FIRST STEPS LINUX BEGINNERS SERIES

OpenOffice.org Word processing

Andy Channelle explores one-touch text formatting, image editing and more in *OOo's Writer*.

LAST TIME

A tough-sounding topic was made easy as we created perfect partitions for a well-organised desktop. If you missed the issue, call 0870 8374773 or +44 1858 438795 for overseas orders.

ON the DISC

Most people use their machine for a very limited range of functions: web browsing, email and word processing are really the core computer activities. Linux is blessed with a good selection of excellent packages for all three of these. Late October saw the release of *OpenOffice.org 2.0*, the long awaited, feature-packed office suite that is one of Linux's flagship applications. We'll be looking at how to get the best out of *OO.o 2.0* over the next few issues, starting with the word processing package, *OO.o Writer*. This has a vast number of features designed to make it easy to create simple pages or complex, good-looking documents.

To show you as many of its features as possible, I will go through the process of writing an academic essay, but the methods used are equally valid for the creation of letters, reports, novels or ransom notes. We'll also look at the file format options available and show you what to do if and when you're forced to open and save documents in other formats, including the *MS Word* format.

Page-ism

Before we can start our tutorial, we'd better select our page format. *Writer* can deal with a large number of page formats, ranging from the UK standard A4 and A5 to more esoteric sizes such as tabloid, letter, legal and various envelope sizes. These terms dictate the physical size of your document and must relate to the capabilities of your printer. While it is possible to design a page in letter size and print it to A4 paper, it sort of defeats the object of having a WYSIWYG word processor.

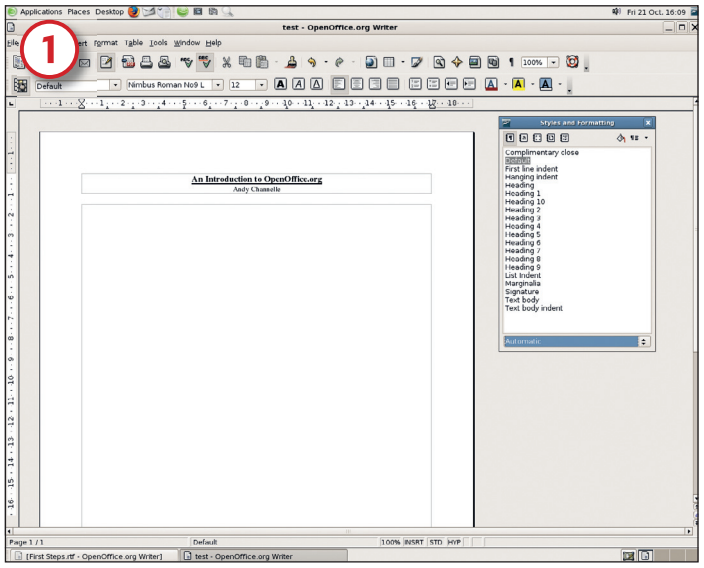
Access the Page Format dialog via Format > Page, and select the option for the format you want from the Paper Format drop-down list. We'll use A4 for our document. This dialog also has options for setting the orientation of a page (ie landscape or portrait), its borders and several other document elements. For now we just need to configure the page size (A4), orientation (portrait) and borders (2.54cm or 1 inch all round) before hitting the OK button.

Many word or desktop processing projects have some text elements that appear on every page; these include the title, author and page number. Traditionally, these are located at the top and/or bottom of each page. To add a header to the document, go into the Insert menu and select Header > Standard. On the image of the page, the main text frame will now have a single line at the top of the page. Anything added to this line will be repeated on each page. I'm going to add the title of the document and my name to the header and centre it on the page.

The equivalent of a header at the bottom of the page is called a footer. To add one, choose Insert > Footer > Standard. This, again, will create a new blank line at the base of the page, which is the ideal place to add page numbers. Click anywhere in the box, hit the Centre icon in the icon bar and then click through Insert > Fields > Page Number.

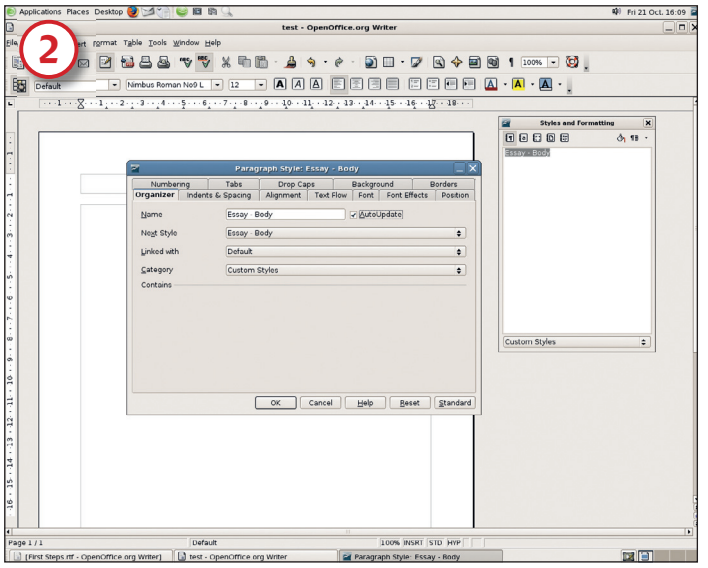
PARAGRAPH STYLES

It's perfectly feasible to start writing the document now, but we're not going to. First, we're going to set up a series of styles, which can be applied to common textual elements such as footnotes, quotations, headings, subheadings and plain old body text. It is with this last elements that we'll start, as it will form the basic style from which the others will flow.



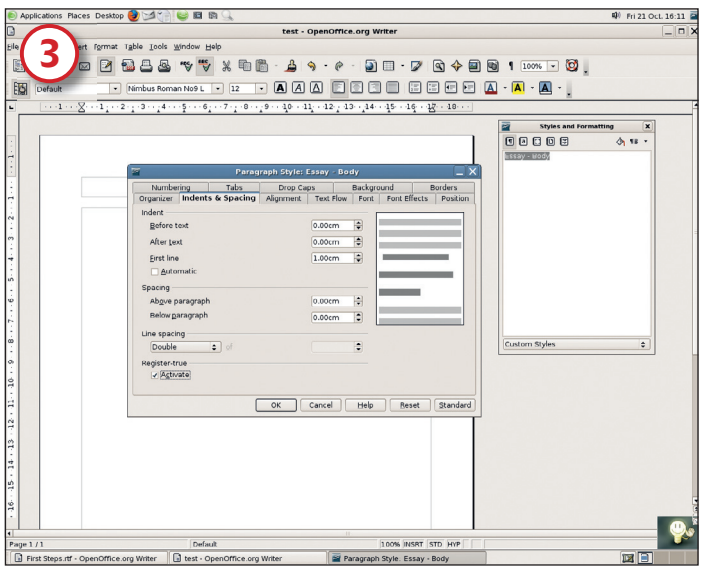
Create a paragraph style

Go into the Format menu and select Styles And Formatting (or just hit the F11 key) to open up the Styles And Formatting (S&F) palette. There should be a range of styles already defined, and you can use or edit any of these; but we're going to create our own so that we'll have a finer degree of control. To start with a blank sheet, open the drop-down list at the bottom of the S&F palette and select Custom Styles. Right-click anywhere in the S&F window and select New to open the big styles dialog-box.



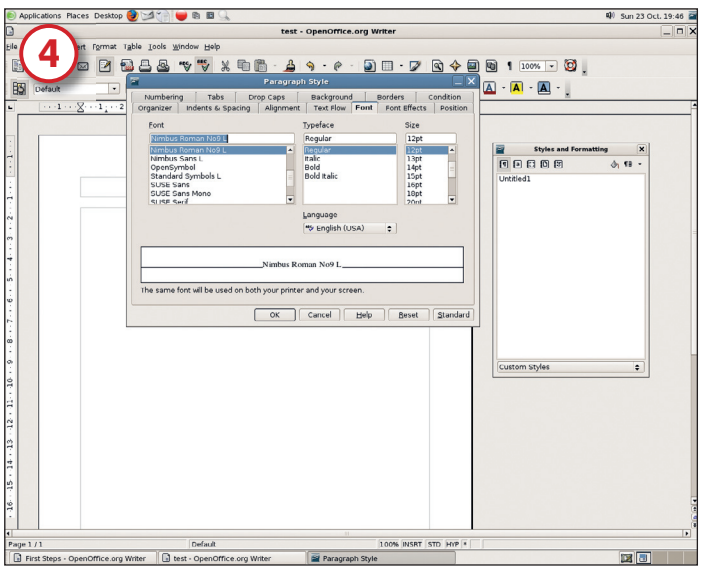
Choose your Next Style

The Organizer tab is where we define the new style's name. Selecting the AutoUpdate option will cause changes made to a style to be cascaded through the document without manual intervention. The Next Style drop-down is quite clever, because it allows us to set what style the next paragraph (after the one that a style has been applied to) should adopt. For example, if we make the Next Style for Essay – Heading to be Essay – Body, after you've typed a heading and hit Return, *Writer* will automatically select the Essay – Body style.



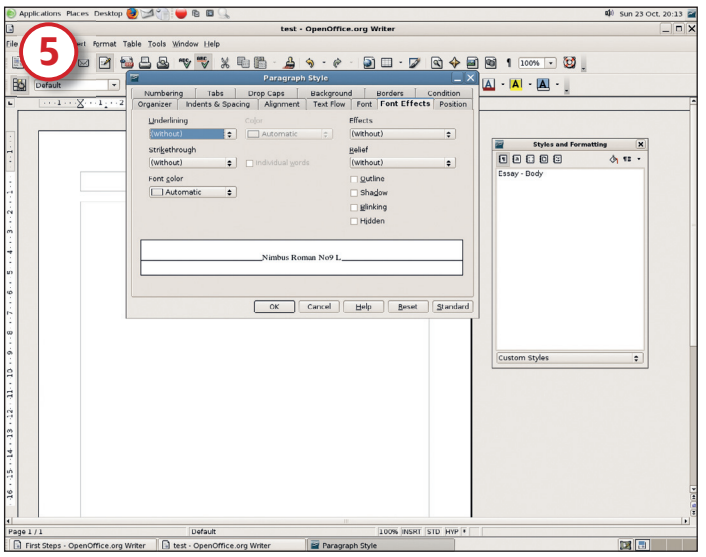
Apply indentation and spacing

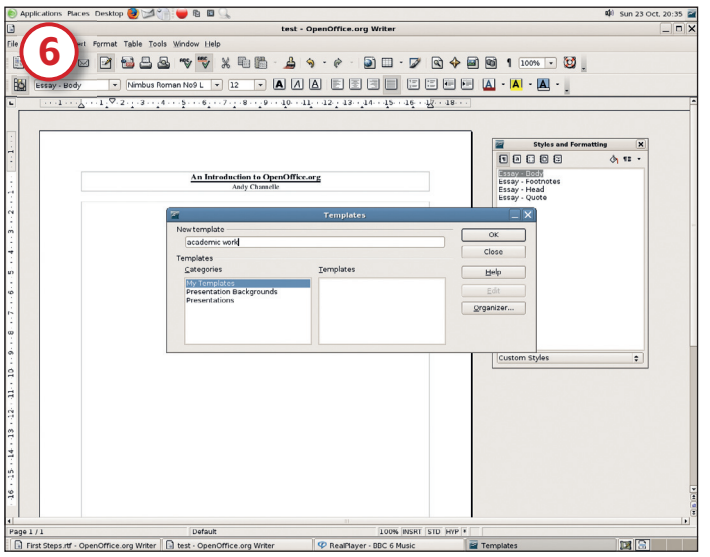
Next up is the Indents & Spacing tab, where we can set the line spacing (double in this example) and left, right and first-line indents. We're setting up the main body text with no universal indents, but the beginning of the first line will be shifted over by one centimetre. The Register-True option in Format > Page > Page dialog snaps each line on to a invisible grid on the page. It's very useful if, for example, you are printing on both sides of a page and don't want to be able to see text from the front when reading the back, and vice versa.



Pick a font

The next option we need to be concerned with is the Font tab, which is where we define the font that will be used for each particular paragraph style. Importantly, this is also where you can set the language for each style – by default it will be set to the local language that was selected when *OO.o* was installed on your machine.





Apply font effects

Other options in this dialog box include font effects, such as colour, underline style, weight and 'relief.' Once you've gone through these options, hit the main OK button to save the style, then build styles for other recurring elements of your document. If you base one style on another, it will inherit changes made in the original style. To apply a style, insert the cursor into a paragraph and double-click on the appropriate style in the Styles And Formatting palette.

Save the template

Once you've defined the paragraph styles and the headers/footers, we'll have a single document that can be used as a template. Go to File > Templates > Save... and save the document in a sensible place with a suitably descriptive name. Then, to create a new document using this template, go to New > Templates And Documents and navigate to its location. Once opened it will have all the styles, headers/footers and any other extra details you added.

QUICK TIPS

- **For added security, save documents with a password. In the Save As... dialog, make sure the File Types option is open and a supported format selected (all of *OO.o*'s native file formats are fine). Then hit Save With Password.**
- ***OO.o* has a gallery of objects such as backgrounds, sounds and icons for use on a website. See what's available at Tools > Gallery, and drag/drop items to your page.**
- **You're not restricted to a single cut/paste operation. The Paste dropdown (the little arrow next to the paste board icon) retains a long list of the most recently cut or copied items.**
- **You can email a document using your default mail client simply by hitting the Envelope icon on the toolbar.**
- **Almost any part of an *OO.o* document can be made into a hyperlink. Just select it, hit the Hyperlink icon (with the picture of the globe on it), and input the details.**
- **Hyperlinks are not restricted to the web. Links in documents can go to anchors within the same document or completely different ones.**

TABLES, IMAGES & FILE FORMATS

A good essay has a table or two to show off the writer's brilliant data, and there are a number of ways to add tables to a document in *OO.o Writer*. The quickest is to use the table tool, the small 'down' arrow next to the table icon on *Writer*'s top toolbar. Hitting this button will display a small drop-down that enables us to pick the number of rows or columns needed in our table. Using this method will create a table (to our specifications) that will cover the width of the whole page; it will also launch the excellent Table palette to provide quick access to all the tools we might need.

First and foremost on this palette is the Autoformat tool (the magic wand icon), which lets you create good-looking tables for a number of purposes with just a few mouse clicks. You can, by the way, make small adjustments to these Autoformat styles by hitting the More button, and choosing just how much of the style you'd like to adopt and how much you want to keep under your own control.

Once a table has been created there are tons of things that can be changed using just the Table palette. Add or remove rows and columns, change the background colour of the whole table or individual cells or even treat the whole thing as a basic embedded spreadsheet by hitting the SUM button.

You may notice, if you go into Table > Table Properties, that the width option is greyed out (the traditional sign that a tool is unusable). However, if you first left-click on the left or right edge of the table in question and change its position slightly, and then go into the Properties dialog box, the width option will be available and allow accurate control of the table size.

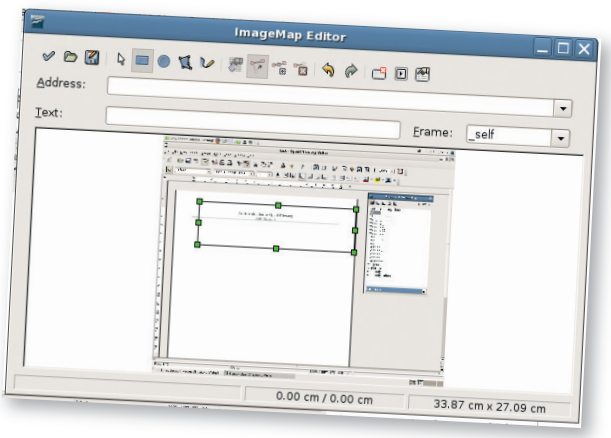
You can change the width and height of columns and rows respectively by right-clicking somewhere in one of the cells and doing Row > Height or Column > Width.

For the first time *OO.o* is capable of reliably using nested tables (tables within tables), which means that it can be used as a pretty good web editing application. This is especially useful if you need to write content for printing and viewing online. To create a nested table, simply select the cell you'd like to contain a table, then use the table tool mentioned above to insert the object. This can contain any content that *OO.o* is capable of importing (including more nested tables), and has all the usual table options available.

Picture perfect

On top of its excellent illustration tools, in version 2.0 *OpenOffice.org* now boasts a capable and, crucially, intuitive set of bitmap editing facilities, as well as some new ways of working with pictures once they have been edited to perfection.

Writer imports pictures through the Insert > Picture > From File... or Scan options, and once the picture is on the page (it initially embeds it where the cursor was), it can be clicked and dragged anywhere. Each picture on a page, when selected, will display eight green handles for resizing. Clicking and dragging any of these will change the size of the image, and you can keep it in the same proportions (constrain its aspect ration) by



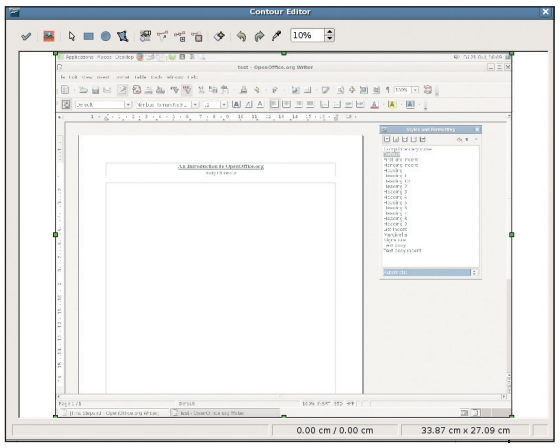
***OO.o* is a good option if you do a little web editing on the side.**

holding down the Shift key as you move the handle.If, when you select an image, the Picture palette doesn't appear, do View > Toolbars > Picture to open it.

Select an image in the document and hit the Properties button to launch the full image dialog. This has a wide range of editable options including links and borders, but all we're going to go through here is making sure that the picture fits nicely into the page and is easy to work with.

The first port of call is the Type tab, in which we should choose the Keep Ratio option. This will ensure that when we come to move the picture around, we won't inadvertently change its shape. We could also make some fine adjustments to the size of the picture if necessary, or to its position on the page. In the Options tab we could go one step further, and prevent any accidental changes being made to the image at all by using the Protect options, which can be set to protect any combination of Contents, Position or Size.

Like AbiWord (see our review on page 28) *OO.o Writer* has seen some serious attention put into its text wrapping capabilities. The Wrap tab is where you define how the text in your document flows around graphical elements (which can be either images or other frames). In previous versions of the software this was limited to very simple shapes, but now there is a new Contour option. Select this and the text will follow the contours of your image.



***Writer* now boasts great text runaround features, including a path/contour editor.**

What contours you say? Well, you need to add one – actually this involves changing the default contour, which is a rectangle that conforms to the dimensions of the image. Right-click on the image and select Wrap > Edit Contour. This will open the image in a larger window with a ton of icons across the top. To get rid of the default contour, select the Workspace icon on the far left and then select the image.

It's now possible to define your own shape using the available tools, and these are Rectangle, Ellipse and Polygon. Once you have a basic shape, you can fine tune it by hitting the Edit Points icon about halfway along. There are options here to add, take away or move control points.

If the image has a well-defined outline (if you've done a cutout in *Gimp*, for example), it's possible to get a good contour using the Autocontour option, which is the fourth icon from the right in the dialog box. This will examine the shape of your picture and (to a certain, adjustable colour tolerance) make a bespoke contour. When you're satisfied, hit the Apply button (furthest left) and set the Spacing in the regular contour box.

These options are great for print productions, but the web side of the story has not been forgotten. Right-click on an image and select Image Map to launch the image map tool.

MANAGING EMBEDDED PICTURES IN OO.O WRITER

This toolbar gives you plenty of options for formatting images:

1. Opens an extensive properties dialog (see BELOW).
2. Offers up a range of image filters such as noise reduction, colour invert, and smooth or sharpen.
3. Changes the default colourspace (which is RGB) to black and white, greyscale or the faded-out 'watermark'.
4. Provides a selection of tools to change the brightness, contrast and gamma (lightness) values of an image, as well as the individual red, green or blue values.
5. The transparency option adjusts how much of the underlying page is visible through an image. This is useful for overlaying one picture on another. The percentage represents the transparency value, so 0% is completely opaque and 100% is completely see-through.
6. This pair of icons will flip the picture either horizontally or vertically.
7. This icon is saved for those times when a picture is in a frame of its own, and opens the frames dialog.

Creating a client side image map – one in which all the hyperlink information is embedded within the image itself – involves selecting areas of the picture using the shape tools available, then assigning a link, frame reference (which frame or window the link should open in) and a text string that will become the tooltip.

When viewed on the internet (or by another *OO.o* user) each pre-defined part of the image could link to different web pages. These links can also be associated with Java-based macros, but you – and any other reader – will need the *Java Runtime Environment* installed to make use of them.

Picking the file format

For some people, distributing or receiving documents in .doc format is a part of the job, and while sending stuff out in .odt or even .rtf might be desirable, sometimes (for now at least) it's just not allowed. Fortunately, we can set *OpenOffice.org* to automatically save documents in any supported format, including the ubiquitous *MS Office* ones.

To set this up we have to venture into the rather complex Options dialog, which can be accessed through the Tools menu. The section we need is labelled Load/Save > General, and this also contains the options for automatically backing files up, setting timed 'recovery points' and also for controlling the way in which *OO.o* saves website addresses.

"WITH NESTED TABLES, *WRITER* CAN BE USED AS A PRETTY GOOD WEB EDITING APPLICATION."

However, the bit we're interested is at the bottom of the screen, headed Default File Format. In the left drop-down list, select Text Document and choose the appropriate file type in the list on the right-hand side.

While it might be tempting to use .doc format, I'd always recommend the .rtf option: this offers the best compromise between almost universal access and document formatting options – most people will be able to open the file and it will retain features such as bold, italic and justification. We might not like it, but not everyone is using open file formats – yet. LXF

NEXT MONTH

Next time we'll delve into *OO.o Impress* with some pointers on preparing the perfect presentation.