



Chapter 12

Word Processing



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Coping with the Learning Curve

Word processing is for most people the *raison d'être* of the computer. We want the word processors complete with all the bells and whistles and we upgrade to the newest versions to take advantage of all the newest features. Sadly, few of us use all those bells and whistles; in fact, we use so few of the high-powered features and struggle so frequently with all those high-powered word processors that we sometimes think that every one should go back 20 years to the original, non-snazzy word processors that got the job done.

What most people neglect is that the computer is not a blender, so there is a steep learning curve for all these new features, and there are clearly proven methods for learning in general, whether it be 7th grade math, 11 grade Latin or VCR skills at age 33. A teacher at Meadowbrook School, Louisa Birch, has said often that in her many years of teaching Kindergarten, watching little children use the computer reveals more insights on how those children learn than any other activity in her classroom. Observing whether children take risks, how they read the instructions, how well they help each other, what is their frustration level and how they problem solve - all come to the forefront when children learn to use a new program. And so whether you are about to learn a new word processor or are trying to teach someone else how to use a word processor, the following suggestions are intended for you. What is fascinating is that regarding computers, we are all beginners and we are all computer teachers. Over the next 20 years, each of us will learn to use a new word processor that we have never seen before; hence we are all beginners. And over the next 20 years each of us will end up helping someone - perhaps friend, spouse, child or parent - with word processing features that we are skilled with; hence we are all computer teachers. And so, as they say in the restaurants, these tips are for you!

The Human Rule of Three

(L,K and R: in honor of Larry, Kevin and Robert)

• **Lean on someone!** • **Keep pushing FD with skills!** • **Read the manual!**

Learning Tip #1: **Lean on someone**, whether half or twice your age! No matter how capable



you are, you will hit minor and major snags in using that word processor. Minor snags might be annoyances, like occasionally you get an extra blank page when you print. Major snags represent tasks you are simply unable to do without help, such as printing mailing labels. If you have a friend, colleague, student or teacher who has been using that word processor, then set up a relationship for support.

Learning Tip #2: **Keep pushing forward with skills!** Take risks and try new features when



your project is not due tomorrow. When you are not pressured for time, try learning 3 new features each time you sit down to use the word processor for a task. Over the course of several months, you will increase your word processing skills immeasurably this way.

Learning Tip #3: **Read the manual!** No, this doesn't mean read it from cover to cover on day



one. Perhaps you read the beginning chapters at first, mark off with a √ each feature you understand and put a q box for each feature you do not understand. Weeks later, you'll come back and re-read that section and maybe some of your q's will be checked off with √ marks.

Learning Tip #4: **Stop complaining about the manual.** Writing technical information is difficult, and occasionally the writers have the communication skills of a toad, but virtually every manual ever written has much to offer in terms of facts and tips. Your mission - should you accept it - is to learn. Complaining about the manual is both counterproductive and too easy because it allows the user to avoid the real issue. Instruction booklets are not ideal, but the issue is how to learn from them anyway. Most people who take a math course are forever complaining about the explanations in the text, but it is the same issue there as well. People complain about the instructions for programming their VCR, setting their microwave or putting together that toddler's bike. It is a truism that technical writing is difficult; most techies do not communicate very well and many people who write well have trouble with technical details. We clearly have a left brain/right brain problem here, but the challenge to you is to learn from those manuals anyway!

Learning Tip #5: **Take notes in an organized fashion** (e.g. 3 x 5 file cards) for studying and reference. You might want to title each card with 1 specific skill, such as How to Insert a Page Break. Why is it that so many educated people who have learned to take notes in schools for years refuse to take notes on topics like inserting URLs and tabs that they can't remember from day to day? Teachers joke about how students take notes only on things that go up on the blackboard regardless of their importance. Is it possible that the same phenomenon affects adults?

Learning Tip #6: **Write up your own notes!** What can be better than typing on your word processor a summary of its features? Inevitably, you will end up helping others over the next year or two on that word processor and so your notes will serve a second purpose. And yes, when you forget that feature, your typed, word processed notes will serve a third purpose.

Learning Tip #7: **Use the Help feature.** All software has a Help Menu Item (usually the last menu item on the right of the menu bar). Learn your program's version of help: most have an index feature and an ask a question feature. There is also usually a table of contents and sometimes a Tutorial.

Learning Tip #8: **Avoid new features when your project is due.** If you don't know how to do a mail merge, don't try it under pressure. Nothing is wrong with using the same old non-computer methods until you have time to work through the process carefully and methodically.

Tips for WP Beginners (using a proportional font: Times 10 point)

- don't push RETURN at the right edge of each line of a paragraph
- begin each new paragraph with a TAB not 5 spaces
- push the SPACE BAR once, not twice between sentences
- use RETURN only for blank lines or to end paragraphs or short lines
- make sure you SAVE your new document after you've typed for one minute
- be careful about which piece of plastic you are SAVING onto
- every 10-15 minutes, re-SAVE your work
- when you are finished with a task for the day, SAVE one last time
- after SAVING one last time for the day, re-SAVE to a second location
- when ready to print, SAVE one last time before you print
- avoid pushing the SPACE BAR repeatedly — use TABs instead
- use descriptive file names, perhaps including project, initials and date
- read the screen WHISPERS where the programmer frequently puts info

Tips for Experienced WP Users (using a monospaced font: Courier, 10 point)

- read, practice and re-read the section on using TABS until you get it
- SAVE when you think of it & avoid "doing one more thing before you save"
- never push the SPACE BAR even twice consecutively (use TABS)
- use the REPLACE features to change all occurrences of 2 spaces to 1 space
- organize your projects into folders or subdirectories
- use file names with alphabetical groupings for convenience
- do not neglect backups — Murphy's law will get you if you don't!
- organize a backup scheme
- save major projects in separate locations

Why Use One Space Not Two?

There was a need for 2 spaces between sentences created on typewriters because all characters were monospaced. But on a computer, fonts have proportional spacing. Thus the single space between sentences is enough to visually separate them, and two spaces creates a problematic gap particularly for justified text. (By the way, this paragraph has two spaces between sentences on purpose. Other examples on this page show the variations between proportional and monospaced fonts.) You can see a Web page referencing this point from the AP StyleBook at www.thewritersgroup.cc/Editors_Notes.htm and can access this book at APstylebook.com; this same stylebook from Associated Press explains that "Web page" has two words with the W being uppercase.