Book review: *LATEX Quick Reference*
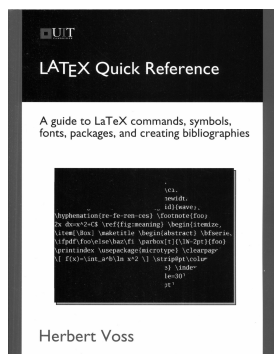
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Herbert Voß, *LATEX Quick Reference*.
UIT Cambridge, 2011. vi+234 pp. Paperback,
US$29.95. ISBN 9781906860219.

A bookcase in my home is filled with dictionaries and reference books. Several times I promised myself to stop buying them: they take up too much space, and it is much easier to look up a definition on the Internet or in an electronic book using search functions. Still I just cannot resist. Thus if Herbert had not given me a copy of this book at the last TEX Users Group meeting, I probably would have ended up buying it anyway: this book is a perfect addition for this bookcase.

The author warns the readers this is *not* an introduction to LATEX: you cannot use it for self-learning or as a textbook for LATEX. Rather, it is a reference book. The difference between a textbook and a reference is the organization of material. In a textbook the topics are introduced in a pedagogical order. A reference book puts the material in the order which is easy to look it up. This is the difference between a phrase book with the chapters like "In a restaurant", "On a bus" etc., and a dictionary with chapters "A", "B", "C", etc.

While alphabetical order is natural for a dictionary (at least for alphabetic scripts), it is not so for reference books about computer languages like LATEX. If the commands are explained alphabetically, then to find the command, say, `\DeclareSymbolFont`, I need first to know its spelling. However, when I need the information I usually do not know the spelling — or even whether such command exists. I probably have just a vague understanding of the task, for example, 'I want to use the symbols from another font for my math'. Getting the name of the command may be the *result* of my query rather than its start. Therefore most reference books about TEX or LATEX assume the logical order of organization. For exam-ple, Victor Eijkhout's *TEX by Topic* has chapters like *Characters*, *Boxes*, *Grouping*, *Spacing*, etc. *The LATEX Companion* by Mittelbach, Goossens, *et al.*, has chapters like *The Layout of the Page*, *Fonts and Encodings*, *Mastering Floats*, etc.

Unfortunately, *LATEX Quick Reference* uses alphabetical order for most of its chapters. choosing simplicity over meaningful context. For example, pages 16–22 are occupied by a long list of all document classes currently existing on CTAN accompanied with one-line descriptions, sometimes rather cryptic; e.g. `qcm` is described as *multiple choice.* Another chapter is devoted to LATEX commands; it consists of three lists, *Environments* (pp. 41–46), *Commands* (pp. 46–67) and *Special Commands* (pp. 67–70). Another chapter has lists of all counters and lengths in core LATEX. The entries in the lists are short — sometimes too short. A chapter about fonts has a list of fonts with samples (I liked this list the most simply because I love to study font shapes).

Besides these chapters, reminding one of Umberto Eco's *The Infinity of Lists*, there are some less dry ones, much better written. There is a chapter about TEX binaries with a description of useful auxiliary programs like *pdfcrop*, rarely discussed in TEX books. There is a chapter about several selected packages such as *hyperref* or *xcolor* with a nice introduction to these packages. There is a chapter about BibTEX and the newer alternative *biblatex*. Even in these chapters one finds long alphabetical lists (for instance, four pages of *hyperref* options and six pages of `bst` files), but also finds a useful discussion, covering topics usually not explained elsewhere. These chapters alone probably can justify buying the book.

The book is nicely typeset, printed and bound — although the margins might be a little more generous.

In conclusion, I can imagine a reader thumbing through the book, stopping at an interesting passage or enjoying a font sample. It is less clear to me how to use the book as a reference due to the way the material is organized. Maybe an electronic version of the book with the possibility of full text search would be a better idea. Otherwise I would much prefer a logical grouping of the topics.

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