Cloud Computing: Hype or Help?

Documents are Made for People
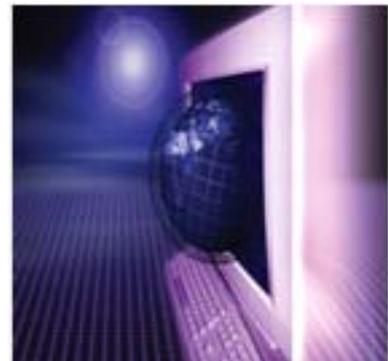
Collaborating in the Cloud with Acrobat

Audio and Visual Editing on a Budget

Australian Technical Communicator Salary Survey

Contents

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Questions about Graphics from Word to Web

by Rhonda Bracey

Rhonda established her technical writing and consulting business, CyberText Consulting Pty Ltd, in 1999. She now runs her business from home in Western Australia and works remotely with clients from all over the world.

What graphics file format should I use for online content?

A perennial question that arises on the various technical writing lists I subscribe to is "What graphics format—GIF, PNG, or JPG—should I use for content that will be viewed online?"

While many academic papers and long articles have been written on the merits of various file formats and the technical details of why you should use one over another, here's my short version:

- use PNG or GIF for line drawings, diagrams, and screenshots
- use JPG only for photos.

Use GIF or PNG for line drawings, diagrams, and screenshots. GIF and PNG tend to be similar in final size (reasonably small) but GIFs can only display 256 colours whereas PNGs display 16+ million colours. While I've used GIFs successfully for screenshots, I know some people have problems with them. GIFs are great for line drawings or diagrams with few colours and no gradients, but GIFs can lose data in colour-rich screenshots. So that I don't have to think about it, I set my capture and graphics programs to 'save as' PNG as the default, and only change this setting for photos.

Use JPG for photos. Be aware that JPG (also 16+ million colours) is a lossy format, which means that every time you resize or alter the photo in some way, it will lose 'data' on saving. Over time, a regularly saved JPG will start to show artefacts (usually fuzzy patches and pixellation). If you're old enough, you'll remember when jokes were faxed or photocopied multiple times—the first few times wasn't a problem, but after numerous copy iterations, much of the data was lost.

How do I create good screenshots?

Use a screen capture program that automates many of the tasks for you. While Photoshop can crop and add special effects to graphics, it's probably overkill for screenshots. Of course, if you're experienced with Photoshop and have access to it, go ahead and use it. But for the rest of us who don't have ready access to Photoshop, use a much cheaper and simpler screen capture program that does all that you want. My preference is SnagIt (http://www.techsmith.com; under US$50), but there are several other good screen capture programs around.

SnagIt lets you set up profiles. For example, you can set up a profile for your PNG settings and then just do a heap of captures in a row and they will all save as PNGs. SnagIt also captures scrolling web pages, and drop-down menus and cursors. For free alternatives without many features, Windows Vista has a Snipping Tool and Word 2010 has a built-in screen capture tool.

Crop or doctor the screenshot. Don't confuse your users. Crop or doctor the screenshot so the user doesn't inadvertently click on it thinking it's the real thing—even after writing Help for many years, I still occasionally click a button on a screenshot! Another reason to crop a screenshot is to focus only on the critical information the user has to deal with for that step of the task—there's no point putting in the entire screen every time if only one section relates to the task at hand. A good screen capture program allows you to select the area of focus, add effects (such as torn edge, drop shadow, highlight/fade), blur some details, and show the user in other ways that the graphic isn't the real application.

Wherever possible, crop or doctor the screenshot so the user doesn't inadvertently click on it thinking it's the real thing...

How does Word handle graphics?

Word deals with most graphic formats well.

However, Word does its own transformation of the graphic, including resizing it to fit the page's margins. Many users are unaware of this auto resizing—they insert the graphic 'as is', then wonder why their small document's file size is blown up by several megabytes. For example, a 4 MB graphic may look fine in Word, but it will blow out the file size by that amount; and if you add lots of large graphics, the document will be slower to load, work with and save. Where you can, use graphics software to create a copy of the image and resize it so that it's smaller, save it as a GIF, PNG or JPG, then insert it into the Word document.

I recently saw a 6-page, 8.5 MB Word document that consisted of minimal unformatted text and three photos. When I checked the size of the photos, they were something like 50 cm × 60 cm. Word had automatically reduced each one to 20% of its original size so it fitted on

a page; however, Word still stored the photo in the document at its original size, thus blowing out this very simple document's file size.

How can I export the graphics from a Word document?

When you need to resize a graphic outside Word and you don't have access to the original, you can copy and paste it into a graphics program. However, this doesn't always give you a nice clean graphic, and it's tedious if you have a lot of graphics to resize. Here's a neat trick if you don't have access to the original graphics used in a Word document—save the document as an HTML document. You don't need to work in it as an HTML document (in fact, I strongly suggest you close the HTML version immediately after saving, then reopen it in its native Word *.doc or *.docx format). When you save as HTML, a new subfolder is created containing the individual graphics files (typically labelled image001, image002 and so on). These may have different graphics file formats, depending on what the original formats were and whether you saved as HTML or as Filtered HTML— try both 'save as' options to see what suits your requirements best.

Another 'quick and dirty' workaround for getting a graphic out of a Word document is to use your screen capture program to capture the image. This method is fairly labour-intensive, so only use it if you have a few large graphics to resize. Before you capture the graphic, set the zoom on your Word document so that the graphic displays at a decent resolution and at the dimensions you'd like, and turn off formatting marks if you're concerned you may accidentally capture them. Take a screenshot of the image, save it as a PNG or GIF, then insert the saved graphic back into the Word document. Its physical size should be much less than the original.

Collaborating in the Cloud with Acrobat

by Alan Houser

I provide technical support, both free and paid, for the products in which I train and consult.

Several years ago, I got a call from one of my FrameMaker students. No matter what she did, a chapter would not autonumber correctly. It always appeared in her FrameMaker book as chapter 7, regardless of its location in her book.

Walking her through the process on the phone, I had her check the numbering properties of the chapter. I asked her to check the autonumber string of the chapter paragraph format. I asked her to move the file to a different location in the book. She imported formats and page layouts from a "good" chapter file. I had her check everything I could think of that might affect the chapter number. But nothing worked. A big number '7' appeared on the chapter title page, almost mocking us. The entire time I wished I could look over her shoulder to see what she was doing.

After nearly an hour of checking, testing, and getting nowhere, I said "email me the file." When I received and opened the file, I could immediately see the problem. Somebody had pasted a screen capture of the number '7' over the chapter number.

Today, I really can "look over somebody's shoulder" when providing remote training, coaching, or support.

The first thing I say when I get a phone call is "Let's jump on a Webinar." In just a few minutes, I can now solve problems that used to require a degree in investigative journalism.

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