

Tips for Making the Switch to Apple

by David Epstein

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Macs are elegant; Macs are powerful; Macs are, for the time being, remarkably safe from infection. But when people tell you that Macs are "intuitive," you're well within your rights to sneer. In my ten years of using Macs, I've found them no more intuitive than Windows PCs, perhaps even a little less so. If you're a recent or prospective switcher, you might avoid some trial and error by dipping into the following grab bag of factoids and advice.

FILE MANAGEMENT

Just like Windows, Mac OS X organizes information as files within directories. Beyond that, there are differences that may take a few seconds to puzzle out, and some that will be more frustrating—it largely depends on your computing style. If you like to use the keyboard more than the mouse or trackpad, and if you like to customize everything possible, these tips should save you a fair bit of time and annoyance.

Right-click. You probably already know that life with Windows is made easier by right-clicking wherever possible to view the context menu. Contextual options are just the ticket to learning more about what you can do in any particular situation. On a Mac, right-click is Ctrl-click. Depending on which Mac hardware you're using, you can also configure your mouse or trackpad to respond to actual right-clicking (you'll find that option under Apple | System Preferences). Whichever way you do it, do it constantly and you'll never stop learning.

Find the Finder. The Finder—Apple's rough equivalent of Windows Explorer—is what lets you navigate files and folders on your Mac. (People have strong opinions on the relative merits of the two interfaces; I'll keep mine to myself and just mention a few differences.) You'll know you're in the Finder, as opposed to another application, because the word Finder will appear on the top left corner of the screen. After that, pressing Cmd-n (don't press Shift to make it a capital or it'll be a different command) will open a folder-navigation window. If you prefer, you can do this in one step by clicking on the little blue smiley at the far-left side of the Dock. Just like Windows Explorer, Finder is always open, even if there's no Finder window open. As you navigate through the window (say, by double-clicking on a folder to show its contents), you're using the Finder. You're also using the Finder when you perform basic housekeeping functions such as dragging a file from one folder to another.

Open files in various ways. As in Windows, you can double-click on a file or application icon to open it. If you're slow of mouse-thumb, other options are to press Cmd-o or Cmd-DownArrow. Just don't expect to open a file by pressing Enter! In Windows this opens a file; in OS X, it lets you edit the filename.

Customize the Finder view. You can set preferences in the Finder, but—in a prime example of what isn't intuitive about a Mac—most of these preferences are not in the Finder's Preferences menu. Instead, they're hidden under the View | Show View Options menu—and the options here will differ in accordance with how you're currently displaying files (as icons, as a list, or in columns). Take some time to explore the

settings here; they can make a big difference in your everyday interactions with the Mac.

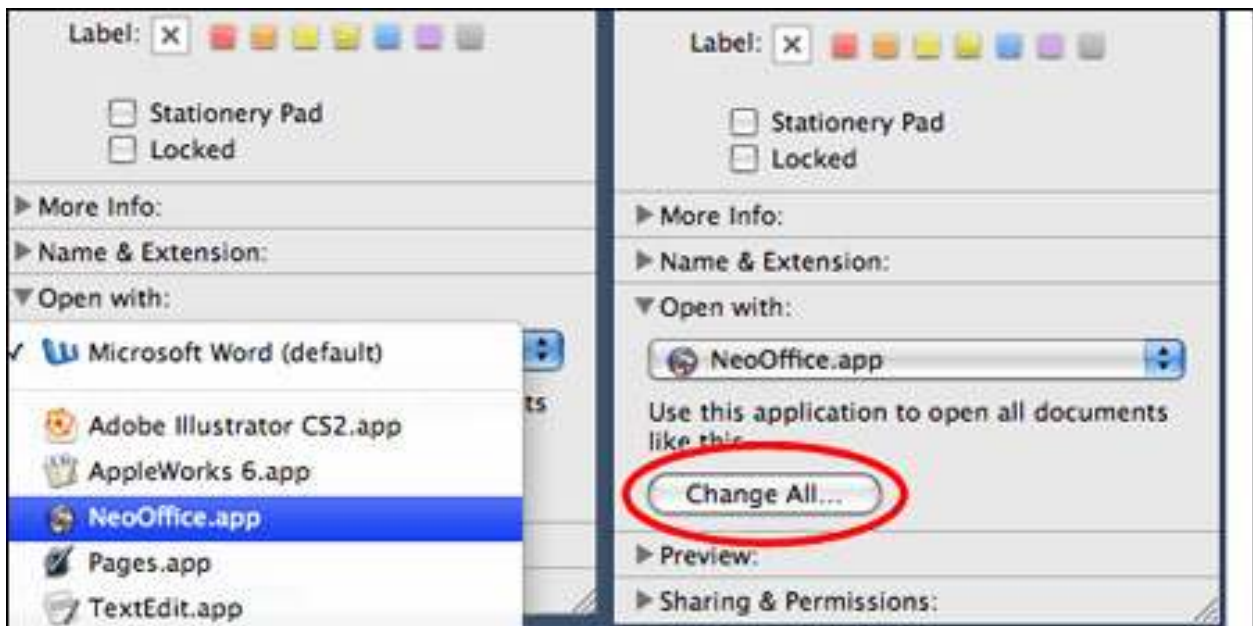
Choose your sidebar. One thing I recommend, for convenience, is to customize what appears in the left-hand sidebar of folder-navigation windows. You can do some of this under Finder | Preferences | Sidebar, and you can also drag elements (such as folder icons) directly into the sidebar, or pull them off. This is a good way to make your commonly used folders more quickly available to you.

Display extensions. Another thing I recommend, for the sake of avoiding surprises or confusion, is to go into Finder | Preferences and check Show all file extensions.

Understand a key difference: extensions. Speaking of file extensions, Macs do use them the same way Windows PCs do—to determine which application should open a file—but this is a relatively recent development, and it continues to coexist with the Mac's older way of doing things: Some files are stored with a property called creator, which, if present, can override the effect of its filename extension. You'll probably never need to view or change a file's creator (though there are third-party utilities that let you do so); I mention this mostly so that you'll know why your Mac can sometimes open a file whose name has no extension. The Save dialogs in some Mac applications will give you the choice to use extensions or not. Definitely use extensions if you plan to send files to your Windows-using friends. Your Mac might know that MyWordFile should open in Word, but Windows won't—the file needs to be called MyWordFile.doc.

Customize file associations. And speaking of determining which application opens a file, there are at least two ways you can customize that.

1. To open a file with a particular application just once, Ctrl-click on the file's icon and choose Open with....



2. To make a choice that your Mac will remember, Get Info on the file (select the file, then press Cmd-i), go into the window that will pop up, and set the Open with option. You'll have the option of applying your choice to all such files (for example, you can choose to have every JPEG open with Photoshop instead of Preview).

3. Here's a quick-and-dirty third way that will never occur to the average Windows user: Just change the extension. For example, a plain-text file that ends in .txt will normally open in the Mac's TextEdit utility, but if you change its extension to .doc, it will open in Word.

Change icons. Now that you know how to "get info" on a file or folder (Cmd-i), you also know how to change its icon. Just drag and drop (or paste) an image onto the icon that appears in the upper left-hand corner of its Get Info window. The image should be approximately 128 by 128 pixels.

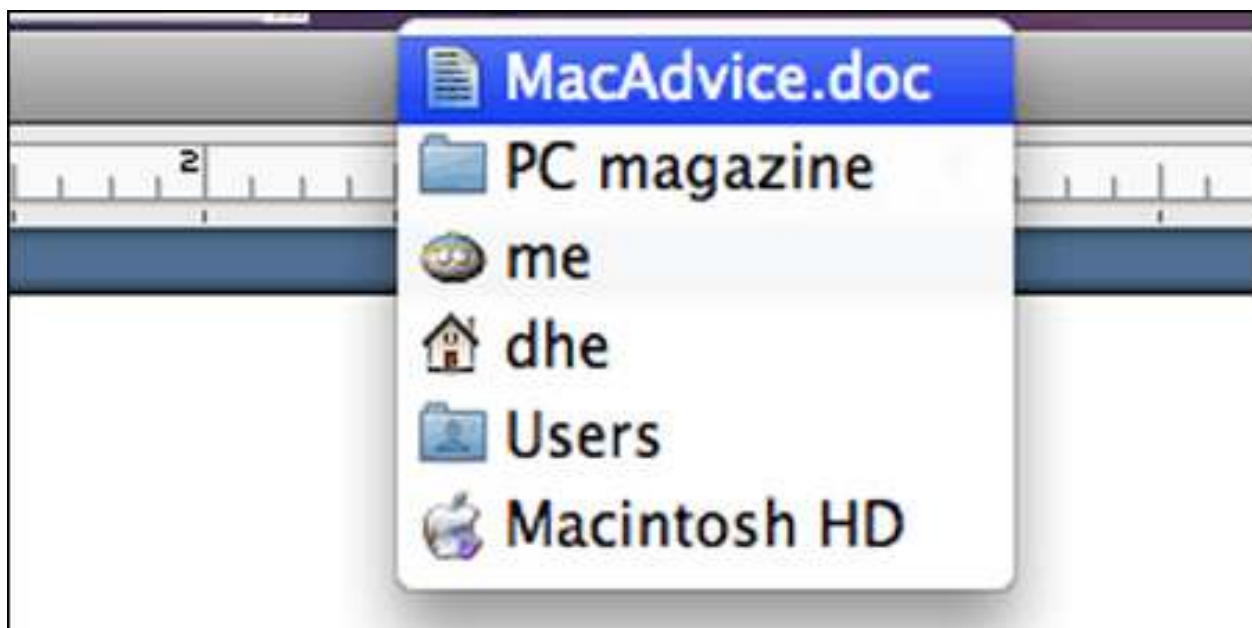
FINDER TIPS AND TRICKS

Here are few more things that should improve your relationship with the Finder:

No regrets. Cmd-z will undo whatever you just did in the Finder.

Move on up. Cmd-UpArrow will go take you to the folder one level up from the one you're currently in—that's called the "enclosing folder" or the "parent directory."

You are here. This one's beautiful: Cmd-clicking directly on the name of the folder (at the top of its window) will give you a navigable drop-down display of its path—meaning that you'll see what folder it's in, and what folder that's in, and so on, and you can click on any of the folder names to navigate directly there.



Better still, this trick also works for most documents: If you're working on a Word document and you have no idea what folder it's actually in, just Cmd-click on the document's name at the top of its window, and you'll be immediately oriented.

If you liked the Windows option of always displaying your path (the Address bar) as you navigated through folders, you can have the Finder do the same: Find the option under View; check Show Path Bar. For me, the most efficient way to use the Finder is to keep everything in List view (so that you can always see dates and file sizes) while keeping the Path Bar displayed at the bottom so that you can, say, move a file up to its enclosing folder.

Universal preview. The Quick Look feature lets you take, well, a quick look at the contents of a large number of files without bothering to open the applications associated with them. Just select the files' icons—as many files as you like—then press the spacebar. There may be a delay of a few seconds, but then you'll see the contents of the first selected file, and you can use the arrow keys to navigate among the rest. The Finder will even invoke little players for audio and video files.

Rename freely. Try renaming a file while it's open. Why? Because you can. The title bar of its window will update accordingly.

THE DOCK

The Dock—that cartoonish thing at the bottom of your display—does several valuable things and is pretty customizable. The Dock functions something like an amalgamation of Windows' Quick Launch bar and the taskbar.

Icons to the left. To the left of its vertical separator bar, the Dock displays icons for any applications you might want to launch quickly (with a single click). Don't settle for what Apple put there. If there's something you don't plan to use on the Dock, pull it up and out; it will vanish in a puff of animated smoke. Populate the Dock by dragging in icons for frequently used applications from the Applications folder. Drag them left or right to arrange them; and note the little marker under each application that's currently open.

Icons to the right. To the right of the vertical separator bar, you'll see icons for any windows you've minimized (as well as the garbage). By the way, you don't have to hit that tiny yellow button to minimize a window. Go to Apple | System Preferences | Appearance, and choose Minimize when double-clicking a window title bar. Now you can be a lot less precise with your pointer when you want to minimize a window. Alternatively, you can use the keyboard shortcut Cmd-m.

Set dock preference. Preferences for the Dock are available on the Apple menu. You can make it stand on its hind legs on the left-hand or right-hand side of your screen rather than lazing along the bottom; you can make it hide itself when you're not using it; you can make it stop animatedly arching its back when you run the pointer over it. There are third-party utilities that will tweak

the Dock's appearance further, but such tools can stop working when Apple provides system updates—something that doesn't typically happen with Windows updates, and a good thing to keep in mind.

Find the Dock's special powers. Do a lot of Ctrl-clicking (or right-clicking) in the Dock. You'll get options such as closing an application without bothering to bring its open windows to the front, or aborting the launch of an application that you hadn't meant to open.

ORGANIZATION

To make the most of your Mac, you should know a few things about how its hard disk is organized. Double-click on the drive's icon in the upper right-hand corner of the desktop, and let's look at what's there.

Applications. This folder is equivalent to the Program Files folder on a Windows PC. In the Finder, you can always go straight to your Applications folder by pressing Cmd-A (that's a capital A—Cmd-Shift-a) or by choosing Go | Applications from the menu bar. While we're here, let me tell you something nice about applications on a Mac: They're usually self-contained, meaning that you can simply drag and drop an application to a new location and it will run—there's no Windows-like Registry into which it can spread its tentacles, so you usually don't need a special installer program. Obviously, you will never exploit this knowledge to copy programs illegally. Similarly, simply deleting the application's icon tends to neatly uninstall the program. **Library.** This is where the system and various applications store information that they need—things such as fonts and Internet plug-ins (applications that your Web browser runs automatically so that it can play video files and display PDFs). Until you've learned a lot more, keep out!

System. This is, as you'd expect, where the operating system lives. Again, keep out.

Users. Okay, now we're home: Users is the equivalent of the Documents and Settings folder on a Windows XP PC. Each person with an account on your Mac will have a folder under Users; that folder is called your home directory. This is the folder you want to back up; it's what makes your Mac yours. Double-click on it and here are some things you'll see:

Desktop, Documents, and Downloads. No tricks here. The Desktop is your desktop, Documents is the default for saving documents, and Downloads is where Safari will default to saving anything you download.

Likewise, Movies, Music, and Pictures are just what they sound like. The Music folder probably contains your iTunes music files (unless you've told iTunes not to store music there). It also contains a file called "iTunes Library," which doesn't actually contain any music—it's just a database of the songs that your copy of iTunes knows about.

Library. This is your library rather than the system's. One thing you'll find here is your bookmarks: If you use Safari, they're in a folder called Safari under the filename Bookmarks.plist. Firefox users will need to drill down through the Application Support folder (or search for a file called bookmarks). You'll also find a Library folder called Preferences, which is where your applications will generally store any preference settings you make. Peek in the Preferences folder and you'll see that most of the preference files have the extension .plist, which stands for "property list." There are third-party utilities you can use to edit these files directly, but you'll probably never need to.

The important thing is to know where they are so you can copy them to another Mac if you copy one of your applications to another Mac. Also, if one of your applications starts crashing or freezing, try deleting its preference file—it may have become corrupted. The next time you run the application, a new preference file (set back to the application's defaults) will be created automatically. Note the naming scheme for the preference files: For the sake of organization, they're named like Web sites in reverse, so, for example, your preference file for Photoshop (whose vendor is Adobe) is com.adobe.Photoshop.plist.

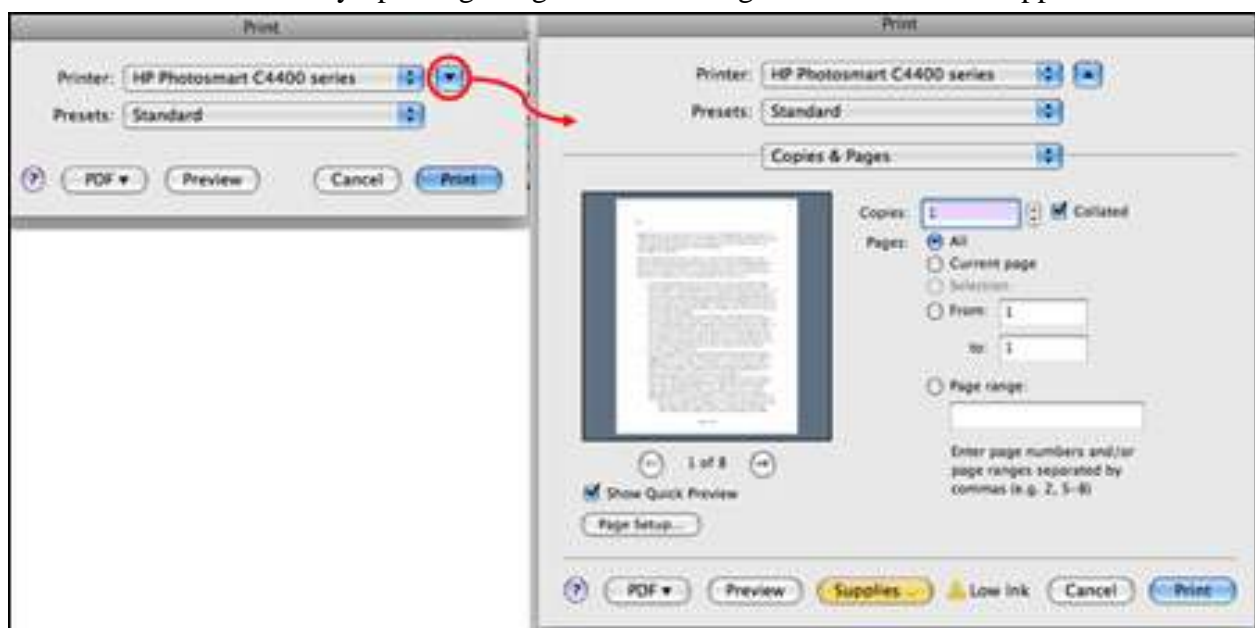
Public contains a folder called Drop Box, where other users on your Mac can drop files for you without being able to see what else is in the folder.

Sites is where you might want to store local files for any Web sites you create. Up to you.

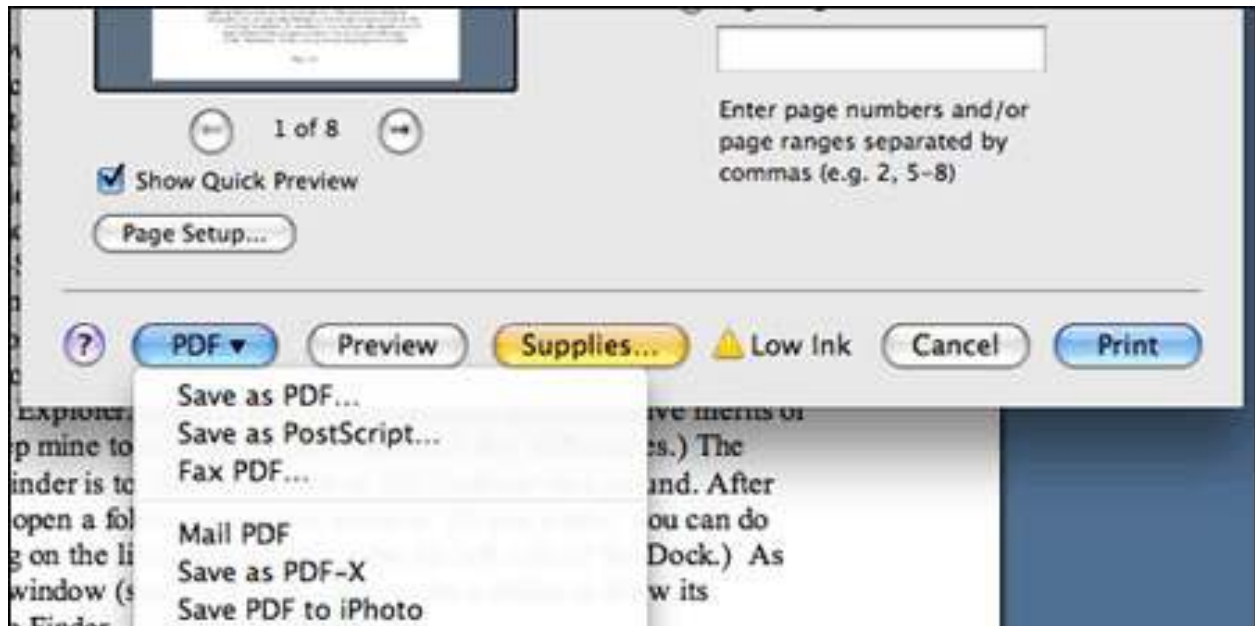
That's the lay of the land to begin with. Presumably, you'll be creating lots of new folders in your home directory. And the quickest way to do so is by navigating where you want to go, then pressing Cmd-N (that's a capital N) to make a new folder.

SAVING, PRINTING, FINDING

Here are some more handy tips for getting around & using Mac OS X and the applications on it.



Uncover options. By default, the Print and Save dialogs for most applications are pretty sparse-looking. That's deceptive. See the downward-pointing triangle in the blue box? Click on it to display a lot of options that are otherwise hidden



PDF it. While you're in the Print dialog, note the inconspicuous button marked PDF. Clicking on it will give you a drop-down menu that includes Save as PDF. What this means is that anything you can print, you can convert to a PDF instead of printing. No more printing and losing online receipts.

Search with Spotlight. This hard drive search tool needs an article all its own, so I won't try to do more than tell you what it is. Your Mac maintains a Spotlight index that includes not just filenames, but also every word within each file, and Spotlight will fetch results accordingly. Click on the magnifying glass in the top right-hand corner and enter a word to begin. Spotlight is also the engine that drives the little search bar you'll find at the top of any Finder window. When you perform a Spotlight search that way, your results will be displayed with the option of limiting them to the current folder, and with the option of searching file contents or only filenames. We'll go further into depth about Spotlight's capabilities in a future article.

If you're accustomed to using Google Desktop on a Windows PC, you know that it does something Spotlight can't: It displays your results with snippets of the surrounding text, just like a regular Google search does. You can download a Mac version of Google Desktop to gain this feature, but I've found that doing so slows things down a bit, perhaps because Spotlight and Google Desktop are both continuously indexing your files. A nice alternative is to download the freeware application SpotInside, which uses Spotlight's index but displays results in context with snippets of text, Google-style.

Manage windows with Exposé. Exposé is another feature that can save you a lot of time. One key will sweep aside all open windows to reveal your Desktop (until you press the key again);

another key will push all your open windows out of each other's way so that you can choose among them by hovering the pointer over them; a third key will do the same, but only for windows in the front-most application. Which key does which function will depend on your Mac, and you can change it under Apple | System Preferences | Exposé and Spaces.

Change every shortcut. Well, that might be going a bit far. But you really can change and create all kinds of keyboard shortcuts. Under Apple | System Preferences | Keyboard, you can create a keyboard shortcut for any preexisting menu item. This can be done system-wide or for individual applications. Users of Microsoft Office for Mac should note that the Office apps have their own applets for accomplishing this.

MISCELLANEOUS WINDOWS-TO-MAC ISSUES

Here are some questions that come up quite a bit, in my experience. They're a bit hodgepodge, but you can't argue with experience.

Command and control. Often enough, if you used a Control-key combo in Windows, Command plus the same other key will work in OS X. For example, Ctrl-x, -c, and -v to cut, copy, and paste a selection becomes Cmd-x, -c, and -v. Cmd-a selects all, whether you're in Finder or an application.

Know what you're closing. Ctrl-w to close a window in Windows is Cmd-w to close a window on the Mac. Quitting an open application requires not just closing its windows but actually telling it to quit—that's Cmd-q from the keyboard, or a right-click-accessible mouse command from the application's Dock icon.

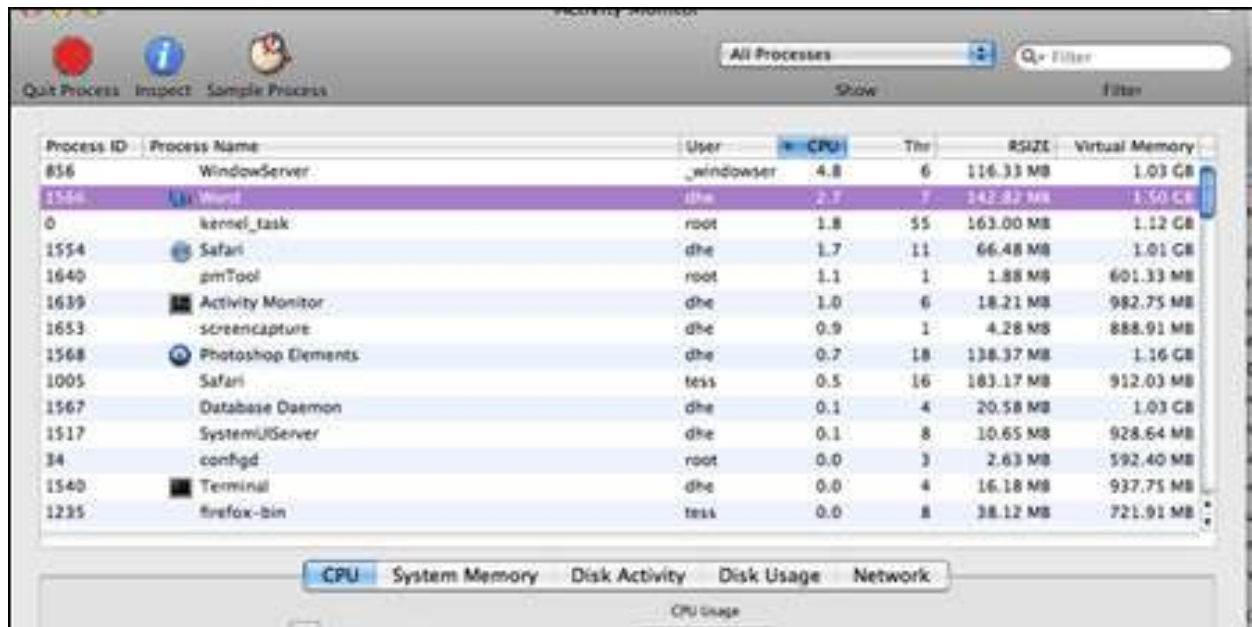
Jump around. Alt-Tab to switch among open windows is Cmd-Tab on the Mac. Actually, Cmd-Tab switches among open applications. Use Cmd-~ to switch among open windows in a particular application. But once you get used to the Exposé feature, you might not care about this anyway.

Erase bidirectionally. Most Mac users seem to use the Delete key exclusively. It's in the same spot on a Mac keyboard that the Backspace occupies on non-Mac keyboards, and it deletes characters backward from the cursor, just like a Backspace key. But Windows users are used to having a Delete key that deletes forward as well. If you miss your Windows-type Delete key, use Fn-Delete on a Mac to delete forward.

All-stop. If you're old enough to remember when the Break key on a PC did something, you'll want to know about Cmd-period on a Mac. In many applications, it cancels whatever is in the midst of happening. Try that or the Escape key before you try what's next.

Quit it. Ctrl-Alt-Delete on a Windows PC (to bring up the Task Manager when something seems to be frozen) is Cmd-Option-Escape on a Mac: It will bring up a list of running applications so

that you can force a frozen one to quit. You can also get there by choosing Force Quit from the main Apple menu.



Monitor activity. The full functionality of Task Manager on a Windows PC is found in Activity Monitor on a Mac; that's in the folder `\Applications\Utilities`. It's worth dragging that one to the Dock for quick access. If your Mac slows down, or if loud fan activity suggest that something is overwhelming its processor, Activity Manager will show you every currently running process and allow you to force-quit the culprit.

Create aliases. What Windows calls a shortcut, Mac calls an alias. You can make one by control-clicking on the icon for a file or folder, then choosing Make Alias—or simply by pressing `Cmd-I` (that's a lowercase L). Unlike a Windows shortcut, a Mac alias knows the actual identity of the target file, not just its location (the Mac assigns a unique ID number to each file); therefore, you can move the target file around, or even rename it, and the alias will still work.

Grab a screen. There's no Print Screen button for screen captures, but there is this abstruse keyboard shortcut: `Cmd-Ctrl-Shift-4` (you'll get used to it). Once you press that, you can trace any area of the screen for capture to the clipboard; then you can paste it into, say, a document or photo-editing software. If you don't bother to press the Control key, the screenshot will be saved to your desktop as a file instead. If you press 3 rather than 4, you'll automatically capture the whole screen. And if you're in no mood for any such finger contortions, you can use the Grab application in your Utilities folder.

Clean up drive-image detritus. Unlike a Windows PC, your Mac won't offer to remove the unused icons on your desktop, so let me tell you about one type of file that might begin to accumulate there needlessly: the DMG file. If you download applications from the Web, a lot of them will download in the form of `.dmg` files (disk-image files). When you double-click on the DMG icon, it opens in the form of a virtual disk—a temporary folder that your Mac treats like a

newly inserted disc or flash drive. If you want to keep the contents of the virtual disk, you have to drag them to another folder (such as your Applications folder or your desktop); doing so will copy them. The virtual disk can then be "ejected"—just drag it to the trash or press the Eject icon that appears next to the drive in a Finder window to do that. But you'll still have the DMG file that spawned the virtual disk. You don't need it anymore—go ahead and drag it to the trash, too.

Get info. On a Windows PC, you can get system information from various selections on the Start menu—information such as how much memory your computer has, or what kinds of hardware are built into it. To get this information on a Mac, select About This Mac from the Apple menu. The window that immediately pops up will tell you which version of OS X you're running, among other things. Then press More Info to open the System Profiler utility, which will glut you with details.

Type worldly. There's a world of hidden characters and symbols behind the Option key. For example, press Option-e and any vowel you type next will have an acute accent. Press Option-u and any vowel you type next will have an umlaut. Press Option-4 (the dollar-sign key) and you'll get ¢. The results for any of these will differ if you also hold down the Shift key. To learn more about keyboard combinations and diacritical marks, see Apple's guide.

For laptops only: Don't be dim. Have you noticed that when you're running on battery power, the display keeps dimming every few minutes? Yeah, that's annoying. Turn it off in Apple | System Preferences | Energy Saver, under Options, where you can uncheck Automatically reduce the brightness....

Come on and zoom. There's a keyboard shortcut for zooming the whole screen. First, press Cmd-Option-8 to toggle it on (you'll never need to do that again). Now press Cmd-Option-= to zoom. Press Cmd-Option-minus to pull back out.

MAC APPS

I won't attempt to give you much information here about specific applications that come with your Mac, but there are a few things worth mentioning:

Preview is the application that, by default, will open your PDF files (along with image files). You can generally use it instead of Adobe Reader; you'll find that it opens much faster than Adobe Reader does (what doesn't?). And unlike Adobe Reader, it permits light editing of PDFs—you can delete or resequence pages in the right-hand sidebar. It's also nice for generating a quick slideshow: In the Finder, highlight a bunch of image files, then double-click on any of them. They'll all open simultaneously in Preview, with a sidebar of thumbnails on the right that will let you quickly scroll through them.

Disk Utility (in the folder \Applications\Utilities) is what you'll use to format flash drives and external hard disks. For highest speed and best compatibility with the Mac, choose Erase, and Volume Format, Mac OS Extended (Journaled). If you need the backup device to readable by a Windows PC, choose MS-DOS format (performance won't be as good). By the way, Disk Utility

also lets you make your own DMG files—use the menu option File | New | Disk Image from Folder. What's really nice about this is, you can encrypt your .dmg file; this is great for storing sensitive data.

Well, that just about scratches the surface. Mac aficionados will note with displeasure that I haven't said a word about Time Machine, Dashboard widgets, Spaces, Automator, or any of several thousand other things you're probably going to like. Watch this space.