

Ways a computer word processor is not like a typewriter

We are all at the stage in life where we tend to learn new things by making connections to things we already know. For many of us, that means learning how to "word process" on a computer by taking advantage of all of our time learning about creating documents on typewriters. While there are some obvious similarities (the QWERTY keyboard, the ability to set tab stops, etc.) there are enough differences that may not be obvious that I'd like to call them out here.

1. There is no need for "white out".

The backspace key (erasing the character before the cursor) and the delete key (erasing the character after the cursor) are your friends. Note that if you "select" an area of text either key will erase the selection. The Insert key changes what happens to the letters after the point where you are typing. By default, those letters are just pushed to the right and the letters you type are inserted in the document. However, if you hit the Insert key (deliberately or by accident) the letters to the right of the cursor will be overwritten, erased, by the letters you are typing. Hit the Insert key again to go back to the mode where the old letters simply move to the right.

2. There is no need for carbon paper.

I think we'd all agree that it's easier to just print three copies of a document than to make two carbon copies of the original. Corrections are easier, too — each copy is a faithful copy of the original. This ease of generating paper copies, may create some problems, though. If you are working with multiple drafts you can insert the date in the document or put "DRAFT" in the header until you are sure you are ready to print the final copy. (Note that for many word processors, there are ways to have the "date saved" or "date printed" inserted so that it is calculated automatically.)

3. Filing cabinets may be used in a different way.

Well, we certainly haven't entered a "paperless" world, and we may be generating even more paper (that needs to be filed) than we did before. However, these paper copies can be considered "backups" of the documents that were created on the computer. Each document can be saved on a computer disk (either the hard disk or a removable floppy disk), and it is even easier to make copies of these computer files than it is to make Xerox copies of the paper documents. Take advantage of the ease of copying computer files to make sure that you have multiple copies of important documents (one in the filing cabinet and, perhaps, one in a safe location away from the computer itself).

4. There's no need for scissors and paste.

The computer has its own version of "cut and paste". You can select information in one document, copy it to (a virtual) "clipboard", change to another document and then "paste" the information into place in the new document. In Microsoft Windows almost all applications support the keystrokes CTRL-C for Copy and CTRL-V for paste. [There is also a "cut" if you want to **delete** the information from the original document. That "keyboard shortcut" is CTRL-X.]

5. There's no margin bell

The standard word processing paradigm is to "word wrap" the document and interpret hitting the "Enter" key (where the "Carriage Return" is on the typewriter) as the end of a paragraph. Take advantage of this whenever possible. If you try to hit the Enter key where you think an end of line "should" appear, chances are that you will be guessing wrong if you decide to go back and change the wording. Early e-mail systems did encourage "line wrapping" of messages, but these days, there's rarely a need for that — anyone reading your message is apt to be using a program that will do the wrapping for them.

6. It's easy to control the space between paragraphs.

In typewritten documents, paragraphs are often separated by a blank line. On the computer, it is possible to format the document so that there is a specific amount of space either before or after each paragraph if that's needed, say, to fit the document onto the page or make the layout more visually pleasing.

Other paragraph properties (such as hanging indent, indented first line, left and right margins) are also easy to control. Note that an indented first line is usually not required if space between the paragraphs gives a good visual cue to the start/end of each paragraph.

7. Multiple fonts are easy to use.

Two basic font families are Serif (like this, with tails on the end of characters) and Sans Serif (like the headings in this document) can add variety to the printed page and help the reader understand the message more clearly.

However, fonts can be so easy to use, that new users tend to make their documents "too decorative". Be careful to use good taste when mixing font faces. You might want to look at newspapers or magazines whose style you admire and count the number of different fonts that they put on a page.

8. Font styles (e.g. bold, italic) are easy to use.

With a typewriter, the easiest way to highlight text was with the underline. With computer word processing, underlining is rarely used — bold and italic are just as easy and are usually more readable.

9. Proportional fonts are trickier to use than the Typewriter font.

The standard typewriter font is called Courier (or Courier New) in many word processing programs. In that font, each character takes up exactly the same amount of space (so it's also called "mono-spaced").

Some typewriter shortcuts are no longer valid with proportional fonts. For instance, on many typewriters, there is no key for "one", and the typist uses a lower case "ell" for that character. That is fine since in the Courier font, these two characters take up the same amount of room and are difficult to distinguish. However, in some contexts (for example, e-mail addresses) it is very important to distinguish "one" from "ell", all computer keyboards provide both characters, and in many fonts they do look very different: 5 "ells": lllll; 5 "ones": 11111.

As another example, it is relatively easy to line up figures on a typewriter using tab stops and spaces. This doesn't work if you are using a proportional font and need the "space" to be the same size as a numeral. In a proportional font, you can use a "decimal" tab stop. However, it may be easier to change the font to Courier for the numbers.

Example:

Decimal tab stop here> .0	Regular tab stop here>
1.21	1 . 21
12.20	12 . 20

Finally, when using a proportional font, try to "train your fingers" so that you type only one space at the end of a sentence. There's no longer a need for the two spaces we learned when we were using a typewriter and a mono-spaced font.

10. Document "look and feel" can be copied as easily as text

In the typewriter world, to change the look and feel of a document required retyping. But in the computer word processing world, there are many tricks for copying the "look and feel" of a document or a portion of text within a document. You can define paragraph "styles" with custom characteristics (font, font style, font size, margins, indents) and then apply those styles to new paragraphs. You can copy the style from one paragraph to another. You can save the document as a template and then create new documents with the same characteristics and styles.