

Microsoft Office vs. OpenOffice.org  
from the point of view of a college student.  
By Les Blake

In a world widely driven by monetary gain and sustained in large part by greed, it becomes necessary for poor college students to examine the options available to us. Whether you are an English major or whether you are actively seeking a degree in thermal nuclear tropical fruit, at some point in the pursuit of your degree you will be called upon to not only read papers and documents created by your professors but to also create and turn in various papers and reports, projects and presentations. So the question isn't one of will I have to do papers it is the question of "how" will I go about doing my thesis on radioactive bananas.

As we more closely examine the question of HOW, we encounter several options that seem plausible. And there really is no right or wrong answer. So for now let us narrow down the options to two, Microsoft Office and the open source OpenOffice.org.

OpenOffice.org has a plethora of wonderful advantages that lend to its strength as an aid to the common college student. First of all OOo writer is extremely style driven, it uses a method of formatting and control of page layout that is not only extensive but also very reliable and stable. OOo includes a free floating palette named oddly enough the Stylist. The Stylist is not only repositionable anywhere on the screen; it also makes the implementation of styles more convenient. Styles are determined by the user just one time and then are permitted to be implemented as needed.

Conversely, the method office uses to format the page and its content is much less efficient. It is done using a by paragraph or by line selection, then using various tools found in the toolbars in combinations to get the desired effect.

Other than styles one reason that OOo is a contender for the crown of College Student Office Suite King isn't that it has a ton of features that aren't available in Microsoft Office it's just that the features seem to run smoother and are more reliable in OOo than in Microsoft Office. Anyone that has ever tried to use numbers and bullets in Microsoft word knows that they can quickly get out of hand. Not to mention that while in Microsoft Word I find myself constantly going back to fix things that I have already fixed several times before.

OpenOffice.org also has some very cool functionality that is just not found in Microsoft Office. For example office comes with a PDF export filter built right in. And if you are writing a fifty page thesis, OOo has some very cool, and very stable functionality for large and long projects or books, not to mention its smaller file sizes, its true text frames, and its database connectivity.

Don't get me wrong, OpenOffice.org is wonderful, but it is far from perfect and Microsoft has some very useful and interesting advantages. Chief among these I would have to say is that a vast majority of people are using Microsoft Office, this means that it

is easy to find help and understanding of how to accomplish something in MS Office. That and compatibility with other peoples work is hugely increased if you are using the same suite that they are. You will not run into problems combining doc files from group members or adding slides to someone else's PowerPoint. OOo does have compatibility functions that allow users to save writer files as .docs and to open and view powerpoint in OpenOffice Impress, but I have heard of several problems occurring when people use these functions, sometimes they are amazingly stable and other times they just don't seem to work correctly.

Chances are you have already been exposed to Microsoft Office, and have been using it from an early age and are somewhat familiar with it. OOo does indeed have something of a learning curve when you first start using it. It may take some time to get to the same level that you are at in MS Office and as a busy college student you may just not have that time.

Also as you write your papers, they are going to be perused and graded by your professors, and professors are notorious for wanting things to be grammatically correct. Odd as that may seem, it is important to compile with that particular requirement. OOo doesn't come with a grammar checker. So you don't get the cool little green underlines when you have a run on sentence or when you forget to end a question with a question mark.

Another supposed advantage to MS office is the Graphical User Interface. It is smooth and very pleasing to the eye. OOo does a good job, but it simply isn't as smooth or neat and clean looking as its Proprietary Partner. In fact it can not unrealistically be said that the OOo interface is actually quite clunky. To me if it works who cares what it looks like, but there are people that prefer the smoother look, and that is enough to keep them from switching to OOo.

But in the end in my mind it all comes down to one main thing, Price. College students are going to school full time, they are working hard and time is important. Most college students have a definite monetary constraint, because it is just to hard to find a good quality full time job that doesn't interfere with school. OpenOffice.org is distributed freely as an open source project. Microsoft Office on the other hand, even with student discounts is very expensive.

Like I said at the beginning there really is no right or wrong choice, everyone's circumstances are different and for some people the price whether it is money or time, is worth it. Each person should do some personal research, and weigh the pros and cons of both OpenOffice.org and MS Office and decide what is right for them.