Software Essentials for Graphic Designers

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Introduction

For most graphic designers, there are four distinct areas in which a working knowledge is essential: page layout, vector drawing, image editing and website production. Some designers specialize in one particular area, but, for the greatest employability and to gain an overview of how everything fits together, it is best to know something about all four.

This is a daunting prospect for the beginner – consider the size of the manuals! – but the reality is that it does not have to be. The actual information required to accomplish everything needed for day-to-day use is only a fraction of the content of the manuals or the 'how to' books lining the shelves in local bookshops. This book focuses on the vital foundations needed for the main programs found in graphics studios worldwide. Also, as I have a strong background in commercial printing, I have included many pointers about sending work to a print shop, as this is, sadly, a misunderstood area.

For all software, learning and using keyboard shortcuts will speed up working time beyond belief. Most people approach shortcuts in the wrong way, trying to learn too many at once and, of course, they end up retaining and using on a regular basis only a handful of shortcuts like open, save, print. A friend once gave me the most useful advice about shortcuts: learn one a day, make sure you use it a few times and that way it will stick in your memory. Then, the next day, learn another, and so on. My own experience has taught me the wisdom of these words. As a result, when trying to generate variations of a logo in Illustrator, for example, I am able to work almost as quickly as I think – something I considered an unattainable dream when I first used the software.

By way of assisting in this process, I have included keyboard shortcuts for most operations immediately following their menu listing. Mac shortcut commands involve the use of the 'apple' key, which is known as the 'control' key on a PC, so I have used the words 'apple/control' to indicate a choice is to be made. The 'alt' key is (now) named as such on both platforms, so no variations are given.

I have often felt thankful that, as I have been working with the programs covered in this book for many years, I am no longer in the position of having to learn any of them from scratch. Early versions of these programs were comparatively simple, but now they have grown to awesome proportions and are regarded as the Godzillas of digital graphics. However, in teaching these programs to others, I have found that it is possible to convey the essentials of each one in a couple of days of (fairly) intensive work.

This book is a compilation of those courses. It will not teach you everything there is to know about any of the applications, but it will instruct you on the key issues that you need every day as a graphics professional. You will not find too much esoteric information here, but you will find the software essentials.

So, for example, if you need to learn Adobe InDesign, sit down at a computer with this book and work your way through everything in that chapter. There is a logical flow of information and methods that allows you to start using the program, regardless of the version, immediately. By the close of the chapter, you will have covered everything you need to know to accomplish at least 95% of what would be required of you as a professional.

This book has been written with a sincere wish to benefit others, and I hope it will be useful to you.

A brief overview:
How the various software packages fit together

Page layout
Page-layout software allows you to do precisely that: lay out a page. Whether you intend to produce a 400-page book, a magazine, a newsletter or a brochure, page-layout software is the assembly point for images, drawings and text. Therefore, it is also the file that will be sent to a printer either in native (QuarkXPress or InDesign) format or converted into a Portable Document Format (PDF), a brilliant (but not always straightforward) Adobe creation that bundles together everything as it looks in the page layout, either at high resolution to print using offset presses or at low resolution to email to a client for approval.

Early versions of page-layout software were not designed for drawing or image editing. However, things have changed. InDesign contains one drawing feature – the ability to apply a colour gradient to an outline (or stroke) – that is not even found in Adobe Illustrator (the industry-standard vector-drawing package). From v. 6.5 of QuarkXPress, basic image-editing functions are included.

Why has this happened? The problem seems to be that each new version of the software has to be bigger and better than the last to keep up with the competition. Also, assuming that you already have a program that delivers the full page-layout package, the most obvious areas for expansion are those covered by associated programs. Unfortunately, these new and exciting capabilities that go beyond the requirements of page layout itself may not be very good substitutes for the more detailed tools available in dedicated software. The logical development of this trend is towards all-singing, all-dancing mega-software with an associated learning curve that would make those of today seem comparatively gradual.

Nevertheless, the fundamental methods, those that are still needed every day in graphics production, have barely changed at all.

Vector drawing
A vector, to distinguish it from a bitmap, is a mathematical definition that connects two or more points. It is simply a path: it has no colour or thickness, merely a shape. No matter how much you zoom in on a page of vector shapes in outline mode, all you see are thin, black lines telling you where the shapes are. Fortunately, colour can be tagged to a vector