



Use Tabs to Handle Proportional Fonts

by
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Along with many other features word processors have greatly expanded the range of fonts that we can use to create our documents. While this is good, it has led to some new things we need to learn. There are many fonts differing in many details. Fonts come in two distinct types monospaced and proportional. The figure below and its caption in Arial Black compares Courier New, a monospaced font with Arial and New Times Roman, two very popular proportional fonts.

Font	Sample
Courier New	iiilll
Courier New	MMMWWW
Arial	iiilll
Arial	MMMWWW
Times New Roman	iiilll
Times New Roman	MMMWWW

The monospaced font "Courier New" uses the same amount of space for all letters.

Proportional fonts use less for the narrow letters and more for the wide ones.

Fonts with serifs are a bit wider than those without (sans serif).

Making fonts bold makes them darker & wider.

Some fonts have short horizontal lines at the top and bottom of the vertical lines that make up the characters. These are called serifs. Experts say that serifs improve the readability of the font. In addition fonts can also be divided into cursive, fantasy, and monotype. Finally, fonts can be different sizes, usually measured by their height in points (72 pts = 1 in).

While most of us who learned to type mastered setting the margins, many did not bother to learn how to use the tab stops on their typewriter. Those of us who needed to type tables with neatly aligned columns found that tabs were an invaluable help. Word processors with their proportional fonts have been a challenge for those who have not mastered tabs. Fear not, help is on the way.

Have you ever tried to type a double column list like the following? I found it painful to do so using only spaces between the names and titles. Why, because there are much easier ways to do this job and they do it better. Go on, put a straight edge along the left edges of these columns. They are all over the place and you won't be able to get them straight no matter how hard you try. Its like trying to level a chair by sawing a bit off its legs.

President	Renee Steinpreis	Communications VP	Joe Gray
1 st Vice President	Bill Evans	Education & TrainingVP	Ed Harragan
Secretary	Esther Halbrook	Instructional Coordinator	Helen Williams
Treasurer	Dick Kaiser	Editor	Ron Brubaker
Membership VP	Ted Elzerman	Webmaster	Mary O'Neill
Programs VP	Clay Herrmann	Instructional Technology VP	Pat Hagen
Social VP	Mary Lou Moran	Past President	Herb Williams

If you were to change the size of the font you would find minor adjustments are required to get the alignment back, approximate as it may be. If you change fonts it's not pretty at all. If you cut and paste the whole table you may get a big surprise, all but one of the spaces may disappear in each column separator.

You could do the above using tabs between each of the columns. If you aren't really familiar with tabs you might end up putting multiple tabs between the entries because the titles are so different in length. This will work but only because MS Word and OpenOffice Writer will place default tabs every 5 characters.

Are you ready to try it the best way? It is really the easiest way of all. When I typed the following I put a single Tab character between each column. Now all that is needed is to set three tab stops to indicate where we want the columns.

President	Renee Steinpreis	Communications VP	Joe Gray
1 st Vice President	Bill Evans	Education & TrainingVPEd Harragan	
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First, select the entire table. It doesn't have to be right under the ruler bar but I will show it as if it is to save space. If your word processor does not have a visible ruler bar at the top of the text area you need to turn it on. In Word or in OpenOffice Writer make sure the word Ruler is checked in the View menu options. At the far left end of the ruler bar you should see a symbol that looks (normally) like the letter L. Click on this tab symbol if you need to change it and then move the cursor over the ruler bar to the point where you think the first tab should go. Don't worry, it can be moved later. Click the ruler bar to set the tab or press and hold the left mouse button and then drag the cursor left or right along the ruler until the left side of the second column is in the desired position, then release to set the tab.

The following shows the first tab has been inserted and the second column of the table is aligned with the tab.

President	→	Renee Steinpreis	→	Communications VP	→	Joe Gray
1 st Vice-President	→	Bill Evans	→	Education & Training VP	→	Ed Harragan
Secretary	→	Esther Halbrook	→	Instructional Coordinator	→	Helen Williams
Treasurer	→	Dick Kaiser	→	Editor	→	Ron Brubaker
Membership VP	→	Ted Elzerman	→	Webmaster	→	Mary O'Neill
Programs VP	→	Clay Herrmann	→	Instructional Technology VP	→	Pat Hagen
Social VP	→	Mary Lou Moran	→	Past President	→	Herb Williams

After inserting the other two tabs the following was obtained. Note that the arrows indicate tabs and the symbols at the end of the paragraph indicate return characters. There are dots between the words or names that indicate a space. None of these will not be printed but are a feature of Word and OpenOffice Writer that I find useful to have turned on while editing.

President	→	Renee Steinpreis	→	Communications VP	→	Joe Gray
1 st Vice-President	→	Bill Evans	→	Education & Training VP	→	Ed Harragan
Secretary	→	Esther Halbrook	→	Instructional Coordinator	→	Helen Williams
Treasurer	→	Dick Kaiser	→	Editor	→	Ron Brubaker
Membership VP	→	Ted Elzerman	→	Webmaster	→	Mary O'Neill
Programs VP	→	Clay Herrmann	→	Instructional Technology VP	→	Pat Hagen
Social VP	→	Mary Lou Moran	→	Past President	→	Herb Williams

If you need to adjust a tab stop you can position the cursor over the symbol on the ruler bar, press and hold the left mouse button, and drag the symbol left or right and release when you have it in position. If you want to delete a tab simply drag it off of the ruler bar.

There are four types of tabs, left, right, decimal and center. Clicking on the tab button at the left end of the ruler bar will change the type of tab. Right tabs cause the right edge of the text to be aligned at the tab position. Center tabs cause the center of the text to be aligned at the tab. The decimal tab is useful for columns of numbers because it causes the numbers to be aligned with their decimal points at the tab position.



A nifty feature of OpenOffice Writer is that you can also right click a tab symbol on the ruler bar and a menu will drop down that allows you to change the tab's type. To accomplish the same thing in MS Word you must delete the tab, set the new type, and then replace it on the ruler bar.

Let's review:

- Type the text of each line using a single tab between the columns.
- Select all of the rows of the table you are building.
- Click on the tab type button to select the appropriate tab type (left, right, decimal, or center).
- Move the cursor to the ruler bar at or near the position where you want the tab. Press the left mouse button and hold it down as you drag the tab to its final position, then release the mouse button.
- You can move tabs by dragging them with the mouse. Dragging a tab off of the ruler bar deletes the tab.
- With OpenOffice Writer you can right click a tab to change its type. With Word you must delete the tab, select the desired type, and replace the tab on the ruler bar.

Try it, I think you will be surprised at how easy it is to use tabs properly to align columns.