but things that you type on the keyboard happen wherever the cursor is. In word processing, there are two ways to move the cursor: by using the cursor-movement keys on the keyboard, or by pointing to the location where you want the cursor to go and clicking; the cursor will jump straight to where you clicked.

Whatever you do with the keyboard takes place where the cursor is. For example, if you use the *backspace* key on the keyboard to erase, it erases the character right before the cursor.

Word Wrap:

The word processing software knows how a paragraph should be shaped. It knows how to move words down to the next line, or back up to the previous line, to make the paragraph look right. Rather than manually moving the words around every time you make a change, let the word processing software do it for you – but how does the software know where one paragraph ends and the next begins? For this there is a special character, called a paragraph break.

Characters:

A *character* is a single piece of text in a word processing document: a letter, a numeric digit, a punctuation mark... what trips most people up is that a few special characters are not directly visible (although their effects are visible). The most common of these invisible characters are

What is Desktop Publishing?

Desktop publishing has the same basic purpose as word processing: to make things look good on paper. Historically, the difference between the two applications has been one of degree: word processing was simple, and professionals who needed to do more complicated things used desktop publishing. Over the years, though, word processing applications have gained more and more of the features of desktop publishing, so that there are fewer and fewer differences. Features that originated in desktop publishing and are common in word processing today include scalable fonts, frames, columns, expanded and condensed fonts, the ability to have text wrap around the contoured edge of an image, and the ability to export formats that printing shops can use, such as Postscript and PDF. Desktop publishing applications do still have some extra features, like the ability to rotate objects at any angle.

the space, the tab character, and the paragraph break, which are inserted with the spacebar, the tab key, and the return or enter key, respectively. (There are others too, such as column breaks and hard page breaks.) These characters, although not directly visible, are still characters that are present in the text, and may be erased just like any other: put the cursor right after the character, and hit the backspace key. So, to separate a paragraph into two paragraphs, position the cursor where you want the break and press the enter or return key. To combine two adjacent paragraphs into one, place the cursor after the break – *i.e.*, at the beginning of the second paragraph – and tap the backspace key.

Commands:

Typing in text is a great start at a document, but sooner or later you're going to want to do something more interesting with it. All the different things the software knows how to do are called *commands*, and you can get to them through the menu, toolbars, or special key combinations called *shortcuts*. All of the available commands are available in the menus; the toolbars and shortcuts are just another way (perhaps a more convenient way) to reach the most common ones.

We'll start with the menus: across the top of any word processing window, just below the title bar, is a menubar, containing several menus: *File, Edit, ..., Help*. If you click any of these, it will drop down an entire menu of choices – these are the commands, the things the software can do for you. To the right, the shortcut key (if any) will be listed for each one. For commands that you use frequently, you may choose to learn the shortcut, so that you don't have to take your hand off the keyboard and mess with the mouse each time you need to do that thing.

Selecting Text:

Dragging

Dragging is when you hold the mouse button down while moving the mouse. To select text by dragging, point to the beginning of what you want to select, press and hold the mouse button, move the mouse to the end of what you want to select, and then release the button.

In a word processing program, there are two ways to select text: you can use the cursor-control keys on the keyboard while holding the *shift* key down, or you can drag over the text with the mouse. Either way, the text you select will become *highlighted*, and then you can do things with it. For example, you can delete it, format it a certain way (bold, perhaps, or underlined, or with a different font face or size), or you can cut or copy it to the clipboard – but to do any of these things, you have to select the text first. The text that you have selected is the text that will be affected by the changes.

Important Commands

Here are some of the most useful commands:

- *Save* – Found under the *File* menu, the *Save* command commits any changes you have made to disk, making them permanent. If the document is new (*i.e.*, has not been saved before), *Save* will automatically do *Save As* instead. Remember: *Save early and save often!*
- *Save As* – Instead of committing just your changes to an existing document, *Save As* will save a new copy of the whole document, prompting you for a new filename to save under. The previously-saved version of the document will not be disturbed.
- *Open* – This command allows you to revisit a document that you have saved previously, so that you can make further changes, print another copy, or whatever.
- *Undo* – This lifesaver will allow you to revert the most recent changes that you have made. (Of course, you can always discard your changes and open the last saved version, but *Undo* is a less drastic way to quickly recover small mistakes.)

Formatting Text:

In addition to the actual text itself, a word processing document may also contain formatting information. (This sets word processing apart from typing with a typewriter or text editor.) The text may be formatted to appear underlined or in *italic* or **boldface**, expanded or condensed, larger or smaller, in a different **FONT** face or **color**, and so on and so forth. There are usually toolbar icons for the most common types of formatting, but you can find all of them under the menus. In the OpenOffice.org software, pull down the *Format* menu and select *Character*, and a dialog box will appear offering all these options. Other word processing programs may put the menu item in a slightly different place, but the option will be there, somewhere.

Formatting Paragraphs:

Each paragraph can have certain formatting settings associated with it. Different word processing software may support different options (such as borders around the paragraph or a background color), but the most important ones are margins and tab stops. These can be set in the paragraph formatting dialog found under the menus, but the ruler bar is easier. By selecting several paragraphs at once, you can change their settings together.

Paragraph Margins control where the word wrap feature shapes the paragraph. You can make a paragraph narrower or wider than the ones above or below it by changing its margins. The right margin is the simplest: on the ruler bar, near the right, you will find a handle (often triangular) for the right margin. If you drag it to the left, your paragraph will rewrap at the new, narrower margin. Drag it back to the right, and your paragraph will be wider.

Near the left of the ruler bar you will see two handles for the left margin. The lower one is the main left margin handle, and works similarly to the right margin but for (most of) the left edge of the paragraph.

The Clipboard:

Before word processing was commonplace, people used creative means to avoid retyping pages. Sometimes they would take scissors and Scotch™ tape to a page they had typed, rearrange the pieces, and use a photocopier to make a clean copy of the result. The computer's clipboard works on similar principles. These commands are found under the *Edit* menu:

- The *Cut* command is like the scissors. It removes the selected thing from the document – and places it on the clipboard.
- The *Copy* command is a less destructive version of the same thing. Rather than removing the selected thing from your document, it makes a copy, and places the copy on the clipboard.
- The *Paste* command is your Scotch™ tape: it inserts the contents of the clipboard into your document, wherever the cursor is located. So, click to place the cursor where you want it to go, and then paste.

The clipboard can only hold one thing at a time. When you cut or copy something new onto the clipboard, its previous contents are gone.

However, the top handle, above the main left margin handle, is called the *indent* handle, and it controls the indentation of the top line of the paragraph only. By moving this handle to the right, you can cause the first line of the paragraph to be indented. Going the other direction, if you move the main left margin in a bit and then move the indent handle to the left of it, you can create a situation known as a *hanging indent* (or *outdent*), wherein the top line of the paragraph starts further left than the rest of the lines. (Hanging indents are commonly used for resumes and bibliographies, among other things.)

Tab Stops:

Ancient mechanical devices known as "typewriters", which were used by primitive cultures during the late pre-silicon era, used a metal tab to stop the advancing carriage when the tab key was pressed. This was called a *tab stop*. Today, we have something very similar. Rather than metal tabs, we now use paragraph settings, which can be conveniently set on the ruler bar.

If you click on the ruler bar, a tab stop marker will appear there. This new tab stop applies to the current paragraph where the cursor is (or whatever paragraphs you have selected). Now any tab characters within that paragraph will cause the following text to line up at that tab stop. This is the best way to get things to line up, because they will line up exactly. (Lining things up using spaces is prone to be off a little, because not all characters are the same width. Using tabs will give you much better results.)

Once you have placed a tab stop, you can move it by dragging it from one location on the ruler bar to another. To remove a tab stop, drag it off the ruler bar and drop it anywhere.

Types of Tab Stops:



There are four types of tab stops: left, center, right, and decimal. Usually there is a button somewhere near the ruler bar that you  can click to change which type of tab stop you are placing. The appearance of this button  also will change to depict the type of stop. Whichever type of stop you select on this button is the type that will be added when you click the ruler bar. The ruler bar shown above has a left tab stop at one inch, a center tab stop at two and a half inches, a right tab stop at five inches, and a decimal tab stop at six and a half, the same settings used for the following lines:

Left	Center	Right	Decimal
tab stops	tab stops	tab stops	42
align	align	align	512
at the	along the	at the	12.5
left edge	center line	right edge	3.14
like this.	like this.	like this.	2.71828

Sometimes you will want to change the margin or tab stops for the entire document at once. For this reason there is a shortcut for selecting all the paragraphs in the entire document: under the *Edit* menu, choose *Select All*. Then any changes you make will affect the whole document.

Print Preview:

Most word processing software offers a *print preview* or *page preview* that will show you what the document will look like on paper. Sometimes you can save ink by using this preview to catch changes you want to make before you print.

File Formats:

Whenever you save anything on your computer, the software uses a specific *file format* designed to store the kind of information you are saving. The file format tells the software how to represent the information you see on the screen as a series of numbers that the computer can store. For example, if you draw a picture and save it, it will be saved in an image file format, but if you save a word processing document, it will be saved in a word processing file format.

There are many different file formats for word processing documents, because each word processing program has its own format. OpenOffice.org uses ODF. Microsoft Word uses either Word Format (DOC) or OOXML (DOCX), depending on what version of Word you have. Word Perfect uses Word Perfect document format. Even different programs by the same vendor may use different formats: Microsoft Word uses Word format, but Microsoft Works uses its own, different format. Before ODF, old versions of OpenOffice.org used StarOffice XML Format.

Why does this matter? If you only ever want to open your documents on the same computer you created them on, there's no problem. But if you want to open them on a *different* computer, you may find that it does not have the same software installed.

The different word processing programs make some effort to support each other's formats, up to a point, but none of them support *every* format. OpenOffice.org can open Microsoft Word documents, for instance, but it does not support Microsoft Works format. For that matter, even Microsoft Word does not support Works format. So if you take your document to a computer that does not have the same software... you may find that you cannot open it.

The only solution is to use Save As to save the document in a different format that the other computer will be able to open. For example, if you create a document on your home computer using Microsoft Works, and you want to bring it to the library (where we don't have Works) to print it, you can use Save As. Microsoft Works knows how to save in Microsoft Word format, which is one of the formats that our software at the library does support. So, when you do your Save As, look at the options for "file type" or "file format", and pick one that the software on the other computer will be able to handle.

No format is universally supported, but if you don't know in advance what format you'll need, Microsoft Word format is usually a good bet. Most word processing software can open files in Word format.