

Typographers' Inn

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No time for copyright

For several years I have used a locally-developed *L^AT_EX Tips* document as an extension to the *Very Short Guide* which I maintain as the `veryshortguide` package. The document lists 10 tips distilled from my support time which I suppose constitute a personal FAQ. It's one of the very few documents which I actually wrote from scratch in *L^AT_EX*, because I wanted it to work as an example of how you can produce a 4pp folder FAQ by hand (normally I write in another system entirely, and transform to *L^AT_EX* only for formatting).

All of which is a long way round to saying that the reason it's not included in the `veryshortguide` package is that the first thing it says is not to reinvent the wheel, for which I (illegally) use a cartoon without permission. It shows a caveman offering a round wheel to two friends hauling a cart with square wheels, only to have his offer refused because the friends were 'too busy' trying to make the square-wheeled cart work. In extenuation, I did try to find who the artist was, in order to get permission, but a Google image search shows it used on hundreds of sites without permission, and no evidence of whose it originally was, and searches on several image-library sites we subscribe to also turned up nothing.

I was therefore delighted when I saw a live-tweet from a Project Jupyter session at Lund University of a guest lecture on Python tools by Ben Krikler of Bristol University, showing a drawing making exactly the same point. Dr Krikler has kindly given me permission to use the drawing, so I will now be able to add the document to the package, and use it here.

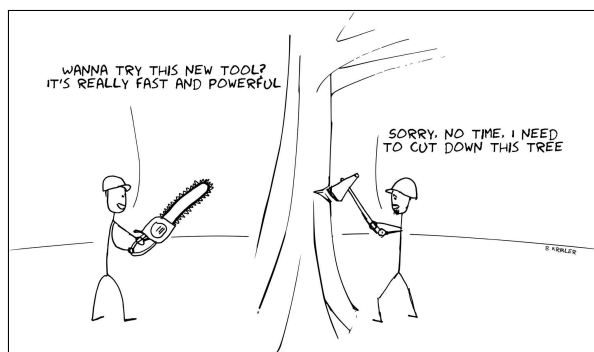


Figure 1: No time [Ben Krikler, University of Bristol]

If you're setting type for someone, it's conventional to assume that they have permission to use all the images that are not their own. In a formal

contractual situation, you simply make it a condition, so that if there is a problem later, it's their problem, not yours. However, when you're under time pressure as an author or editor, especially if you don't have an amanuensis to take care of administrivia, it's easy to forget, or to assume it'll be OK 'because it's on the web and everyone does it'. Please don't.

No time to learn

Back to where I left off: the principal problem with documentation is that no-one wants to read it, no matter how prettily formatted or useful (see the item 'Be useful.' in the list on p.72). This applies just as much to the documentation for *L^AT_EX* packages as to the articles in *TUGboat* and all the books on *T_EX*. Tobias Oetiker's comprehensive and wonderful *The [Not So] Short Guide to L^AT_EX 2_ε* [3] and other guides on the *T_EX* Users Group's list at <https://tug.org/begin.html> should be on every new user's reading list, as of course should my own *Formatting Information* [1] but if the users believe there's no time to read them, they risk ending up 'learning' about *L^AT_EX* from word of mouth and obsolete web sites, along with all the bad practices inherited from decades of 'sitting by Nellie'.¹

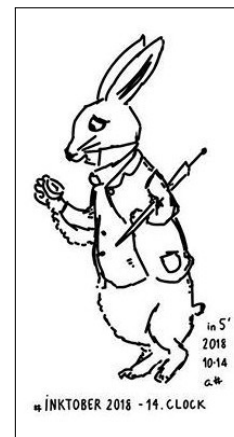


Figure 2: No time [@fiveminutedoodles]

So what can we do, typographically, to help make our documentation more attractive? As it turns out, quite a lot, if you have the freedom to influence the layout.

Avoid Computer Modern. There isn't anything wrong with it; in fact I quite like it for classical book or journal work, but it helps to perpetuate the myth that *L^AT_EX* only has one font.

¹ The term comes from the learning-by-watching training methodology used in mid-20th century British industry, and adopted by *The PracT_EX Journal*, <https://tug.org/pracjourn>, for their Q&A column.

Use $\text{Xe}\text{L}\text{A}\text{T}\text{E}\text{X}$ and the `fontspec` package to make use of all your typefaces, or any of the myriad fonts that come in TEX distributions, many supported by all engines (<https://tug.org/fontcatalogue>).

Reset the margins. The defaults in the standard document classes are designed for printing on smaller paper sizes than Letter or A4, and don't let you make use of the space effectively. Use the `geometry` package to change this.

Look at the line-spacing. If you use lines of full width with margins less than 3cm (2¼") on A4 or Letter paper, you may need to widen the line-spacing a little (unless you use 12pt or larger) otherwise it becomes harder for the eye to flip back to the start of the next line. Alternatively, use a two-column layout with `multicol`.

Use color. Unless you are going to print big quantities, for which color becomes expensive, look at introducing spot color like colored section heads with the `xcolor` and `sectsty` packages, or add a light background color on figures or tables.

Make code interesting. If you're documenting a program or language or markup with blocks of code examples, use the `listings` package to provide syntactically-colored or fontified listings.

“...it just makes you look better
to have a little color.”

Lady Bird Johnson
(out of context, but
nevertheless...)

Break up the text. Try not to have whole pages of text without a break. You may be able to introduce pull quotes (as above) or add marginal highlights. Talk to the author or editor about using deeper sectioning to deal with subtopics instead of lists.



Be useful. Indexes, glossaries, and heralded cross-references all add to the usefulness of a document, but sometimes fail to add to its usability by being non-obvious or too complex.

Alas, if you're presented with a fixed layout, you have to work within it, but there is usually some scope for adding visual interest without changing the style.

Afterthought: proofing the unproofable

When you get asked to typeset something for somebody, you are in a sense making yourself partly responsible for the content. Most of the time this isn't a problem, but it's not just what they say, it's how they say it. Quite apart from the 'greengrocer's apostrophe', as in 'Fresh Orange's' and the cognitive problems I have referred to before of line-breaks in

• All Golfers/Members & Non must register prior to teeing off at Hotel Reception.

Figure 3: Misplaced referent [Author's collection]

centered displays, there's a perennial difficulty with dangling misplacement.

In the case of Figure 3 it's the awkward expression of whom it applies to, and the fact that it's the registration which has to take place at the hotel reception, not the teeing-off (I checked: the first tee is a long way from reception).

Here, it's a trivial case which causes a smile and harms no-one. If you typeset it, no-one is going to come running with complaints, although you might get some good-natured flak from pedants.

• All golfers, members or not, must register at reception before teeing off.

In more serious circumstances, though (thinking of signs, posters, forms, or other critical documents relating to disease control), it could direct people to the wrong place, or exclude people for whom it is intended, or *vice versa*.

If you're asked to typeset material during a period of difficulty and pressure, it's important to take the time to read and understand what you're being asked to set, and suggest changes if you think they're likely to be misunderstood. Charles Fyffe, in *Basic Copyfitting*, has an important comment:

It is true, of course, that the copy should be correct when it comes to you, but it rarely is: and few people have the head for detail of a good typographer. In general, if *you* don't, no one else will correct the copy, and probably no one else has the ability. [2, pp. 59–60]

References

- [1] P. Flynn. *Formatting Information: A beginner's guide to formatting documents with L^AT_EX*. Silmaril, Cork, Ireland, Nov 2018. ctan.org/pkg/beginlatex
- [2] C. Fyffe. *Basic Copyfitting*. Studio Vista, London, 1969.
- [3] T. Oetiker, H. Partl, et al. The Not So Short Guide to L^AT_EX 2_ε: Or L^AT_EX 2_ε in 139 minutes, Feb 2018. ctan.org/pkg/lshort

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