Microsoft Word
Using Word Processing Software

When you start taking classes that require you to write papers, instructors usually require you to type them. Because it is the main software used by businesses, organizations, and schools, the program you're most likely to use is Microsoft Word. Word can be intimidating at first, especially if you aren't used to using a computer. However, Word is not as scary as it can seem at first glance, as long as you remember a few important things:

- **Using Microsoft Word is not like using a typewriter.** You don't have to manually return each line, and letters are not usually lined up in neat columns. Trying to treat Word like you would a typewriter will make much more work for you.
- **Microsoft Word will not do anything you don't tell it to do.** If the font of the text randomly changes in the middle of the paper, it's because you've given it some reason to do so – most often, it results from a copy and paste operation. If something isn't quite right, it wouldn't be accurate to say, "Oh, the computer just did it." Despite how it may sometimes seem, a computer can't think for itself; it can only respond to your input within the boundaries of its programming.
- **Microsoft Word is specifically designed to make your work easier, not harder.** If you're not used to using a computer, Word can seem needlessly complex at first glance, with all of its buttons and menus, but most of those things are there for the sole purpose of streamlining the process. Need a double-spaced paper? Don't press enter after every line – use the line spacing button. Need a running header? Don't type it at the top of every page – use the header tools. You can find out what almost any button in Word does just by hovering the mouse pointer over it. Save your work often and just click around. Learn the program by "playing with it" a little bit. The most important thing is not to let it intimidate you – *you* are the boss, and Word is your assistant!

If you keep those things in mind, you'll master the basic tasks of Microsoft Word in no time at all.

Formatting a Paper

When you write a paper in Microsoft Word, you shouldn't just open the software and start typing. Most instructors have at least some basic requirements for how they want you to format your papers, and even if your instructor says nothing about the formatting, there are at least a few assumptions you can probably make. Most of what you do to format a paper has to do with three things:

- How the letters look
- How the lines and paragraphs look
- How the top of the page looks

The specific format may vary from instructor to instructor, or even from assignment to assignment. However, some aspects of the proper formatting will most likely be consistent across the board. (That being said, it's always best to ask your instructor to clarify anything of which you're uncertain.)

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Font: How the Letters Look

When you type a paper in Word, it needs to be readable – not just from a grammatical standpoint, but also from the visual standpoint of what the letters look like. There are two components of this:

- **Size.** How large the letters are, measured in points (there are 72 points in an inch)
- **Typeface.** The style of lettering, often incorrectly referred to as the "font."

The **font** is the combination of size and typeface that defines how the letters appear. While it can be tempting to pick a typeface that looks "pretty," such typefaces (like Papyrus or Comic Sans) are distracting and not suitable for academic use. Usually, instructors want a simple, academic, professional typeface. The one usually required is Times New Roman, but you may also be asked for Arial, Palatino Linotype, or Garamond, among others. Some instructors will also accept Calibri, which is the default typeface in Microsoft Word.

When you first start a document in Word, one of the first things you should do is change the font to size 12 Times New Roman. Just look for the group of icons on the ribbon at the top of the screen labeled "Font." If you don't see the font group, make sure you've got the tab labeled "Home" selected. If you've already typed text and need to change the font for the text you've already typed, select the text (click and drag over it, making sure your mouse cursor is a text cursor rather than the usual arrow), then choose the appropriate font settings.

Spacing and Indents: How the Lines and Paragraphs Look

For most academic papers, instructors want the text to be double spaced. If you're not familiar with this term, it means that the lines of text are spaced twice as far apart as the default. In other words, if you were writing in a ruled notebook, you would skip every other line.

The solution in Word, however, is much simpler, but it takes a little bit of understanding of word processing. When you type, at the end of each line is a "return" – that is, reaching the end of the line and returning to the start of the next line. There are two kinds of returns:

- **Soft return.** This is when you reach the end of the line and keep typing on the next line. Word inserts soft returns automatically when you run out of space on a line, but you can manually insert a soft return (if you want to keep separate lines grouped together, like the front matter for MLA format) by holding the shift key and pressing enter.
- **Hard return.** This is when you reach the end of a paragraph and need to begin a new one. Word does not automatically insert hard returns; to insert a hard return, you simply press the enter key. Note that a hard return (pressing the enter key) begins a new *paragraph*, not just a new line.

Double spacing text in Word is *not* performed by pressing the enter key, since the enter key inserts a hard return instead of a soft return. To set the spacing of your lines, use the **Line and Paragraph Spacing** button, located in the **Paragraph** group (immediately to the right of the Font group). Remember, you can hover the mouse pointer over any button to see what it does. Click the spacing button and select "2.0" to double space. Try to fit titles on a single line, and center-align your title. You can align text to the center by pressing the "Center" button, or by pressing Ctrl+E on your keyboard.

Paragraphs

A paragraph in Word is created automatically every time you use a hard return. Most instructors want indented paragraphs. This means the first line of each paragraph should be slightly away from the margin. There are two basic kinds of indents that you'll typically use in a paper:

- **First line indent:** the paragraph is flush with the left margin, except the first line, which is spaced a little to the right.
- **Hanging indent:** only the first line is flush with the left margin, and all other lines of the paragraph are indented. In other words, the opposite of a first line indent.

Sometimes instructors specify that they want a "five space" indent. This name can be a little confusing if you're not familiar with typography, but just remember that **you should never use the spacebar to indent paragraphs**. The "five space" moniker is a holdover from typewriter days, when typesetting was very different and all letters took up the same amount of space. A "five space" indent simply refers to a standard half-inch indent. If you're ever unclear on this, ask your instructor for clarification.

You can indent the first line of a paragraph just by pressing the **tab key,** but it is much more efficient to use the ruler. The ruler can be used to set both first line indents and hanging indents. Use the following steps to set the indents:

- Select the paragraphs you want to modify.
    - Select the whole paragraph, even if it's just a first line indent.
    - If you haven't started typing your paper, skip this step.
- Make sure the text is aligned to the left.
    - Use the "Align Left" button or press Ctrl+L on the keyboard.
- Locate the ruler at the top of the screen, underneath the ribbon.
    - If the ruler isn't visible, click the **View** tab on the ribbon and make sure the **Ruler** checkbox is checked.
- Adjust the sliders on the ruler to set the appropriate indent.
    - The top, downward-pointing slider is the first line indent, and the middle, upward-pointing slider is the hanging indent.
    - The standard indent (both hanging and first line) is half an inch. This applies to MLA, APA, and Chicago style.

Headers: How the Top of the Page Looks

All of the main academic formats (APA, MLA, and Chicago) require some sort of header. For Chicago style, it's just a simple page number. For MLA, it's a name and page number. For APA, it's a title and page number. The specific formatting may vary from assignment to assignment, but the process for creating a header is usually the same.

- Double-click at the top of the page, on the page but outside of the margin.
- If you need the first page to have a different header (like in APA format) or no header (like Chicago style), make sure to check the "different first page" checkbox.

- Align the text to the left or right as necessary.
- Type the required header text, and insert a page number.
  - Make sure to insert a page number using the page number tools instead of just typing a number; select "current position" (*not* "top of page") and then select "plain number."
- Make sure the font of the header matches the font of the paper.
- Repeat the process on page 2 if you selected "different first page."

Additional Writing Center Resources

- MLA Format: A Quick and Easy Guide
- APA Format: A Quick and Easy Guide

Further Reading

- Word 2013: Getting to Know Word (GCFLearnfree) – http://gcflearnfree.org/word2013/4