

TeX - LaTeX Stack Exchange is a question and answer site for users of TeX, LaTeX, ConTeXt, and related typesetting systems. It's 100% free, no registration required.

Take the 2-minute tour x

“Correct” way to bold/italicize text?

Is either of these considered better/more readable/more “proper”/more conventional than the other for making text bold? If so, what is the reason?

I like my text `\textbf{bold}`

versus:

I like my text `{\bf bold}`

`{best-practices} {bold} {italic}`

edited Jan 20 '12 at 12:58



Martin Scharrer ♦
139k 19 443 629

asked Jan 20 '12 at 4:00



Mehrdad
1,710 5 13 26

- 29 It is very simple: DO NOT USE `\bf` IN MODERN LaTeX DOCUMENTS! It is deprecated. Use `\bfseries` instead, which will work properly under the New Font Selection Scheme (NFSS) of LaTeX2e. About `\textbf` vs. `\bfseries` : There is no real difference, except that the latter will not read the text as argument and therefore work with verbatim content, but there you hardly use bold font anyway. See [Does it matter if I use `\textit` or `\it`](#) and [Will two-letter font style commands \(`\bf`, `\it`, ...\) ever be resurrected in LaTeX?](#). – Martin Scharrer ♦ Jan 20 '12 at 11:36

3 Answers

Marc van Dongen gave a great answer. I'll throw in another reason:

`\it` and `\bf` do not play well together. That is, they do not nest as one would intuitively expect:

```
{\rm Roman {\it Italic {\bf Bold-Italic}}}
```

Roman *Italic* **Bold-Italic**

oops! ☹

Whereas `\textit` and `\textbf` do play well together:

```
\textrm{Roman \textit{Italic \textbf{Bold-Italic}}}
```

Roman *Italic* **Bold-Italic**

ah, yes! ☺

This is nice. However, you may notice that it still fails to handle nested style adjustments to small caps, since the Computer Modern fonts do not contain slanted or bold small caps:

```
\textrm{Roman \textsc{SmallCaps \textsl{SlantedSmallCaps}}}
```

Roman SMALLCAPS *SlantedSmallCaps*

oops! ☹

If this is a problem for you, then what I recommend—and I just happened to learn about this yesterday—is the wonderful `slantsc` package in combination with the `\modern` package. `slantsc` provides, among other things, `\rmfamily` (roman), `\ttfamily` (typewriter/teletype), `\sffamily` (sans-serif), `\bfseries` (boldface), `\itshape` (italics), `\slshape` (slant/oblique), and `\scshape` (small caps). With these, small caps can obtained in slanted form:

```
{\rmfamily Roman {\scshape SmallCaps {\slshape SlantedSmallCaps}}}
```

As a bonus, `\slant` fixes `\textsl` to behave properly with `\textsc`, so you can continue using those if you like.

Alas, I haven't yet found a package which fixes the behavior of nested instances of `\textit`. In typesetting, when you nest italics, you're supposed to *come back* out of italics to roman. For example, the word "Titanic" below is in nested italics (which should ideally render as roman, not italics):

Tanaka, Shelly. *On Board the Titanic: What It Was Like When the Great Liner Sank*. New York, NY: Hyperion/Madison Press, 1998.

As a workaround, one can usually write `\textrm` to temporarily return to non-italics in those cases, but of course this is only valid if you know the exact number of nested italic levels, which may not always be the case, especially inside a macro.

Update:

As others have pointed out, `\textit` and `\textsl` do automatic italic correction, whereas `\it`, `\itshape`, `\sl`, and `\slshape` do not. Thus, you can write `\textit{stuff}`, but you must write `{\it stuff\}` or `{\itshape stuff\}` to get the same effect.

edited Jan 20 '12 at 16:12

answered Jan 20 '12 at 11:51



Todd Lehman

6,872 2 22 46

8 See above: *Don't use* `\bf` or `\it`. – Martin Schröder Jan 20 '12 at 12:57

1 Rather than nesting `\textit{...}` you should use `\emph{...}` which correctly reverts to roman inside of italics. – John Tang Boyland Apr 28 at 15:50

In *general* the command (`\textbf` / `\textit`) approach is more useful if the text is followed by more text on the same line and isn't followed by a small punctuation symbol. If the text is in a paragraph on its own or is followed by a small punctuation symbol, it doesn't matter really. In that case the declarations (`\bf` / `\bfseries` and `\it` / `\itshape`) are equivalent to the commands. As pointed out by others, the declarations `\bf` and `\it` are deprecated and should be avoided.

To see why the commands should be preferred, notice that `\textit` inserts an italic correction at the end, which adds a small horizontal compensation if the text ends in letters with long ascenders that would otherwise run into the next character. The declarations (`\it` and `\itshape`) don't insert an italic correction.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth row in the following shows why the commands may differ from the declarations. In the fourth row you get a proper italic correction, in the fifth and the sixth you don't and this results in the `ff` ligature running in to the `h`.

```
\documentclass{article}

\usepackage{booktabs}

\begin{document}
  \Huge
  \begin{tabular}{lll}
    \toprule
    \verb|\textbf{fluff} hair| & & \textbf{fluff} hair
    \\ \verb|\bf fluff} hair| & & {\bf fluff} hair
    \\ \verb|\bfseries fluff} hair| & & {\bfseries fluff} hair
    \\ \midrule
    \verb|\textit{fluff} hair| & & \textit{fluff} hair
    \\ \verb|\itshape fluff} hair| & & {\itshape fluff} hair
    \\ \verb|\it fluff} hair| & & {\it fluff} hair
    \\ \bottomrule
  \end{tabular}
\end{document}
```

<code>\textbf{fluff}</code>	hair	fluff	hair
<code>{\bf fluff}</code>	hair	fluff	hair
<code>{\bfseries fluff}</code>	hair	fluff	hair

<code>\textit{fluff}</code>	hair	<i>fluff</i>	hair
<code>{\itshape fluff}</code>	hair	<i>fluff</i>	hair
<code>{\it fluff}</code>	hair	<i>fluff</i>	hair

EDIT: Undeleted at 2012-12-09.

edited Dec 9 '12 at 15:42

answered Jan 20 '12 at 4:33



Marc van Dongen

812 3 39 69

3 `\documentclass{memoir}\begin{document}\bf` bold results in an error. Classes are *not* required to support the two letter commands, so I think it's better to avoid them altogether. – [egreg](#) Jan 20 '12 at 9:57

1 See above: *DONT USE* `\bf` – they come from LaTeX 2.09, which is *OBSOLETE*. – [Martin Schröder](#) Jan 20 '12 at 12:56

First of all you should not use the obsolete `\bf` or `\it` macros from LaTeX 2.0. They do not use the new font selection scheme (NFSS) of LaTeX 2e. So `\bf` will do bold and bold only, but will not mix with an italic setting, which makes bold-italic impossible. Use the new `\bfseries` macro instead.

There is not much practical difference between `\textbf{<content>}` and `{\bfseries <content>}`. I would say most people use (for short texts) the first usage because it follows the common `\somemacro{<content>}` LaTeX style. The latter should be used if you want to make the rest of an environment/group bold, of course.

You should note that `\textbf` uses `\bfseries` internal, so the latter is a more fundamental macro. The definition of `\textbf` is:

```
\ifmmode
  \nfss@text {\bfseries #1}%
\else
  \hmode@bgroup
  \text@command {#1}%
  \bfseries \check@icl #1\check@icr
  \expandafter
  \egroup
\fi
```

So `\textbf` switches to text mode inside math mode, while `\bfseries` apparently doesn't. It also adds checks for italic correction before and after the content, which is a great feature of LaTeX 2e.

One benefit of `\bfseries` is that it doesn't read the content as an argument, which would interfere with catcode changes required by verbatim content and other special code.

In summary I recommend `\textbf` for smaller texts, mainly because of the italic correction, and in math mode. `\bfseries` is IMHO more intended for environments and larger texts. One notable exception is if you have bold and italic (etc.) combinations, then you could write `\textit{\bfseries <content>}`, to avoid two sets of braces, but this is more a fashion choice. You should not use `\bf` in modern LaTeX documents.

answered Jan 20 '12 at 12:55



Martin Scharrer ♦

139k 19 443 629
