

WRITING REPORTS WITH A COMPUTER : WORD PROCESSING

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Even at a later stage, when compared with developed countries, there is a general awareness among school-leavers, secretarial staff, scientists, academicians, professionals, and many more of developing countries, on the usefulness of word processing. We know of many persons who have heard of "word processing", but are not quite sure of what it really does. There is no doubt the present trend to learn word processing would be increased substantially if people know more about what it really does. This article intends to fulfil that need at least up to some extent.

One of the most remarkable things the computer age has introduced to us is the "word processing", or the processing of words, as the name implies. This came as a consequence to the electronic data processing which started along with the 1st generation of computers somewhere around mid-forties. However, not until the evolutionary transition from the 3rd generation to the 4th generation of computers and their languages somewhere in late sixties, saw the beginning of an era which opened doors for today's remarkable computer applications.

The micro computer which we are very familiar with, today, was a natural descendent of the generations of computers. The 4th generation languages, or the "packages" of computer software, were initially developed to cater to the increasing demand for many applications on "physically large", or main-frame, and "physically medium", or mini, computers, but later introduced in modified versions to run on micro computers. Word processing is one such application and a word processor is one such "package".

The importance of word processing lies in the fact that, whatever the field and whatever the task one may be engaged in, the ultimate outcome would be a "report" of some kind. Therefore, knowing a little bit of word processing would no doubt help anybody in the final outcome, irrespective of the type of task. Particularly in scientific disciplines research papers, reports, dissertations, theses, etc., need careful attention in the preparatory stage. They also need very careful editing. For this purpose, it is the usual practice to use a "rough" printed copy to do the corrections. Sometimes, one may have to go through several stages of corrections by referees or supervisors. Word processing facility would be the ideal choice in such a situation, to save time and energy.

What is word processing ?

A word processor is just another type of a "computer software package", which finds application in the processing of words. Now-a-days, most people know the meaning of a "computer software package". But to those who are not familiar with it, the simplest meaning is that "a computer package is a set of prewritten computer programs, or simply instructions, usually developed by experts in that field, designed to do a specific task". For example, we talk about statistical packages, data base management packages, graphics packages, accounting packages, multi-task utility packages etc., etc., depending on their applicability.

Why learn it ?

In a rapidly changing world, especially with respect to advances in computer technology, one finds infinitely many tasks that the computer would take-over from manual operation. The computer is very much faster, very much neater, and very much accurate, than its manual counter part in these tasks. Word processing by a computer is no exception. It does many things that a type-writer is incapable of doing, in the processing of words.

On the other hand, a knowledge in word processing would also save a lot of money which would have otherwise gone as charges for typing your report or thesis. Imagine the cost of typing, especially if you are on a mission to a developed country and you are in need of 10 copies of a 50 - page report at short notice !

Its uses in brief

A word processor on a computer could be used to type a letter, a document, or a report, and for editing and printing it. What else? It can save your document in a computer storage medium for future use, do as many corrections as you want just in a matter of minutes give you as many copies as you want, manipulate words, sentences, and blocks of text freely, and give you many more special features that we will discuss later in this article.

Requirements

Of course, one has to have access to a suitable computer capable of running the type of word processor available with him. There are many types of word processing packages commercially available now. Most of these will run on any standard computer. To become familiar with word processing, one has to take a formal course in word processing. These courses are offered by many semi-government and private institutions in Sri Lanka for a fee of around Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 3,000. These courses normally are of 3 - 4 month's duration and would cover the basics of computer system operation as well. Having a good typing speed would obviously be an advantage.

Word processing

Supposing you need to type a large document or a report and you need many copies

of it. Further, you may want to add more text to your document later, so you need to keep it for further modifications. You may also want to send your final report to different addresses. The following list of some of the interesting features of a standard word processor would give you a chance to choose between a computer and a type-writer to do your job, if you have access to both.

The following are some of the things that you can do with a word processor, just by a push of a button.

- * Adjust left, right, top, and bottom margins to suit your need.
- * Define tab stops as you wish
- * A title to be repeated on each page, if you wish.
- * Option to type with or without page numbers, and place the page numbers anywhere you want.
- * Change from capital letters to simple letters and vice versa.
- * Change the 1st letter of each sentence, to capitals.
- * Change line spacing to suit your need.
- * Move or copy a block of text, at will.
- * Delete unnecessary text.
- * Insert, or on the spot editing, of text.
- * Center text
- * Align your paragraph after corrections.
- * Check the spelling of most of the common English words using the "dictionary" inside the computer.
- * Give a short hand definition to a large word that appears often in your report.
- * Underline, double-strike or darken any word or block of text (especially with titles).
- * Change the character size at will (eg. slightly bigger letters for titles.)

- * Change the typing mode (eg. italics for botanical terms).
- * Save your document for future use.
- * Print any number of copies of your document.
- * Print any section of your report, starting with some page number and ending with the same number or a number after that.
- * Find and replace any word with any other word you want, throughout your document.
- * Start a new page at any place you want.

Special features

There are some very interesting and important features, too. One of them is the facility to join two or more documents of reports one after the other in the printing stage, so as to make it look like one large report with continuous page numbers. Another feature similar to this is the "nesting" of documents. This means inserting one document within another document without affecting the continuity of page numbers of the final outcome. There are some advanced shorthand features as well. However, the smartest of them all is the feature to write "personalized" letters to a number of persons, at the same time. For example, if we need to send the same letter or an official document, to many different addresses at the same time, one way is to type them separately with separate addresses. This of course is tedious. The other way is to use the facility of "merge-printing" in word processing.

In merge printing one has to type the letter he intends to send to different addresses, only once. This, called the master document, is typed with "variable" names and addresses. The list of names & addresses should be typed on a separate document. Then, just by a matter of few lines to combine the master document with the addresses, the word processor will print the letters for you one by one as if they were typed separately. This feature is used by many business enterprises today throughout the world, to send personalized letters to many prospective customers, as part of their propaganda work.

The features discussed above are most of the currently available ones on any standard word processor. However, due to rapid advances in computer technology, we may be able to use highly advanced word processors with many special features, in the near future.