

Basic Intro to Word Processing

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Introduction

In order to use any word processing program, like OpenOffice or Microsoft Word, you need to know a lot about some basic subjects. Most intermediate and advanced users have learned these so well that they don't realize how much effort they spent learning them.

For each of these things, I've seen at least one person in one of these classes who had trouble with it. If you're one of those people, does this explanation help? If you didn't have trouble with something, can you think of a better way to explain it?

Here's one list of things you need to know:

1. Cursor vs. insertion point
2. Single click
3. Delete vs. backspace keys
4. Holding a key down (called auto-repeat)
5. Characters, paragraphs, and formatting
6. Rulers and current paragraph
7. Invisible characters
8. Font names and font attributes
9. Setting character formatting for new text
10. Selecting text
11. Changing character formatting for existing text
12. Double click, triple click, quadruple-click
13. Make sure "caps lock" is off
14. Using nested menus

Cursor vs. insertion point

In most programs, you only need to know about one thing that you can move around. We usually call it the cursor, sometimes the pointer. It usually looks like an arrow; sometimes it looks like a finger. Other programs can make it look like other things. We move it by moving the mouse.

In a word processing program, the cursor often looks like an I-beam. We also have another thing we can move around. We usually call that the insertion point. It looks like a vertical bar. When we type text, the text we type goes into the document at the place where the insertion point is.

In Fig 1, the insertion point is the bar just before the first word in the document. The cursor is before the line "This is an example..."

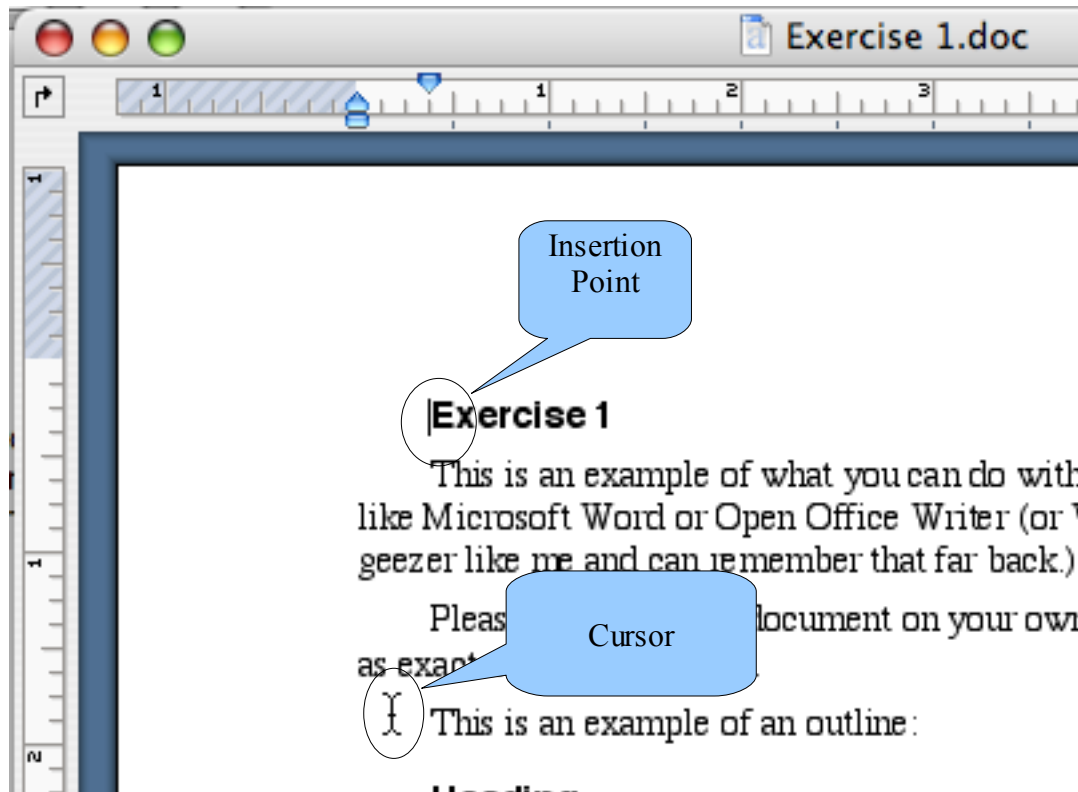


Fig. 1

We can move the insertion point around in several different ways. The usual way is to move the cursor to where we want the insertion point to be and to single-click the mouse button.

Exercise 1: Start Word and type in a couple of sentences. Using the cursor, put the insertion point just before the first word. Put it before the space between the first two words. Put it after the space between the last two words.

Exercise 2: Start Word and type in a couple of sentences. Using the cursor, put the insertion point before the first word. How far away from that specific point can you click the mouse and still get it to go where you want it to go? Repeat this, putting the cursor after the last word.

Single-click

To single-click the mouse, move the cursor to where you want it to be. Then, hold the mouse very still and press down on the left button, then let up.

While you're pressing and releasing the button, make very sure you don't move the mouse. If you do, the computer will think you're trying to click somewhere else, and it won't do what you thought it should. This is something that many people have trouble doing without a lot of practice. If you see someone who says that it's really easy, well, it is - after you've done it a few thousand times.

Also, click the mouse only once. If you click twice within about half a second, you're telling the program to do something different. Don't do that unless you know what the different thing is and you want to do that.

Exercise 3: Start word and type in a few words. Put the cursor in the middle of one of the words and single click. Now double click. You'll know when you've single clicked because the insertion point moves to between two of the characters in the word. You'll know you've double clicked when the entire word is highlighted. Experiment to find the longest interval between clicks that your computer will interpret as a double click.

Delete vs. backspace key

OK, you've moved the insertion point to where you want it, and you've typed some text. You notice that you don't like what you typed. What do you do?

One thing you could do is to use either the delete key or the backspace key to get rid of the characters you don't like. There's a small but very important difference between the two keys. Both of them delete one character from your text each time you press it. The difference is that the backspace key erases the one to the *left* of the insertion point. The delete key erases the character to the *right*.

In the following screen shot, which character will the program erase if you press the delete key? Which if you press the backspace key?

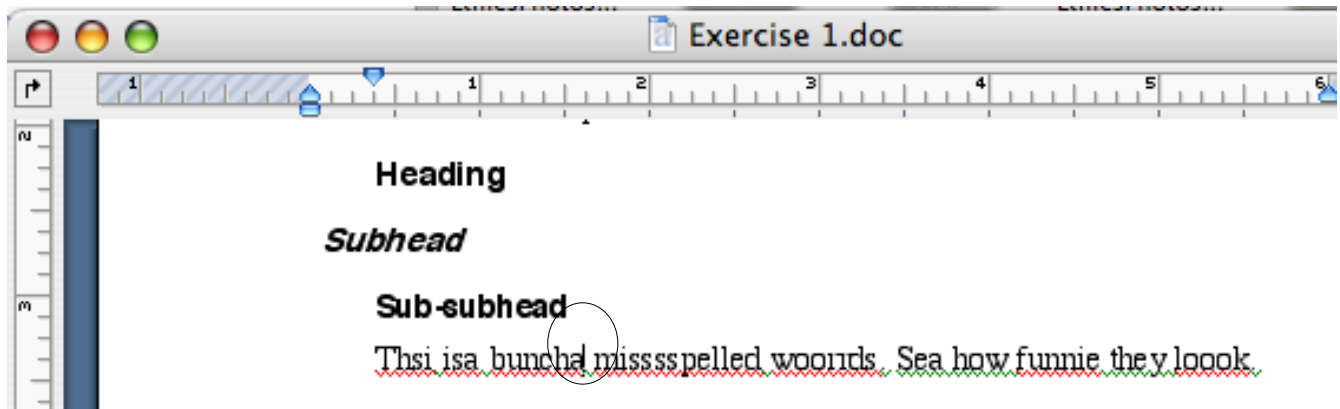


Fig. 2

If you said that pressing delete would delete the space and pressing backspace would delete the 'a' in 'buncha', that's right.

Exercise 4: Start Word and type in a few words. Position the insertion point to where you can delete the last character of the first word by pressing backspace. Test this by pressing backspace and checking to see that the correct character is deleted. Now position the insertion point to where you can delete the second character of the second word by pressing delete. Test this.

Holding a key down (autorepeat)

If you press the backspace key once, it will delete one character. If you hold it down, it will delete a bunch of characters. Everyone I've ever seen do this, including me, deletes too many characters when they hold it down. It's very hard to delete just the ones you want to without going too far and having to retype something. Use the autorepeat feature sparingly. Hold the key down for just a few moments. If you have more to do, hold it down just a moment longer. Keep doing this until you've deleted just the characters you want to and no more.

Exercise 5: Start Word and type in the following “Stop here:”. Then add a whole bunch of 'x's by holding down the 'x' key until it autorepeats. Then, use the backspace and autorepeat to delete all the 'x's but not the colon. Try this several times with different numbers of 'x' characters.

Characters, paragraphs, and formatting

We think of English text as being composed of characters, words, sentences, lines, paragraphs, chapters, pages, books, and several other things. Most of these concepts are not very important when working with word processing documents.

The two most important components of word processing documents are characters and paragraphs. A paragraph consists of some number of characters followed by an invisible paragraph mark. A paragraph always has precisely one paragraph mark. If it is an empty paragraph, that's all it has. Otherwise, it has some number of other characters.

Certain types of formatting apply to characters. One character might be bold and the next might be in italics, the next underlined. A few characters might be in Times New Roman font, the next few might be in Arial. Each character has its own individual formatting, which might be the same as that of its neighbor, or might be different. See Fig. 3.

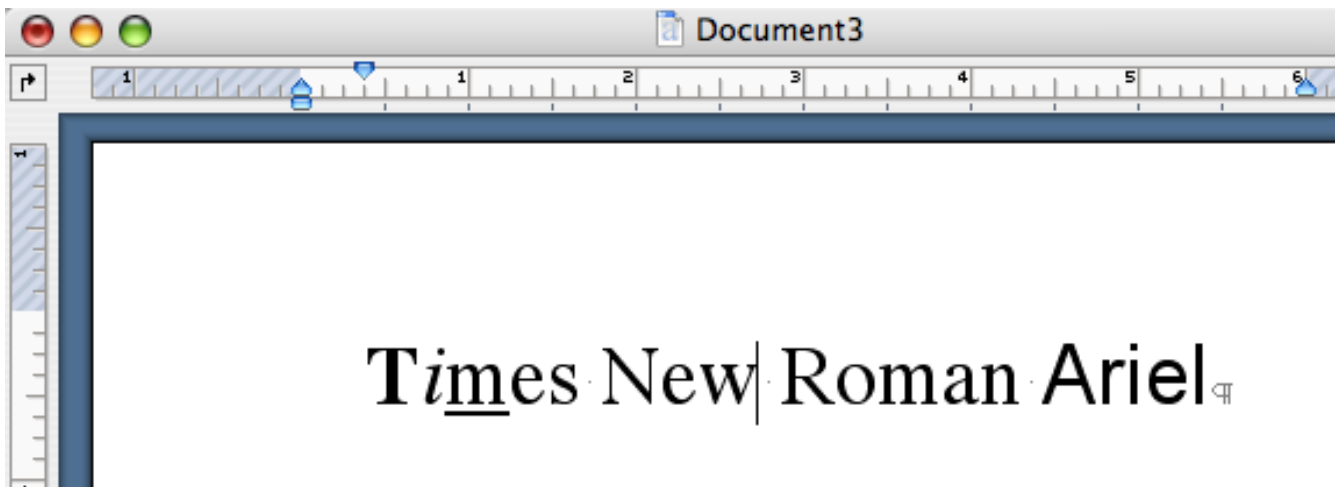


Fig. 3

Other types of formatting apply to whole paragraphs and can't be applied to only part of a paragraph. One paragraph might have no left indent, and the next might have 1" left indent. But, a single paragraph can't possibly have both. See Fig. 4 for an example.

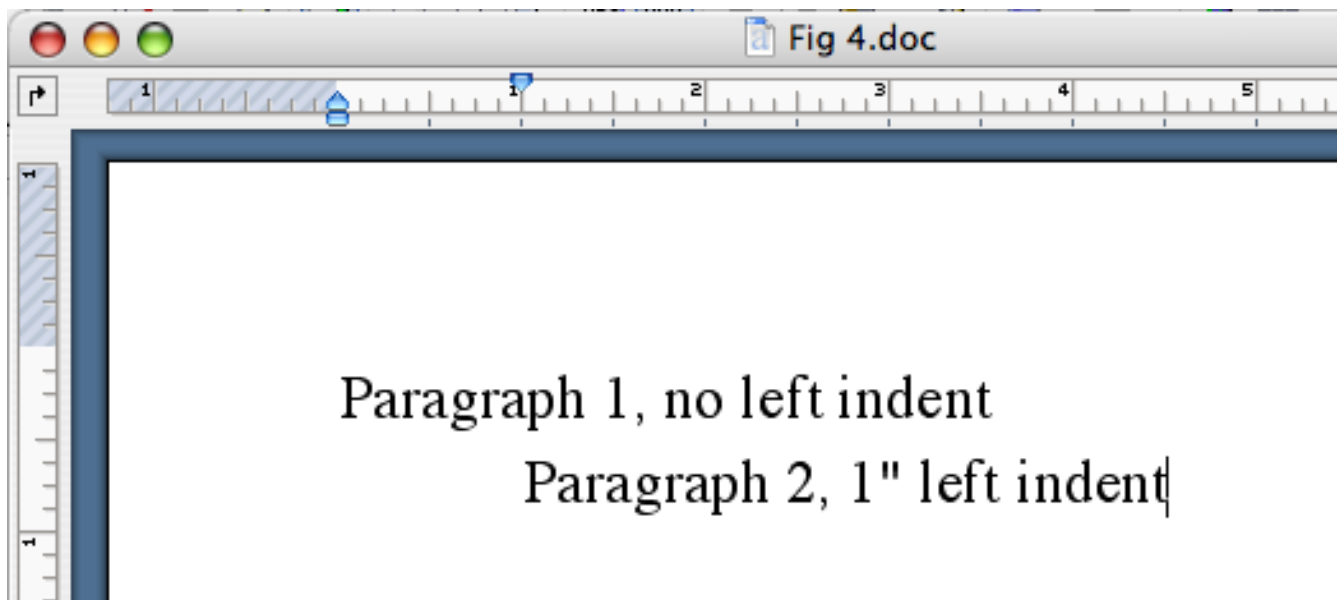


Fig. 4

You can access the formatting attributes from the "Format" pull-down menu. The character formatting attributes are on the "Character..." menu item (which in some versions is called "Font..."), and the paragraph formatting attributes on the "Paragraph..." item.

Exercise 6: Duplicate Figure 3. The font size is 24 pt.

Exercise 7: Duplicate Figure 4. The font size is 24 pt. Use the Format -> Paragraph menu to change the indent.

Rulers and current paragraph

In Figure 4, look at the ruler. You can see that there's a blue icon right at the 1" mark. This icon shows where the left indent is. So, which paragraph does this apply to? Why?

It must apply to paragraph 2, because we know that paragraph 2 has its left indent at 1", not at 0" like paragraph 1 has.

Now look at the following, Fig 5.

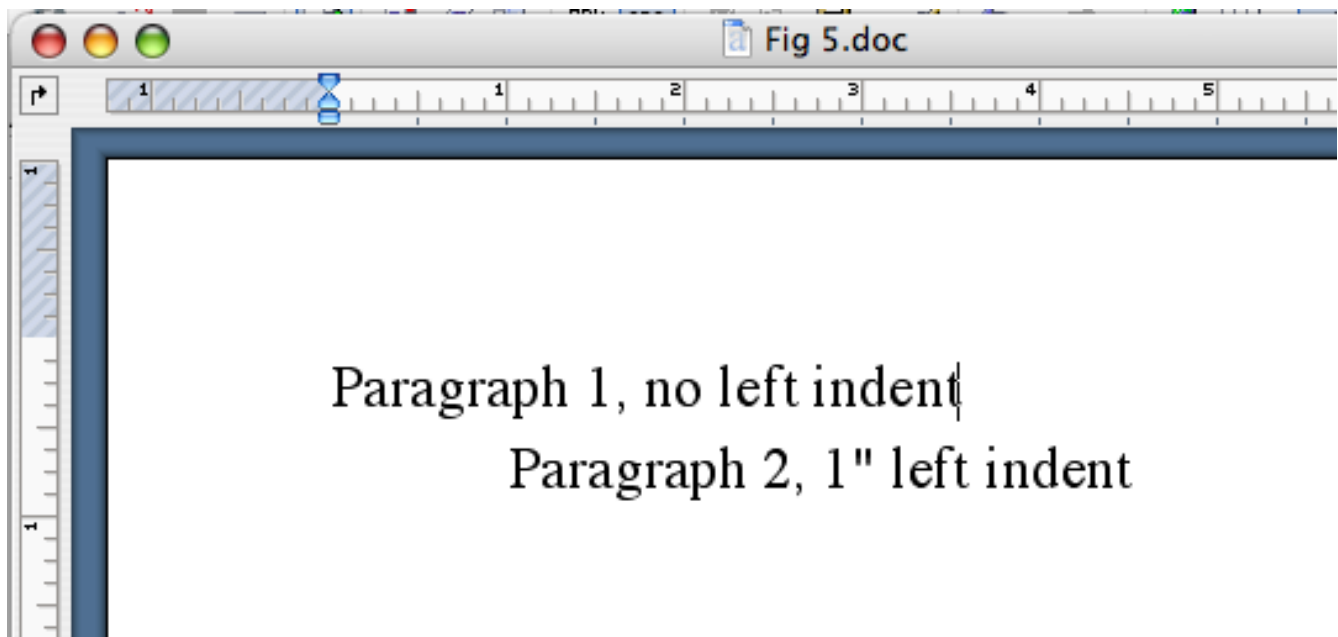


Fig. 5

What things are different between Fig. 4 and Fig. 5?

I see three differences:

1. The name of the window is Fig 5.doc in the second, Fig 4.doc in the first.
2. The position of the left indent icon is at 1" in the first, and at 0" in the second.
3. The insertion point is at the end of Paragraph 1 in the second, and at the end of Paragraph 2 in the first.

The file name is different because I changed it. The insertion point is in a different spot because I moved it.

The ruler is different only because I moved the insertion point.

The ruler shows the various indents, borders, and tabs *for the paragraph where the insertion point is*.

We call this paragraph the current paragraph.

If you move the insertion point to a different paragraph, the ruler will show the indents, etc. for that paragraph. These might or might not be the same, so maybe you won't be able to tell the difference. But, it really is different because it's the ruler for a different paragraph, even if it looks the same.

Exercise 8: Start a new document. Duplicate Figure 4 again. This time use the ruler to change the indent.

Invisible characters

Open Office and Word, like most other word processing programs, keep characters that are normally not visible. They are sometimes called "non-printing characters." You can use a command to tell the program to show them, like I've done in Fig. 6.

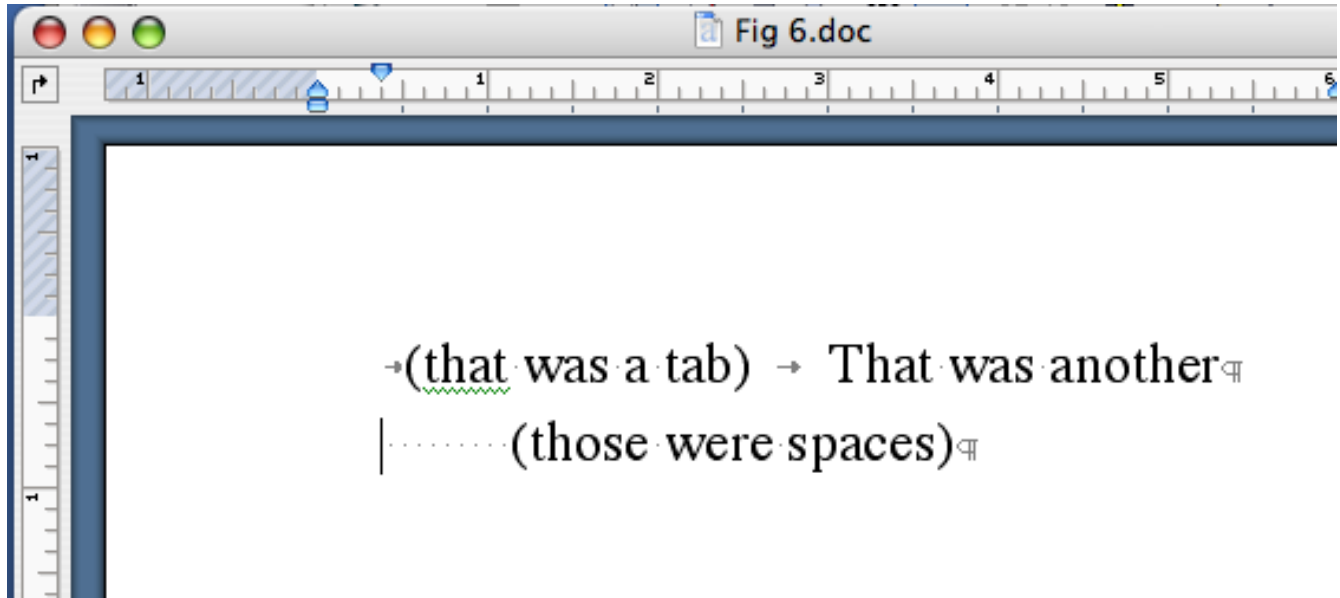


Fig. 6

The small arrow shows where a tab character has been inserted. The centered dots show spaces. The ¶ (called a paragraph mark, or pilcrow) shows where a paragraph ends. (It begins right after the previous pilcrow, or at the beginning of the document if this is the first one.)

If you don't understand why things don't line up correctly, you can often figure it out by looking at the invisible characters. Tell OpenOffice or Word to display them by clicking on the pilcrow, which is usually on the tool bar. Click on it again to turn the display off.

Exercise 9: Duplicate Figure 6. Now put the insertion point right after the tab between the first two sections of the first line. Insert another tab. What changed on the display?

Font names and font attributes

Each character has a font name, and some font attributes. For instance, look at Fig. 7.

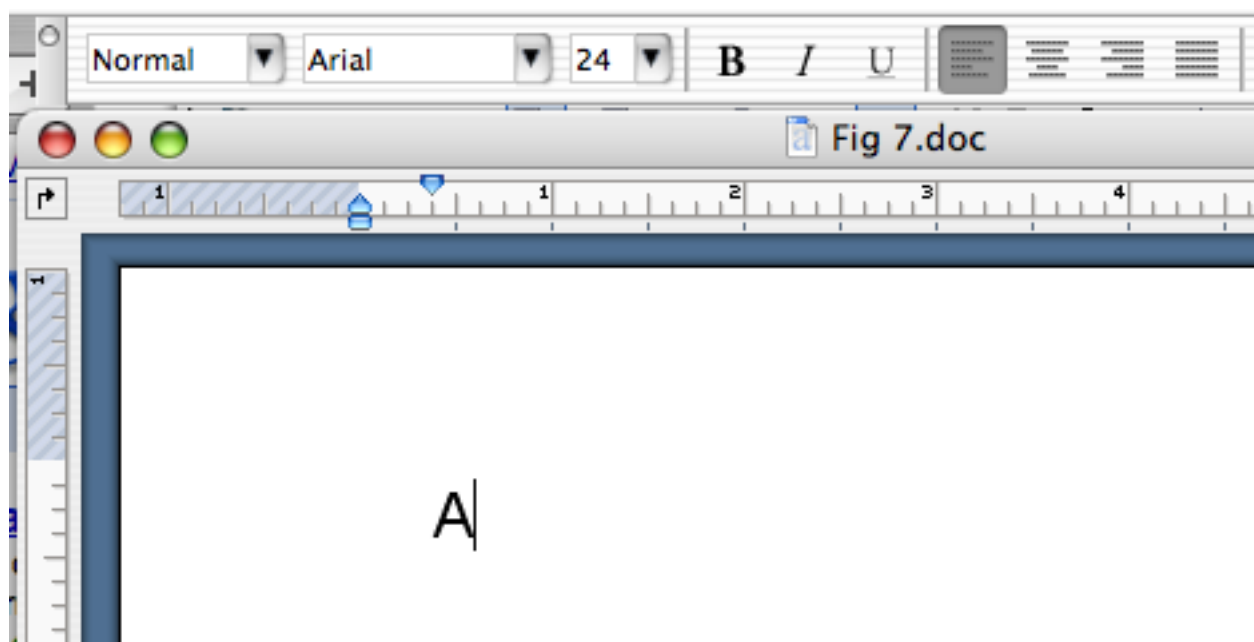


Fig. 7

This shows a document with a single character: 'A'. The character is in a font named "Arial", in a font size called "24" (normally read as "24 point"), and does not have bold, italics, or underline.

You can change the to any other font that your computer has installed. You can give it the bold attribute, the italic attribute, or the underline attribute.

I prefer to use "Times Roman" or "Times New Roman" because I like the way they look. Other people prefer other fonts. The font with the name "Arial" controls the essence of the way the 'A' looks. All 'A' characters in Arial look basically similar.

You can change the size of the font. In general, 72 point fonts are about an inch high, which means that 24 point would be about a third of an inch. (I say "about" because it's more complicated than that, but the details don't matter here.)

You can change the attributes of the character, making it bold or italic or underlining it.

One confusing thing is that many fonts have lighter or heavier versions. For example, "Arial Black" is a heavier version of "Arial." It looks very similar to "Arial" with the bold attribute turned on. It's not quite the same, but you have to look closely to see the difference.

In general, you should use the "bold" attribute to make some text heavier instead of changing the font to a heavier version. If you stick with the basic fonts, with the shortest

simplest names, you'll avoid trouble later on.

Setting character formatting for new text

A few pages ago, I described what formatting applied to characters as opposed to paragraphs. Now, we'll look at how to set that.

When you start a new document, you can change the font or size or attributes by using the drop-down menus and buttons in the tool bar. Look back at Fig. 7. The Font drop-down is the one that currently says "Arial". The size drop-down says "24". The Bold ("B") button, Italics button ("*I*"), and Underline ("U") button are to the right of the size drop-down

You can also set them by selecting the "Font..." (or "Character..." if that's what your word processor calls it) item from the Format menu. See Fig. 8.

In Fig. 8, the current font name is "Times". Right under that, you can see the other available font names.

After you set the character formatting at the beginning of a new document, every character you type will be formatted according to what you set.

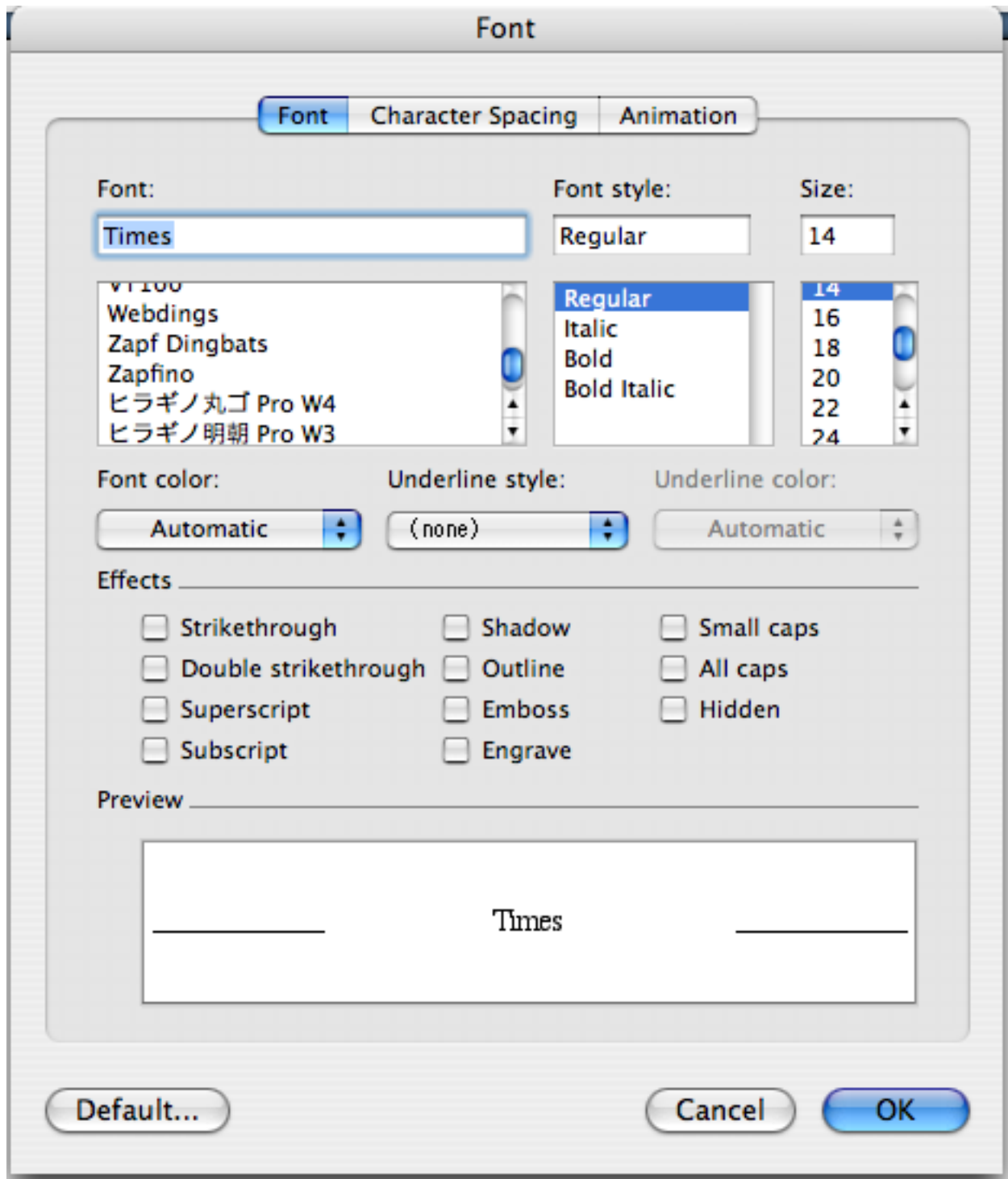
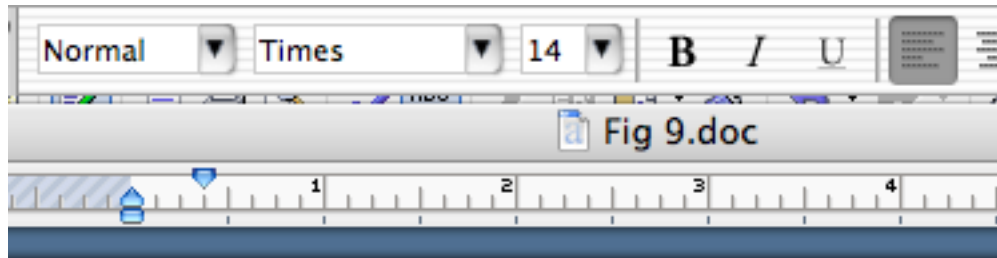


Fig. 8.

If you want to set something different for new text, put the insertion point right before where you want to put the new text and change the formatting. Then, type the new text. It will be formatted according to what you've just set.

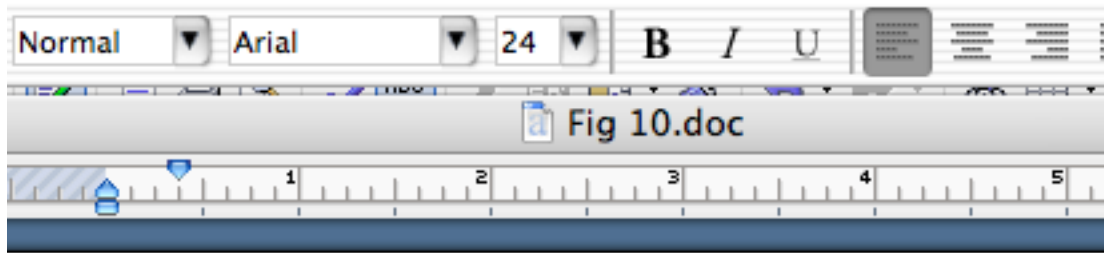
This is true even if you set the insertion point in the middle of some existing text, as I've done in Fig 9.



old text old text old text old text

Fig. 9

After putting the insertion point in the middle of some old text, I changed the font and the font size, and typed some new text, giving the result shown in Fig. 10.



old text old **NEW TEXT** | text old text old text

Fig. 10

Exercise 10: Start Word. Duplicate Figure 10.

Selecting text

Before we can work on changing the character formatting for old text, first we have to know how to select some text. Say that I want to change the format of the old text that is to the right of the new text in Fig. 10 to Italic. How would I do that?

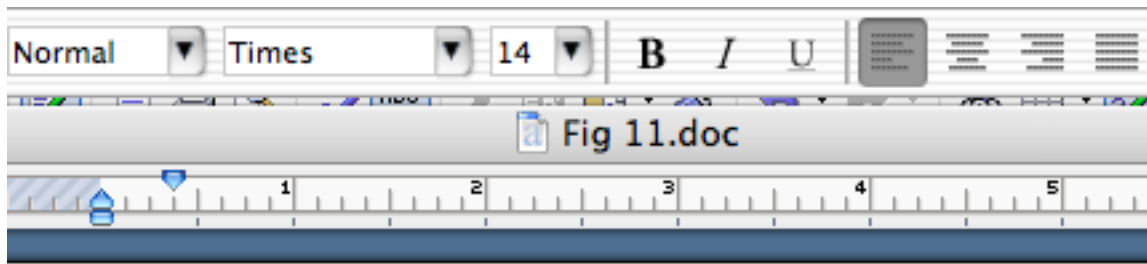
First, I have to select the text I want to change. There are several ways to do this. One is to single-click at the beginning of the text, move the mouse cursor to the end of the text, then single-click again while holding the "shift" key down.

This can take some practice as often the letters are very close together. Keep working on it.

What you'll get should look like Fig. 11. The shading shows what text has been selected. Note also that the insertion point cursor has disappeared.

Another way to accomplish the same result is to move the mouse cursor to the beginning of the text to select. Then, press the mouse button down and hold it down as you move it to the end of the text to be selected. You'll see that the shaded area grows as you move the mouse.

You may also see the shaded area growing in unexpected directions, like up or down. This is because you've moved the mouse up or down, not straight to the side. Practice, practice, practice.



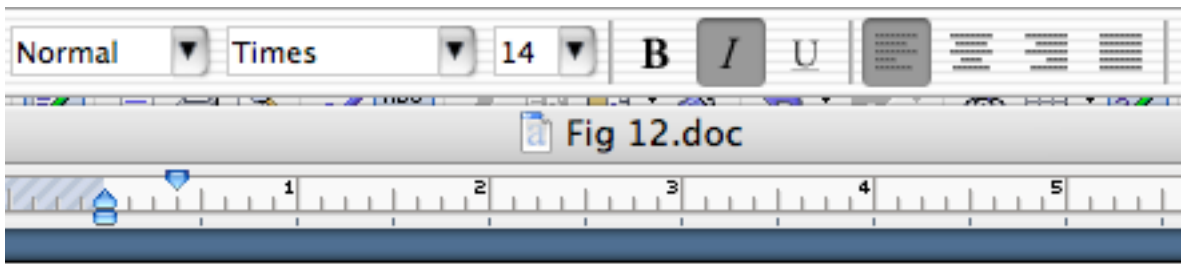
old text old **NEW TEXT** text old text old text

Fig. 11

Changing character formatting for existing text

Remember that we wanted to change some text to Italic. In the last step, we selected that text.

Now, when I click on the Italic icon, you'll see something like Fig. 12.



old text old **NEW TEXT** *text old text old text*

Fig. 12

You can see the text has become italic and the Italic icon is on.

Double click, triple click, quadruple-click

In other programs, double-clicking on something causes the program to do something to the thing you double-clicked on. Not so in most word processing programs.

In word processing programs, single-clicking sets the insertion point. Double-clicking selects the word you pointed to. Triple-clicking and quadruple-clicking do different things in different programs, but usually select larger chunks of the document, like sentences or paragraphs.

In general, you don't really need to do this in a word processing program. Avoid this until you've reached Intermediate level.

Make sure "caps lock" is off

Sometimes, when you type, you'll see something like this:

"nOW IS THE TIME"

What happened was that you hit the "caps lock" key and turned on caps lock mode. You can see this by looking for a light on the keyboard marked "A" or something like that. In caps lock mode, this will be lit. Press the "caps lock" key again to turn it off.

In caps lock mode, everything you type will be in capital letters, except when you hit the shift key. This is backwards from when the mode is off.

Using nested menus

Windows uses nested menus in several places, and some people have trouble using them well. A single-level menu is one where you click on something, like "Format" in the tool bar, and you the program shows all the items you can select from. A nested menu is one where you select an item off of one menu and the program shows you another menu that you can pick something from. Some menus can be three or four levels deep.

The Windows "Start" menu seems to be the one most people have problems with. When I click on the "Start" button, it shows me a two-column menu like Fig. 13.

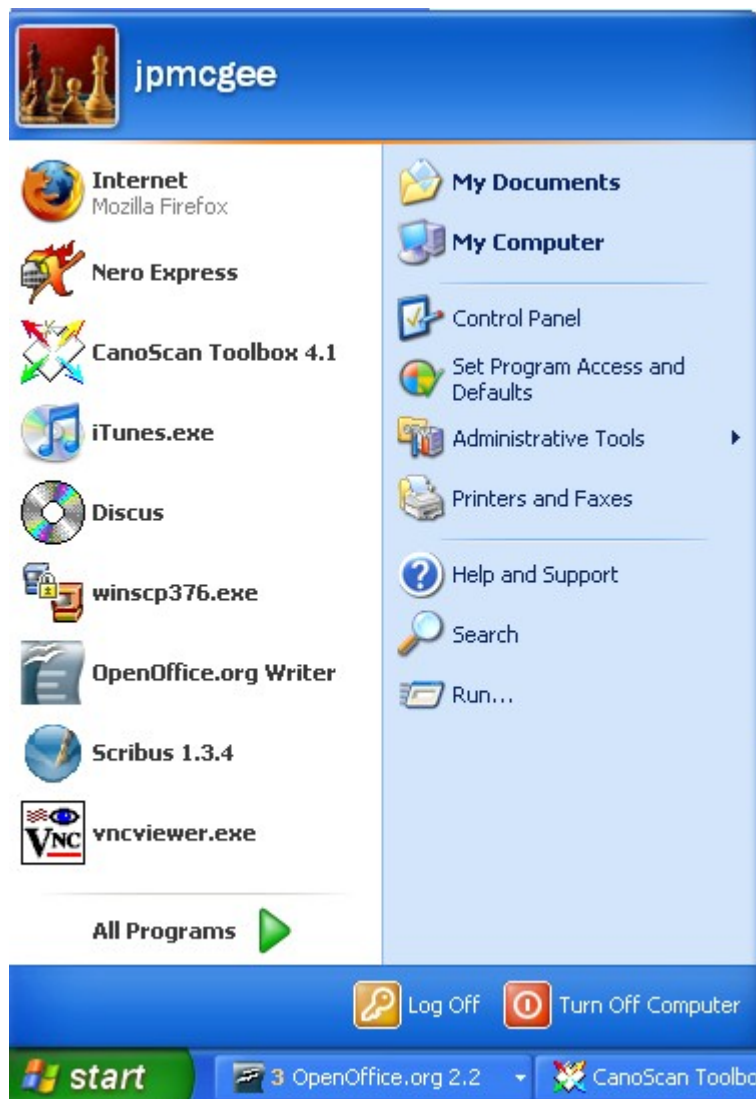


Fig. 13

When I click on "All Programs", I see another big menu. My computer doesn't have much software, so I see only one column here. Some computers have a lot, so people might see two or sometimes even three columns. Part of mine is shown in Fig 14. I cut off the top because it wouldn't fit on this page.

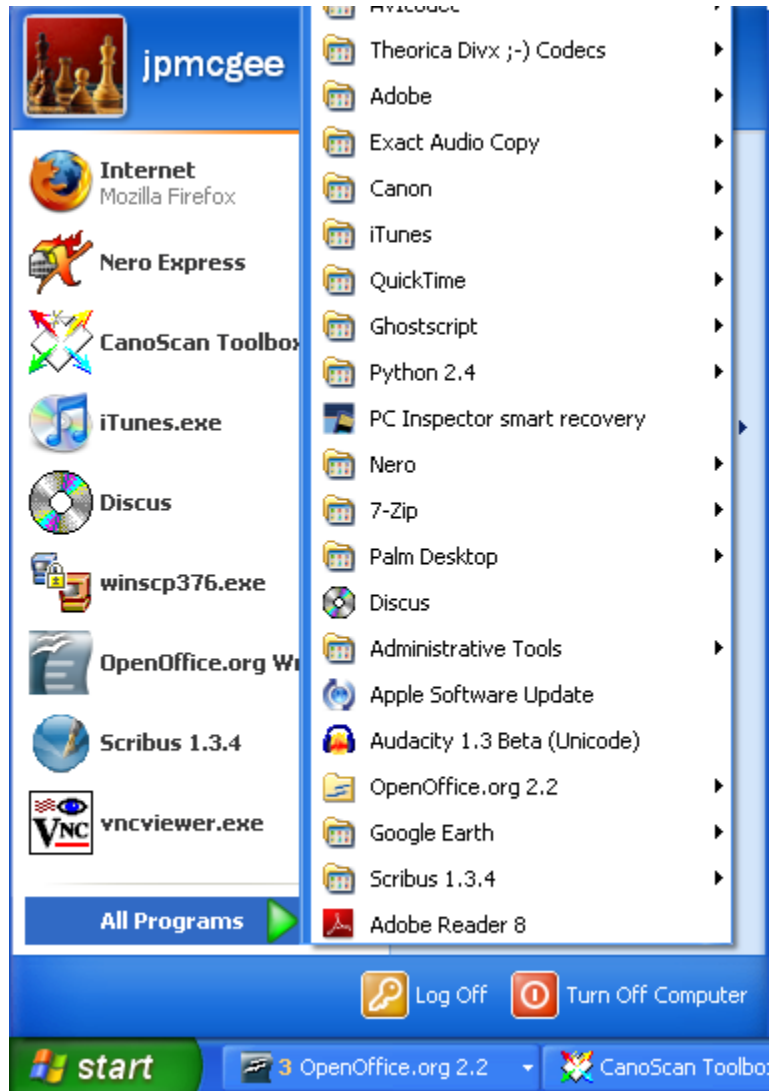


Fig. 14

In order to select a specific program, often you first have to select the program category, like "OpenOffice.org 2.2" in the above menu. The problem some people have is that you must select this without moving the cursor too far outside of the menu. If you move the cursor outside the menu, sometimes the menu disappears and you have to start over. This isn't too hard when you've got a big menu, as above, but can be harder on smaller ones.

Since I wanted to run OpenOffice Writer, I move the mouse over the item "OpenOffice.org 2.2". You don't have to click it; just move the mouse over it. Windows displayed the nested menu for Open Office, as shown in Fig 15.



Fig. 15

Here's where it gets tricky. In order to select "OpenOffice.org Writer", you must move the cursor straight to the right until it's over the menu containing it. If you move the mouse down first, Windows will hide the menu for Open Office and show the menu for Google Earth, the item right below Open Office. So, you have to move the cursor to the right, then down.

This is hard to do without practice. It helps if you start from near the right edge of the All Programs nested menu. That way, you don't have to move very far right to get the nested menu for the program you want, not the one above or below it.

Stuff to add

Deleting or replacing selected text.

Paragraph formatting same in next as in previous.