

An Author's Guide to LibreOffice

I've been writing for several years now, and from the very start I've been using *LibreOffice*. It's been a long, involving ride with the people who make the software. To celebrate the recent release of *LibreOffice 4.0* I thought I might introduce some of my readers to it.

For those of you who've yet to hear about the program, *LibreOffice* is an office suite in the same vain as *Microsoft Office* and, well... there aren't all that many well known competing products.

It has all the basic stuff you'd expect from an office suite, a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation software, ect. But there's one big difference:

It's free.

Go figure, eh? *LibreOffice* is a type of program called 'open source software'. I won't go too deep into what that means, but the upshot is that it's made of a community of volunteers and is given away for free download. Pretty cool, huh?

A lot of folk's immediate reaction is that if it's free than it can't be any good. I'd beg to differ. I've been using the program (along with a lot of other open source software such as *Linux*) for years and I'm more than happy with it.

Like any software it has its up and downs, but works great for what I need. And back in the old days it was one of the few programs to be able to work with full novel length files without vomiting into the bit-bucket. Back then you had to cut stories up chapter by chapter to make them usable in *Microsoft Word*.

Anyway, back on topic. The latest version of the program, version four, has recently been released at libreoffice.com it works on Mac/Linux/Windows and can be downloaded with no strings attached. I'd recommend giving it a try if you don't like / can't afford *Microsoft Office* or you're just like me and can't stand the #\$\$%& ribbon interface!

The Interface

Right off the bat you'll notice that the interface for LibreOffice is pretty familiar looking. For some folks it might even be easier to use than the new versions of Microsoft Office due to it keeping a 'classic' style rather than the debatable changes of the new Ribbon UI.

LibreOffice is a full office suite with a word processor (Writer), a spreadsheet (Calc), presentation program (Impress), along with a range of other applications like databases, drawing, and formula writer. For this discussion, however, I'm going to limit myself to the word processor as that's where I spend ninety-nine percent of my time.

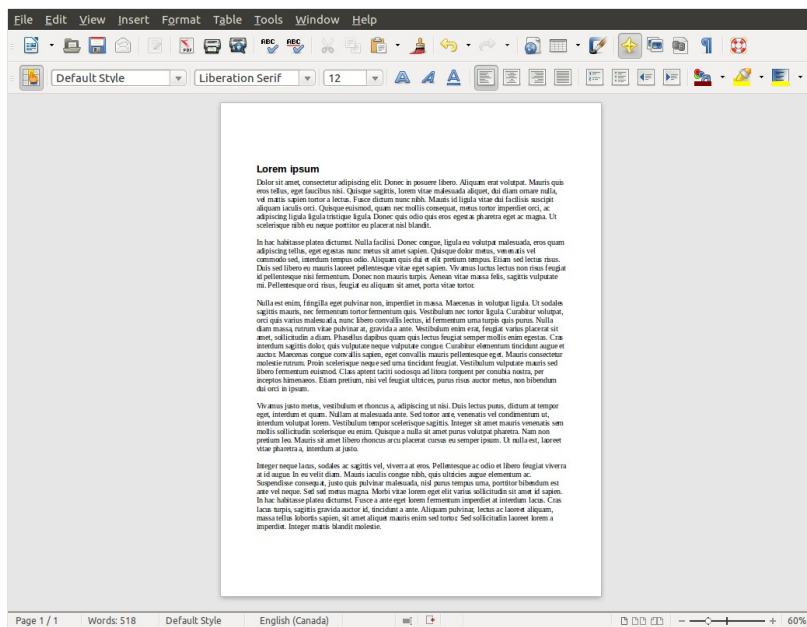


Illustration 1: LibreOffice Writer

The screenshot you see here might not look quite like what you'll see when you run the program. As LibreOffice can run on Windows, Mac, and Linux, it'll look a bit different depending on what kind of system you're using.

All the tools you'd expect are where you'd expect them. No real surprises. Two keys to keep in mind though are F5 and F11.

F5 will open a window known as the *Navigator*. This is a handy little tool for jumping around in large documents. It keeps track of all your chapters, pictures, bookmarks, etc. It can make working with long stores far, far easier when you don't have to scroll up and down a hundred or more pages just to find the chapter you want to work on.

F11 bring sup the *Styles and Formatting* window. Likely the single most useful tool for anyone working with large documents, we'll go in depth with that in the next section.

Under the *Tools* menu you'll find *Extension Manager*. Depending on what you plan to do with LibreOffice extensions can be a great way to save time.

Much like programs such as *Mozilla Firefox*, *LibreOffice* can be extended will all kinds of additional functionality. My personal favourites are *LanguageTool* for improved grammar checking (languagetool.org) and *Alternative Searching* for the days I really want to press the program to its limits (extensions.libreoffice.org). There are hundreds of other extensions to help you accomplish tasks the original developers never thought of.

Pretty, Pretty Styles

One of the biggest things you're going to need to know if you plan to be working with files that grow into the hundreds of pages is how to use styles. All modern word processors use styles, with the sole exception of *Word Perfect*... we don't talk about *that* program.

The long story short of styles is that they're a pain to use if you're dealing with a one page flyer, kind of nice if you're working on a ten page report, and absolutely indispensable if you've got a hundred page novel on your hands.

A *style* is a pretty simple object. It's nothing more than a setting of the text's colour, size, font, etc. The nice thing about styles is that you can decide what they are once, then use them again and again.

Take a look above at my chapter titles. I have the text 'Pretty, Pretty Styles' in bold italic, twelve point, and with a line beneath it. It looks *exactly* the same as my other titles 'Oh God, Something's Gone Wrong!' and 'Better, Worse, or Just Different'. By defining them all with one style I can let LibreOffice take care of the work of keeping them all the same for me.

So the big question you're asking yourself is “Why do I care? It's easy to just bold and set fonts when I need them” and you'd be right. For short documents at least.

Styles take a little while to set up, but they pay off big times when you use them again and again. I have fourteen chapters in my novel *Police Dog*, all of them dozens of pages long. By defining a style for each chapter title I can be sure they all look the same. Not to mention that it takes a single click to make the dozens of changes to the formatting.

So what do you do if you want to play with styles? Simple, press F11. This will pop up the Styles and Formatting Window. There won't be much in it yet, don't worry!

A style itself doesn't mean anything, you can call them almost anything you want. LibreOffice expects certain things like 'Header 1' and 'Header 2' to exist, but you can create as many new styles as you like.

Let's say you're writing a story and you want all of Joe's dialogue to be eleven point font, dark red, and italic. This would be a pain if you set it all by hand. A style can make life easier.

Just right-click on some empty space in the Styles and Formatting window and pick 'New'. A moment later you'll have the Paragraph Style window. Name it 'Joe's Dialog'

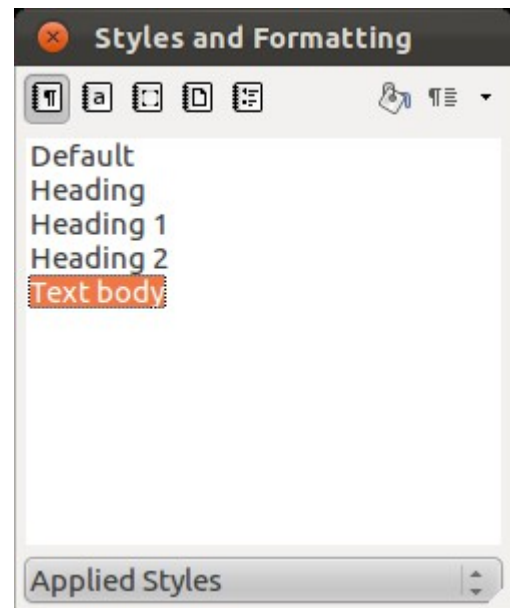


Illustration 2: The Styles and Formatting Window

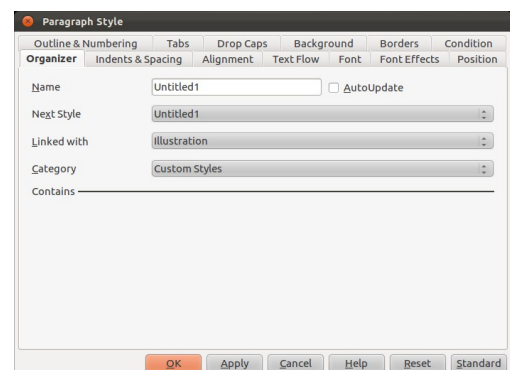


Illustration 3: Paragraph Style Window

and walk through the tabs. You can make all kinds of changes here, many of which you can't do any from any other screen.

Once you're happy with *Joe's Dialogue* press OK and you'll see it pop up in the Styles and Formatting window. Now you can just highlight any text you like and click *Joe's Dialogue* and it'll take all the setting you picked.

Now here's the fun part. Let's say you've written a hundred pages of your masterpiece and styled an untold number of lines as *Joe's Dialogue*... but you have a problem.

Only now have you decided that all of Joe's dialogue should be *green*, not *red*. Oh bugger. The thought of having to go back through all that work is horrifying!

But not to worry. Because you didn't make the text *red*, but rather styled it as *Joe's Dialogue* all you have to do is change the *Joe's Dialogue* style and everything will automatically update!

Just right click on *Joe's Dialogue* in the Styles and Formatting window, change the setting to green, and you're done. A dozen hours of work saved just like that.

Okay, I'll admit my example is a bit on the lame side, but styles really will save you a *lot* of work once you get used to them. Not only can you style paragraphs of text, but also individual characters, and even pages. The most surprising thing I've ever been able to use styles for was changing the margins on my even numbered / odd numbered pages to give me space to hole punch.

Oh God, Something's Gone Wrong!

So you've download the program and everything is going great. But you have a question, or there's just something nagging at the back of your mind.

You've now encountered the best and the worst part of open-source software – the support.

As *LibreOffice* is created and maintained by volunteers there's no one-eight-hundred number to call if you get struck. There are, however, the forums.

For those of you who've grown up in the internet age, hitting a forum when you have a question is second nature. To those of you who a little more old school, it might seem a little alien.

The *LibreOffice Forum* is a website where anyone who has a question about the software is welcome to post. It relies on the support of the community to help people along and solve problems.

If you're just starting out there's even a 'Beginners with LibreOffice' section to help get you started and your first few questions out of the way.

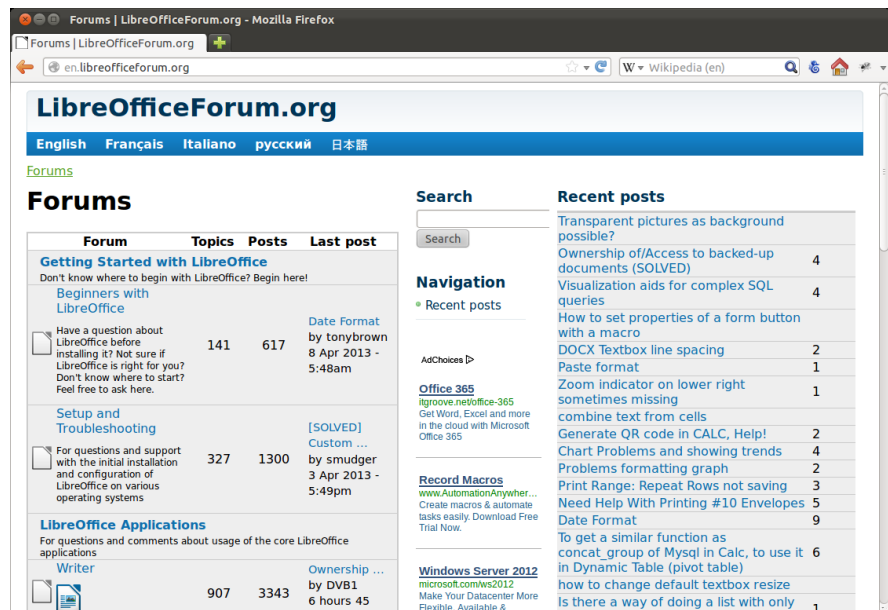


Illustration 4: The LibreOffice Forum

For those of you with a little more knowledge of Google-fu, you might see references to programs named *Openoffice.org* and *StarOffice*. There's no need to worry.

OpenOffice.org was a previous name of the software when it was owned by the company SUN Microsystems. There was a shake up and the team left to develop *LibreOffice* by themselves. The name *StarOffice* is even older. You can still find the product on the shelves here and there, *StarOffice* was the name of an offshoot of the software that was commercially available.

All in all, any solution you find that works in *OpenOffice.org* or *StarOffice* will almost always work in *LibreOffice*, it just might be a bit out of date.

Better, Worse, or Just Different

For all the evangelizing I've done for LibreOffice, I really have to say one thing. It's not for everyone. It works for me and I like it. There's a good chance it'll work for you too.

LibreOffice isn't the right choice for everyone. If you need particular features that only Microsoft Office can provide, or you work in an office where you have to produce the exact same output as everyone else, LibreOffice will likely fall short.

But, if you're like me and write novel length stories that need to work, and you're not afraid of trying something new, I'd highly suggest LibreOffice – it might just become your new favourite office suite.

