

Dear Lawyers: It's Not Word, It's You

By [Barron Henley](#) on March 4th, 2015

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“The ability to beat text into submission via formatting work-arounds and hacks does not indicate that you know how to skillfully use Word.”

Here are two important facts about Microsoft Word:

Fact 1: 100% 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 Word users have achieved domination. In my

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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 you know 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 Word’s most important features are either concealed or nearly impossible to figure out without research and training.

For example, the most important feature one must understand in Word is styles, and nothing in Word’s interface indicates this. Clicking around in Word will not reveal what styles 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.

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Having said that, styles are definitely not difficult or illogical for you to use once you understand them. To the contrary, styles are a wonderful formatting tool that allow you to completely control font-and-paragraph formatting in your documents in all situations. It’s just that these features are not easily mastered simply by using Word.

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The fact that mastering Word requires training isn’t the problem; the problem is that 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.

For example, I ran a quick search on Amazon for Word 2013 manuals. Here’s what I found:

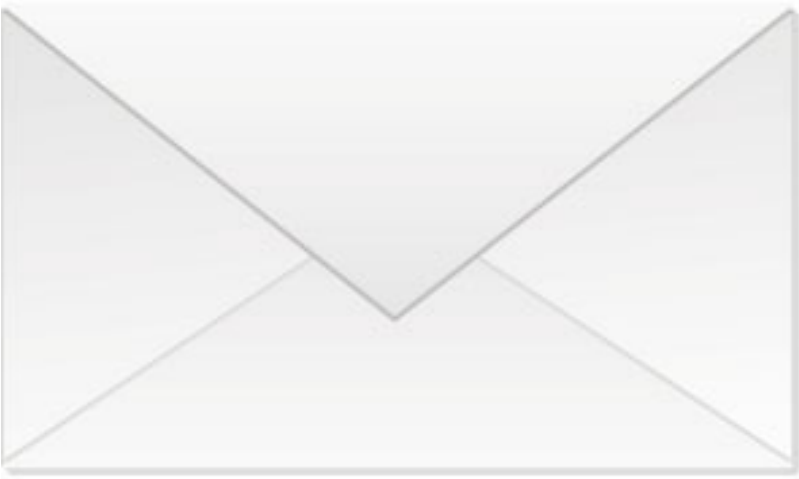
- *Microsoft Word 2013 (Signature Series)* by Rutkosky and Roggenkamp is 1,152 pages
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The page counts alone would indicate that there’s a lot more going on here than most people expect.

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In my experience, you can only build Word proficiency by working through comprehensive manuals 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 do not need to use.

“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.”

As a professional, you 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. You need to understand how to use Word’s table of contents and table of authority feature, how automatic paragraph numbering works, and how to control styles. These are precisely the kind of features ignored in Word classes designed for the general public. So it is important to find legal-specific training that will address these issues.

For years, I’ve heard experienced Word users complain that Word can’t do this and can’t do that. I always ask those complaining if they’ve ever read a whole manual on Word 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 David Copperfield magic trick. Once you learn how the program works, 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.

Featured image: “[Illustration of a monochrome cartoon character \(modified\)](#)” from Shutterstock.

 Legal Technology


 Microsoft Word

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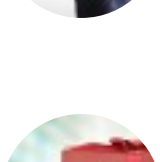
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