

The Apple, Mac, iPod, and iPhone Experts

Macworld

- Jun 22, 2009 1:00 pm
- [12 Comments](#)
- [+ 5 Recommendations](#)
- Digg
- [ShareThis](#)

Mellel 2.6

Microsoft Word alternative keeps getting better

by [William Porter](#), [Macworld.com](#)

There are three types of people in the word processing world: those who use Microsoft Word because they have to, a smaller group who use Microsoft Word because they actually like it, and a third group, who don't have to use Word and are interested in alternatives. For these independent-minded Mac OS X users, there are now a number of strong alternatives to Word, including Apple's [Pages](#) (****), Nisus Writer (Pro or Express), [Scrivener](#) (****), and Mellel 2.6.1, from RedleX. With the release of version 2.6 earlier this year, Mellel stands as a very attractive alternative to Word, especially for academic users, technical writers, and linguists.

Structured and flexible

Do you outline your thank-you notes, number (and then renumber) the items on your shopping lists, or use footnotes in e-mail? Then Mellel is probably the word processor for you. Writers of long technical documents will love the control that Mellel offers over outlines, cross-references, footnotes, table of contents generation, figures, and more.

Mellel doesn't have a traditional outliner like the one in [Microsoft Word](#) (****) or like the excellent stand-alone program [OmniOutliner](#) (****). You don't simply go into a traditional outline mode where you type the titles of the four main parts of your document, with each return automatically creating the next element in the outline. Instead, in Mellel, you insert *auto-titles* to identify the structure of the document. Auto-titles are the elements of your document that correspond to the headings and subheadings of a traditional outline. The term *auto-title* seems a bit misleading to me, though, because the titles themselves are not automatic. You have to enter each one via a dialog. For outlining, many users may not find Mellel's approach as easy as using outline mode in Word.

But this brings me to a key point: The more you expect Mellel to work like Word, the more frustrated you are likely to be, at least initially. What Mellel calls outline view is really a view of all of the many structural elements in your document: not just headings and subheadings, but also charts, equations, figures, pictures, tables, and bookmarks. Assuming that you mark the parts of your document correctly, each of these structural elements has its own flow,

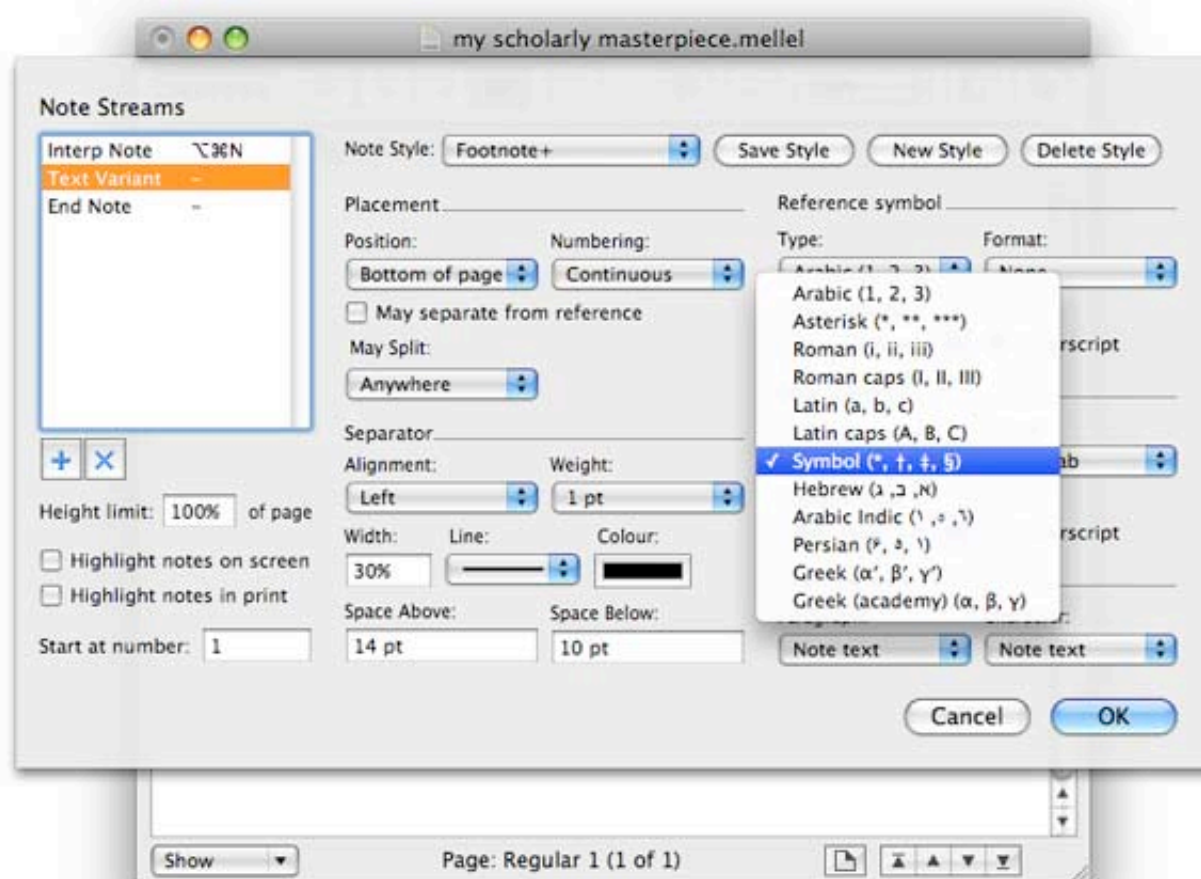
and what's automatic is the way that Mellel keeps track of all these independent sequences. If you have tagged a figure, for example, and then you move it somewhere else in the document, Mellel keeps track of where it is relative to other figures--and relative to the rest of your document. If you tag a section as an auto-title, you can move the title and all of the content it contains by simply adjusting its position in the outline panel on the left side of your screen. Also automatic is the way Mellel applies the right style for each structural element.

This flexibility extends to all of the other parts of your document that you would want to index or catalog, such as tables and figures. Mellel also supports cross-references, including *virtual cross-references*--that is, parts of your document that don't exist yet but which you can identify briefly ("Chapter 12: Conclusions"). Set 'em up now, fill 'em in later.

In short, Mellel's organizational tools are remarkably complete and extremely flexible.

Nota (very) bene

Notes are not listed in the outline view panel, but they are worth a special mention. The option to have footnotes or endnotes is no doubt sufficient for most folks, but if you need something more flexible, by all means, look at Mellel. Are you editing a scholarly text and want to have two distinct streams of footnotes (say, textual variants, followed by interpretative comments), plus a few end notes as well? Each stream can have its own distinctive formatting and numbering scheme. And if you decide that you want the textual variant notes to appear on the page beneath the interpretative notes rather than above them, you just drag the note stream by name in the notes definition dialog. I confess that a number of Mellel features sent me to the documentation, but setting up even a very complicated notes scheme was a breeze.



Can your word processor do this? Mellel lets you create multiple distinct note streams, and control placement, formatting, and the kinds of reference characters used. In this screen shot, I've set up two distinct footnote streams and end notes, as well.

Mellel works with Sonny Software's [Bookends](#), the popular bibliographic package, something that scholarly users will cheer. We did not test Mellel with Bookends, however.

General writing experience

One of the things I like the most about Mellel is full-screen view, where the menus and the formatting palettes disappear and I'm alone with my words and my thoughts. In draft or page-layout views, basic formatting is pretty straightforward, because Mellel comes with a handful of built-in paragraph and character styles (found in the Paragraph and Character menus) that serve pretty well without editing.

But if you decide to venture beyond that point--well, the fairest thing to say is that you will want to read the documentation. A lot of formatting can be done with the formatting palettes, but formatting all the structural elements of your document using styles (telling the word processor that this is a body-text paragraph, for instance) is much more efficient than using ad hoc formatting (where you might simply mark some words for display in a particular font). Mellel encourages you to use styles by making ad hoc formatting harder than using styles. Mellel's implementation of styles is flexible and powerful, like everything else in the program. One gotcha to be aware of: If you have two documents open, both of which share the same style set, changes you make to one document's styles will immediately and automatically reformat the other document as well.

It's not Word

Say it with me: Mellel is not Word. Mellel can import and export .doc format documents, but results are a bit iffy, which is not necessarily a knock against Mellel. If you need to use Word or need to share documents with Word users, use Word. Not being Word means, among other things, that Mellel does not have all of Word's features. In my view, this is usually a plus. Many writers won't notice that Mellel has no programming language, does not support AppleScript, can't track your changes, and has no special editors for graphics or equations or HTML. I list these as cons to help readers who need these features; but for many of you, these are probably pros in con clothing. Mellel is not a page layout program, either. It can do columns and sections extremely well, but if you are looking for a program to create your homeowners association newsletter, check out Apple's Pages instead.

One feature of Word that nobody will miss in Mellel is the price. At \$49 for a single user license, Mellel may be the best word processing value in the Mac OS X world.

Macworld's buying advice

Mellel 2.6.1 seems ideally suited to the needs of folks on tight budgets, like academics writing documents that contain lots of numbered sections and subsections or cross-references. Mellel's structured document strengths should make it attractive to technical writers as well. I didn't test Mellel's handling of non-Roman alphabets like Hebrew or Chinese, but it is clear that Mellel should also be given very serious consideration by writers working in such languages.

[William Porter is a database applications developer and photographer who lives in Dallas,

Texas.]

- See more like this:
- [writing software](#)
- Recommend? [5 YES](#) [0 NO](#)
- [12 Comments](#)
- Digg [submit](#)
- [Email](#)
- [Print](#)