

Word vs. FrameMaker

one technical writer's opinion

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Summary

This document is one person's view of the relative benefits of Word 97 and FrameMaker 5.5 for Windows. It reflects the experiences and opinions of one person only — the author.

The document was written in FrameMaker 5.5.3 under Windows NT, printed to a file using the Adobe PostScript driver (5.0 for NT), and converted to a PDF file using Acrobat Distiller 3.0.

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Overview

What This
Document Is
About and What
It's Not About

Writers, especially technical writers, have to produce many different kinds of documents (letters, specifications, data sheets, white papers, brochures, reference manuals and users guides, *etc.*) in many different kinds of formats (printed, HTML, online help, electronic publishing, *etc.*). Often the same text must be published in several formats. Is there a "one tool—one source" solution available? Is it possible to write once and publish many times? What's the best tool — Word or FrameMaker?

Asking "Which is better: Word or FrameMaker?" is the same as asking "Which is better: a fork or a spoon?" Obviously, the task at hand has some bearing on the answer. Dinner tables are set with both forks and spoons, so there is apparently some appropriate use for each of these tools. People buy and use both FrameMaker and Word — many writers have both installed on their computers — so there is apparently some appropriate use for each of these tools as well.

This document is not an attempt to answer the question "Which is better: Word or FrameMaker?" but rather an attempt to provide some guidelines for deciding which to use for a particular task.

Disclaimer

This is one person's opinion, based on one person's experiences, and should not be regarded as Holy Writ on the subject. The opinions expressed here are those of the author, and not those of his employer or anyone else associated with him.

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Ease-of-Use

GUI Compatible

I used the Windows GUI for both Word and FrameMaker, and it's no contest: Word uses the GUI best. In FrameMaker, there are a lot of quirky, annoying times when you just know that a window wasn't designed with Windows in mind.

Probably the most important GUI feature missing from FrameMaker is the drag-and-drop. You can't move text around by moving it. FrameMaker has a "quick copy" feature (good for copying, but not for moving), and of course the old "select-cut-set cursor-paste" sequence. Word is way ahead on this one.

Typing

AutoText

Only Word has this very convenient feature. If I had written this document in Word, I would have been able to type "FM" and Word would have expanded the "FM" to "FrameMaker" when I pressed F3. Or even better, I could have defined "FrameMaker" as the correct spelling of "FM" and Word would have made the substitution automatically.

FrameMaker has no such feature, so I had to type its name out — 10 letters — every time. Word's is better, easier to use and better integrated with the GUI.

Spell Check

Word Count

Word counts words, paragraphs and characters. FrameMaker counts only words.

Options

Word's Options window has ten tabs and about a hundred options. FrameMaker's has eight options.

Programming

Macros

Word is way ahead of FrameMaker in this area. FrameMaker for Windows doesn't even have a macro language. Word has a rich macro language that is standard across most Microsoft Office applications.

Since FrameMaker for Unix does have a macro language, one can assume that eventually FrameMaker for Windows will have one too. If you are using Word macros to link to other applications, you'll just have to forget about it if you switch to FrameMaker.

Conditional Text

Only FrameMaker has this wonderful tool for maintaining multiple versions of a document in a single file.

Fields

Word lets you display the contents of fields so that you can modify them by hand.

FrameMaker doesn't let you do this directly. There are many cases where you can modify (what in Word would be) a field by selecting something from a menu, but you don't have the complete freedom (to fix and to ruin) that Word gives you. If you are really desperate and don't mind risk-taking, you can save the document as an MIF file and fix it by hand¹.

Formatting

Page Layout and Flows

FrameMaker lays out a page based on frames: text frames, graphic frames, etc. Each body page in a document has an associated master page (usually, these are First, Right and Left), and the text flows automatically from one frame to another on consecutive body pages.

A master page can also hold background text and graphics for body pages. Word has this concept for headers and footers only.

If you want to do a newspaper style layout, where articles continue to pages other than the next one, then it's relatively easy to do with FrameMaker. I don't believe this can be done in Word at all.

Paragraph Styles (Tags)

Both Word and FrameMaker have them, but Word's are hierarchical, which is a great time saver if you want to make major changes. Since in practice, there are usually only two underlying styles (body text and headers), you can change everything by changing just two styles.

In FrameMaker, paragraph styles are not heirarchical, so if you want to change a document's font, you have the individually change the font of each and every paragraph tag. If you are really desperate and don't mind risk-taking, you can save the template as an MIF file and fix it by hand.

¹ This is recommended for professionals only. Don't try this at home.

Character Tags	Both Word and FrameMaker provide this very useful feature. A character tag is like a paragraph tag, except that it can be applied to text within a paragraph. So, for example, you can have a character tag named “code” that you can use to format a few words of program code as Courier (like this: a few words of program code), while leaving the rest of the paragraph as is.
Side Headings	This can be done in Word, but it’s awkward, unreliable and suffers from all of Word’s faults in dealing with frames. (For an example of a side heading, see “What This Document Is About and What It’s Not About” on page 1). In FrameMaker, it’s very easy.
Footnotes	Word provides endnotes and FrameMaker does not. Only FrameMaker lets you have multiple references ² to the same footnote ² .
Tables	Word does a better job of using the GUI for creating tables than FrameMaker does. That said, FrameMaker has better tools for the job than Word does. In FrameMaker, tables have styles and properties, in the same way that paragraphs do. In Word, each table is a separate entity and must be individually formatted. In FrameMaker, an entire tab in the Paragraph Style designer window is devoted to formatting a paragraph when it appears in a table cell. There is no corresponding feature in Word. In FrameMaker, a table’s caption is one of its properties. FrameMaker knows which are the heading rows and which are the body rows, so if a table is continued on another page, the caption and heading rows are automatically repeated on the second page, and you can add the word “continued” to the caption if you like.
Tables Inside Tables	It’s tedious to do this in FrameMaker, because you have to put the inner table in an anchored frame inside a text frame inside a cell of the outer table. In Word, thanks to its really great use of the GUI, you just do it.
Run-In Headers	FrameMaker provides this feature. Word does not. A run-in header is a header paragraph that prints on the same line as the next paragraph, like this: Definition of a Run-In Paragraph — a header paragraph that prints on the same line as the next paragraph. You can’t see this looking at the text, but there really are two paragraphs here on the same line. This feature is useful when you want to reference the run-in header, but don’t want to set it off in a printed paragraph of its own. Word has its own way of doing this, though it doesn’t have run-in headers.
Kerning	FrameMaker provides this little-used feature. Word has something called “character spacing,” which is something less than the real thing.
Templates	
Word	A template is a special kind of file, and a document always “remembers” the template it’s derived from (or was last attached to). When you attach a document to a template, most but not all of the template’s properties are imported into the document. For example, the page layout and header and footer formats are not imported. You have no way of choosing which properties to import — Word decides for you.
FrameMaker	In FrameMaker there’s nothing special about a template — it’s just another document, and there is no record of the template that a document was last attached to. You can choose which properties to import, according to categories. Also, you can import properties from any file, not just from templates.

² Note that are two references to this footnote on this page, both with the same number. Try that in Word.

Graphics

Drawing

Both Word and FrameMaker come with drawing tools. FrameMaker's are more sophisticated than Word's, but both suffer from the drawback that the graphics they create are embedded in the document. This is bad for two reasons:

- It's difficult or impossible to re-use the graphic in another application.
- The size of the document file increases very quickly.

The recommended plan-of-attack is to use another tool (say, Illustrator or Corel Draw) to create the graphic, export it as a WMF or EPS file, and then import it into the document by reference. This means more files and more steps, but also modular and re-usable files.

Word is at a significant disadvantage here: even if you import a graphic by reference, Word keeps a copy of it in the file, inflating the file size. Both Word and FrameMaker handle the reference itself the way they handle references in general (see "References" on page 4) — Word very badly, and FrameMaker very well.

Positioning

FrameMaker gives you many more options regarding positioning a graphic on a page, anchoring it to text, and running text around it.

References

Word

To insert a cross reference in Word (something like: see "References" on page 4), you have to mark off the referenced text and define it as a bookmark. Then, somewhere else in the document, you insert a reference to the bookmark.

This two-step method has the advantage that the reference can be to any text, anywhere in the document, even to a few words in the middle of a paragraph. It has the disadvantage that the bookmarks are unstable and the references are easily corrupted.

For example, suppose you made an entire Heading 3 style paragraph a bookmark and referenced it. Later, after you've forgotten that the Heading 3 style paragraph is a bookmark, you decide to insert another Heading 3 style paragraph and some accompanying text before the original Heading 3 style paragraph. The easiest way to do this is to put the cursor down at the start of the Heading 3 style paragraph and press Enter. This gives you a new Heading 3 style paragraph. Then type the text of the heading, press Enter and type some body text.

The result will be that all the new text you typed, including the Heading 3 style paragraph, becomes part of the bookmark you forgot about, and the reference to it now includes that text.

Another problem is that Word just doesn't care about a document's integrity (the validity of its references, for example). If Word can't resolve a reference, it substitutes an error message something like "Error. Reference cannot be found" and continues printing. If the reference is to another document, then a successful resolution depends on what the current directory is (this is not necessarily the current document's directory). I once printed a whole book with that error message in place of what had been, until only a few minutes before I created the file that I sent to the service bureau, a perfectly valid reference.

FrameMaker

In FrameMaker, cross references are built in. You can reference any paragraph, and the result of the reference can be any combination of the paragraph's text and its properties.³ It's very easy to reference something in another document — just select it from a menu.

Unfortunately, if you want a paragraph's text, you get all of it. There is no way to get only part of a paragraph, as you can in Word. If the text you want is at the beginning of a paragraph, then you can use the run-in header feature (see "Run-In Headers" on page 3).

A very important feature is that FrameMaker tells you when a reference goes bad, whether it's a cross-reference or a graphic file imported by reference. You will never unknowingly print a document with error messages instead of text.

³ In FrameMaker, a paragraph's number is one of its properties, not text in the paragraph.

In FrameMaker, a cross-reference is a live hypertext link in the document. If you click on it, FrameMaker takes you to the referenced text.

Tables of Contents

Word

The TOC can be anywhere, in a separate file by itself or in another file. To include headings from other files in a TOC, you can use the RD field, but you must maintain the list yourself.

FrameMaker

The TOC is always generated in a separate file. This is fine if you are using the book feature (see “Book” on page 5), but annoying if all you want is a little mini-TOC at the start of each chapter (like the one in “In This Document” on page 1). There is no “good” way to do this in FrameMaker.

The generated TOC entry is a live hypertext link in the document. If you click on it, FrameMaker takes you to the source of the TOC entry.

Indexes

Word

The index can be anywhere, in a separate file by itself or in another file. To include entries from other files in a index, you can use the RD field, but you must maintain the list yourself.

FrameMaker

The index can include markers of any kind (useful for tracking down strange goings-on in a file) and is always generated in a separate file. This is fine if you are using the book feature (see “Book” on page 5), but annoying if you are not.

The generated index entry is a live hypertext link in the document. If you click on it, FrameMaker takes you to the source of the index entry. This feature is very useful for debugging, especially for index entries that don’t have page numbers (for example, “see such-and-such” entries), where Word offers no help in locating the source.

Multi-Book Index

Suppose you have two books: *The Great Soup Cookbook* and *The Great Pie Bakebook*, and you want to generate a combined index for both, with index entries something like this:

apples *Soup* 23, 45, 55, *Pie* 34, 56, 72

There is no way to do this Word, but you can do it quite easily in FrameMaker.

Books

Word

Master Document

Word’s “way of thinking” is confined to individual documents. If you want to create a book, that is, a document made up of a number of “chapters,” you must either manage them individually or use Word’s Master Document feature. The bad news is that this feature is poorly designed; the worse news is that it doesn’t work.

Page Numbering

If you want to continue page numbering across chapters (say Chapter 4’s last page is 54 and you want Chapter 5 to start on page 55), then you have to manually set the starting page numbers for each chapter yourself. Since this method is tedious and error-prone (you’ll have to redo this *every time* you print, including draft copies), many writers prefer to use the chapter number-page number method (Chapter 4’s pages are numbered 4-1 to 4-whatever, Chapter 5’s are numbered 5-1 to 5-whatever, and so on). This is pretty easy to do (but not automatic).

If you want each chapter to begin on a right page (as many technical manuals do), then you’re on your own. You’ll have to manually add the missing pages to flesh out each chapter to an even number of pages⁴.

Table of Contents and Indexes

If you want a TOC to refer to more than one file, you must add hidden RD fields to the TOC file, in the correct order.

Adding a New Chapter

If you add a new chapter in the book or change the sequence of the chapters, you must manually readjust all the chapter numbers and RD fields yourself.

FrameMaker

Book

FrameMaker has the concept of a book file, which is a collection of other files in a certain sequence. There are two kinds of files in a book file: ordinary and generated. Examples of a generated file are: table of contents, table of figures, index, etc.

⁴ It may be possible for the service bureau to add the blank pages, as long as you use the chapter number-page number style of numbering pages.

Other Formats

Page Numbering	<p>To create a generated file, just tell FrameMaker what kind of generated file you want, and where to put it in the book. FrameMaker takes care of the rest.</p> <p>If you want to continue page numbering across chapters (say Chapter 4's last page is 54 and you want Chapter 5 to start on page 55), then you have to set up each file and define its page numbering as "continue". You can "restart at 1", for example, if you want multiple series of page numbers in the book — the preface and TOC in Roman numerals, and the book itself to start at 1 (Arabic) and go on from there. FrameMaker then handles this for you automatically.</p> <p>If you want each chapter to begin on a right page, check an option in a dialog box. FrameMaker adds the missing pages automatically, and takes care of the page numbering for you.</p>
Table of Contents and Indexes	<p>These are handled automatically as part of the book.</p>
Adding a New Chapter	<p>If you add a new chapter in the book or change the sequence of the chapters, FrameMaker readjusts all the chapter numbers and page numbers automatically.</p>

Other Formats

HTML

Word has HTML editing built in, and it's easy to convert a Word document to HTML (although this feature is still buggy and uses all kinds of Microsoft-proprietary HTML codes). With FrameMaker, the only really useful tool is expensive and a real resource-hog, but it works. The tool Adobe provides for free (HoTaMaLe) is pretty much useless for anything longer than a few pages.

Online Help

There are lots of Word-based tools for making Windows Help from Word documents. With FrameMaker, you must save the document as an RTF file, and then use RoboHelp or some similar tool. Either way, if you want really useful and informative online help, you will not be able to work with one source, whether you're using Word or FrameMaker or any other tool. Good online help is too differently structured from good printed documentation.

Adobe PDF (Portable Document Format)

Word doesn't know anything useful about Acrobat or PDF. FrameMaker preserves cross-references as Acrobat links in the PDF file. You can see this feature in action by clicking on any of the entries in the mini-TOC in "In This Document" on page 1.

Printing

Books

When the time comes to wrap it up and push a book out the door, FrameMaker helps you get through the frantic last-minute "excitement" faster and with fewer screw-ups than Word. FrameMaker's files are stable, the cross-references are there to stay, and there are no surprises with page numbering.

FrameMaker's book feature makes it easy to print a whole book at once. Page numbering is handled automatically.

In Word, you have to print every chapter separately, but it's easy enough to write a macro to do this.

Crop Marks and Registration Marks

FrameMaker generates crop marks and registration marks automatically. In Word, you have to draw them yourself, as part of the header, and worse: you have to position them on the page very carefully (differently for every page size).

Conclusion

My answer to the "Word vs. FrameMaker" question is this (and remember that this is one writer's personal humble opinion): Word is a word-processor, and FrameMaker is a desktop publishing system. Word is okay for the secretaries and the engineers to use for their letters and inter-office memos, but if you want to do a book, use FrameMaker.