Typographers' Inn

Peter Flynn

1 Indenting

Funny how a small change to a layout can have such a large effect. A former colleague who did freelance bookwork once told me he had found that plain TEX's default indentation of 20pt was considered too small by his US publishers and too big by the Europeans. Both of them claimed this was one reason they didn't use TEX. Another reason they gave was that 'TEX only has one font'!

Both 'reasons' were utterly spurious, of course, and more in the nature of excuses, but they were precisely the kind of ill-informed myth that poisoned TEX's author–publisher–typesetter relationship for years. In the days of LATEX 2.09, setting up a whole new typeface was a royal pain in the arsenic, but had these publishers never even considered changing `\parindent` (which is only 15pt in LATEX anyway)?

It's straightforward enough when you're working to a publisher's compositor's specification: it will say 'para indent 9pt' or something obvious, or give an example you can measure. At least, it should — recently I have noticed that designers seem to be getting sloppy about how they specify layouts, sometimes failing to give some quite basic settings.

But to get back to my colleague's comment, how many of you change the indentation setting in your *own* work? Do you have a favorite value, or do you consider it to derive from the page design, or a feature which drives your page design, or do you just leave it at the default? I would say 20pt is probably acceptable for the relatively long line-length of the default plain TEX document; *The TEXbook* is set with 36pt indentation [2, p. 86], but there are special reasons for that (the 'dangerous-bend' sign, for example). The same reasoning would indicate that 15pt was chosen for the rather shorter line-lengths in the default LATEX document classes, but I would agree that it is probably a little too much for the even shorter lines of a paperback novel.

For special effect, it is possible to set `\parindent` to something like `0.666\columnwidth`, as I have done here; setting it to the length of the last line of the previous paragraph is left as an exercise to the reader.

Skinny indentation, by which I mean 1em or less, always looks like a mistake, as if the text was imported from copy whose typist just used two spaces. Last comes the extreme case of no indentation at all, which is usually used with increased space between paragraphs, otherwise you can't see where one paragraph stops and the next one starts, as with this one. It's probably the default office document layout, simply because it's the default in most wordprocessors, which is no excuse whatsoever.

If your indentation is non-zero, how do you handle the paragraphs which follow other indented material such as lists, block quotations, and floats (tables and figures)? These are probably indented by some value other than `\parindent`. Should they start unindented because the page looks cleaner that way (especially when a paragraph happens to start right after a float); or should they start unindented because the new paragraph is a continuation of the same thought, rather than a complete break; or perhaps they should always be indented regardless?

In LATEX, if you start the text of the new paragraph straight after an `\end{...}` command, without a blank line, the indentation is suppressed. And it's also suppressed by LATEX after a section heading, which is the Anglo-American default, and which is changed in the cultural settings of some babel languages.

More perversely, what do you do with a paragraph so small that it is just a short line, when it occurs between two independently indented environments like theorems? Unindent it or indent it? This question was raised on `comp.text.tex` recently, and parallels a much older question on text conversion from the days of fixed-width unenhanced type in wordprocessing: how do you tell programmatically if this line:

```
The overall effect of indentation.
```

is a very small paragraph or a centred subheading?

If `\parindent` isn't something you've played around with, try resetting it in your next document. I think you might be as surprised as I was at the effect a few points of white-space can have on the whole page.

2 Where have all the flowers gone?

Printers have always made use of decorations, either to fill up a little blank space, or as part of the page design. LATEX can of course use any font of signs or symbols — what used to be known as 'printer's flowers' but now appear under the generic name of 'dingbats' (a word once reserved for people who had spent too much time on recreational pharmaceuticals).

A vast number of the freely-available ones are in Scott Pakin's wonderful *Comprehensive LATEX Symbol List* [3], but probably few people have the time to browse through the range of symbols available.

The pifont package 'provides a LATEX interface to the Zapf Dingbats font', available with all modern

LaTeX installations. These are useful but sadly overworked symbols, having been studiously supplied with every text-handling program on the planet, and they are not really 'flowers' in the decorative sense, although with the graphicx package you can rotate, reflect, scale, and distort them to your heart's content.

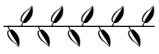
The bbding package provides many more symbols useful for item labels in lists, like pointing fingers and little pencils, but it also has a good selection of crosses and plusses such as ✣ and nearly 40 forms of flowers ❁ snowflakes ❄ and stars ★.

True ornaments can be found in the fourier-orns package, which provides left-hand and right-hand versions of several flowers, including ❧curlicues❧ and ❧leaves❧

The nice thing about the symbols list is that you're not restricted to the purely decorative: why not adapt the functional and use a dove 🕊 or a tunny-fish 🐟 from the phaistos package, or a bat 🦇 or a bicycle 🚲 from the marvosym package?

Swelled rules, a popular device in 19th century typesetting, tend not to be found in many font packages, as they are best constructed programmatically so that they can adapt to the width they are required for. There is an swrule package by Tobias Dussa [1] which builds a geometric lozenge from very fine lines, and there is a paper by Steve Peter [4] which describes a more extensible method using METAPOST for ConTeXt. But it is also possible to produce one using just a character from a font, and some looping in a macro with careful positioning and kerning. The following example was constructed from the swung dash (`\sim`) character in math mode, in a mirror-image. The example is also at `http://latex.silmaril.ie/packages/decorule.sty`, and any suggestions for improving and extending it are welcome.

In fact, with a little bit of practice, you can create a variety of rules and decorations built up from the symbols already available. Here's another rule, done with the left-hand and right-hand leaves mentioned earlier, rotated and arranged at intervals either side of a plain `\rule`:



Decoration is sometimes seen as gratuitous, as mere prettification. Certainly it sometimes is, but it can be much more than that. It can provide relief to the eye; conversely it can be used to attract the eye, or to divert it; it can be used to create an atmosphere or a theme; and it can even be used as a joke — early printers' 'devices' (logos) often contained visual puns on their names. So don't be afraid to decorate where it contributes to the design: there is plenty to choose from.

Apology

In TUGboat 25:1 (2004) I mentioned the automation of formatting XML using XSLT and LaTeX. I referred to two files I had used in an illustration, and said they were on my web server. Either I lied, or I forgot, or my ISP messed up when they 'upgraded' my server and my control panel and reorganised all my directories and subdomains for me.

One way or another the files went missing, and I am grateful to Vincent Douzal for pointing this out. The files have now been restored to their home at `http://silmaril.ie/xml/noaa.xml` and `.xsl`.

Afterthought

In fact, zero indentation isn't the edge case it seems. ¶ For a long period of history, documents didn't have any concept of line-breaking at a paragraph boundary, because there weren't any paragraph boundaries as such. ¶ Instead, they used the pilcrow to delimit arguments or trains of thought.

References

[1] Tobias Dussa. swrule.sty. `http://mirror.ctan.org/macros/generic/misc/swrule.sty`, Oct 2001.

[2] Donald Erwin Knuth. *The TeXbook*. Addison Wesley, Reading, MA, Jun 1986.

[3] Scott Pakin. Comprehensive LaTeX Symbol List, Nov 2009.

[4] Steve Peter. Swelled rules and METAPOST. *TUGboat*, 26(3):193–195, 2005.

◇ Peter Flynn
Textual Therapy Division, Silmaril Consultants
Cork, Ireland
Phone: +353 86 824 5333
`peter (at) silmaril dot ie`
`http://blogs.silmaril.ie/peter`