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Microsoft Word: Practice Does Not Make Perfect

By Barron K. Henley



Two important facts you need to know about Microsoft Word:

Fact 1: 100 percent of the formatting problems you've experienced when drafting new documents can be completely avoided before they occur.

Fact 2: When editing a document someone else drafted, any formatting glitches can be resolved in just a few clicks, no matter how bad of a mess it is.

Unfortunately, the foregoing facts are true only if you have mastered Word.

If instead you feel like every complex document turns into a wrestling match, don't feel bad. Only a tiny percentage of users have actually achieved Word domination. In my decades of experience, even people who feel they know what they are doing with Word have almost always misdiagnosed themselves. The ability to beat text into submission via formatting work-arounds and hacks does not indicate that one knows how to skillfully use Word. Word should be doing the work for the user, not the other way around.

Most users find Word to be pretty frustrating when drafting or editing documents with complex formatting. This is because many of the program's most important features are either concealed or nearly impossible to figure out without research and training. For example, assume you drafted a contract containing headings/titles and you do not want page breaks to separate your headings from the paragraphs that follow them. Furthermore, you have a signature line and acknowledgment at the end which you would like to keep together on a single page not separated by page breaks. There are features which will take care of this for you automatically, but good luck finding them. No button on any tab or ribbon will help you. You just have to know to right-click the relevant paragraph or heading → choose Paragraph → click the Line and Page Breaks Tab → check "Keep with next" and/or "Keep lines together" as appropriate. There are many Word features like this.

In addition, the most important feature one must understand in Word is Styles; and nothing in Word's interface indicates this. Clicking around will not reveal what

they are, how they work, or how to control them. Word's (fairly useless) built-in help sheds little light on the subject. I can give you all of the steps to construct a 5-level deep, auto-paragraph, numbered outline that works perfectly in every situation thanks to Styles. However, you can use Word every day for the rest of your life and not stumble upon those steps or discover what they are by accident. Having said that, Styles are definitely not difficult or illogical. To the contrary, they're a wonderful formatting tool, they allow you to completely control font and paragraph formatting in your documents, and they behave predictably in all situations. They're just not easily mastered simply by using Word; and the program's interface conveys no hint of their importance.

In my experience, Word proficiency is only built by working through a comprehensive manual (of course, no printed manuals accompany the program) or taking hands-on classes. Most people would rather clean toilets than read software manuals, but you have to keep in mind that not all classes are created equal. The critical issue is that legal professionals need to understand word processor functionality that most people have no use for. For example, we need to master automatic paragraph numbering; outline numbering; and auto-updating tables of contents, tables of authority, and paragraph cross references. We need to know how to turn page numbering on and off in the middle of a document, start it over, and switch from romanettes to Arabic and back again. We need to understand how footnotes and endnotes work, when section breaks are necessary, and how to control Styles. These are precisely the kind of features ignored in Word classes designed for the general public. So it's important to find legal-specific training addressing these issues.

The fact that mastering Word requires training isn't the problem. The problem is most people don't *expect* a word processor to be that complicated. There's a general assumption that simply using the program over time will increase one's skill with it. I'm here to tell you that this assumption is patently false when it comes to Word. In running a quick search on www.amazon.com for Word 2016 manuals, I found that,

Shelly Cashman Series Microsoft Office 365 & Word 2016: Comprehensive by Misty E. Vermaat is 679 pages; *GO! with Microsoft Word 2016 Comprehensive* by Shelley Gaskin and Alicia Vargas and is 832 pages; and *Word 2016 In Depth* by Faithe Wempen is 1,008 pages. These page counts alone would indicate there's a lot more going on here than most people expect.

For years, I've heard experienced Word users complain that it can't do this and can't do that. I always ask those complaining if they've ever read a whole manual on the program or taken a hands-on class. Invariably, the answers are no. When I demonstrate how easily one can do all of the things they were complaining about, they often look at me like I just pulled off some kind of magic trick. Once you learn how the program works, you will find it's not complicated (and I'm no magician). Ultimately, you can't complain about the politicians if you don't vote; and you can't gripe about the technology if you don't attempt to educate yourself. The thing to remember with Word is that practice does not make perfect unless you know what to practice; and simply using the program won't reveal it. **CL**



The image is a promotional graphic for the Connecticut Bar Association Legal Tech Conference. It features a background of blue and orange digital data patterns. At the top, the Connecticut Bar Association logo is visible. The main text reads "Legal Tech Conference" in a large, white, serif font, with "Law Practice Management" in a smaller font below it. Below this, it says "Save the Date October 6" in a large, white, sans-serif font. Further down, it says "Featuring Barron K. Henley on Avoiding Malpractice: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Legal Technology" in a white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, it says "Visit CBA LegalTechConference.com to register!" in a white, sans-serif font.