

The ABCs of PDFs

PDF stands for Portable Document Format. PDF files are, for the most part, read-only documents that preserve document formatting, including fonts and graphics, across many platforms. Simply put, it's a great way to send documents to a variety of recipients because it will be readable on their computers, and look just as you created it, regardless of the hardware or software owned by your recipient. As well, the read-only aspect of PDFs discourages plagiarism.

The concept of PDF was introduced in 1991 by the co-founder of Adobe Systems, John Warnock. The idea was to sell software to create PDFs, but offer free software to read PDFs. (Incidentally, the PDF format was proprietary before it became an open standard on 01Jul2008.)

Now, let's get down to the 3 basics of PDFs: How can one read, create, and edit a PDF document?

Of the three, reading a PDF is usually the easiest. Most computers already have a PDF reader installed, so reading a PDF document on your computer or online can be as simple as clicking on it. If you don't have a PDF reader installed, you can get any one of a number of them for free. Adobe Reader (formerly Adobe Acrobat) is the most common.

Creating a PDF used to require a separate \$600 piece of software from Adobe, but now there are many built-in, free, or inexpensive options. Some software products (e.g. Adobe products, Microsoft Office, OpenOffice) allow you to simply "save as PDF". Add-on tools are typically inexpensive (or free) and very easy to use: you install it like a printer driver so to create a PDF from your favourite program you simply hit print, choose the PDF printer from your printer list, and tell it the name and location to save to. One very popular PDF writer add-on product is CutePDF.

Editing a PDF is now possible. Although this (unfortunately) kills the read-only aspect of PDFs we once had, it does give us increased flexibility. For one, you can fill out PDF forms electronically instead of printing them and filling them out by hand. Editing a PDF can be tricky, but you have several options ranging from free to \$150. One totally free option is available at pdftoword.com: for \$0.00, you submit a PDF, and it will email it back to you, converted to DOC (Microsoft Word) or RTF (Rich Text Format). There are free trials of full-blown PDF software packages like Nitro PDF and Foxit that are typically about \$100 once the trial ends. Adobe now offers their Professional package for \$449, but I'm not sure why ... with all the other available options.

Note: All of the free, trial, and paid PDF tools mentioned in this article are available from download.com.



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