Understanding and Using Tabs In MS Word

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Thank you to my wife, Nikki, for watching our kids while I wrote this and for proof-reading it when I thought I was done.

This document was created with love using:
MS Word 2000 and Photoshop 7 in Windows 2000 Professional

Word X, InDesign 2, and Acrobat 5 in Mac OS X: Jaguar
Photoshop 6 in Mac Classic Mode

Using and Understanding Tabs and Indents in MS Word

Trust me. I know that tabs and indents have caused some of you nervous breakdowns. If I promise that once you know a couple little-known secrets, they'll be your best friends, will you read on? Microsoft Word makes it even easier than most programs to generate pretty things like a price list separated by those little dotted lines (called leaders) and hanging indents without prescription medication.

Tabs have traditionally been used to indent the first line of a paragraph or to separate text into columns like the following example.

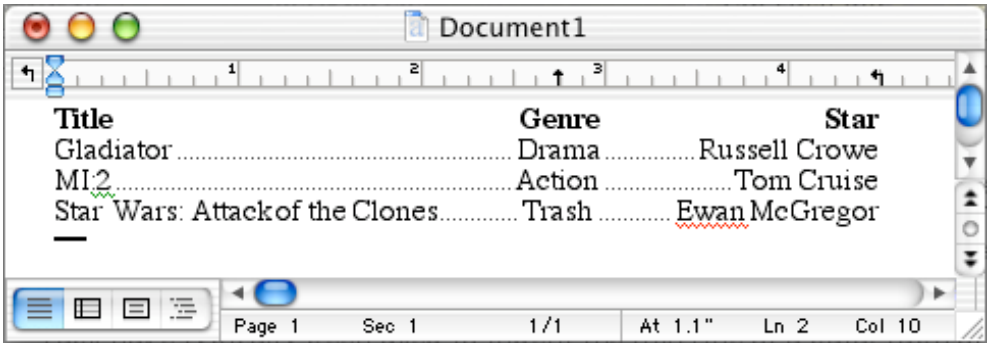
Mad Scientist **Location**

Frankenstein.....Geneva, Switzerland

Dexter.....His Laboratory

Steve Jobs.....Cupertino, California

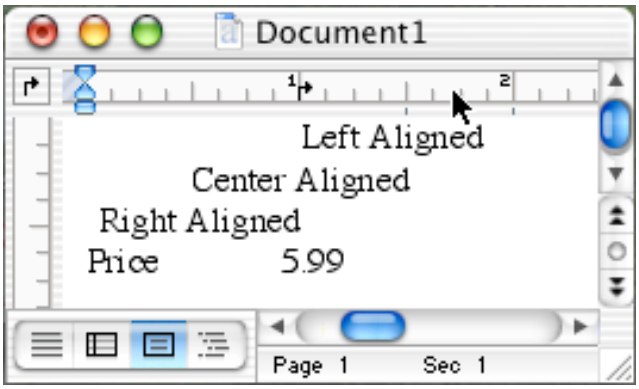
The example above uses one right-aligned tab at the 3.5" mark. I typed "Mad Scientist," a tab, and "Location." Using a combination of left, center, and right-aligned tab stops enables you to put the text in different "columns" with more flexibility for displaying text however you like.

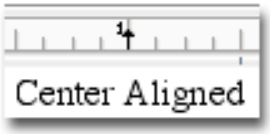


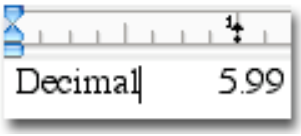
There are several types of tab stops:

- Left-aligned
- Center-aligned
- Right-aligned
- Decimal
- Bar

Tab stops are shown on the ruler as little arrows (with the exception of the Bar Tab).





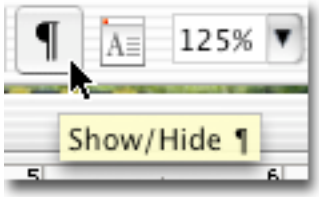


Bar tabs only show up in the text itself as follows:

Fire
Heavy Plow
Printing Press
Macintosh

Bar tabs aren't even really tabs at all – just pretty markers. The above example contains a bar tab at .25" and a Left-Aligned tab at .3".

Tabs are shown in your text by horizontal arrows if you click the Show/Hide button on the standard toolbar.



Note: In some cases, such as having several "columns" of data, you may just want to create a table.

You insert tabs in your text by pressing the tab key one or more times. To specify where the tab stops are, you click on the ruler (View -> Ruler) where you'd like them to be. If it were always that simple, however, no one would throw their hands up shouting obscenities from the next cubicle.

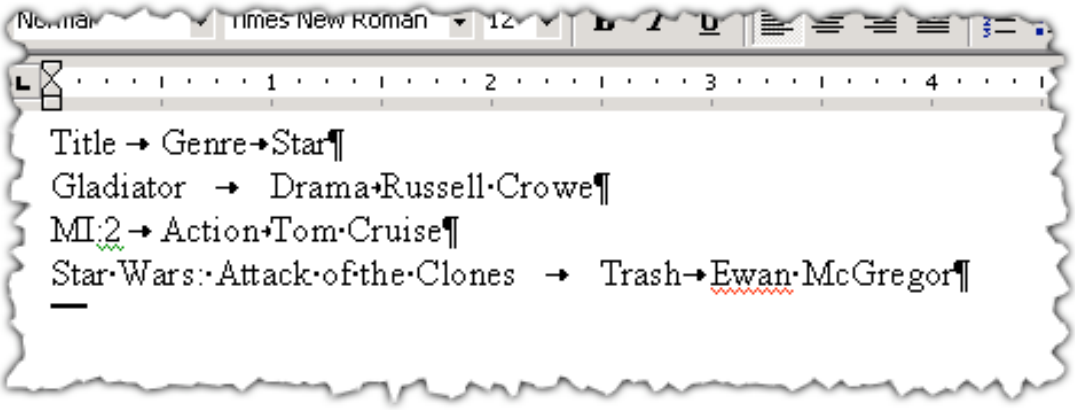
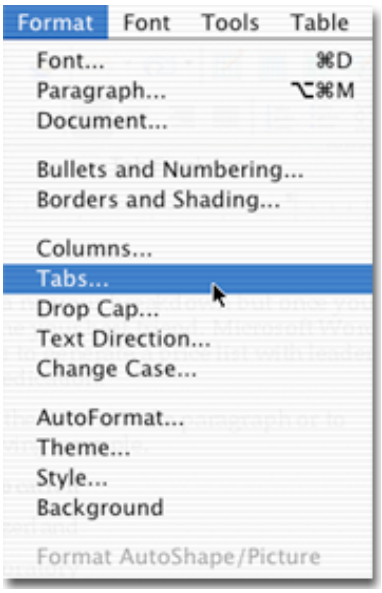


Figure 1



Setting Tabs

Figure 1 shows an attempt to create three columns of text created using the default tab stops. It's ugly because the text stops at the next tab regardless of what you typed. The default tab stops are spaced at half-inch increments.

You can change the default spacing in the Default Tab Stops field by clicking Format -> Tabs but that wouldn't help our table of movie trivia in Figure 1. Their distance wouldn't take into account different lengths of text. It would still be ugly – just in a different way.

Adding in your own tab stops is always preferable to pressing the tab key multiple times to insert multiple default tabs. Figure 2 below looks a little better, but if you add or delete text, you still have to add or delete those extra tabs to fix it completely. Tabs are supposed to decrease your workload, not increase it.

Note: You can also click the Tabs button in the Format -> Paragraph dialog box

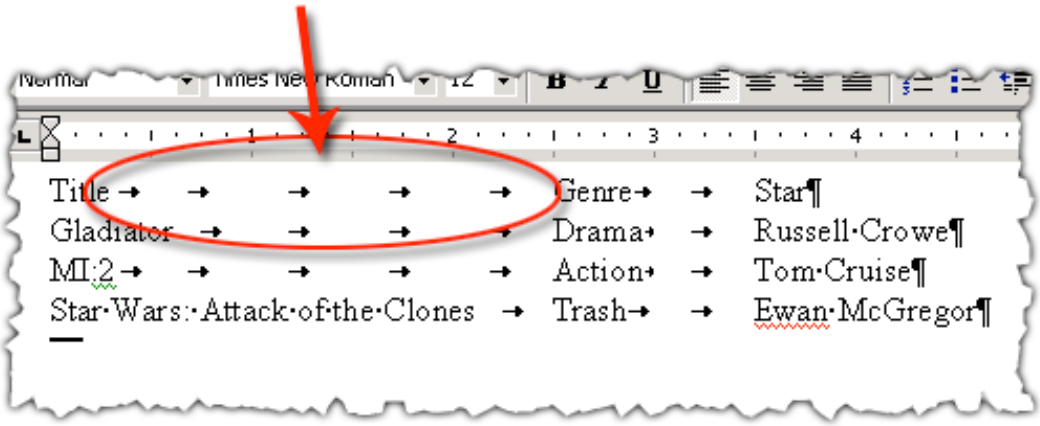


Figure 2

You can add your own tab stops by either clicking on the ruler or using the Format Tabs dialog box. When you add your own, the default tabs disappear so you've only got one tab to set for each column. If you still need extra room, you can just move the tab or change it's alignment.

Setting Tab Stops Using the Ruler:

1. **Select the paragraph(s) you want to have the tab stops.**

   Make sure you select every paragraph you want to change ("Select to Effect").

2. **Click the tab type button at the far left of the horizontal ruler (if you can't see the ruler, click View -> Ruler) until it displays the type of tab you want.**

   If you accidentally pass the tab you wanted, just keep clicking. I've gone through this Roundabout myself more times than I'd care to admit.

3. **Click on the ruler where you'd like the tab to go.**

   You're all done – this should have an immediate effect on your text. If you're trying to fix data that has multiple tabs in it, you could now delete the extras. This gives us the table seen below (Figure 3).

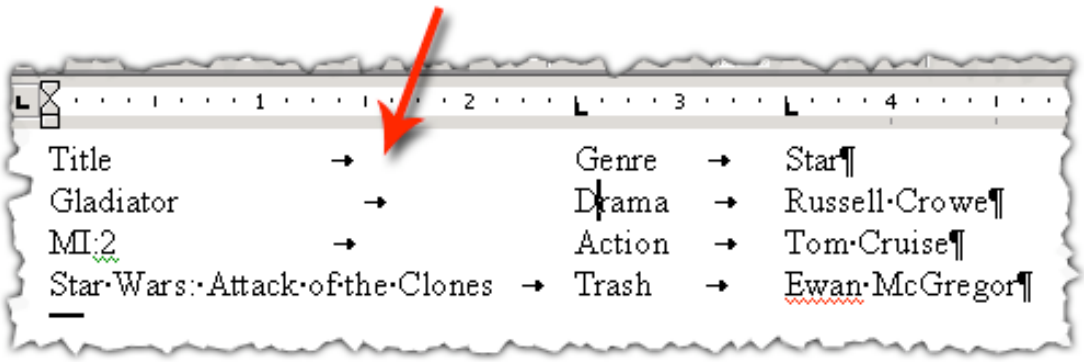


Figure 3

You can further modify the tab stops by moving them, changing their alignment, and adding leaders in the Tabs dialog box.

Note: Bar tabs cannot be added or displayed by the ruler.

Moving and Deleting Tabs

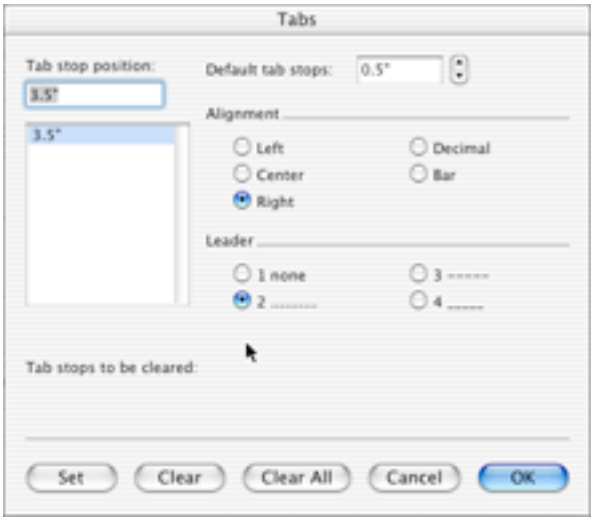
On the ruler, drag the tab left or right to move it. To remove it, drag it down off the ruler.

Leader characters

Once you've set your tabs you can format them with leaders (little rows of dots or dashes between tabs – like in a phone book separating names and numbers) in the Tabs dialog box.

In the Tab Stop Position field, create a new tab by typing in its position or select an existing tab. Under alignment, select the alignment for the tab stop, if needed, and click the leader option you want under Leader. Click Set and you're done.

Setting Tabs Using the Tabs Dialog Box



If you're not the type to do things visually and know the numerical settings off the top of your head, you can set them in the Tabs dialog box.

1. **Type the location in the Tab Stop Position field.**
2. **Choose the alignment.**
3. **Choose a leader, if desired.**
4. **Click Set**
5. **Repeat steps 1-4 as needed.**
6. **Click OK.**

You only need to set your tabs once if you do it before typing the bulk of your document.

If you press Enter or Return after a paragraph with tabs, those tabs carry over into the next paragraph. You can also insert a line break by pressing Shift+Enter or Shift+Return staying within the same paragraph (just on a different line). As an added bonus, this reduces the file size because there's less repetitive information behind the scenes.

As cool as this is, be aware that clicking after the *previous* paragraph and pressing Return means the new paragraph may have the default tabs. If this happens and you don't realize it until it's too late, you can always paste formatting from the paragraph you're happy with onto the other using the Format Painter.

Don't forget you can also include tab settings in Styles.

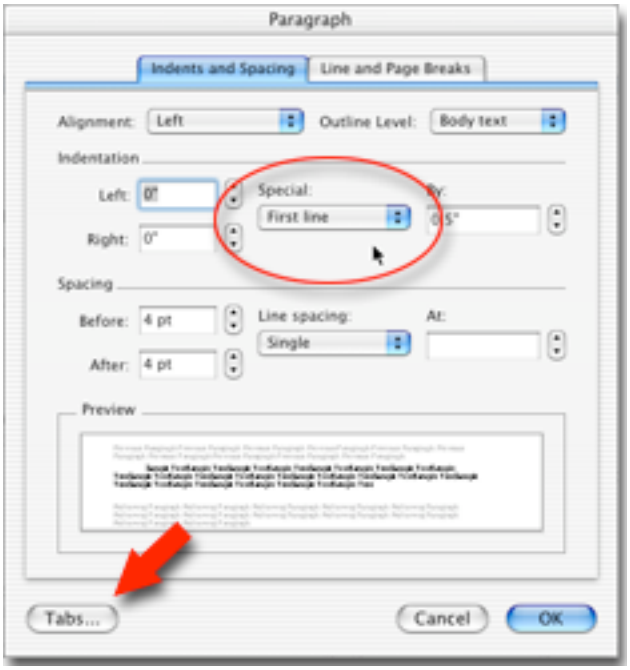
Understanding Indents

You really can't discuss tabs without discussing indents as well.

Most documents nowadays have a lines worth of space between them to separate them, but to create a traditional first line indent for a paragraph, look in your ruler and you'll see this symbol…

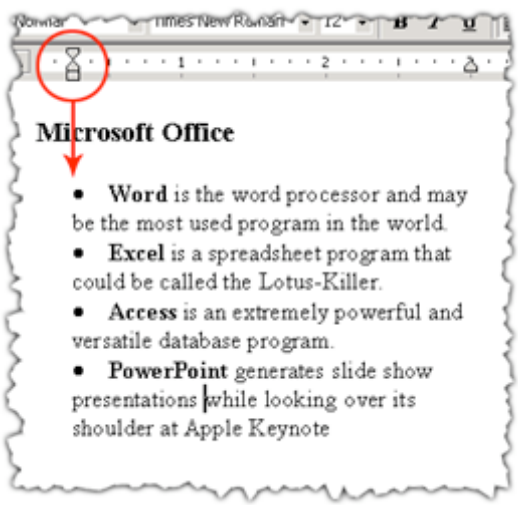
The top triangle-looking polygon is for the first line and the bottom polygon is for the Left Indent (the rest of the paragraph). The rectangle at the bottom moves both.

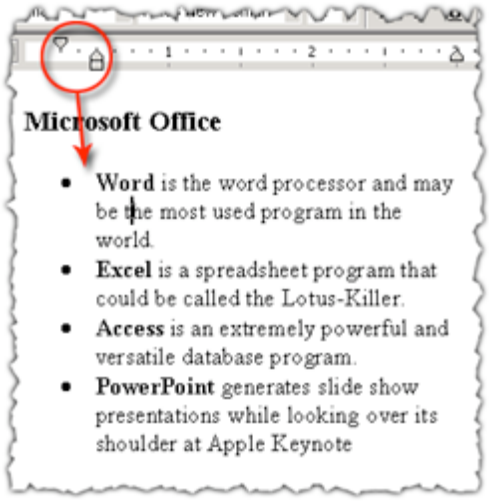
Drag the First Line Indent marker to the left and the selected paragraphs will have an indent as if you'd pressed tab (or five spaces in typing class). If you select all, each paragraph will automatically have a first line indent so you don't have to do it.



You could also do Format -> Paragraph and under Indentation, click the Special menu to choose First line and set the distance there.

That Left Indent (bottom) marker is also known as the Hanging Indent marker. Drag it to the right and you won't have those ugly bullet points that drive everyone nuts. Notice in the first screen shot the top and bottom markers are right on top of each other.





Note: In many cases you may just need to click the bullet button