

Useful and little-known applications of Adobe Acrobat 5.0

Grover C. Furr, English Department
Montclair State University

Adobe Acrobat 5.0 is very useful, yet little known among faculty and students. Among those who do know of it, even use it, many of its applications remain a mystery. This can probably be attributed to the poor Manual that comes, in PDF format, with the product. It is almost impossible to learn from. Below I recommend two third-party books on Acrobat 5.0 that I have found very useful, far better than the Adobe Manual.

My presentation will concentrate on Acrobat 5.0's usefulness for teaching and research. Some of the applications I discuss are very useful even for less formal Internet and computer use.

1. Acrobat Creates Uniform Electronic Documents.

Many articles, books, and works of literature are available on the Internet for free, and can be assigned in course work. But there's a problem achieving uniform texts.

Students' different web browsers, different versions of the same browser, and different default fonts and sizes, mean that web documents longer than even a page or two print out with very different paginations.

Converting the document in question to a PDF file solves this problem. Acrobat produces uniform pagination and appearance regardless of computer settings and even of platform – Windows, Mac, Linux, whatever. Acrobat also paginates, so students can be instructed to “Go to page X”, and every student will have the same page (pagination can also be turned off).

2. Acrobat Is the Best Web Capture Utility.

There are many reasons to “capture”, or download and save, materials from the Web. Some of the reasons one might wish to ‘capture’ an entire Web page, or even an entire site, to one's own computer are:

- archiving a site that may disappear in future;
- selecting only parts of a long “page” or site for use in a class.

I have used two other well-known Web capture programs. Acrobat is far easier to use, and far superior in its results, than either of them.

One of Acrobat's functionalities is 'capturing' an entire remote site or any part of it. For example, I have used Acrobat to capture – automatically – the entire Associated Press website for the A.P.'s No Gun Ri Massacre investigation (<http://wire.ap.org/APpackages/nogunri/index.html>). I've downloaded and PDF'd free versions of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* and of his *Benito Cereno*, as well as many other works of literature and criticism.

There are many other uses for Web Capture. I've downloaded and saved hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles on 9/11, the Afghan and Iraq invasions for future reading and research. Acrobat makes this far easier than any other program I've ever found.

The Web Capture facility saves hyperlinks as 'active.' That means that if you ever want to 'capture' links on a PDF file you have already captured, just open it in Acrobat and click on it. As long as you have an active Internet connection, Acrobat will access and download the file that is hyperlinked.

Web Capture can be set to download different "levels" in a web page. "Level One" is only the page you see on your computer screen; "Level Two" is that page, plus anything directly linked on that page; "Level Three" includes links on those pages, etc. You can also choose "Entire Site", and then go for a cup of coffee or off to class while Acrobat downloads hundreds of pages on an entire site. You can then go back later and easily delete whatever you don't want.

3. Printing Using Adobe Distiller

When Acrobat 5.0 is installed, it also installs a separate program called 'Distiller.' Adobe Distiller acts as a "virtual printer." You can save files by "printing" them from the Printer menu on your Web browser or other application.

This feature allows for certain kinds of page 'capture' that Web Capture cannot do. For example, it permits capturing web pages with non-Latin fonts (e.g. Russian, Arabic). It will also let you capture pages on password-protected sites (e.g. *New York Times*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*), where your browser is permitted – because you typed in a login and password – but where the separate connection Web Capture would demand is not permitted (you can't "log in" using Acrobat, because Acrobat can't send a login or password to a server).

The resulting page is also in “text” format, and so – like the pages created through Web Capture, is searchable. The only difference is that links on “Distilled” pages are no longer active – you can’t “capture” more pages by clicking on those links, as you can with Web Capture.

4. Acrobat Is A Scanning Program.

Acrobat can be used as a scanning program. It has a pretty good OCR (Optical Character Recognition) program built in. You have to download the separate, but free, “Page Capture” plugin. Acrobat will “page capture” – Adobe’s term for OCR using its product – up to 50 pages at a time. Adobe sells a separate, and expensive, Paper Capture product for OCR’ing more than 50 pages at a time. But you can scan and “page capture” as text any number of pages using Acrobat 5.0 and the free plugin, as long as you don’t capture more than 50 pages at a time.

However, I do this very seldom these days. The reason is: time. Whether you use Acrobat Page Capture or some other OCR scanning program like Omnipage or Textbridge, etc., checking the OCR results, correcting the errors, and so on, is very time-intensive. If you need to have a “text” output – a searchable document, for example – then there is no alternative. OCR’d, “text” files, including text PDF files, are also much smaller than image PDF files, which I will now describe.

With faster and faster Internet connections, and with computers equipped with immense hard drives of 20 to even 60 gigabytes and more, file size is less significant, while my time seems more valuable than ever! Therefore, I almost always choose to create an “image PDF” file.

Acrobat with a scanner can save any page as a graphic, yielding a perfect facsimile of the original. A year ago our department bought a high-speed, black-and-white, text-only scanner for around \$2500. It will scan 20 pages a minute – no exaggeration – using Acrobat as the scanning program and the attached Automatic Document Feeder (ADF).

Acrobat’s scanning facility allows for various settings – page size, resolution, lightness/darkness, type of original (basically, text or several different kinds of image, most irrelevant for our B/W text-only scanner), and “Flat Bed” (one page at a time) or ADF (multiple pages – up to about 20 at a time). It also allows for scanning single-sided

or double-sided originals, and for creating a new scanned document or adding scanned materials to an already-scanned document.

The ability to create an exact facsimile of a scanned page or book into a single PDF file has great potential for researchers and students. I would like to enumerate a few of them that I've discovered.

I can scan, distribute, and therefore assign, any book or article that has ever been in print. I can use, even in Freshman courses, works that, until recently, were accessible only to graduate students at research libraries, or, tediously, to one user at a time through Inter-Library Loan.

I call this the "Gutenberg" application because of its truly revolutionary potential for all teachers and serious researchers, and therefore for students as well. Using Acrobat, I have scanned into image PDF files out of print primary sources for Medieval studies and out of print radical and proletarian literature from the early 20th century. I have made important, often-cited secondary source materials from the 1930s through the 1980s but from journals and books our own library does not possess, available to my students.

(I'd like to note parenthetically that I use FTP – "file transfer protocol", one of the original Internet features, long predating the Web – to distribute large and even copyright-protected documents to my students. Unless posting on the Web, distribution by FTP does not constitute "publication", and is permitted under current copyright laws. My article in *Technology Source* for September-October 2003 – see <http://ts.mivu.org/default.asp>).

Of course there are less formal uses for image PDFs. I just scanned a friend's High School graduation yearbook, from 1965, into JPG files, one per page, so the photographs would come out clearly. Then, using Acrobat 5.0, I chose "File-Open as PDF" to select the first scanned page (remembering to select "Objects of Type: All Files" in the "Open As PDF" box). Acrobat converted that page to image PDF. Thereafter I added the rest of the pages by choosing "Document – Insert Pages" and adding them one after another in order. Acrobat allows you to crop, add, delete, and rotate pages, so you can scan them in the best orientation to fit your scanner screen, and then edit them for the best result. You can type your own text over the original, and even change the font, size, and spacing using "Tools-Text Attributes" selection.

JSTOR, the database of scholarly journals (<http://www.jstor.org>), Early English Books Online (<http://www.lib.umi.com/eebo>), and the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris' "Gallica" project (<http://gallica.bnf.fr>), are among the research-oriented resources and companies that reproduce rare and hard-to-obtain materials through a similar process of scanning as image PDF. Image PDF is a standard format worldwide.

It's important to remember that any pages scanned as an image PDF can later be "paper-captured", or OCR'd, if the font is a common one and the original is in good condition. This is because the first step in "paper capture" Optical Character Recognition is, in fact, a graphic-scanned page.

5. Acrobat Works With Microsoft Office.

When Acrobat 5.0 is installed on a computer which already has MS Office installed on it, the installation process adds an Acrobat toolbar to the existing toolbars of all MS Office products. This allows for the creation of a PDF file directly from the respective MS Office file, be it MS Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.

This is quick and very simple. I use it a lot to create PDF files from documents I've found on the Web but whose formatting is unsuitable for direct Web Capture as PDF – for example, if there are large spaces between lines, unsuitable fonts, or huge margins. In such cases, I save the text I want into MS Word, "massage" it appropriately to create the text I like – for example, adding a header, changing the margins, a better typeface, eliminating distracting graphics, or using two columns instead of one or vice-versa. Then I press the 'Acrobat' button on the MS Word toolbar, and create a PDF file that looks exactly the way I want it to look.

However, you don't need these toolbars to create PDF files. Remember: using Distiller, you can PDF any file you can print. Distiller permits the "PDF"ing of any document directly from the application.

6. Acrobat Allows Security.

Using Acrobat, any PDF document you create can be password-protected. It permits various levels of security. You can prevent the document from being copied; from being edited; from being printed; or even from being viewed, without a password you provide.

PDF'd documents can be password-protected and even "print-protected" – made available on-screen but not printable. This is invaluable for putting essays on-line, since it prevents unauthorized downloading, printing, and changing of those documents.

7. Different PDF Files for Different Purposes.

Acrobat can be configured to produce files of smaller size for emailing or viewing on the Internet. If you are publishing a newsletter, however, you can change the settings to save much more color and font detail. This will yield a much larger PDF file, but it now contains all the information needed by an offset printing firm or university print shop to reproduce exactly the color separation and image detail, as well as font, that you want in a professional-looking result.

8. Other Functions.

Acrobat allows you to put internal hyperlinks, called "bookmarks" – in effect, a Table of Contents – to various sections of a longer document. PDF files can be set to open at a certain magnification, with bookmarks either showing or hidden. You can set different magnifications for different parts of the document. For example, you might want a page containing a graphic or photograph to open at a larger magnification than one that has only text, or vice versa.

Conclusion

There are many other functions – for example, creating Forms on-line – that I have not used. In the Bibliography I recommend three works. I've found them all useful.

Acrobat 5.0 is my third most-used program, after my Web Browser and Email client. I use it every day, usually many times a day, for the purposes I outline above. In my view, it extends the usefulness of the Internet and computer technology in ways every professor and researcher will find invaluable.

Bibliography

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