Getting more from Microsoft Office

Microsoft Office is hefty enough but you can add yet more functions by installing further templates, filters, viewers, language support tools and macros. Chris Cain shows you how to make the most of its lesser-known features and introduces some indispensable extras
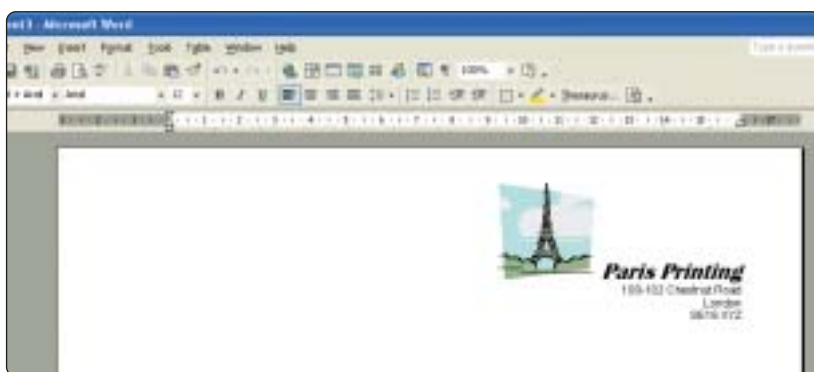
Once the mouse and the idea of using Windows is mastered, most PC users cut their computing teeth by learning to use the applications in Microsoft Office. Word, Excel and PowerPoint are probably the best known packages around, with 300 million users between them worldwide. In fact, aside from working with email in something like Outlook Express, some people never use anything else.

Despite the power of these popular applications, very few of us use more than the basics. Most of us are guilty of using just a small subset of the functions on offer and often in the most long-winded ways. Not only are there handy shortcuts to help us do more in less time but all three programs can be expanded using software add-ins. These range from language tools and formatting utilities for Word to decent clip art and special effects for PowerPoint. And the best part? Many are free to download from the web.

In this feature we reveal some cunning tips and tricks and look at add-ins that can help you make more of Microsoft Office. We've concentrated mainly on Office 2000 and XP but all the tips should work across various versions of Windows and Office.

ILLUSTRATION: JESS WILLIAMS

Tackling Word templates

If you regularly type letters or forms in Word, setting up a standard and professional-looking template can save time. It will also help maintain a consistent look for your documents.

The simplest way to make a template is to start with a blank word document. You can then add the elements to the page, such as a letterhead graphic or forms, changing the fonts and formatting to suit your taste. Here we've created a very simple design by importing a graphic from Word's own clip art selection.

Once you're happy with your template, select Save As from the File menu and instead of saving the document as a DOC file, select Word template from the drop-down file type list. The document will then be saved with a DOT extension. Now you can use this template whenever you write a letter.

Along with custom toolbar options, fonts and graphics, templates can store custom menu settings. For information on changing menus, see *What's on the menu?* on page 119.

Microsoft Word

Probably the most popular component in Office, Word has become the standard by which all word processors are judged. Over the years it has been transformed from a simple typing tool into a complete desktop publishing package and web page editor incorporating a mind-boggling array of new features that many of us will never use. However, there are definitely some key areas worthy of investigation.

All tooled up

There are 19 different toolbars in the current version of Word, providing quick access to file handling, text editing and formatting functions. But with a few clicks you can add any special features you use regularly to the standard toolbars, saving bags of time in the future while getting rid of any unnecessary functions.

To create your own custom toolbar, select Customize from the Tools menu. This brings up a dialog box giving access to the commands used in all the menus and toolbars. To add a new command button to one of your toolbars simply select its category on the lefthand side of the box then drag and drop the command from the righthand list. In our example screen (see below) we're adding a shortcut to Word's Thesaurus. Add as many command buttons as you wish and then click ok.

To avoid clutter you can also remove unwanted toolbar buttons. There are several ways to do this but the easiest is to drag the icons on to a blank area of the page.

By default all the changes you make will be saved in Word's standard template called Normal.dot. It's a good idea to find this (Start, Search should do it) and make a copy of it before making any changes.

Saving time

Another underused feature, AutoCorrect automatically fixes your spelling as you type. However, it does more than correct typos – you can set up your very own Word shorthand. If you regularly type long-winded company names or technical terms, save yourself time by entering a shortened version in the AutoCorrect dictionary.

To add a definition, select Tools, AutoCorrect Options. Check that the AutoCorrect tab is selected in the dialog box that appears and type in your desired shorthand abbreviation in the Replace box. Now enter the full text in the box marked With. Click Add to enter your changes into the dictionary and close the dialog box. Now when you type your abbreviation and press space it will instantly be replaced with the full text.

AutoCorrect is especially handy for firms that have a 'house style' – a consistent way of using terms and capitalisation in correspondence and products.
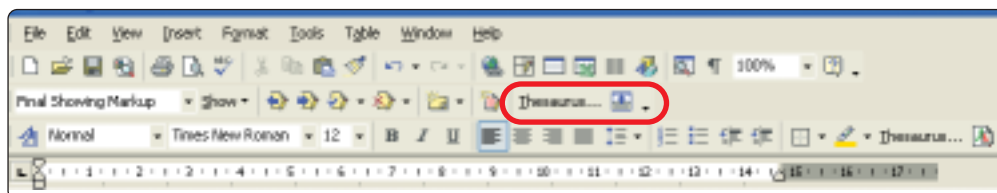
While Word's ability to incorporate images into documents is often useful, some people just don't know when to stop. Adding too many images can make documents difficult to navigate as your PC spends its time trying to redraw pictures as you scroll.

A neat trick to speed things up without deleting all the pictures is to go to the Tools menu and select Options. Click the View tab and then check the box marked 'Picture placeholders'. This won't affect the actual file but will replace all images with a standard graphic, making scrolling much faster.

Extraordinary extras

As well as trying out new things with existing tools, you can enhance Office with add-in programs. Microsoft provides

➔ Customise Word for the way you work by dragging your chosen commands on to the toolbars

several tools that are free to download from its website and there are a few third-party options.

• Web pages via Word One handy Microsoft add-in for Office 2000 and later versions is Web Archive. This allows you to save a web page as a single file, including all images. By default, Office saves web pages as multiple documents and packing everything into one file makes it easier to share and move information. The files are stored in the Mime HTML format and those who already use Word to produce web pages will find this particularly useful.
• Gaelic delights Irish Office XP users will be pleased to hear that Microsoft has developed a downloadable Proofing Tool that covers Gaelic words and phrases (these would normally be flagged up as unknown). After installation simply go to Tools, Language and select the new setting.
• E-book converter Meanwhile, RMR (Read in Microsoft Reader) 1.1 lets you turn an existing document into the easy-to-read e-book format, allowing you to read the file on a desktop system or a portable device such as a Pocket PC – very handy for catching up with reports on the train.
• For the forgetful If you've ever password-protected a Word document and then promptly forgotten the magic word, WordPassword Recovery from AccentSoft Utilities can help you get back into your documents. As shareware, the program is free to download but only supports four character strings until you register for $25.
• And the rest Other handy Microsoft add-ins include a Works 6.0 file converter

(compatible with Word 97 and later), as well as a set of supplementary macros for Word 2000 that allow you to do things such as back up the AutoCorrect dictionary and automate tasks between Word and Excel.

At www.simplythebest.net (shown above) you'll find other handy third-party add-ins including templates to create CD covers and labels, business cards and SuperFax, a tool designed to make faxing from Word as easy as possible.

Microsoft Excel

When it comes to getting more from Excel, one good thing is that many of the tips for Word also work in its sister packages. Toolbars can be adjusted in the same way and you can set up templates with an XLT file just as easily as creating a Word DOT file.

→ Hidden away in the Paste Special menu, Excel's Transpose option will flip rows and columns to save needless typing

Trading places

Spreadsheets are all about rows and columns but have you ever needed to switch things around so that your rows become columns and vice versa? This can happen if you use Excel to produce tables or if you need to get a row of data from one sheet into another that's built around columns. Usually this involves laborious retyping or copying and pasting cells, but there's a much easier way of changing things around.

To transform rows or columns, simply select the data you want change, choose Edit, Copy and then move the cursor to where you want your new row/column to start (or open a new worksheet). Now, instead of simply pasting the data, choose Edit, Paste Special and check Transpose in the dialog box that appears (see below). Click ok to complete the operation.
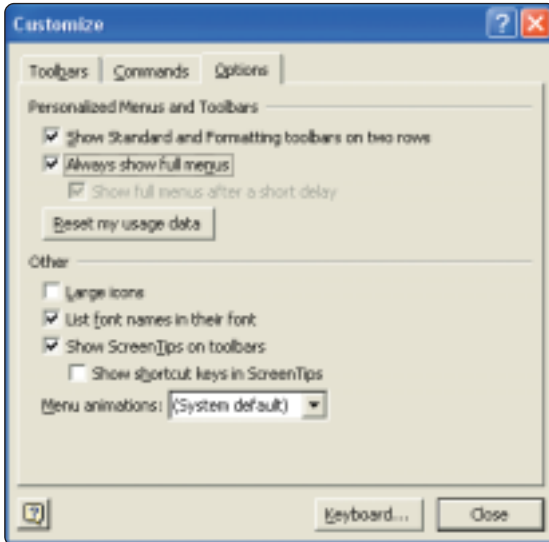
Counting the days

Here's a quick tip for those who regularly use dates in spreadsheets. You can quickly calculate the number of days between two dates with a simple subtraction formula. For example, if cell D1 is 3/1/2003 and D2 contains 26/1/2003, the formula =D2-D1 will reveal the number of days difference.

To get the right result the cell containing the formula must be set to show Number format. Another handy hint is you can quickly insert the current date into a sheet by pressing **Ctrl** and ; (semicolon) and the time with **Ctrl Shift** ;

What's on the menu?

A common complaint about Office is that the options on offer can be overwhelming, especially when it comes to the choices on the menus. Not only are there a lot of functions but some versions automatically hide items based on use – talk about confusing. Fortunately, you can fight back with a few simple steps.
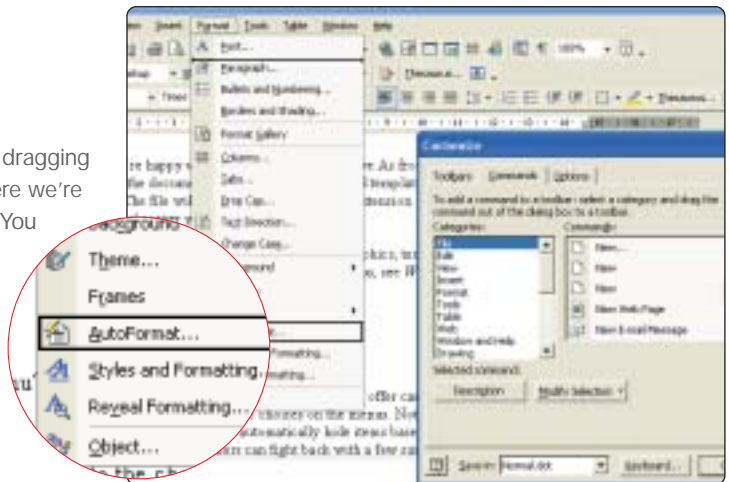
1 If you've got Office 2000 or XP, the first step is to disable so-called Smart menus. Go to Tools, Customize and click the Options tab. Find the option 'Always show full menus' and check the tickbox next to it

2 Now the full menus are visible, we can choose what appears on each one. Click the Commands tab in the Customize dialog box and then select the menu (at the top of the screen) you want to edit

3 Re-order the options to suit your preference by dragging and dropping items up and down the menu. Here we're moving AutoFormat to the second place on the list. You can eliminate options you never use by dropping them into a blank area of the screen, or drag items on to different menus for complete customisation. For the latter, drag an item to the name of the new menu and hold for a few seconds until the menu drops down. If you delete something by mistake or need it later, simply drag the option back to a menu by choosing Tools, Customize, Commands

What's in a name?

Constantly referring to cell numbers when using calculations can be a real headache, especially if you're working on a large sheet or across a whole workbook. One way to make your life easier is to give each important cell or range a name. This not only saves time but makes it much easier to remember and work out what's going on when you revisit a sheet.

To define a name, simply select the cell or range using the mouse and then go to Insert, Name and then Define. Type in the name to describe it and then press ok. Now go to Tools, Options, select the Calculations tab and click 'accept labels in formulas'. You can now enter calculations using names such as =sum (TotalSales)/12 without having to worry about cell numbers.

Names can also be used in place of formulas. Define the name as before but, instead of pressing return, click into the 'Refers to' box and enter the formula you want. If the formula is based on specific cells, such as A1:A25, don't forget to use absolute references (flagged with a $) to ensure consistency – for example, =sum(a1:a25)/2. Just using =sum(A1:A10) will make the cell

references relative, which means the position of the cell in which the name is used could affect the result.

Picture this

If you need to transfer an Excel spreadsheet into another application for some visual impact, just cutting and pasting the data can result in a mess. The best way to keep things looking good is to turn it into a picture. To do this, highlight the area you want to use and hold down Shift while selecting the Edit menu. This reveals the option to Copy Picture. Just select this, click into the other application and choose Paste.

Adding value

Microsoft provides a range of free add-ins for Excel. Here's our pick of the best.

• On report Currently the most popular download is Report Manager, which lets you combine Excel 2002 worksheets, views and scenarios into reports that can be printed. Once you add a report it is saved with the workbook so that you can print it later. Interestingly, this feature was actually included as standard in previous versions of Excel.
• Embrace the euro Excel 97 users can add the euro to their currency formats by downloading the Euro Toolbar button add-in, while Excel 2002 users should download the latest application update file.
• Show me the money Shareware add-in EuroWiz 2002 (shown above) enables most versions of Excel to perform conversions between different currencies, including the euro, Japanese Yen and US dollar. This could come in particularly handy if you need to send financial reports

to other offices around the world. Or perhaps you just want to keep track of your holiday money.
• Power to the add-in Now on version 3.0, Edwin's Power Tools package provides a horde of 2D and 3D formatting facilities, extended zoom controls, visibility options and new workbook facilities including revert to saved, instant sheet duplication and sorting across multiple sheets.

There's something in this shareware program for everyone, but be warned: many features are restricted until you pay the $40 registration fee.

Microsoft PowerPoint

Most PC users have either watched or given a PowerPoint presentation at some stage and we all tend to groan when a projector appears. It's often for good reason – there's only so many times you can sit through slides with the same clip art images, sounds and animation. While we're not going to go into presentation protocol tips, there are some other handy things to know when using the package.

A helping hand

A top tip if you're struggling with the structure of a new presentation is to use PowerPoint's AutoContent option. To find this, go to the File menu and select New. When the taskpane appears on the righthand side, select From AutoContent Wizard under the New heading. (This may be slightly different in version 2000.)
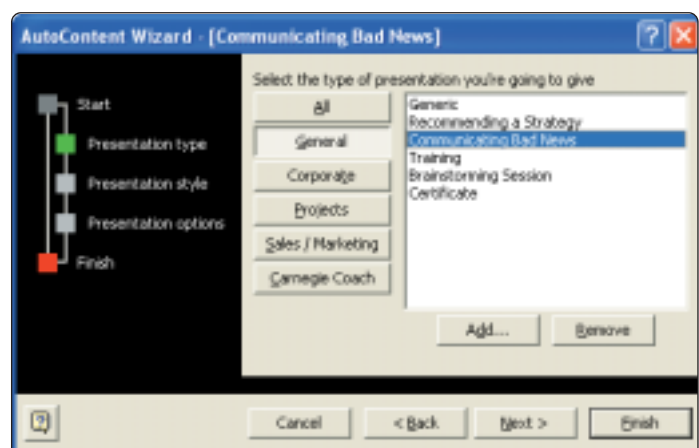
This wizard walks you through the process of setting up various presentations, whether you need to communicate bad news, announce projects or provide an updated sales and marketing report. It gives guidelines for what to cover in each slide and even adapts template formatting and colour schemes. You may not agree with all the wizard's suggestions but Microsoft has an enormous amount of experience in this area and it's worth taking advantage of it. Some templates need to be installed first, so have your original disc handy.

Draw a conclusion

Another useful feature in PowerPoint 2000 or later versions lets you quickly add a summary slide to your presentation. Save yourself the effort of manually reading each slide and scribbling down important bullet points. Go to View, Slide Sorter and select the slides you want to include in the summary. Now if you click the Summary Slide button on the toolbar, a new slide will appear with the key bullet points from those you selected. You can then edit this to fit the bill.

Sharing secrets

If you're working on part of a larger presentation, your efforts can look unprofessional if everyone uses different

→ Microsoft's Producer 1.1 makes it easy to blend PowerPoint files, video, music and even HTML for high-quality, interesting presentations

HTML pages to produce outstanding presentations. You can capture new film footage and sound clips as well as use existing ones – all via the easy-to-use timeline. Finished work can then be viewed either on a standalone PC, broadcast via an intranet or published on the web. You can even add special video effects and transitions. Producer is a must for the serial presenter.

• Presentations a-plenty Meanwhile, power users should try PowerShow. This lets you run more than one presentation simultaneously on multiple monitors, change their aspect ratio and even edit them while running a slideshow. A demo is available from http://officerone. tripod.com/powershow/powershow.html.

• Lucky dip Users of all levels should check out www.rdpslides.com. Here you'll find a range of add-ins known as PPTools, each with a downloadable trial version.

PPTools range from handy new PowerPoint formatting toolbars to PDF and HTML converters. There's also Optimizer, a useful gadget that streamlines presentations for various delivery methods such as screen, black and white print, 35mm slides, video and so on.

formatting. A way around this is to use PowerPoint's revision system to merge presentations into one template.

Open one of the presentations that you wish to merge then select Tools, Compare and Merge Presentations. Now choose the second presentation and click Merge. Select continue and then, in the Revision Pane under Presentation Changes, click 'Insertions at beginning of presentation.' Hit the Apply and End

Review buttons on the Review toolbar, followed by Yes. Repeat this process to add more presentations. Finally, apply a consistent format by selecting Format, Slide Design and choosing a professional-looking template.

If you're sharing finished presentations with others it's also worth embedding any TrueType fonts to ensure proper playback. Simply select this option from the Tools menu in the Save As dialog box.

Expand your knowledge

When it comes to add-ins there are plenty of shareware and commercial options to enhance PowerPoint.

• Produce the goods A complete application in itself, Producer 1.1 lets you combine PowerPoint templates and slides, photos, video files, audio and even

Are you an Office know-it-all?

Hopefully our tips will help you make more of the features in Microsoft's software suite and tempt you to explore the numerous free and cheap add-ins available. Just don't boast to your colleagues about your new-found knowledge too much – nobody likes a show off. ■

Get downloading

All Microsoft add-ins are available from the Microsoft Office Download Center. Visit http:// office.microsoft.com/downloads/ default.aspx to explore the full range.

Third-party add-ins
• WordPassword Recovery
www.passwordrecoverytools.com/ en/word.shtml
• CD Covers, Business Cards & SuperFax
www.simplythebest.net
• EuroWiz 2002
http://download.com.com/3120-20-0.html?qt=eurowiz&tg=dl-2001
• Edwin's Power Tools
http://users.vol.net/edwintam/ ept.htm
• PowerShow
http://officerone.tripod.com/ powershow/powershow.html
• PPTools
www.rdpslides.com

→ The PPTools range provides loads of handy tweaks for PowerPoint and there's a free starter kit to get you going