

# *docbot*, a Markdown to PDF converter

Tom Gidden <tom@gidden.net>

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v.1.0

<https://github.com/tomgidden/docbot>

## Introduction

**docbot** is a Markdown-to-PDF converter using:

- *Docker* - a containerization engine
- *Pandoc* - a document format converter
- *PagedJS* - an library for paginating HTML
- *Chromium* - a PDF renderer ;)
- some CSS, fonts, and some minor glue scripts.

It's not rocket science, but it's fiddly and usually not worth spending the time to assemble into a single utility. That's what this is for.

**Note:** This utility is unrelated to any other project called **docbot** ; I created an unreleased utility using DocBook to PDF via XSL-FO 15 years earlier and previously in various forms back to 2000, and historically just called them **docbot** or similar.

## Installation

The utility is packaged as a Docker image, as the dependencies are messy. You can pull down the image from Docker Hub:

```
docker pull tomgidden/docbot
docker tag tomgidden/docbot docbot
```

or you can build it yourself. To build the image, run:

```
make build
```

or manually:

```
docker build -t docbot .
```

Due to the inclusion of *Chromium* the image footprint is over 1GB.

## Usage

Given a Markdown file `foo.md`, run:

```
make foo.pdf
```

That's it.

## Customisation and development

```
DEBUG=1 make foo.pdf
```

That should do three things:

- Use the current `assets` folder rather than the baked-in copy in the Docker image;
- Use the current folder's `md2pdf.sh` rather than the baked-in copy in the Docker image;
- Preserve the intermediate `tmp` folder, containing the generated HTML file.

As a result, you can tweak the CSS and other things in `assets` and quickly see the result without having to rebuild the Docker image.

For example, a dev workflow might look like this:

```
DEBUG=1 make -B foo.pdf && open foo.pdf
```

Once you're happy with the style, you can build your own version of the image and use it anywhere without having to also transfer any assets.

# Styling

The current CSS is a simple Humanist “white-paper” layout typical of my general tastes. I was influenced in my youth by the original 1995 Java™ white papers and other documentation from Sun, and this is somewhat simplified version. It’s very rough-and-ready, but it does enough for me right now. I have been wondering if it’s worth having multiple themes somehow.

## Document metadata

To support the top front-matter in a Markdown file, you can include a YAML block at the top of the file delineated by `---` and `...`; see this `README.yaml` file for an example.

Unfortunately, other Markdown renderers (notably *GitHub*) may include this as garbled nonsense in their output.

If this bothers you, you can include the YAML as a separate file next to the Markdown instead, eg. `foo.md` and `foo.yaml`.

## Metadata entries

- `title` - The title of the document. If not included, the first top-level heading ( `#` ) in the document will be hoisted to the title. It seems weird to leave the title out of the bare Markdown, but this hoisting behaviour is a little unusual.
- `date` - A block containing `month` and `year` to be displayed in the front-matter.
- `revision` - A revision number, to be displayed in the front-matter and the footer.
- `copyright` - An optional copyright attribution to be included in the page footer. If set, it will be preceded by ‘©’, the year (determined either from `date.year` or `year` in the metadata, or the current year), and then the attribution.

- `footer` - An optional text to be included in the page footer, added to the copyright if there is one.
- `docbot_features` - See below

## Example metadata:

```
title: Set this or just let it use the first `#`

date:
  month: September
  year: 2024
revision: First Draft
authors:
- firstname: Tom
  surname: Gidden
  email: tom@gidden.net
- name: D. C. O'Author
  affiliation: Institute of Documentarian Affairs
- firstname: Harold
  surname: L'astname
  affiliation: Institute of Documentarian Affairs

copyright: Tom Gidden & Institute of Documentarian Affairs
footer: Confidential

docbot_features:
- no_wide
- no_wide_pre
- shade_monospace
- strong_monospace
- narrow_monospace
```

## docbot\_features

The document metadata see above can include a `docbot_features` line or list that contains a few optional choices controlling formatting. These can be left in but ignored (ie. disabled) by prefixing them with `no_`, or just removing them.

These include:

- `wide` - Don't indent the main body text. This gives extra space, useful especially for pre- and code-blocks, but at the expense of the left margin.
- `wide_pre` - Don't *further* indent pre-formatted text blocks. Again, extra space, but less easily read.
- `shade_monospace`, `shade_pre`, `shade_code` - Use a light grey background for monospaced font material, or just block (`_pre`) or inline (`_code`) sections. This is to further distinguish from the main text.
- `strong_monospace`, `strong_pre`, `strong_code` - Use a bolder font for monospaced. By default it uses a lighter font to try to distinguish from body text, but this goes the other way.
- `narrow_monospace` - Use a narrower font for monospaced content, to try to get it to fit nicely on a page.
- `justify` - Use full justification for body text. I like this, but some of my designer friends say it's bad and ragged edge makes for better typography.
- `strong_href` – embolden hyperlinks to make them stand out.

## Adding a logo

If there is a file `logo.svg` in the `assets` folder, it will be used in the top-right header box.

# TODO

- *TOCs*
- *Better images.* You can put things in the `assets` folder that can then be referenced for use in `DEBUG=1`, and you can (presumably) use remote URL files. However, there's no easy way to pass them into the container for processing at this time. More thought needed.
- *Improved layout.* This is still a work in progress.
- *Themes.* Multiple CSS options in `assets` that could be selected with the metadata.
- *Comprehensive support for the format*
- *HTML, EPUB, etc.* Given the use of *Pandoc* these should be very simple to support. I'm just an old fart that likes neat A4 documents even if I never actually print them out.

Any feedback, assistance or code contributions welcome.

# Licence

I hereby release the parts of this project I have written freely under Creative Commons CC0 1.0, but this clearly does not apply for any of the sub-components it uses nor the fonts in the `assets` folder which are released under their own licenses: OFL and the GUST/LPPL license as appropriate.

Attribution and code contributions would be nice though.