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Creating PDFs

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Creating PDF Files

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The free Adobe Acrobat Reader is a very popular program for reading all types of documentation. To date, more than 300 million copies have been distributed worldwide. Acrobat Reader is often bundled with the software packages that come with new computers. But if this isn't the case, the program is easily downloaded from the Adobe website (www.adobe.com).

There are two main reasons why Acrobat Reader is so popular:

1. It lets you read highly formatted (or very long) documents, such as software/hardware manuals, product/company brochures, official documentation (Tax, National Insurance literature, etc.), and even whole books (from classic to contemporary).
2. It is cross-platform. You can read documents on just about any operating system - Windows, Macintosh, Linux, Unix - which is a *very* big bonus.

To create PDF (Portable Document Format) files that are read by Acrobat Reader, you need to buy Adobe Acrobat 5.0. Strictly speaking, you don't actually "create" PDF files with Acrobat; you *convert* existing electronic documents into PDF. You can then publish and distribute them in many different ways - in print, attached to email, on corporate servers, posted on websites, or on CD-ROM.

Conversion

Converting documents to PDF is simple. In Microsoft Office, Acrobat installs menus that let you convert Word documents, Excel spreadsheets, or PowerPoint slides with a single click. Some programs, however, don't offer one-click conversion. But this is not a problem as Acrobat installs a virtual printer called Acrobat Distiller, which appears in the Windows "Printers" folder. Select Distiller as your printer and "printing" the document creates a PDF file.

See *Creating PDF Files Using Adobe Distiller* below for full instructions on how to do this.

Encryption

Acrobat uses encryption technology to give the document compiler a good deal of control over how the finished document is used. You can lock a document so that it can only be read with the "key". You can allow recipients to view, but not print. Or print, but not make copies of the document.



PDF Versus HTML

Acrobat has definite advantages if you want to post documents on the Web. Clearly, you could format your documents as web pages. But, compared to Acrobat PDF, the HTML code used to create web pages gives little control over typefaces, font sizes, and other elements of how a document will appear on screen.

It's difficult to create complex documents using HTML because different browsers - or even different user settings in the same browser - can turn them into an unreadable mess. What's more, what looks good on-screen can be ugly, or even illegible, when printed. PDF, on the other hand, *guarantees* that a document will keep all of its formatting and other characteristics when displayed on screen or when printed.

PDF Versus Word

It's true that you could achieve the same thing by distributing Word documents. But you can't be certain everyone has programs that will allow Word documents to be viewed properly. The recipient of your document could be running WordPerfect, Lotus SmartSuite, or StarOffice for Linux. If so, your formatting won't come out precisely as you intended. But because the free Acrobat Reader is so ubiquitous and works on nearly all operating systems, you can feel confident that your documents will be viewed exactly as you want them to be. This is why Acrobat is a must for anyone involved in the creation and distribution of documents over the Internet.

Creating PDF Files Using Adobe Distiller

The latest versions of many desktop publishing programs let you create a PDF file from inside the program. Other programs, such as Quark Xpress, don't have this feature. However, creating a PDF file when it is not a built in option, is straightforward. It's a two-step process, requiring Acrobat Distiller, which is installed with Acrobat 5.0 (and earlier versions).

Step One

The first thing you need to do is create a Post Script (.ps) file with Acrobat Distiller. The instructions below are for converting a Microsoft Word document into a PDF file. But the process is very similar for other programs and operating systems. MS Word is used as an example, for convenience.

1. Start Word and open the document you wish to convert into a PDF file.

Tip: Before you begin the conversion, make sure you've set up a "Table of Contents" in your Word document (you do this by selecting "Index & Table" from the "Insert" menu). That way, Acrobat automatically generates a navigation sidebar from your "Table of Contents".



2. From the “File” menu, choose “Print”. This will bring up the “Print” dialogue box.
3. Select “Acrobat Distiller” from the drop down menu at the top of the “Print” dialogue box (your main printer will be set as default). Make sure you tick the small “Print to File” box to the right. Now click “OK”. The “Print to File” dialogue box will come up on screen.
4. From the drop down menu at the top of the “Print to File” dialogue, select the folder where you want to save your Post Script file (“My Documents” will likely be set as default).
5. At the bottom of the “Print to File” dialogue, enter a file name for your Post Script file. Make sure you type in the file extension too - e.g. “Post Script File.ps”. Now select “All Files” (*.*) from the “Save As Type” menu and then click “OK”.

Note: The reason you need to type in the file extension by hand, rather than let Word do it automatically, is Word tends to insist on using a “.prn” (Printer Files) extension instead of “.ps”.

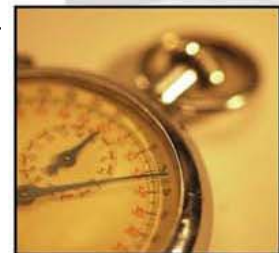
Step Two

Distilling The Post Script File

Note: It is important to set up Adobe Acrobat Distiller before you begin converting your Word document into a PDF file. Just click on “Settings”, then “Job Options”, and choose the settings you require. But if you just want to get on with it, just choose the appropriate setting from the main dialogue window of Distiller: if your document is for the Internet select “Screen Optimisation”, for print select “Print Optimisation”, and so on. It’s pretty straightforward.

1. Begin the Distiller process by selecting “Open” from the “File” menu. Then navigate to the folder where your Post Script file is saved.
2. Select your Post Script file and click “Open”. Distiller will display a “Save” dialogue for the PDF file it will create. Select a convenient folder to save it in - such as the desktop - and enter a name for the file. Click “Save” to start the distilling process.
3. Finally check the messages in the window at the bottom of the Distiller dialogue to make sure the PDF file was created successfully, without error. Your PDF file is now ready to be distributed.

Any comments about creating PDF files or if you have examples of any interesting PDF documents, email me at: feedback@plainwords.co.uk



Plain Words – The Big Picture

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- Writing for the Web



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