

Working efficiently using modern word processors

Eirik Romstad

Norwegian University of Life Sciences
UMB School of Economics and Business, PO Box 5033, NO-1432 Ås, Norway
e-mail: [eirik.romstad\(at\)umb.no](mailto:eirik.romstad@umb.no), WEB: <http://www.umb.no/hh/>

1 Introduction

Modern word processors have some tools and facilities that make the process of working with documents a lot easier. This is particularly important in cases where multiple persons work on the same document. The downside is that with multiple versions of the various word processing packages, one is not ensured full compatibility between versions, or even worse across word processor programs. There are, however, several steps one can take to increase the likelihood of seamless and trouble free sharing of documents.

In this day and age of electronic storage of data, where a text document also falls into this category, it is always better to store one thing to many than one thing to little. The drop in prices on electronic storage media has made this more true than ever before. The morale is once you have read something that is potentially useful pertaining to a project you are working on, store a reference on it. With storage possibilities being many, it should be unnecessary to retype information, i.e., once you have entered something on a computer, you should never have to be retyped.

Whenever several people work on a document, it is important to ensure that word processors or versions of word processors are compatible. Agreeing on a document type and which version to use of that word processor reduces the risk of unexpected (and undesirable) events, or in the worst case scenario, a complete document crash.

With this as a starting point, we go to our proposals of making the technical aspects of working on papers with modern word processors more enjoyable, or at least less burdensome.

2 Using styles

A key feature for being able to reedit and change the appearance of a document is to use styles. This implies that all document parts and text elements (body text, headings, tables, table headings, figure headings, footnotes, numbered and unnumbered lists, etc.) are tagged with a style.

By making a document with the examples of the various document and text elements, one ensures that layout and other text attributes stay the same, and can easily be changed if one adjusts the style for the chosen document/text element.

Marking styles (like Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.) that are to be listed in a table of contents makes it much easier to generate this list automatically. This feature is also useful when you send a manuscript to someone else to review. Often you do not want to send the entire manu-

script, but just one chapter as a separate file. Then you can easily insert a table of contents at the start of the file to provide the reviewer with the chapter structure.

In the styles one can also set other parameters than pure layout issues. One issue that is particularly pertinent to ECN 371 is to set the language, and hence the spell checker dictionary, to English. Please recall that there are several English dictionaries, of which English-English and US-English are those most commonly used.

When working on the style document, it is also recommended to set the paper type (A4 portrait). This ensures that all later documents that builds on the style document retains this paper format. In turn that calls for less trouble when merging documents or printing.

In MS Word the flat text format is *Normal* or *Default Text*. The problem with this template is that it may not stay stable. Choosing another name for this template, for example "Flat text" or "Std.text", reduces the risk of the Normal or Default templates overriding your settings.

A final note on styles and layout. Choose layouts that are rather simple. This reduces the risk of crashes when documents are transferred from one computer to another.

Saving the style file in the pre-agreed version of the word processor reduces the chances of the previously mentioned unexpected and undesirable events.

3 Breaking up a document into parts

The larger the file, the more time is spent saving and editing it. Breaking a document into parts not only reduces editing time. It also lowers the risk of the document crashing, and thereby loosing work.

Our advice is to break up a document into the various main chapters (Introduction, Problem formulation, Models, Concluding remarks, Literature, etc.). This implies one file for each main chapter. To preserve the layout, and avoiding tables/figures being placed poorly (= on the next page), it is recommended that each new main chapter starts on a new page. In the case of two-sided printing of a document, new chapters should always start on an odd page. This secures that the initial placement of tables and figures in relation to the text, maintains its position vis-a-vis the explanatory text.

Another advantage of breaking up a document into parts is that it becomes easier to preserve multiple versions of the document, and to send documents around to co-authors for comments and changes (team editing). The morale is: Never delete a previous version as it may just happen that you discover that a section in a previous version again fits with the whole. The follow up to this is that one needs to develop a naming convention that makes it easy to figure out which files constitute the various versions.

4 Using the "Team editing feature"

When team editing a document, we recommend to agree in advance on the order a document is to be commented on. This requires a bit of extra planning, but our experience is that good planning pays off. Having an agreed order on which to comment on a document makes

changes become cumulative. It makes it much easier for the person in charge of finalizing the document to take all comments into consideration.

To further facilitate the team editing, and to avoid a document being cluttered with minor comments, the first author should always send a document that is spell checked.

Finding a good naming convention for team edited documents also makes life easier. Suppose you team edit chapter 2. A document named Chap2-Ver1.doc (in case you write in MS Word) is sent to the first person on the list, who accidentally happens to have initials BB. When he/she is done with the document and sends it to the next person, the document is named Chap2-Ver1-bb.doc. By the time the document reaches the main author, it will have the name Chap2-Ver1-bb-cc-etc.doc, where all comments, changes etc. are contained. Once a new version of the document is sent out for team editing, it will be named Chap2-Ver2.doc, and the initials game starts all over.

One final note on team editing. Sharing documents increases the risk of spreading of viruses. If you are to maintain good working relationships with your colleagues, make sure you have an updated anti-virus program, and scan documents before you send them off. Those who are a bit paranoid (like Eirik), of course also scans incoming documents.

5 Figures and tables

Get it right from the start. The essence here is that the reader should be able to view a figure or a table with the accompanying heading and understand what it is all about. Hence, the figure or table headings should be self explanatory. This may cause table and figure headings to be a bit long, which is a problem if you automate the creation of figure and table contents lists (similar to the table of contents for level 1 - x headings). One way around this problem is to use two styles for the figure and table headings, one for the core text to appear in the figure or tables contents lists, and another one for the explanatory text.

Also note that for tables, the table heading should be above the table, while for figures the heading should be below the figure.

6 The literature list

The literature list is one of the aspects of working on a document that many dread, and rightfully so. It needs not be such a bad experience if one plans ahead or uses end note or any similar references tool.

If one chooses not to use the reference tools, one way of dealing with this is to have a separate literature list file for each main chapter/- version of the document. As the contents of the chapter changes, and there are changes in the literature list, this is immediately reflected in the literature list (that is team edited like any other document), and follows the standard naming convention.

When the final editing is to be done, one merges the alphabetically sorted literature lists, deletes double entries, and is certain that all references that should be in the literature list are there.

Obviously, by agreeing in advance on a joint standard for how literature are to be referenced, one minimizes the job of final editing of the literature list.

7 The final document

When the various files making up the document are complete, the work of making the final joint document starts. Some word processors allow for having a master file, in which the other documents can be inserted. If this functionality is not present, it is recommended to make the master document with the front page, preface, table of contents, figure list, table list, etc., and paste in the various chapter files. Remember to start each new chapter on an odd page if you plan on two-sided printing. After each new file is pasted in, save the document.

Usually, there will be some edits in the joint document. If your word processor handles master files, editing in the joint document automatically updates the files that make up the master file. If your word processor does not, you need to carefully consider if edits are to be made in the chapter files or the joint file. There is no general rule for this, but if there are only minor changes, editing in the joint file usually works well.

When the final document is ready, make a PDF version of it (see the ECN 371 WEB pages for a link to a free PDF writer). This ensures that everyone who receives the document, gets a version that looks like you intended it to look like. Contents, not layout, is the most important element of writing. Good layout is, however, quite helpful in terms of helping you to get your main messages across to your readers.

8 Processing information

As indicated in the introduction, store information on what you read in such a way that you easily can find it again. This is particularly the case for quotations, actual numbers, etc. that require a more exact reference (page numbers) in addition to the standard format.

The ultimate solution to this is of course to use some data base or referencing program, like end note. Doing that constitutes a long term investment for those who expects to stay in the business of writing. If that appears too dreadful for you at this stage, find some intermediate solution that ensures that you do not need to reenter information, and that helps you find what you are searching for.

9 Concluding remarks

Many of these tips may appear quite trivial. It is, however, the experience of the faculty that most students struggle with these practical aspects of producing documents. Using the capabilities of modern word processors wisely, frees up time to work on contents, or just doing something else that you find enjoyable.

Good luck!