



Making the Move to OpenOffice.org

You might be willing to believe that you can get a complete operating system for no cost. You might even be able to accept that this offers everything Windows does and much more. But one stumbling block many people have is in believing a Microsoft Office-compatible office suite comes as part of the zero-cost bundle. It's a step too far. Office costs hundreds of dollars—are they expecting us to believe that there's a rival product that is free?

Well, there is, and it's called OpenOffice.org. It comes preinstalled with Ubuntu, as well as most other Linux distributions, making it the Linux office suite of choice. It's compatible with most Microsoft Office files, too, and even looks similar and works in a comparable way, making it easy to learn. What more could you want?

Office Similarities

OpenOffice.org started life as a proprietary product called Star Office. Sun Microsystems bought the company behind the product and released its source code in order to encourage community development. This led to the creation of the OpenOffice.org project, a collaboration between open-source developers and Sun. This project has released several new versions of OpenOffice.org, and at the time of this writing, the current version is 2.0. This is the version supplied with Ubuntu.

Note For what it's worth, Sun still sells Star Office. This is based on the OpenOffice.org code, so it's effectively the same program. However, in addition to the office suite itself, Sun includes several useful extras such as fonts, templates, and the all-important technical support, which you can contact if you get stuck trying to undertake a particular task.

OpenOffice.org features a word processor, spreadsheet program, presentation package, drawing tool (vector graphics), web site creation tool, database program, and several extras. As such, it matches Microsoft Office almost blow-for-blow in terms of core functionality. See Table 21-1 for a comparison of core packages.

Table 21-1. *How the Office and OpenOffice.org Suites Compare*

| Microsoft Office | OpenOffice.org | Function |
|------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| Word | Writer | Word processor |
| Excel | Calc | Spreadsheet |
| PowerPoint | Impress | Presentations |
| Visio | Draw ¹ | Technical drawing/charting |
| FrontPage | Writer ² | Web site creation |
| Access | Base ³ | Database |

¹ Draw is a vector graphics creation tool akin to Adobe Illustrator. Creating flow charts or organizational diagrams is one of many things it can do. For some reason, it is not on the Ubuntu Applications menu; to start Draw, open any OpenOffice.org application, and click File ► New ► Drawing.

² Writer is used for word processing and HTML creation; when switched to Web mode, its functionality is altered appropriately.

³ Writer and Calc can be coupled to a third-party database application such as MySQL or Firebird; however, Office.org also comes with the Base relational database. This must be installed separately—see Chapter 26.

You should find the functionality within the packages is duplicated, too, although some of the very specific features of Microsoft Office are not in OpenOffice.org. But OpenOffice.org also has its own range of such tools not yet found in Microsoft Office! OpenOffice.org does have a couple of notable omissions. Perhaps the main one is that it doesn't offer a directly comparable Outlook replacement. However, as we will discuss in Chapter 27, the Evolution application offers a highly capable reproduction of Outlook, with e-mail, contacts management, and calendar functions all in one location. In Ubuntu, you'll find Evolution on the Applications ► Internet menu. Evolution isn't directly linked to OpenOffice.org, but it retains the overall Ubuntu look, feel, and way of operating.

OpenOffice.Org Key Features

Key features of OpenOffice.org include the ability to export documents in Portable Document Format (PDF) format across the entire suite of programs. PDF files can then be read on any computer equipped with PDF display software, such as Adobe Acrobat Reader.

In addition, OpenOffice.org features powerful accessibility features that can, for example, help those with vision disabilities use the programs more effectively. For those who are

technically minded, OpenOffice.org can be extended very easily with a variety of plug-ins, which allow the easy creation of add-ons using many different programming languages.

Although OpenOffice.org largely mirrors the look and feel of Microsoft Office, it adds its own flourishes here and there. This can mean that some functions are located on different menus, for example. However, none of this poses a challenge for most users, and OpenOffice.org is generally regarded as very easy to learn.

File Compatibility

As well as core feature compatibility, OpenOffice.org is also able to read files from Microsoft Office versions up to and including Office 2003. Currently OpenOffice.org doesn't support Office 2007 files, although several projects are working on adding support, and it's likely it will be added soon. This is just one more reason why you should regularly update Ubuntu online in order to make sure you're running the very latest versions of each program.

Note It's fair to say that many people still use the older Office file formats, even if they're using the latest version of Office. This is done to retain compatibility with other users who may not yet have upgraded.

Although file compatibility problems are rare, two issues occasionally crop up when opening Microsoft Office files in OpenOffice.org:

VBA compatibility: OpenOffice.org isn't currently compatible with Microsoft Office Visual Basic for Applications (VBA), although work is being undertaken to allow this functionality. OpenOffice.org uses a similar but incompatible internal programming language. This means that Microsoft macros within a document probably won't work when the file is imported to OpenOffice.org. Such macros are typically used in Excel spreadsheets designed to calculate time sheets, for example. In general, however, only high-end users use VBA.

Document protection: OpenOffice.org is unable to open any Office files that have a password, either to protect the document from changes or to protect it from being viewed. Theoretically, it would be easy for OpenOffice.org's programmers to include such functionality, but the laws of many countries make creating such a program feature illegal (it would be seen as a device to overcome copy protection). The easiest solution is to ask whoever sent you the file to remove the password protection. For what it's worth, OpenOffice.org's has its own form of password protection.

If you find that OpenOffice.org isn't able to open an Office file saved by your colleagues, you can always suggest that they, too, make the switch to OpenOffice.org. They don't need to be running Ubuntu to do so. Versions are available to run on all Windows platforms, as well as on the Apple Macintosh.

Note Two versions of OpenOffice.org are available for Mac OS X: the standard release, which runs in an X window and is available from the main OpenOffice.org web site, and NeoOffice, which has been adapted to run natively within OS X. For more details, see www.neooffice.org.

As with the Ubuntu version, versions of OpenOffice.org available for other operating systems are entirely free of charge. Indeed, for many people who are running versions of Office they've installed from "borrowed" CDs, OpenOffice.org offers a way to come clean and avoid pirating software. For more details and to download OpenOffice.org, visit www.openoffice.org.

Once your colleagues have made the switch, you can exchange files using OpenOffice.org's native format, or opt to save files in the Microsoft Office file formats (.doc, .xls, .ppt, and so on). Figure 21-1 shows the file type options available in OpenOffice.org's word processor component's Save As dialog box.

Note OpenOffice.org also supports Rich Text Format (RTF) text documents and comma-separated value (CSV) data files, which are supported by practically every office suite program ever made.

When it comes to sharing files, there's another option: save your files in a non-Office format such as PDF or HTML. OpenOffice.org is able to export documents in both formats, and most modern PCs equipped with Adobe Acrobat or a simple web browser will be able to read them. However, while OpenOffice.org can open and edit HTML files, it can export documents only as PDF files, so this format is best reserved for files not intended for further editing.

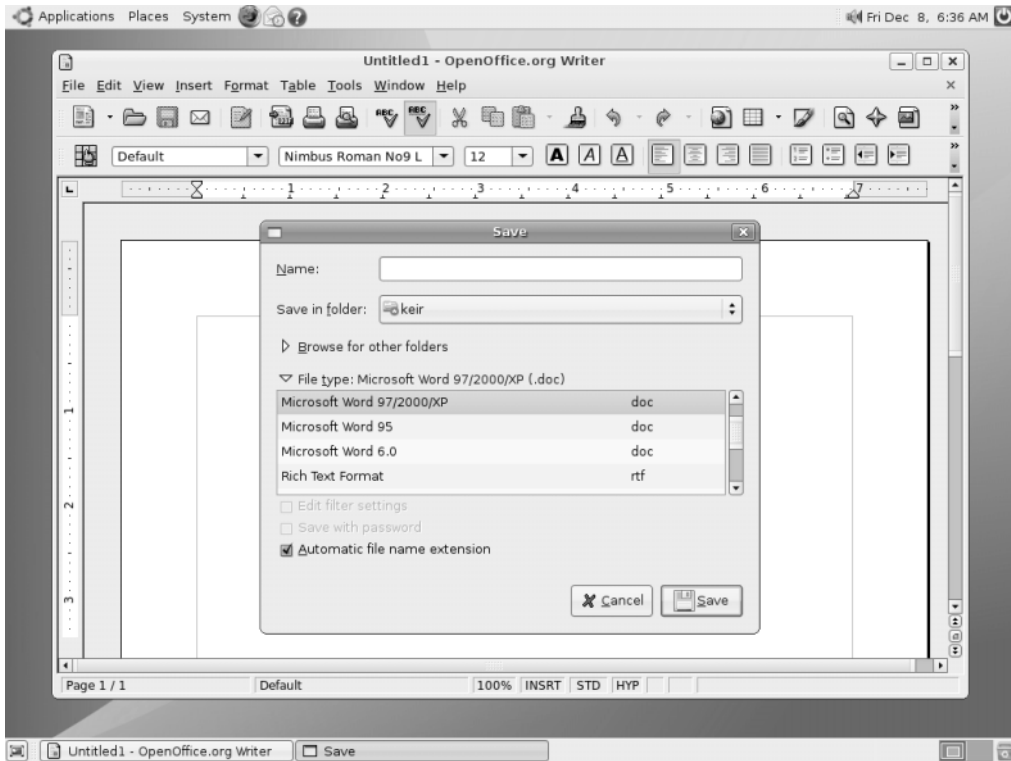


Figure 21-1. All the OpenOffice.org components are fully compatible with Microsoft Office file formats.

OPEN DOCUMENT FORMAT

One of the principles behind all open-source software is the idea of open file formats. This means that if someone creates a new open-source word processor, she also makes sure that the technology behind the file format is explained, so that other people can adapt their programs to read and/or save in that file format.

To meet the goals of open-source software, the OASIS OpenDocument Format (ODF) was created, and this is utilized in OpenOffice.org 2.0. This is a completely open and free to use office document file format that all software suites can adopt. The idea is that ODF will make swapping files between all office suites easy.

Sadly, Microsoft has decided not to support ODF and is sticking with its own proprietary file formats, although it has recently opened up the file formats and made a promise not to sue anybody who implements them in non-Microsoft software.

However, several local governments in countries all around the world have adopted ODF, and there's little doubt that ODF will become one of the main ways of disseminating and sharing documents online.

The Right Fonts

One key to compatibility with the majority of Microsoft Office files is ensuring you have the correct fonts. This is an issue even when using Windows. It's very common to open an Office document to find the formatting incorrect, because you don't have the fonts used in the construction of the document.

Although most Windows systems have many fonts, most people tend to rely on a handful of core fonts, which are default on most Windows installations: Arial, Tahoma, Verdana, Trebuchet MS, and Times New Roman (MS Comic Sans might also be included in that list, although it isn't often used within business documents).

You can obtain these fonts and install them on your Ubuntu system in several ways. Here, we'll cover two methods: copying your fonts from Windows, and installing Microsoft's TrueType Core Fonts. The latter method is by far the easier way of undertaking this task.

Copying Windows Fonts

If you dual-boot Ubuntu with Windows, you can delve into your Windows partition's font folder and copy across every font you have available under Windows. This method is useful if you wish to copy across *all* the fonts you use under Windows, such as those installed by third-party applications. If you wish to get just Arial and Times New Roman, you might want to skip ahead to the next section.

Caution Installing Windows fonts under Ubuntu is a legally gray area. Technically speaking, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able to use the fonts under Ubuntu. Purchasing Windows as well as any software running on it should also have meant you purchased a license to use the fonts. But the situation is far from clear. You'd be well-advised to read the Windows End-User License Agreement (EULA) for more guidance. This can be found in the packaging for your computer.

1. Click the entry on the Places menu for your Windows partition, so it is mounted and its icon appears on the desktop.
2. Click Applications ► Accessories ► Terminal. In the window that appears, type the following:

```
mkdir .fonts;nautilus /media/disk/;nautilus .fonts
```

This will cause two Nautilus file browsing windows to appear: one displaying the directories in your Windows partition and the other displaying your personal fonts folder (the first command in the line above creates this folder).

3. In the Nautilus window displaying the Windows directories, navigate to your Windows fonts folder. The location of this varies depending on which version of Windows you're using. On our Windows Vista test computer, it was located in the Windows/Fonts directory, but on our Windows XP Home test machine, it was located in the WINDOWS/Fonts directory. Remember that case sensitivity is important under Ubuntu!
4. Still in the window displaying your Windows font directory, click View ► View As List and then click the Type column header in the window, so that the list is sorted according to file extensions. Scroll down to the list of TrueType fonts, and select them all. This can be done by clicking the first, holding down Shift, and then clicking the last.
5. Click and drag all the TrueType fonts to the Nautilus window displaying your personal font directory. The fonts will be copied across and installed automatically. In some of our tests, this happened instantly, and there was no indication copying had happened (such as a dialog box).
6. Close any open program windows and start them again. You should find your Windows fonts are now available.

Installing TrueType Core Fonts

If you don't want to undertake the font-copying maneuver, you can download and install Microsoft's TrueType Core Fonts. This package contains common Windows fonts, including Arial and Times New Roman.

Note The fonts were made legally available by Microsoft in 1996 for use under any operating system—for more details, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Core_fonts_for_the_Web.

Here's how it's done:

1. Click System ► Administration ► Synaptic Package Manager. Enter your password to continue.
2. Click the Search icon, type `msttcorefonts`, and click the Search button. Click the check box alongside the entry in the results list, and select Mark for Installation. You'll be warned an additional program needs to be installed; this is fine. Then click Apply on the main toolbar to install the fonts. During installation you'll be warned that the fonts are part of a larger system called Debian Fonts Manager. You can ignore this. Just click Forward when it appears.

3. Close all program windows, click System ► Quit, and opt to log out of the system. Then log back in again. You should now find the Windows fonts are available in all applications, including OpenOffice.org, as shown in Figure 21-2.

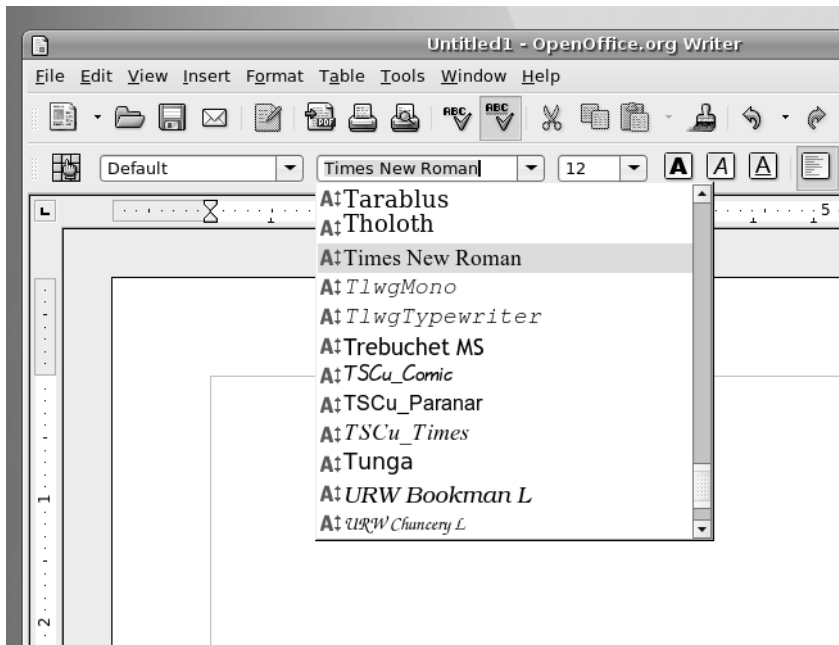


Figure 21-2. Vital Microsoft fonts are just a download away courtesy of the Synaptic Package Manager.

OTHER LINUX OFFICE SUITES

OpenOffice.org is widely regarded as one of the best Linux office suites, but it's not the only one. Its main competitor is KOffice. KOffice tightly integrates into the KDE desktop and mirrors much of its look and feel. It includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation package, flow-charting tool, database-access tool, and much more. As with OpenOffice.org, in most cases, you can load and save Microsoft Office files. For more details, see its home page at www.koffice.org. It's available with Ubuntu, too. Just use the Synaptic Package Manager to search for and install it.

In addition, there are several open-source office applications that aren't complete office suites. For example, AbiWord is considered an excellent word processor, which packs in a lot of features but keeps the user interface very simple. It's partnered by Gnumeric, a spreadsheet application that is developed separately (although both aim to be integrated into the GNOME desktop environment). For more details, see www.abiword.com and www.gnome.org/projects/gnumeric/, respectively. You can also find both of these programs in the Ubuntu software repositories (use the Synaptic Package Manager to search for them).

Summary

This chapter was a general introduction to OpenOffice.org, providing an overview of what you can expect from the programs within the suite. In particular, we focused on the extent of the suite's similarities with Microsoft Office and discussed issues surrounding file compatibility with Microsoft Office. We also looked at how Windows fonts can be brought into Ubuntu, which aids in successfully importing and creating compatible documents.

In the next chapter, you'll learn about the configuration options globally applicable to the suite, as well as common functions provided across all the programs.