M-x auto-fill-mode

Wraps your lines automatically when they get longer than 70 characters.

M-x flyspell-mode

Highlights misspelled words as you type.

M-x follow-mode

If you have a buffer displayed in two windows side by side, follow-mode forces them to scroll together such that the text displayed in the second window comes right after the text in the first window, and moving your cursor off the bottom of the left window causes it to appear at the top of the right window:

Some minor modes are global, i.e. they affect the behavior of the entire editor, rather than just that of a specific buffer.

M-x icomplete-mode

In the M-x prompt (and elsewhere), show completions as you type.

M-x iswitchb-mode

Show all buffer names when you switch buffers with C-x b.

See (info "(emacs)Minor Modes") for more information.

If you need help with a particular mode, C-h m describes the active major and minor modes. The mode description often lists important commands which are useful in that mode, which is helpful when you're learning to use a new mode.

The minibuffer

The minibuffer (the space at the bottom of the frame) is where Emacs prompts you for input in most situations: for a command, when you type M-x; for a file name, within M-x find-file; for an Elisp expression, within M-x eval-expression, etc. Here are some features common to most minibuffer prompts:

You can use most buffer editing and movement commands. You can move around in, kill text from, and yank text to minibuffers.

You can browse previous inputs to the current prompt using M-p and M-n.

Tab completion is often available. For example, the M-x prompt offers tab completion, so you needn't worry about typing long command names like M-x wdired-change-to-wdired-mode when M-x wdired-ch TAB suffices.

Tips for beginners

In the event of an emergency…

Here's what to do if you've accidentally pressed a wrong key:

If you executed a command and Emacs has modified your buffer, use C-/ to undo that change.

If you pressed a prefix key (e.g. C-x) or you invoked a command which is now prompting you for input (e.g. Find file: …), type C-g, repeatedly if necessary, to cancel.

C-g also cancels a long-running operation if it appears that Emacs has frozen.

Keyboard and terminal setup

Some Emacs users remap their Caps Lock key to act as an additional Ctrl key, because it is easier to reach. See instructions for moving Ctrl.

Due to your keyboard or terminal configuration, you may find that some keys seem to do the wrong thing:

If your DEL key is not working (sometimes, typing DEL brings up a help screen, as if you typed C-h), try M-x normal-erase-is-backspace-mode.

If your meta key is not working, in order to type a key that contains meta, you can instead type ESC, then the remaining keys. For example, ESC x is the same as M-x, and ESC C-s is the same as C-M-s.

Frequently asked questions

Emacs comes with a FAQ which explains how to perform many commonly requested tasks; press C-h C-f to read it.

Migrating to Emacs

Emacs has a number of options for easing the transition from other editing environments.

Emacs for Windows users

In Windows, the bread and butter editing commands are C-z, C-x, C-c, and C-v. Unfortunately, these keys are frequently used in Emacs for other purposes (suspend, prefix key, prefix key, and next page). You can get those keys back for Undo, Cut, Copy, and Paste by turning on "CUA mode" from the Options menu. CUA mode also lets you make a selection by using Shift in combination with movement keys, as you would do on Windows.

Since C-x and C-c are so integral to Emacs operation (they are prefix keys for many commands), CUA mode only binds C-x and C-c to Cut and Copy, respectively, when you have selected some text.

You can learn more about CUA mode by typing C-h f cua-mode RET.

Emacs for vi/vim users

Viper (M-x viper-mode) is a set of modes for emulating vi editing behavior in Emacs. It provides different levels of vi-adherence, depending on how vi-like you want your Emacs to be.

For more information about Viper, see (info "(viper)").

Emacs resources

The GNU Emacs Manual (C-h r) is the definitive guide if you want to learn more about Emacs. Some Emacs features have their own, separate manuals (C-h i d).

The GNU Emacs FAQ (C-h C-f) answers many questions that beginners have about how Emacs works and how to set it up to do particular things.

EmacsWiki contains information about many downloadable Emacs extensions, as well as tips for using and customizing Emacs.

You can ask questions on the help-gnu-emacs mailing list.

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