

The keys to the kingdom

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Last time I talked about how the keyboard is often a quicker way to launch programs and open files than the mouse. It's just a question of knowing how. This time around I'd like to take the idea a step further: using the keyboard to cut down your usage of the keyboard.

A lot of what we type is the same: Our name. Our address. Thank you letters to Aunt Gertrude. Disclaimers. These are all tasks we could outsource. But to whom?

Well, it depends a bit on what you're doing. If you're working in something like Microsoft Word, you'll find that there are features that let you insert chunks of text just by hitting a couple of keys. While this used to be straightforward enough in earlier versions of Word but it's gotten more complicated in the latest version.

In fact, the feature is not included; you need to add it to the toolbar at the top of the Microsoft Word window (the program's help will tell you how.) Once that's done, though, it's straightforward enough. Just select the text (and any graphics) you want to reproduce, and then hit the autotext button. Give the selection a name, and next time you want to insert it, just click on the autotext button and then the name of the saved text.

Microsoft, however, clearly don't consider this an important feature, since they've dropped the best bit: being able to recall -- i.e., insert -- the text by not leaving the keyboard. This used to be done by assigning the block of text a keystroke code -- dc, for example, to insert a standard disclaimer text -- and then typing it and hitting Enter. Word 2007 won't let you do that. (OpenOffice's free office suite (openoffice.org) will, but the feature is not particularly easy to figure out, so I wouldn't recommend it.)

The problem with doing this is that any text you save can only be retrieved inside the program itself. Which makes it less of a time-saver and more of a time-waster. So if you're writing an email, for example, you can't access the text you stored in Microsoft Word. A better solution is to use a program that will insert text wherever you are.

This is where I'd recommend something called Texter, a free program created by the website Lifehacker (itself well worth a visit: <http://lifehacker.com/software/texter/>). Once installed, the software sits in your system tray (the bottom right hand corner of the screen) until you either double click or right click on the icon.

Adding text is straightforward: Just select the text you want to save, add a "hotstring" the keystrokes you want to use to recall it (dc, for example), and then the "trigger" -- the key you hit after the hotstring to insert the text (you have the choice of Enter, Tab, Space or, none -- meaning your saved text will be inserted straightaway.

Texter works well -- and has lots of extra features you can explore. It won't handle large blocks of text, however: It's best for small bits of oft-typed text, like a note to typesetters to convert text to italics, or a sign-off (Best regards, Humphrey").

A more powerful and commercially minded alternative is something called ActiveWords (\$50

As more people, and commercial entities, become so convinced of the value of ActiveWords (see from www.activewords.com), which allows you to do a lot more. (Think of it as developing macros for the less techy of us. Macros are scripts which automate oft-repeated functions or series of functions, like opening an email and replying to it, or selecting a word and then having your browser automatically look up the word on Google.)

ActiveWords also lets you do what I was talking about in my last column -- assigning shortcuts to launching programs or opening files. It's a wonderful piece of software and, if used well, removes the need to ever force your fingers to leave the keyboard. But it's not worth getting unless you plan to make major changes to the way you work.

I use it for loading files buried in distant folders and for template text I sent to PR companies (though never readers; you get only my full un-scripted attention. Promise.), for inserting phone numbers (I can never remember my phone numbers for some reason) and addresses, as well as for more ambitious tasks like moving text from one program to another.

I'd suggest you start out with Texter and start building a list of the words, sentences or other text that you find yourself typing a lot. If you're really getting into it a tryout of ActiveWords might be on the cards (the trial is for 60 days, rather than the usual 30; a smart move, since it might take you that long to really appreciate its power.)

A word of warning: Don't put anything sacred or secret in one of your text strings in any of these programs. It's tempting to store passwords and bank account numbers and other hard-to-remember and sensitive data.

If you're looking for something that does that, you might want to check out RoboForm (\$30 from www.roboform.com) that can memorize passwords, fill in registration forms quickly and will encrypt your data. RoboForm will work in Internet Explorer and Firefox (Opera, another browser I must have recommended in the past because my wife uses it religiously, isn't mentioned.)

The trick with these programs is not to dedicate a day to inserting lots of text strings you may never use, but to look over your own shoulder as you work and notice what text you type a lot of. Then get into the habit of saving that in whichever program you decide to use, and assigning a keystroke combination that makes sense to you and will be easy to remember. I guarantee you'll save yourself time. You may even write more letters to Aunt Gertrude. I know she'd like that.

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