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Still Using Microsoft Word 2003? What's New for Law Firms in Word 2007

By Seth Rowland

INTRODUCTION

Once you get past all the hype over the introduction of Microsoft Word 2007, it's still just a word processor used for writing briefs, letters, agreements, memos, reports, etc.

Over the years, we have come to expect more from our word processors. The way a document looks has become a form of branding that goes beyond the mere words on the page. It is important how the document looks because it tells the reader something important about the author, namely how seriously the author treats the material being conveyed.

The presentation of a well formatted, good looking, and well-coded document sends a signal that the author has likely paid attention to the content. Conversely, a poorly formatted document — with typos and grammatical errors, manual cross-references, and manual numbers — sends a signal that the author slapped the document together without much forethought.

This brings us back to the hype over Word 2007: revolutionary innovative ... ground-breaking ... re-engineered from the ground up ... not your father's word processor. Well, Word 2007 has a number of important changes that make it worth considering — but there are some items you should know about before making the switch.

I cannot hope in this short article to provide an exhaustive review of all the new features of Word 2007. I have used the product for the past few months on a new HP Presario laptop running on a dual-core processor with 2 GB of RAM and Windows Vista Ultimate 64 operating system. As a document specialist, building automated document assembly systems, I have a different perspective

than most users. I qualify as what you would call a power user: namely I use more than 25% of the features of Word in my business, including styles, macros, cross-references, WordArt, advanced numbering, tables, text boxes, field codes, data links etc. Most people use less than 10% on a good day.

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And so, when I sat down to “take Word 2007 for a spin,” I didn't just put the key in the ignition and throw the car into drive. I looked under the hood. I had my checklist of features I used frequently as well as my automated templates that I could test with Word 2007.

For a list of many of the new features, [check out Wikipedia article on Microsoft Office 2007](#).

If you have trouble finding an old familiar feature, Microsoft has provided an [interactive guide](#) that enables you to find the menu item in your old Word 2003 interface and tells you where to find it in Word 2007.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND CAUTION

My initial impression of Word 2007 was: “What the \$#%#\$#!!! What happened to my menus and my toolbars?” I was lost. Few of my keyboard commands worked. I couldn't find my “styles.” Everything was in the “wrong place.” Things were

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happening to my document that I didn't tell Word to do. My writing speed took an instant 20% hit as I struggled to find where the Microsoft geniuses had hidden my commands. Then this big fat ribbon was eating up 1/5 of my screen. On these new wide-screen laptops (read: short), this represented a significant amount of space.

There is also the new .docx file format used in Word 2007. This means that when you send your file to people using Word 2003 or other word processors, they can't open it. That is, until they download and install a [file converter](#), available for free from Microsoft.

Because the .docx format is actually a .zip file containing multiple XML files, the converted file is extracted and compiled to a temporary folder and designated read only. You will need to save the file before you can use it.

Microsoft knows how to build a solid word processor. This version represents hundreds of bug fixes and feature improvements.

Many may also be concerned about buying software before the first service pack release. Software versions are often rushed out the door to meet marketing deadlines, before all the bugs and gremlins have been ironed out. Only after the first service release is the software usually ready for wide usage. Because Word 2007 represents a radical departure from the previous version, this would suggest taking it slow.

THE WOW ON CLOSER LOOK

First impressions are not lasting impressions. On closer examination the "ribbon" and the "mini-toolbar" are major improvements. The "ribbon" contains large and small graphic icons, grouped by function whereas the old Word required extensive training to master all the menus and icons. The mini-toolbar, available everywhere with a right click, gives you a

mini-graphic toolbar of the relevant ribbon options for the place you are in your document (in addition to the menu options).

For new Word users, the ribbon is intuitive. When you are writing, the "Home" tab shows a ribbon with text formatting and text search options. Click on the "Insert" tab and the ribbon shows you all the items you can insert in a document: graphics, hyperlinks, cross-references, headers/footers, text boxes, WordArt, and symbols. You may discover options you could never find in the old menu system. Click on a picture, and the "Format" tab appears, with a complete selection of picture formatting options. Insert or select a table and the "Design" tab shows you a complete set of table styles and design options.

If the "ribbon" takes up too much room, it's easy to hide. Just right-click on one of the ribbon tabs and choose: "Minimize the Ribbon." If you want quick access to a button found on one of the ribbons, just right-click on the button and choose: "Add to Quick Access Toolbar." Alternatively, you can get a list of all options and customize the "Quick Access Toolbar." You can easily add dozens of buttons to the toolbar.

As for the .docx format, it provides a number of advantages. However, most of them won't be realized until the format is more widely adopted. The main current advantage is a dramatic reduction in file size. More importantly, for the long term, the format is an "open format" with a published specification. This means that other "non-Microsoft" programs will (in the future) be able to read the file and write back to that format — no conversions necessary. The file converter is an inconvenience you can avoid by saving files to .doc or .rtf format. Until Office 2007 is more widely adopted, you might want to set Word 97-2003 Document (.doc) as you default format.

Over time, the use of XML (Extensible Markup Language) should provide the ability to separate "information" from "format." For example, you can open a document and extract key provisions from an agreement. You will also be able to apply a cascading style sheet so that you can edit the same document on a mobile phone, BlackBerry, and computer.

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One of my favorite programs, a graphic outline called [MindManager](#), enables you to send an outline to Word 2007 for editing, and then return it back to MindManager. All the special MindManager formatting is stored in a separate XML layer hidden in the .docx .zip file. This technology also has implications for document assembly that could be implemented in future releases that allow for an assembled document to function like a template for further programmatic alterations.

As for the concern about buying software before the first service pack, no need to worry. Office 2007 is a very mature product. Microsoft knows how to build a solid word processor. This version represents hundreds of bug fixes and feature improvements. Microsoft has performed extensive testing, and has created the type of intuitive features that typically are the mark of its rival Apple. Perhaps some “new features” exist that don’t work as advertised, but you will be hard-pressed to find them. I haven’t yet.

CONCLUSION

Word 2007 is a mature and well thought out product. If you have never used Microsoft Word, now is the time to switch. Finally, a product that places all your formatting commands no more than 2-clicks away. If you have used Microsoft Word as a “text

editor” and struggled to format documents like the pros, you will find the new Ribbon much more intuitive. In particular, the ability to “preview” a change as you review the options will result in much more professional-looking documents.

If you are a Word power user like me, you may be frustrated at first. But give it time. You will soon find many new features to love as you survey the “Ribbon.” You will find even more power and produce even more polished and professional documents.

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