

Word Processing - Formatting Your Documents

Getting your words down on ‘paper’ is only part of producing a document. Just as important is making your document look good. A well-formatted letter, report or memo is easier to read, draws attention to the most important information, and creates a receptive and favourable impression in the reader.

Word processors provide you with the tools to make your documents look good. They can’t give you taste and a sense of style but they do supply you with everything you need to take your words from raw text to stylish output.

Clean and consistent

Making your documents look good can be as simple as making your headings bold or positioning addresses and salutations correctly in a letter. It can be much more than that, too, but when you’re first starting out it’s far better to aim for a clean, simple, consistent look to your documents than to try to achieve the ultimate in style. Of course, the ultimate in style may well resemble the clean, simple consistent look you aim for in the first place.

In fact, the most frequent mistake made in formatting documents is to try to do too much: apply multiple styles, use half a dozen fonts, go for fancy layout.

Instead of going for broke, take a look at your document, decide which elements you want to emphasise, and assess how formal the document needs to be. Then do the minimum amount of formatting required to achieve your ends.

How formatting works

As with most word processing tasks, the first step in formatting text is selecting the text you want to format. Decide which text you want to change, select it, and then apply the appropriate formatting.

Some formatting is applied to your whole document (such as page margins), but most is applied to specific portions of text.

You’ll find most essential formatting tools on your word processor’s toolbars and the ruler.

Formatting controls include:

- **bold** , *italic* and underlined text;
- alignment tools (left, right, centred and justified);
- font size and typeface;
- indentation;
- tab settings;
- margin settings.

If you want more control, you may need to use the menu equivalents of these toolbar options. Look for extended formatting tools in the Format menu.

Formatting as you go

If you apply formatting *after* you've completed typing a document you'll find it easy to identify which sections of text are being affected by a particular style of formatting. Things can get a little more confusing if you format as you type. For instance, try this:

1. Type two paragraphs.
2. Select both paragraphs and then click the Italics button (the italicised *I* on the toolbar). This will italicise the selected text.
3. Now, click immediately at the end of the first paragraph you typed, and press Enter to begin a new paragraph.
4. Start typing.

What happens?

The new paragraph you type between the two paragraphs is also italicised, even though you didn't select it and format it with italics. This is because information about the formatting for each paragraph is stored in an invisible 'paragraph mark' at the end of the paragraph. If you press Enter, you 'carry over' the existing formatting onto the next line or paragraph.

Carry over formatting

This makes sense: you can start a document, format the first paragraph, and then have that style carry over for the rest of the document, including margin indents, typeface and so on.

However, it can also cause you problems if you don't keep your eyes peeled. It's very easy to end up with carry-over formatting and not know why your paragraph is, for example, appearing centred on the page. You can check the formatting on particular paragraphs by clicking in differently formatted paragraphs in your document: you'll find that the ruler and toolbar icons change to reflect the formatting of the current paragraph. The ruler will show the tab settings and indents for the current paragraph; toolbar buttons such as the alignment buttons will appear 'depressed' if they're currently in effect.

Let the program do the work

Most newcomers to word processing make work for themselves by failing to comprehend the amount of work the word processor can do for them.

The whole point of using a word processor is to let it do as much of the work as possible, freeing you to focus on your words and the overall look of the document.

Avoid the Enter key

One common error is to space paragraphs by pressing the Enter key twice. There's no need to do this, as the word processor provides an alternative way that gives you much subtler control over the look of your document.

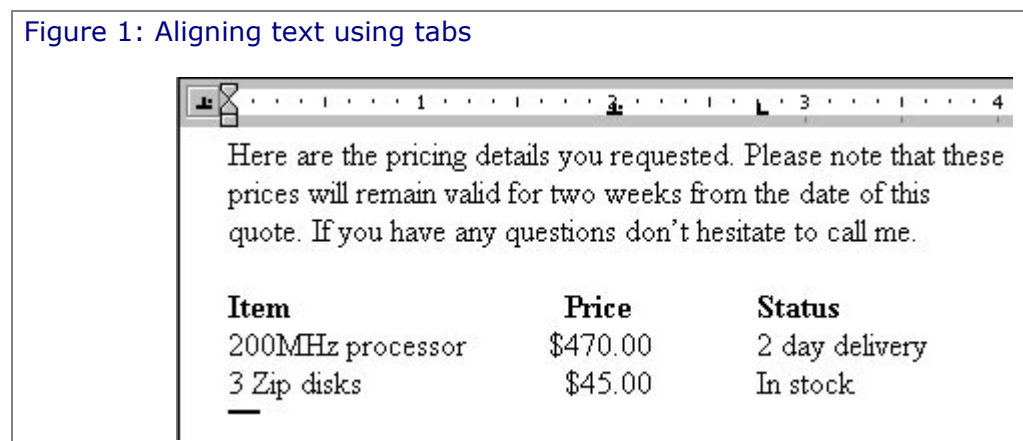
To space paragraphs, use this method:

1. Type your document, pressing Enter *once* at the end of each paragraph.
2. Select all the paragraphs in your document and then use the Format Paragraph option to adjust the spacing after each paragraph. For example, open the Format Menu, choose Paragraph, and then adjust the "Spacing After" to 6 points.

Avoid the Spacebar

A second common error in the way people use word processors is to align text by using the Spacebar, instead of using tab stops or ruler settings.

For instance, take a look at the text in figure 1:



See how it contains a list of items, neatly aligned in columns?

A common beginner's approach to creating such columns is to type a word, press the Spacebar multiple times to position the next column, type the next word, press the spacebar again and so on. On the next line, they try to align words under the existing text by repeatedly pressing the Spacebar again.

Not only is this incredibly tedious and wasteful of your time, it also won't work.

Most word processing typefaces are *proportional*, meaning each character is a different width (contrast this with *monospaced* typefaces, where each character – such as M and I – occupy the same width). For example, contrast the word *smile* in the proportional Times New Roman font with the same word printed beneath in the monospaced Courier New font:

smile
smile

See how each character is a different width in the proportional font – making it very space efficient, by the way. The monospaced font has no such elegance.

So, trying to type words and then fill the gaps between them with spaces will lead to uneven alignment.

The ruler

Word processors offer a quick, neat way to align text using *tabs*. In most word processors, you have enormous control over tab settings, allowing you to create aligned text very rapidly.

Most word processors have a *ruler* which lets you set indentation, margins and tab settings. You'll find it situated near the toolbars at the top of the page.

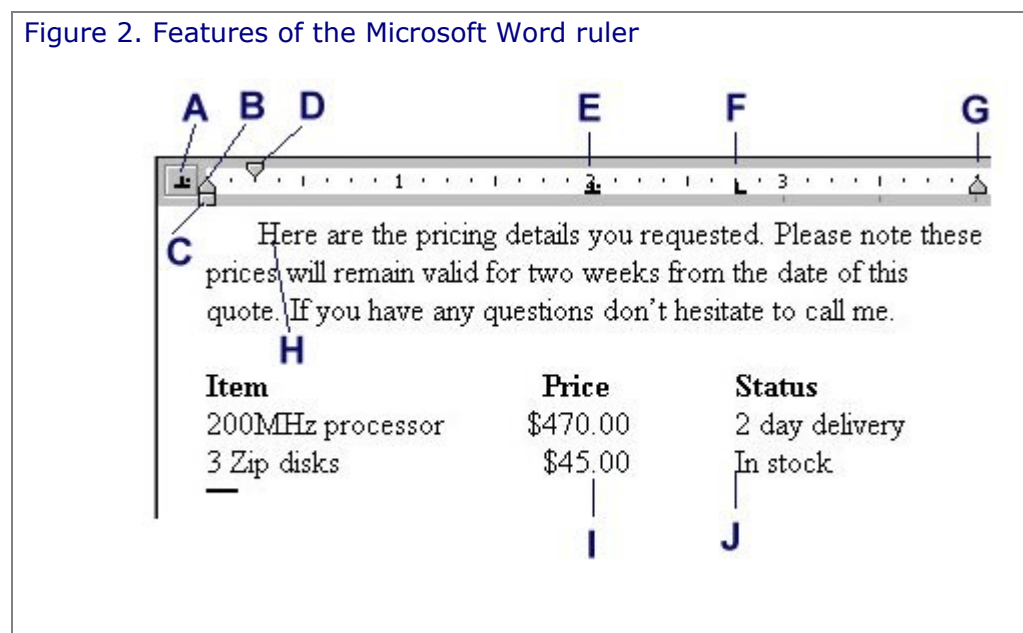
The ruler, like the toolbars, provides single-click shortcuts to controlling the most common elements of paragraph indentation and tabs. If you need additional control, you'll need to check out options on the Format or Text menus, which will give you greater control.

Using the ruler

Use tabs when you want columns of words or numbers to be aligned. You can also use tables to do this task, though not all word processors support tables.

To use the ruler, first select the paragraph(s) you want to format, then make the appropriate adjustments to the tab settings, indents and margins. You can then select another paragraph and apply a different group of settings if you wish.

Look at figure 2 below. It's similar to figure 1, but highlights the features of Microsoft Word's ruler.



- A. Tab style selector: click to select between left-aligned, right-aligned, centred or decimal tabs.
- B. Left indent marker: Click and drag to indent the second and subsequent lines in a paragraph.
- C. Indent box: Click and drag to indent a whole paragraph.
- D. First line indent marker: Click and drag to indent the first line of a paragraph.
- E. Decimal tab: To position a tab, first use the tab style selector at the left end of the ruler to choose the type of tab you want, then click on the ruler to position a tab. The decimal tab is used to align numbers on their decimal point.
- F. Left-aligned tab: This is the 'default' tab style, aligning text flush left with the tab position.
- G. Right indent marker: Click and drag to change the right indent of all lines.
- H. Notice the first-line indent on the paragraph created by moving the first-line indent marker to the right on the ruler.
- I. The numbers are aligned around their decimal points, in line with the decimal tab on the ruler.
- J. This last column is left-aligned with the final tab placed on the ruler.

Readability is the rule

You'll find most simple formatting controls straightforward to use. Probably the key thing to keep in mind – other than not going overboard with all this power at your fingertips – is to remember that the key purpose of almost any document is communication. Therefore, any formatting you apply should go towards increasing the readability of your document.

Don't get caught up in too many other 'rules'. For example, many people believe you should justify paragraphs in letters (justified paragraphs are spread across the page so the right and left margins are both perfectly even). This looks fine when you're working in columns – as in magazines or newspapers – but doesn't work so well on wider expanses, as you end up with uneven gaps between words that actually decrease the legibility.

We tend to get taught lots of rules about formatting documents such as letters – where the address should go, where your signature should go, and so on. Don't fret too much about these things. Instead, take a good look at your page and see just how balanced it looks, how readable it is.