FIRST STEPS LINUX BEGINNERS SERIES

OpenOffice.org Presentations

With trepidation, Andy Channelle stepped out on to the stage with only a laptop between him and his audience. Fortunately, the laptop was loaded with *OpenOffice.org Impress*...

ON the **DISC**

Many of us will, at some point in our lives, be asked to 'do a presentation'. This request is often the trigger for butterflies in tummies, anxiety dreams and genuine terror. I can't help with that, but the free software community has given us a tool to ensure that, when the moment arises, the audience will spend at least some of the time looking at a big screen, which means less time looking expectantly at you.

This tool is, of course, *OpenOffice.org*'s excellent presentation application, *Impress*. At the top of *Impress*'s feature list is the ability to output *MS PowerPoint*–compatible files, and though we don't usually recommend using proprietary formats over open ones, in this case it is a sensible precaution to save your finished presentation as a native file, and then export it as a PPT.

This is simply to help reduce performance anxiety. If you are relying on someone else's equipment, there's a possibility that they won't have *OOo* installed; and as *PowerPoint* doesn't like non-PPT files, it would be sensible to make sure you're able to work with whatever is available. Either that, or print your presentation out on OHP sheets and go for 1984 nostalgia.

When you launch *Impress* for the first time, you will be taken through a wizard interface to begin defining the presentation. There are options for the presentation style (limited) and output medium (paper, screen, etc) and for setting the default transition effect and a display period for each slide.

In this tutorial, we're going to start with a blank presentation and build up images, text and animation settings.

The first thing to do is add a background image that will be used on every slide in the presentation. *Impress* comes with a selection of background images that can be tiled easily – these are accessible by doing Format > Page... > Background and selecting the Bitmap option. This is good, but not so great if you have a single image – say a company logo – that needs to occupy the same space on each slide or as a background. In this case it's best to create a new master page which can then be applied to each slide in the presentation. The advantage of this is that the master page can later be edited and the changes will propagate through every slide that uses it.

Masterful performance

Using master pages in a presentation makes for a more consistent experience for people watching and – even better – makes it much quicker to actually design and build the presentation. It's similar, in fact, to the way that desktop publishing works. The idea is that there are elements that are replicated on each slide – such as default font sizes, backgrounds and headers and footers – in the same way that magazines create a consistent feel across all the different pages. *Impress* has these options hidden away under View > Master > Slide Master. Let's look at them now.

PART 1 – CREATE MASTER PAGES
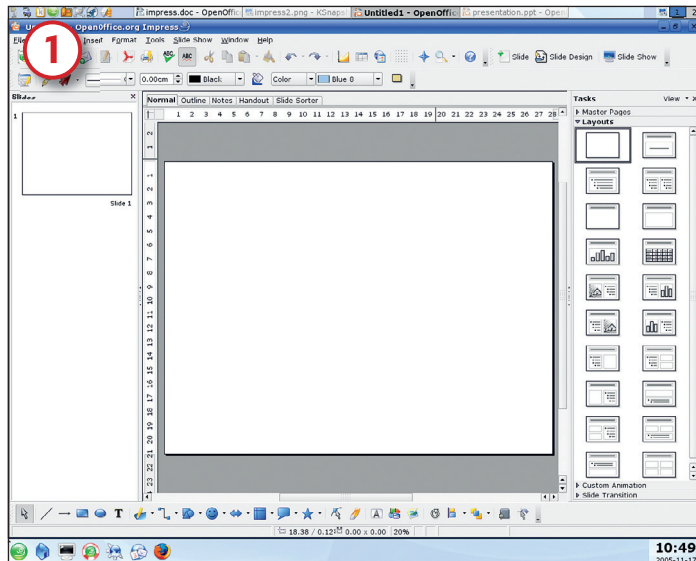
Start her up

The main interface is where most of the work takes place. In the centre is a workspace set to the dimensions of a standard computer screen. This is flanked by a slide browser on the left – populated with a single blank icon at present – and a Task browser on the right. At launch, the Task browser will show a selection of slide layouts, which can be dragged and dropped on to the main screen to set up automatic text and image boxes. At the top of the window is the usual array of menu and toolbars, and also a tab bar for selecting the various views available for a presentation. Mostly we'll be staying in the Normal view, but the Slide Sorter view, which makes adjusting presentation order very simple, is worth a look.
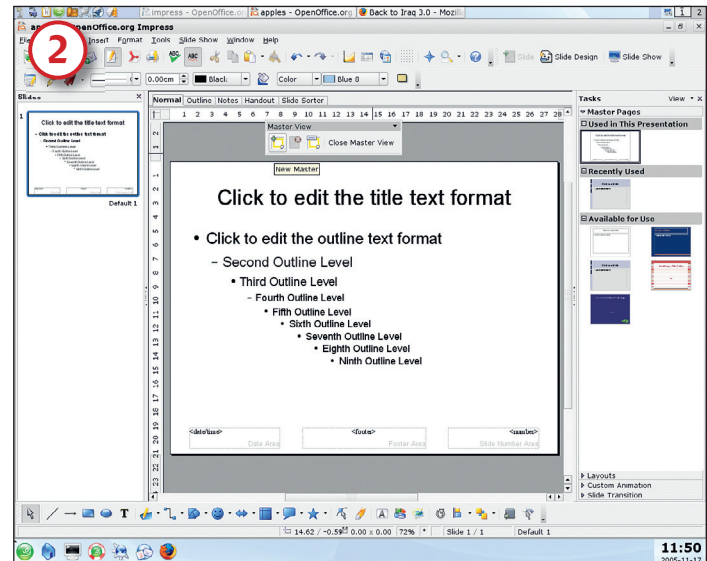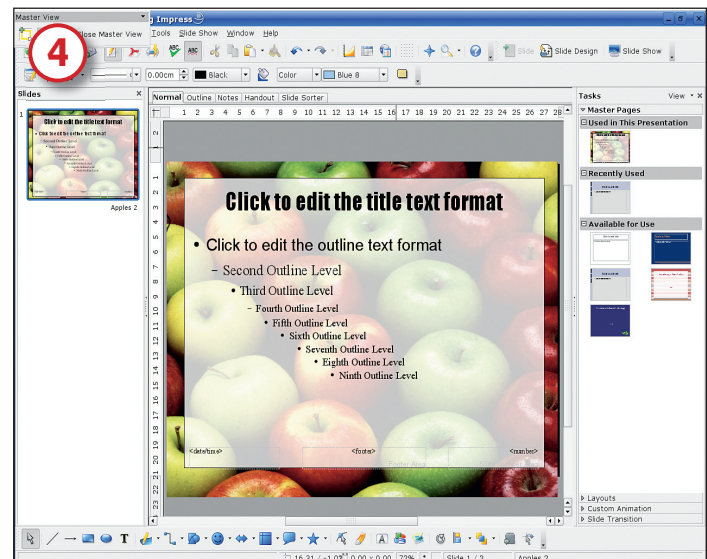

Create a master

Rather than write over the default master page, select the New Master icon (far left) from the Master View toolbox to create a duplicate of it. This has all of the standard elements you might need for a basic presentation. Rename it using the Rename Master tool (third from left). On the master page you should see fonts for different levels of outline, and space for the inclusion of a slide number, footer and the date. Putting text into the footer box will see it added to every slide, and we can add date and slide information by closing down the master slides box and selecting Insert > Page Number... and selecting the appropriate options.
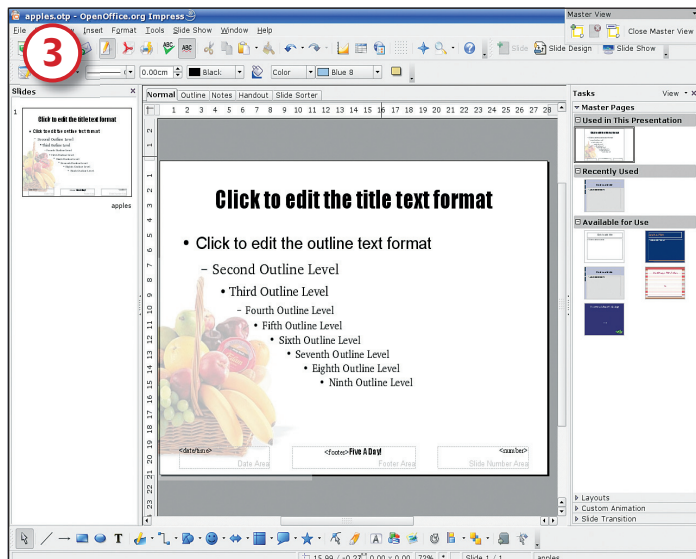

Add an image

Once you've selected the fonts and set up the footer information, you're ready to insert a background image. Calling in an image is the same in *Impress* as is it is in *Writer* (or anything in *OOo*). Simply do Insert > Picture > From File... then browse to the location of your picture. Once added to the page, the picture can be resized using the green handles (remember to hold down the Shift key to preserve its aspect ratio) or changed in any of the ways we discussed last issue. As this is a background image, we've increased the transparency to 70%, and pushed it to the back of the page by right-clicking on the image and selecting Alignment > Send To Back.


Try a second master

A master page can contain any element that a regular slide can, including text blocks and any other graphical devices *OOo* has at its disposal. It's also possible to create more than one master page per document, so you might decide to have, for example, different master designs for the various sections of a presentation, or designs dependent on the content of a slide – perhaps a quotation, chart or bulleted list. Once the slide masters are all set up, close the Master View toolbox to get back to the main editing screen. As we did last issue, it's possible to save this document now as a template to use again in the future (File > Save > OpenOffice Presentation Template).

»
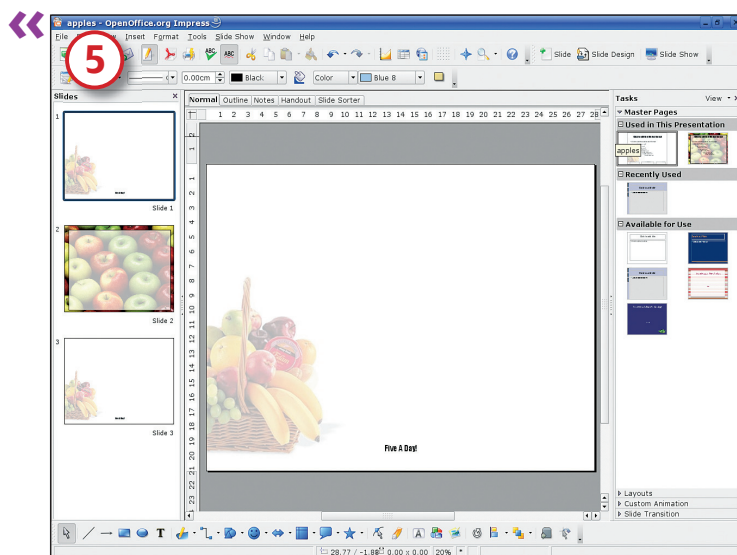
Set up the series

To apply a new master page, first create a new slide by doing Insert > Slide or right-clicking in the Slide pane and selecting New Slide. With the slide selected, click on the master page you'd like to apply and watch as the page is updated instantly. It's possible to apply a master page to every slide in a presentation by right-clicking on the master page in question and selecting Apply To All Slides. You can also make a selection of slides – use Shift+click to choose a continuous range or Ctrl+click for a non-continuous range – then use the Apply To Selected Slides option to alter just those.
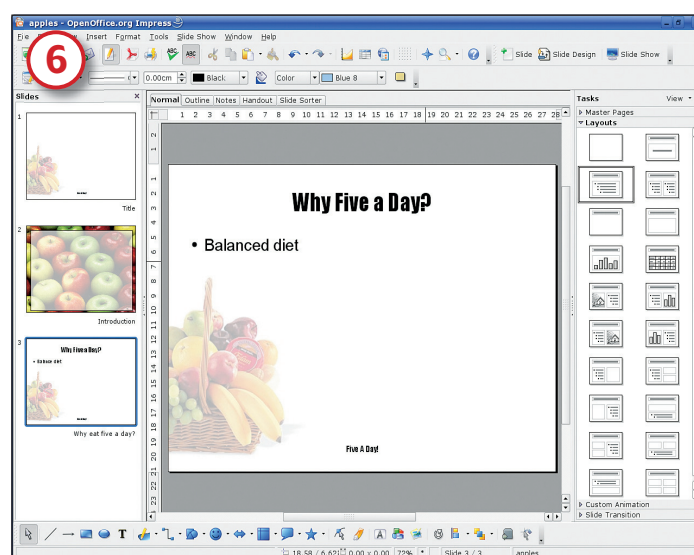
Easy amendments

The intention behind master pages is to save you work. So, if you've lovingly set up 50 slides with a footer saying 'Bringing the past to life' using master pages and your boss decides she wants it to say 'Bringing life to the past', you'll only need to change one master page, rather than edit 50 individual slides. And once that's all done, you can get on with the process of putting the slides themselves together – divorcing content from presentation is always a good idea!

PART 2 – ADDING THE CONTENT AND ANIMATION

We now have a blank canvas on which to paint a dazzling presentation. Only the point of a presentation is not to dazzle, but to put across an idea or argument clearly and concisely. Presentation software such as *Impress* has rightly been criticised for its ability to confuse and distract from what users are trying to get across. I do not endorse this sort of behaviour.

A presentation consists of a series of slides, which are displayed one after the other either at a timed interval or, more usually, by the click of the mouse or a button push. Each slide can contain text, images, sounds, animations and even links to web pages and, thanks to the modular design of *OOo*, pretty much every tool and option available in the word processor and spreadsheet is also accessible from within *Impress*. We will set up a couple of slides, add some animation on elements within a slide and then create simple transitions between the slides that can add finesse without overdoing things.

Remember we have a couple of master pages to work with, and they provide a background and some common features. We need to add some information, starting with the title of the presentation which, ordinarily, will be on the first slide. So, the first thing needed is a text box – this can be added by selecting
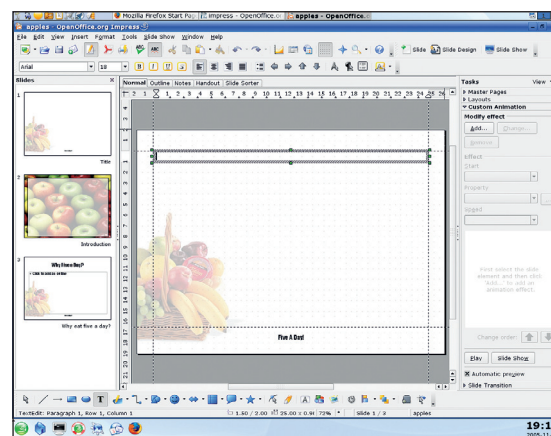
Stay consistent in your slide design by using the grids and guides available for creating pages.

the 'Text' icon from the toolbar at the base of the window (this has a big T on it) and drawing a box on the page. The resulting box will acquire the 'width' you have drawn but its depth will be the depth of the currently selected font. Once the box is on the slide, just start typing.

Just like in a DTP package, it's possible to click the mouse in the rulers on the left and top edge of the screen and drag a ruler out on to the page. If you can't see the guides, do View > Guides > Display Guides. It is also possible to display a faint grid (View > Grid > Display Grid) to make designing and positioning objects within a slide more consistent.

If this sounds unnecessarily complex, we can simplify things by using one of *Impress*'s pre-designed Layouts. These are available via the Layouts task pane on the right of the screen. *Before* adding any content, select a slide (or series of slides),

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Simplicity makes for a better presentation, and minimises the risk of translation issues if you run it through *PowerPoint*. Here are some pointers.

■ Bullet points and striking images are better than big blocks of text.

■ Keep effects to a minimum for stylistic and practical reasons.

■ Stick to two legible typefaces throughout.

■ Avoid timed transitions – it's better to stay in control yourself.

■ Use colour wisely. Light text on a dark background looks good when projected.

■ Head up your notes with the slide names so you don't lose your way.

■ Don't bury your content under four tons of pretty packaging.

right-click on the Layout required and choose Apply To Selected Slide(s). It's also possible to create a new slide based on one of these layouts by right-clicking on the one you want and selecting Insert Slide. A new slide will be added immediately after the one selected in the slide browser on the left.

There are a variety of presentation layouts, including simple lists, images, objects and more, but if none of them fits the bill it's possible to make adjustments to the elements after a layout has been applied. This new slide could then be duplicated or saved as a template for later use.

We're starting with a simple layout featuring a title at the top of the slide and some text below for introducing the subject of the presentation; the Title Slide layout is ideal for this. Once it's applied, we can click in any of the boxes on the screen and start adding text. The text will conform to the styles we defined earlier in our master pages.

Our next page will again include the title, but will also have a list of points that highlight the structure of the presentation itself. For this purpose we'll use the 'Title, Text' layout, which has the title at the top and an area set up to display a bulleted list.

It is possible, once the text has been added, to right-click on the text, select Text and control the way that it's displayed, but the options in here should be used sparingly, if at all. Effects include the hated Blink and some scrolling options, and there are controls for the duration and speed of the effect.

Animate your audience

Much more effective is the animation available for introducing textual − or visual − elements of the presentation. Again, it's easy to go overboard, but judicious use of an effect can really enhance a performance. We have five lines on our Agenda slide, and these need to be revealed one at a time with a mouse click. Again, turn to the Tasks pane on the right, and select Custom Animation. Now select the first line of text − it's important to select the whole line of text, rather than simply clicking the mouse in it. Doing the former defines that line as a single element, while doing the latter assumes that the entire text box is the element that should be animated.

With the first line selected, hit the Add button in the Task pane and select the type of animation you'd like to use. A handy preview will demonstrate what the finished product will look like, and you can either OK it to apply the effect or choose another one. We're sticking to the basics here − all we're doing is making a textual element appear on the click of the mouse button − but there are options for emphasising or de-emphasising elements, exiting in interesting ways, and changing various parameters, and it's worth experimenting once you are comfortable with the concept of animating in this way. Again, simplicity is often the best policy − even though *Impress* gives you the option of being wacky − so use just enough motion to suggest dynamism.

Select and edit

Once each of the lines has been 'effected', they will appear as a list in the task pane. They can be edited by selecting and then hitting the **Change** button. More extensive edits, including adding sound-effects and making the text appear letter by letter are available by double-clicking on an entry in the list. Auditioning effects are accomplished by selecting a line from the list and hitting the Play button (you can also make and audition multiple selections with the Shift+click method mentioned above) or test the whole slide by selecting the Slide Show button.

Once the slides are finished, it's time to set up transitions − that is, the visual style in which one slide disappears and the next is presented. By default, the transition will be a sharp

There are a range of transitions on offer − some better than others. This is Dissolve...
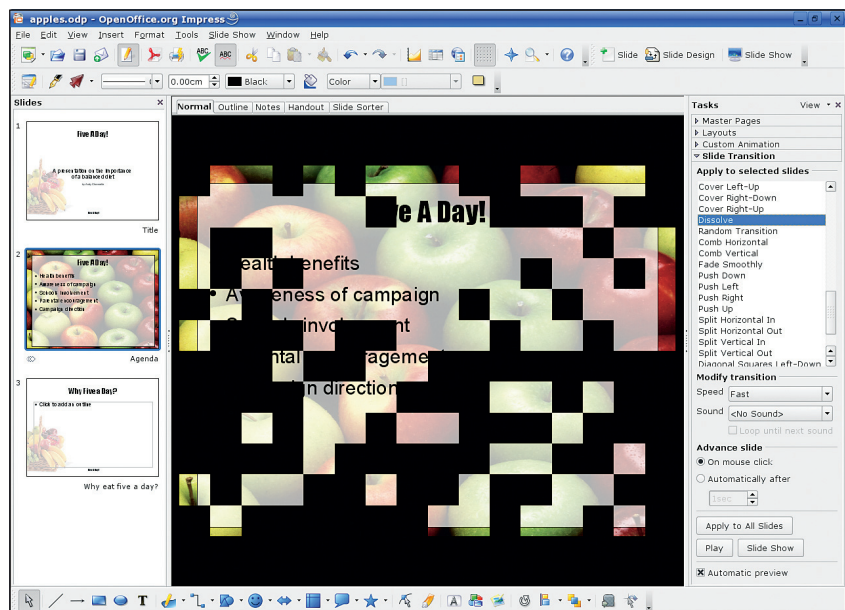
change with no effect, and for many occasions this will be adequate. However, some gentle, non-intrusive transitions can give the presentation a little extra polish.

Transitions are applied using the Slide Transition task pane on the right, and it's important to remember that any selected transition will be applied to the current slide − that is, we are talking about the way the currently selected slide appears, so there's very little point in having a transition on the first slide in the presentation. So, select the second slide, then start to experiment with the transitions on offer. If you like, select a single transition then apply this to the entire presentation using the Apply To All Slides button at the base of the task pane. It's also possible to audition transitions with the Play button. As with in-slide effects, don't go mad or you'll just annoy your

"JUDICIOUS USE OF AN ANIMATION EFFECT CAN REALLY ENHANCE A PERFORMANCE."

audience; find a transition (or two, but never more) that fits what you're trying to say and use it throughout. Adding a sound to a transition can be effective if it adds something to the presentation − but it should be used sparingly. *Impress* has options to play the sound once, or loop it until another sound interrupts it. The latter is a bad idea.

Finally, we can set the slide to switch automatically after a period of time using the Automatically After <time> option but, again, you may prefer to retain more control of the presentation by using the On Mouse Click setting (this also allows the use of the space bar or Enter key to advance a slide).

Once the presentation is complete, you can save it in the standard *OOo* OpenDocument format, which has a .odp extension, or export it in PPT format, which will work with *PowerPoint*. *Impress* will also export slides as a series of HTML pages for putting on the web, or as PDFs, JPEGs or other graphical (but non-editable) formats. Although we didn't experience any issues moving a slideshow from *Impress* to *PowerPoint*, it's only sensible to test the presentation (and make any adjustments) before you introduce yourself to the audience. **LXF**

NEXT MONTH

Make the most of blogs, social bookmarking and the new breed of photo-sharing websites.