

L^AT_EX, Again

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Recently, my attention was pointed to two opinion pieces why professional philosophers should think twice before starting to use L^AT_EX ([this piece by Josh Parsons](#) and [this piece by Richard Zach](#)). I agree that the choice is non-trivial. At the same time, I felt that these opinion pieces underplay or do not mention some striking advantages of L^AT_EX, and that some drawbacks are inflated.

For people who have no clear idea about L^AT_EX: it is superficially very similar to a markup language such as HTML. You prepare the document in a text editor. The document has a *preamble*, where you specify the settings for layout, call packages, etc., and a *body*, which contains the text without formatting. References are added automatically based on a separate bibliography file.

For typesetting logical and mathematical content, L^AT_EX is clearly superior to WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”) editors like MS Word, LibreOffice Write, etc. What is at stake in the debate is whether L^AT_EX is suited for academics who do *not* make heavy use of formula-based content. For example, if you do philosophy of language, ethics or hermeneutics.

I will provide some arguments in favor. In doing so, I focus on costs and benefits and avoid ideological arguments about what is good or evil in the IT World. At the bottom of the document, I provide some online resources.

Of course, the final choice depends on you, the way you like to interact with your writing tools, and how much you like or dislike changing habits. This is part of the comparison. The following arguments apply, in my opinion, to the average student or researcher in philosophy.

Advantages

1. It is easy to learn!

The most widespread prejudice about \LaTeX is that it is hard to learn and only for geeks. This is simply false. I am regularly teaching a \LaTeX crash course at the University of Turin with three or four meetings. After that, students are able to write documents independently and produce good-looking output. For their thesis, I provide a template that takes care of the global settings ([you can download the template and the course material here](#)). Recently, it was even used for a thesis in continental philosophy.

If you do not want to install a compiler and editor on your hard disk, just use Overleaf. (I prefer not to because I want to be able to work offline and be independent of a commercial platform, but that's another story. To get a taste of \LaTeX , Overleaf is alright.) This has the additional advantage that the built-in compiler is very generous about coding errors and compiles your document nonetheless.

What about debugging? First, if you use few or no maths, you do not have to debug much. This document compiled instantly. Second, if it happens, copy and paste the error message into your browser and tex.stackexchange.com will probably deliver the answer. If that fails, ask a LLM. Mostly, it will be a trivial typo that is easy to spot.

True: many things you can do with \LaTeX are possible with MS Word, too. But if you want to get a satisfactory, at least near-professional appearance, you need to study some features of Word, too. There is no free lunch.

2. It saves you time

Have you ever tried to format a complex MS Word document manually? Make the paragraphs look uniform, edit lists, use different font sizes for headings, subheadings and text, move your figures as to avoid ugly page breaks, and so on? I can tell you that it is very painful. Last-minute changes (e.g., implementing particular journal requirements) mean you can start all over again.

Since \LaTeX separates visual appearance from the content of the document, you focus on what you want to write (in plain text) and take care of the typesetting by means of global settings in the preamble of the

document. The compiler does the rest. Not your business.

Big publishing houses like Springer have also their LaTeX house style. But this just means that you call the corresponding package in the preamble. The rest is done by the program. (Okay, perhaps you need to tweak something here and there, but generally, it is a fast process.)

3. Professional Appearance

This is perhaps for geeks, but professional visual appearance matters for you, [LaTeX seems to have the winning hand](#) over its WYSIWYG competitors.

4. The Bibliography

Of course, bibliography managers like Zotero and JabRef can be used with Word as well as with LaTeX. But the interface with LaTeX is particularly nice. You cite with citation commands and the compiler adds all and only those references which you have effectively used. WYSIWYG editors do not offer a comparable mechanism. Yes, you can export your JabRef or Zotero entries into the MS Word bibliography manager, but then you have to deal with that ugly beast. Good luck.

Moreover, you can control the citation and bibliography style from the preamble of the document and simply adapt it to a particular journal. This is another time-saving feature.

Students find the bibliography management amazing and tell me it is one of the best features of LaTeX. I am still waiting to find somebody similarly enthusiastic about integrating MSWord with Zotero, Endnote or Jabref.

5. Float Management

Floats are tables, figures, diagrams, etc.: objects that can “float” in the document in order to optimize the visual result.

Have you ever refereed a psychology paper written in Word with “Figure 5 about here” etc., with the figures inserted at the end of the document? This is due to the fact that inserting them at the place where they should appear is very unstable in Word. You add a line of text somewhere and suddenly, you get an ugly page break. So people put them at

the end, which is a pain in the ass for the reviewer. In \LaTeX , the compiler takes care of choosing the proper place for the floats.

Back in the days, you had to type tables and diagrams (e.g., truth tables and causal graphs) by hand, which was annoying. Now there are various intuitive online tools for preparing them in a GUI (graphical user interface, e.g., [here](#) and [here](#)). After creating the table or diagram in the GUI, you simply download the code and import it into your document.

6. Big Documents

The advantages of \LaTeX are even more striking in big documents. A PhD thesis in Word is not exactly a pleasure to scroll. Sometimes, the program freezes, sometimes it crashes. Very annoying. If you insert a section somewhere, you have to change the numbers of the other section and the table of contents by hand. \LaTeX organizes everything automatically, including a table of contents with page numbers. You can also divide the document into independent files, which are then assembled by the compiler.

True: if you just want to write a brief document, like a memo or a letter, without particular attention to the layout, WYSIWYG editors are faster, and the advantages of \LaTeX are relatively unimportant. But for almost everything else, and in particular for any kind of research paper, I use LaTeX.

7. Presentations

\LaTeX comes with its own presentation package: beamer. Honestly, it has pros and cons. Generally, it is convenient to prepare presentations in your writing environment. You can easily export bits of text or formulas from the paper to the presentation.

The output tends to be a bit sterile. If you want lots of images and animations, use a dedicated program like PowerPoint, Keynote and Prezi. On the other hand, these features of beamer force you to avoid the common error of putting too much text on the slides. Generally, \LaTeX presentations are therefore well structured and easy to follow.

Bottom line: using \LaTeX for presentations privileges clarity over fancy visual effects, so it depends on what you want and whom you are talking to.

Disadvantages

Let us walk through the common arguments against using \LaTeX .

1. Conversion to Word

There are, unfortunately, some publishing houses that insist on the final, accepted manuscript being in Word. It is a minority, and contrary to what has been predicted by Parsons, their number is not growing—or at least I have not noted, being in the business for 20 years. Recently, we also published a paper in \LaTeX in the *Psychological Review*, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association. Psychologists are more conservative and obsessed with conventions than philosophers are, so that's probably something that would not have happened 10–20 years ago.

But yes, some publishing houses in philosophy (I recall Routledge and Taylor & Francis) want Word documents, and converting the manuscript by hand is nothing you want to do. Fortunately, John MacFarlane has done an immense service to the profession with [his pandoc program](#), which allows for conversion from and to LaTeX for a variety of languages. It is not perfect, and you will have to fine-tune, but it saves you the hard work.

Moreover, if you use few formulas, the conversion is simple. It is only an issue for symbol-laden papers, but journals that publish such papers accept \LaTeX anyway.

2. Collaborations (track changes, comments, etc.)

\LaTeX is good for *academic* writing, not for writing documents that pass through many hands before taking their final form. If you interact with your admins, do not write anything in \LaTeX because they want to revise and to reformat it according to institutional standards.

This does not mean that collaboration on a LaTeX document is difficult. Unlike WYSIWYG editors, \LaTeX has no native track changes function, but you can emulate it with the command `\sout{...}` which strikes out content, and add new text using a color `\textcolor{red}{...}`. Not super-elegant, but arguably a minor issue. I collaborate a lot in \LaTeX and never thought it was a substantive problem. There are similar macros for adding comments to the margins.

Perhaps you are an MA or PhD student. You want to submit a chapter to your thesis advisors. Since \LaTeX is not a WYSIWYG editor, they will have to insert comments into the pdf file produced by \LaTeX . That's perhaps slightly less intuitive than doing so in Word, but you can do exactly the same thing (mark text, add notes, etc.). I annotate both Word and pdf documents regularly and do not see a meaningful difference.

Concluding Remarks

Your final choice— \LaTeX yes or no?—depends on what kind of documents you write, and how much you like the WYSIWYG visual format. I have argued that even if you are not doing formal work, \LaTeX offers a lot of attractive features for academic writing. It will save you a lot of time in the long run, the drawbacks are minor and the initial investment (“learn \LaTeX ”) is not that big.

I quote from [another comparison](#), which I find quite fair:

LaTeX often presents a more challenging initial learning curve when contrasted with Word, which constitutes one of its primary drawbacks. [JS: not that much imho, see above] Nevertheless, it provides numerous advantages that can enhance the efficiency, professionalism, collaboration, and scalability of research writing. Researchers, book authors, editors, or journalists are those who benefit most from LaTeX.

In contrast, if you just need to write a simple document, a short letter, or a report, Microsoft Word is a better option for its user-friendly typesetting system. Your choice of software depends on your specific needs, familiarity with the tools, and the type of documents you want to create.

I close with a list of useful internet resources on \LaTeX .

- [Wiki book on LaTeX](#)
- [My own LaTeX resources](#)
- [GUI for generating diagrams](#)
- [GUI for generating tables](#)
- [Short summary of LaTeX presentation commands on the MIT site](#)
- [Overleaf tutorial for the beamer package \(presentations\)](#)