

Beginning OpenOffice 3

From Novice to Professional



Andy Channelle

Beginning OpenOffice 3: From Novice to Professional

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*For Alison.
Finally it's done!*

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About the Author



ANDY CHANNELLE is a writer, designer, and educator. He has written on the subject of Linux, open source, and other technical stuff since 2000 and teaches new media and journalism students at the University of the West of England. He writes regularly for publications, including *Linux Format* and *Mac Format* in the UK, and has had work published all over the world.

In the past, Andy has worked as a magazine editor, TV and film reviewer, technical author, information architect, new media consultant, web designer, and strawberry picker.

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On those occasional moments when not working, Andy likes playing the drums and guitar, reading novels and books on the history of science or philosophy, and losing at games of Mario Kart. He's been in the middle of writing a ground-breaking novel since 1999.

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■ **BRUCE BYFIELD** is a journalist who writes about free and open source software. He got his start by writing about OpenOffice.org and now writes regularly for *Datamation*, Linux.com, and *Linux Journal*.

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Introduction

Office suites are one of the most popular types of software, and most computer users will, at some point, find themselves staring at the user interface of a word processor, spreadsheet, or presentation package. Traditionally, office suites have been quite expensive packages, but thanks to the generosity of Sun Microsystems and a massive community of developers, writers, and testers, there is an alternative to shelling out hundreds of dollars or taking the risks (computer viruses, law suits) associated with downloading and running pirated editions of commercial software. OpenOffice.org (which is both product name and web address) is a piece of software that offers access to the most common features used in office environments, and some of the more uncommon ones too. In addition to being a great collection of applications, one of the revolutionary things about this “business class” software is that it costs less than your daily paper. In fact, anyone—individuals, businesses, charities, governments—can download and install OpenOffice.org for absolutely nothing. And this isn’t trial software; it’s not restricted in any way. Who said there’s no such thing as a free lunch?

A Tiny Bit of History

The suite started out as a proprietary product called StarOffice developed by StarDivision in Germany, but this changed when it was purchased by Sun Microsystems in 1999. Sun released the software under a permissive license in 2000 in the hope of gathering a community of developers around the application that would then build and improve upon it, allowing it to emulate the success of other open source projects such as the Mozilla browser suite, which spawned Firefox. The intention of the project is to compete with Microsoft Office, and it therefore borrows much of the structure of Microsoft’s flagship suite and also supports its file formats. The latest version of OpenOffice.org can open files created using Microsoft Office 2007.

OpenOffice.org’s native formats—collectively called the Open Document Format (ODF)—have been adopted as an international standard and are in use across a growing range of applications.

The latest version of OpenOffice.org has been released for Windows, Linux, Solaris, and, for the first time, as a native OS X application. Previously, it required users to run within an X terminal session. So with this version, it’s now possible to deploy the suite across an organization regardless of the operating system choices. The software itself is

divided into five main sections covering word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, database building, and illustration. These are complemented by a selection of smaller applications and a growing range of third-party plug-ins, which extend the available features considerably.

The StarOffice name lives on in Sun's “official” version of the OpenOffice.org suite.

The Applications



Writer is, for most users, the core of the application suite. It can be used for a wide range of text-based tasks from newsletter design and thesis writing to posters, flyers, and book production. *Writer* is also a very usable web-editing package that is ideal for creating templates for e-mail newsletters. Its equivalent in the Microsoft Office suite is *Word*, and *Writer* can open and save documents in both Microsoft's .doc format and .docx format from the latest version of *Word*. In addition to printed output, *Writer* also outputs standard PDFs, Rich Text (RTF) documents, HTML, and many other current and historical formats. The first three chapters of this book deal with documents in *Writer*.

Calc is the spreadsheet element of the software, which will be familiar to anyone who has used Microsoft Excel. *Calc* can open and save Microsoft Excel's .xls file format and includes support for the vast majority of the functions available in that package. In addition to being useful in large-scale accounting work, *Calc* includes options useful in managing household budgets, performing small business tasks, and producing table data for the Web. Chapter 4 works through the tools and options in *Calc*.

Impress is a presentation package that ships with all the tools you might find in Microsoft PowerPoint. As with the other parts of the suite, Impress opens and saves the ubiquitous Microsoft Office formats, in this case .ppt, and compares well with the competition. Impress features a large number of usable animations, effects, and transitions, and can use the many PowerPoint templates available on the Web, making the job of building engaging presentations a breeze. Impress can also output presentations in various formats suitable for distribution on the Internet or through more traditional channels, and it dynamically integrates data from other parts of the suite. Chapter 5 explores Impress.

Draw often seems like the black sheep of the OpenOffice.org family, but its extensive graphical prowess provides other parts of the suite—especially Writer and Impress—with some useful design tools. The package’s collection of standard shapes, lines, and fills makes it ideal for building flow chart diagrams and editing clip art for adding to word-processing documents or presentations. Chapter 6 runs through a basic Draw project.

Base is the newest element of the system and allows users to build, edit, and query small and large databases. These databases can be anything from a small address book of club members—perfect for creating mail merges in Writer—to more extensive asset-management applications complete with forms, multiple views, and role-based queries. Despite its power and complexity, you can build and manage small-scale projects in Base without advanced technical knowledge. Chapter 7 features a simple Base project capable of being adapted to much broader applications.

Although these applications are strong individually, the common OpenOffice.org core and the ability to take elements from one document and insert, paste, and migrate them into another makes this a powerful package.

About This Book

This book is divided into project-based tutorials that have been designed to expose as many of OpenOffice.org’s individual tools and features as possible. Although the projects may seem quite specific, the processes and tools discussed are transferable to many other office tasks. The projects themselves are based on real-world scenarios and will guide you from the basic options available in the suite to more ambitious uses. Additional tips and guides are included outside of the main text to help take your experience of the software even further beyond the tutorials.

This is not a book for elite hackers, rather it’s aimed at those approaching OpenOffice.org for the first time with the intention of getting the most out of the suite in the shortest time. You may have experienced other office suites, in which case, you’ll find many tools in expected locations, but it’s not a prerequisite. In fact, many of the skills, tools, and processes we’ll work through will be useful way beyond OpenOffice.org, and after you’ve mastered this, you should be able to sit down at any basic application on Windows, Linux, or OS X and feel confident that, with just a little exploration, the application will behave as you want.

The first part of the book is perfect for those who've been given a horribly tight deadline to put together a report, chart, or presentation or to format a long essay because it covers the most commonly used parts of the OpenOffice.org package. It begins with basic word-processing document creation and then moves on to cover the tools available that will allow you to create smart, consistent documents, spreadsheets, presentations, databases, and illustrations with the least effort.

After we've covered the main applications themselves, Part 2 looks at various ways of dropping content from one application into another, looks at document and author management, runs through the methods of output, and takes a quick tour through some of the essential extensions for the suite.

The screenshots used in this book were taken on a Linux PC (running Ubuntu Hardy Heron 8.04), but the key combinations, menu structures, and options are applicable to both Windows and Mac OS X, although on the latter, the Ctrl key should be transposed to the Apple key directly to the left of the spacebar.

Conventions Used in This Book

Graphical user interfaces can be difficult to represent in written form, but the method used in this book is as follows:

- Menu entries are shown with a ► between each element. You should follow from left to right; for example, File ► Save As launches the Save Document dialog box. Many menu entries contain an ellipsis, and for the purposes of visual clarity in the text, these have been removed from the written commands.
- Many options in the applications have associated key combinations. These are joined together with a + sign. For example, Ctrl+S saves a document, whereas Ctrl+Shift+S launches the Save Document dialog box.
- And finally, although OpenOffice.org is a perfectly serviceable name for an application, we'll often shorten it to OO.o, and individual applications within the suite will be referred to by their shortened names—Writer, Calc, and Impress.

Anything else will be explained in the text because, well, we need to crack on... there's so much to do!