

Microsoft *Word* for Students

Scope and purpose

Just about any modern course of study will involve the production of documents—perhaps occasionally, perhaps in quantity. With the proliferation of IT equipment in recent decades, students are now conventionally required not only to compose such documents, but also to deliver them in hardcopy with at least a quasi-professional level of visual presentation. This often features in marking schemes, so some students regularly lose credit for needlessly failing to observe presentation guidelines.

Even for relatively short undergraduate essays you will undoubtedly find that particular institutions (and even individual departments) have specific criteria for general considerations like size and colour of text, width of margins, and line spacing. If you are writing a Ph.D thesis, you will probably be presented with a blizzard of requirements extending to factors like the layout of Contents pages, presentation of quotations and references, and the formatting of footnotes.

The most effective solution to such matters is a word processing application, partly because so many of its functions can be globally customised and/or otherwise automated. At this purely mechanical level a word processor can shoulder the basic burden of keeping all of your presentation consistent, if you create a *template* incorporating your institution's basic rules and then base all of your documents on that. The same software can also support all other general phases of document design and development (see 'Capabilities', below).

Microsoft *Word* has set a high standard for word processing applications over many versions since its introduction in 1983, and is now the most commonly-utilised word processor in general use. As such, *Word* has greatly influenced the way other word processors present their capabilities, and its file format has also become something of a *de facto* standard for exchanging files: documents created in *Word* can be accessed (and often edited) using many other packages such as the free *LibreOffice Writer*, which inevitably implements many functions in a similar style to *Word*.

(Incidentally, while you don't need to understand the technical issues here, you might at times need to recognise that modern *Word* files, ending with the filename extension .docx, are fundamentally different from files in the original pre-2007 format, ending in .doc. Your institution should have advice on whether this might be a problem.)

Capabilities

Strictly speaking, *Word* is not a fully-fledged Desktop Publishing (DTP) package, for developing documents right up to typesetting for professional printing. Recent versions, however, are powerful enough to deliver reasonable results even in the later stages of that process for relatively simple documents. If your studies include things like fancy magazine layouts, for which *Word* is not really suitable, then your institution is likely to have

specialised software for such purposes. Broadly speaking, *Word* can help you with all phases of producing less ambitious or specialised documents.

Composition

As you type (or paste) text, *Word* monitors your document's spelling and grammar and indicates possible areas for correction. You should specify your appropriate language carefully (e.g. *Word* supports many different varieties of English), and you are not obliged to accept any of the suggestions.

Within *Word's* ever-growing list of functions you can create reasonably complex diagrams and flowcharts. Your installation might also include its very able Equation Editor, obviously invaluable for creating mathematical material.

Design

Slightly distinct from nuts-and-bolts textual composition, *Word* can help you to refine your document's overall flow. For example, you can switch to look at your document's *outline* (perhaps arranged in terms of major and minor headings) in order to change the way one topic leads into another. You can chop a single document into separate *sections*, each of them with its own visual *styles*, if you wish. In a related vein, you can create one large *master document* out of several constituent documents, each existing independently as its own separate file.

Editing

Word offers many editing tools including very versatile search-and-replace abilities that can adjust your entire document consistently, at a stroke. Its facility for suggesting synonyms is also powerful (so long as you don't overuse it and produce purple prose!).

As you become more familiar with *Word* you can also discover a huge range of keyboard shortcuts that can make dashing around your document to edit it *far* quicker than constantly reaching for the mouse.

Layout and pagination

This is where we get into much more identifiable DTP territory. For a mere word processor, *Word* includes many tools that can help make your printed pages basically much easier for a reader to absorb (a factor that can be very important with marked assignments). In various ways, for example, you can control the way your text flows from one page to the next. Methods for that can be as blunt as *slightly* changing the margins for a single page, or as nitty-gritty as adjusting the character spacing for whole blocks of text. Most academic tasks won't require anything like this kind of intervention, but it is worth having a general idea of what *Word* can do should some special requirement suddenly apply (e.g. forcing certain characters to overlap, to represent a note seen in a film).

Version control and data management

This really applies to any development of textual and other material, in academia and elsewhere, not just to documents produced in *Word*. Particularly in academic *writing*,

however, you might very well find that an early version of a document that was very heavily modified for a particular task might be perfect for some later project: perhaps your original take on a given topic included a load of material that had to be removed simply to save space, but which might now be ideal for a different but related objective. Or you might simply decide to abandon one line of development, and backtrack to an earlier set of possibilities. For reasons like these it can be very valuable to store successive versions of each document in an orderly way, and to have that store backed-up through whatever practice best suits you. With such a system in place, *Word* itself can help you in comparing one document with another in order to identify the one that would best suit your new purpose.

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