

Joys of PDF

Tips and tricks for using these sometimes misunderstood files.

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When you circulate documents by e-mail but don't want other people to edit them, you probably convert them to "PDF" (portable document format). But PDF format also lets you do many other things. Properly used, PDF files can become a form of electronic paper—a flexible, powerful and convenient way to communicate, store and manipulate information.

This column describes a few of the useful things you can do with PDF files. Some need Adobe® Acrobat® software, which creates PDF files. Others just need Adobe® Reader®, which only reads existing PDF files and is free. In each case, the most current version of the software is "7," for which this column is written. Earlier versions, as well as Macintosh versions and PDF software from other companies, may not work exactly the same way. Every version will, however, let you perform most of these tricks, often using toolbar buttons or dropdown menus, though sometimes using a different sequence of commands.

To the uninitiated, reading a PDF file on a computer screen usually falls far short of reading a document on paper. On a computer, you can only look at one page and then the next, one after another. If you want to look somewhere else in the document you lose time and focus while you find what you want. But you can make reading a PDF file much more like reading a document on paper.

First, you can activate the "pages" (sometimes called "thumbnails") feature. While viewing a PDF file, click on the "pages" (or "thumbnails") tab at the left edge of your screen. You'll see miniature views of the pages in your document stacked up on the side of your screen.

Want to jump to a particular page? Click on its miniature view to go there.

Do you want to get an overall sense of the size and structure of the document? You can scroll up and down through the miniature pages—using the vertical scroll bar just to the right of the miniature

pages—to get an overview much like flipping pages. If something looks interesting, click on the miniature view of the page, and you will go there.

Are the miniature views too tiny or too large? Click on the "options" (or "thumbnails") button directly above. Then "reduce" or "enlarge" the "thumbnails" (or choose "small" or "large" thumbnails).

If you want to make the righthand image—the "big picture" of your pages—larger or smaller, go to the menu bar at the top of the page, look for the little box with a percentage in it, click on the down-arrow next to the box, and choose a new percentage (e.g., "100%" would display the document full size as if it were printed on paper). Or you may be able to type a new percentage in the box.

You can use the mouse to "drag" any page upwards, as if you were pulling it out of the bottom of your computer screen. Just move the "hand" cursor anywhere within the page, click, hold down, and drag upwards toward the top of the screen. Sometimes, though, you can't pull the document past the bottom of the particular page you are viewing.

Here's an easy fix. Look in the lower righthand corner of your screen, just above the little squat rectangle that probably tells you what time it is and has a few pretty pictures. You'll see four pale blue little sets of rectangles and squares. Click on the second set from the left—a square on top of another square. Now you'll be able to keep pulling your document out of the bottom of your computer screen without getting stopped at the bottom of every page.

Sometimes a PDF file page will appear sideways. You can fix that by clicking on the "pages" (or "thumbnails") tab in your PDF document. Then right-click on the page that's turned on its side. Click on "rotate pages." Choose which direction to rotate and how far. If you need to rotate multiple pages, you may be able to hold down the control button and click on all the offending pages. Then right-click on

any of them and proceed as above.

After you've fixed the orientation of pages, you will want to make sure that the next time you look at the same PDF file, all the pages stay oriented correctly. To do this, you will need to save the "edited" PDF file, the same way you save an edited word processing document. While you're in your PDF file, click on "File," then "Save as" (or "Save a copy"), and save the file.

In the process, you can use another powerful but often ignored or unknown technique: give your PDF file a name that will help you remember what it is. Don't just call it "Scan001.pdf" or some other computer-generated name. File names can typically have more than 200 characters. Use at least a reasonable number of them (but sometimes overly long file names can create other problems).

Lawyers often think of a PDF file as a static object that no one can modify. Not true. For example, if you want to distribute only certain pages, you can pull them out, making them a separate PDF file, if you are using Acrobat software.

To "extract" one page from a PDF file, first click on the "pages" (or "thumbnail") tab on the left of your screen. Right-click on the page you want to extract. Choose "Extract pages." Result: a new PDF file that contains only the page you "extracted." To extract multiple pages, you may be able to hold the control button, click on all the pages you want to extract, then "right-click" as just described. When you're done, you need to save your work.

What if you want to copy part of a page—say, a definition you're analyzing in a legal memo—from a PDF file into a word processing document? You can take a rectangle-shaped snapshot of anything in a PDF file and copy it as a graphic image into a word processing document. You don't need to retype anything or convert it into text, though you won't be able to edit whatever you copy.

To copy a "snapshot" from part of a PDF file, look near the top left of your PDF screen for a little picture of a hand. About an inch to the right you'll see an icon that looks like a little camera. (Move your mouse so the cursor hovers over this icon, and you'll see "Snapshot tool.") Click on it. Now your cursor becomes a "snapshot tool."

Find the upper lefthand corner of the rectangular image you want to copy from

your PDF document. Move the cursor there. Click, and hold down, the click button. Drag the cursor to the bottom right-hand corner of the image you want to copy. Release the click button. You may hear a little gong sound. You've now invisibly saved a snapshot of your image.

Now go into your word processing document. Move the cursor to wherever you want to insert your copied image—usually somewhere along the left margin. Right-click on your mouse and choose “paste.” Your graphic image will now appear in your word processing document. If the sizing seems wrong, adjust the viewing percentage. When you return to your PDF document, click on the “hand” icon at the upper left corner of the screen, to change the cursor from the “snapshot tool” back to a “hand.”

You can also combine multiple PDF files into one. You can save an entire Web site as one PDF file (with “clickable links”). You can “convert” a word processing document, with links conforming to the table of contents and indexes in the document—making the document easier to jump around in on screen than on paper. You can write comments in PDF files; the author can then combine comments from multiple reviewers into a single PDF file to deal with them more easily.

These additional tricks are all beyond the scope of this column, but even they just scratch the surface of what you can do with PDF files. •

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