

*whatsit*

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**whatsit.** A *whatsit* is an item of information that tells T<sub>E</sub>X to carry out some action that doesn't fit into its ordinary scheme of things. A *whatsit* can appear in a horizontal or vertical list, just like a box or a glue item. T<sub>E</sub>X typesets a *whatsit* as a box having zero width, height, and depth—in other words, a box that contains nothing and occupies no space.

Three sorts of *whatsits* are built into T<sub>E</sub>X:

- The `\openout`, `\closeout`, and `\write` commands (p. 'openout') produce a *whatsit* for operating on an output file. T<sub>E</sub>X postpones the operation until it next ships out a page to the `.dvi` file (unless the operation is preceded by `\immediate`). T<sub>E</sub>X uses a *whatsit* for these commands because they don't have anything to do with what it's typesetting when it encounters them.
- The `\special` command (p. 'special') tells T<sub>E</sub>X to insert certain text directly into the `.dvi` file. As with the `\write` command, T<sub>E</sub>X postpones the insertion until it next ships out a page to the `.dvi` file. A typical use of `\special` would be to name a graphics file that the device driver should incorporate into your final output.
- When you change languages with the `\language` or `\setlanguage` commands (p. 'language'), T<sub>E</sub>X inserts a *whatsit* that instructs it to use a certain set of hyphenation rules later on when it's breaking a paragraph into lines.

A particular implementation of T<sub>E</sub>X may provide additional *whatsits*.