

Decent Academic Layout, and Using Word to Achieve It

Matthias Brinkmann

matthias.brinkmann@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

The Prevalence of Ugly Academic Papers

Please look, for just a moment, at the following random page from an academic draft. It's something I've written, but content doesn't matter. I don't ask you to read the page; please just take in the overall impression that this page makes on you.

the state imply (AA). In that sense, (AA) is merely a placeholder. While few liberals explicitly advocate or consider (AA), they will almost certainly have a set of more particular convictions about which non-trivial policies are legitimate that entails and commits them to (AA). Thus, it does not matter here which particular policies are thought to be legitimate, or how wide that set is.

With (JL), (RD) and (AA) in place, it is easy to state the Basic Problem: According to (JL), legitimacy requires public justification. But due to (RD), we can expect reasonable disagreement for all non-trivial policy issues. Thus, it is to be strongly expected that the majority, if not all, of proposed non-trivial laws will fail to be legitimate. But this contradicts (AA): Many non-trivial laws and policies, including the redistributionist policies required by liberal theories of justice, are held to be legitimate by liberals. This problem is basic in three senses: First, it expresses a problem that has always intrigued liberals: explaining legitimacy under conditions of dissent. Second, the problem is not based on a conflict of any particular values, but on a conflict between two very high-level sets of values: a concern for legitimacy, and a concern for the pursuit of justice. Third and relatedly, this problem is more general and abstract than many other critiques that have been levelled against justificatory liberalism – e.g., that justificatory liberalism is unfair to religious believers, or fails to harness the epistemic advantages of diversity.

3.3 The Debate So Far

In Political Liberalism, Rawls explicitly acknowledged versions of (JL), (RD) and (AA). But Rawls wrote as if agreement on policies was achievable and unproblematic, and as if there were enough “public reasons” available to support a wide set of laws as legitimate. Rawls’ critics in the 1990s, however, objected that Rawls had underestimated the problem (Waldron 1994; Sandel 1994). The charge became common that Rawls, despite his professed aims, had not taken serious (RD) (Caney 1998; Raz 1998); some remarks of the late Rawls did little to alleviate this impression (Rawls 2001). While Rawls and Rawlsians such as Larmore and Nagel appeared to

An Ugly Academic Paper.

There's nothing extraordinary about this page. A layout similar to this this dominates academic writing: the vast majority of unpublished papers I've read—that is, papers which authors give their colleagues, upload on portals such as academia.edu or SSRN, or send to conferences and journals—look like this. If a philosopher touches a word processor, their article is likely to turn out looking something like this, or something close to it. Judging from anecdotal evidence, this extends to other disciplines as well.

I find this layout a repulsive eyesore. Articles designed this way I find unpleasant to read, and if I don't have to, I avoid reading them. The prevalence of this style is puzzling, given that it could be improved easily. This article tries to convince you that what you saw above is in fact soul-hurtingly ugly, and that you should stop using this layout if you do. I'll give some moderate suggestions how a decently layouted academic paper would look like. I say "decent", not "beautiful", because I do not claim to be a layout whizz.

Some people's intuitive reaction will be to recommend using LaTeX instead. True, the default layout of a LaTeX paper is much preferable to the one we see in figure 1. But papers layouted in Word can look just as fine. LaTeX, in fact, has a learning curve which isn't worth it for 95% of philosophers, unless you tend to do hard-core formal stuff. (I've used LaTeX for many years, so I do have the comparison.) I will also give some practical advice on how to use Word properly. Three quarters of philosophers do not use Word to its full capacity, something which I repeatedly see in documents sent to me by others.

Why It's Ugly

Before turning to details, I should describe in general terms why the above page is so ugly. The main virtue of a decent layout, I think, is that the layout itself orients the eye: it is not only aesthetically pleasing, but provides a visual guide to the structure of the text. Newspapers do this naturally: they feature clearly delineated boxes which structure the content, differently sized headings and sub-headings, quotes set apart from the text, images supporting the content, and so forth. You will usually find that reading a newspaper is pleasing to the eye: paragraphs are short, you never lose track of a line, you find it easy to skip to what you consider the interesting parts. Of course, designing a newspaper isn't the same as designing an academic paper, but the principles are the same.

The problem with the layout above is that it does very badly on these principles. First, the layout is unbearably monotone. The paragraphs are very long, and there's no gap between the paragraphs. Second, it's lacking in clear lines. The text fizzles out on the right-hand side without a precise boundary. The subsection heading has an empty line above it, but otherwise nothing sets it meaningfully apart, and it leaves little visual memory. There's lots of white space between the lines, but it doesn't really orient us to anything; it's just space between the lines.

The page also isn't pleasing to read, for two reasons. First, the paragraph is very wide. Pay close attention to what your eyes are doing when you

try to read, for a change, what I'm writing here. You might notice that your eyes are moving *with* the line.

When you have stopped reading this line of text, your eyes have to momentarily reorient themselves to the beginning of the next line. The wider the paragraph, the harder it will be to reorient yourself in this way. I'm not saying that it's impossible to do when paragraphs get wide. It just becomes more inconvenient, more unpleasant. Good layout avoids this. (You might notice that newspaper columns are usually very thin.)

Furthermore, academic writers tend to think of paragraphs merely as ways of compartmentalizing their thoughts; but they fulfil an important *visual* function as well. A paragraph is helping us to get a natural sense of progressing in reading. If you zoomed out from this paragraph without trying to read its content, you would see that it's roughly a box. You will find it much harder to identify such boxes in the layout above. That's because paragraphs are so long, have no gaps between them, and are shot through unnecessarily with white space.

An Alternative

The layout I'm using in this article is not fancy at all. Still, I think that it is vastly superior precisely because it doesn't fall for the pitfalls I described. Look just at this page. You'll find that each paragraph, when looked at from afar, is roughly a box (that one annoying line aside), none with overbearing size. This helps to orient and guide the eye. There's generous space between paragraphs, but each paragraph is a visual unit which remains coherent and clearly identifiable.

There are other helpful visual structures. The section headings are set apart from the text, and if you have to find this page and paragraph again, you'll find this easy. You'll also notice

that the borders to the left and right of this text are very broad, meaning that the paragraphs themselves are thin. So your eyes have to do much less ‘legwork’ in scanning from line to line. I think you’ll find this more convenient, and perhaps even quicker, to read.

You might have various reactions at this point. First, you might defend the standard layout on various points. I commonly hear that you need it for proofreading. I turn to such points at the end of this article. Others might think that setting up such layout takes extraordinary amounts of time. This is just plain wrong. It took me a minute to set up the layout for this document, and below I explain to you how. I will now describe in greater detail the elements of good layout.

Elements of Decent Layout

Let’s turn to some hands-on advice for improvement, then. As I said, this provides advice for decent layout, not brilliant layout.

SINGLE-SPACING

Double-spacing is very hard on the eye, destroys any visual coherence, and in my opinion just wastes space. Single-spacing is all you need. Some like a bit more space between lines, in which case you might consider 1.2-spacing, for example.

WIDE PAGE MARGINS

As described above, give your reader’s eye space on the margins liberally. I would recommend around two inches (or 5cm) to both left and right. Around one inch (or 2.5cm) for top and bottom suffice.

A PLEASANT SERIF TYPEFACE

Your typeface should be a pleasant-looking serif typeface (“have little hooks”), not a sans-serif typeface like this. Unfortunately, the last few years have seen a rise of papers set in Calibri, the typeface you see here. Sans-serif fonts are, in the opinion of many, hard on the eyes and should not be used for the main body of text. You can use them for headers if you wish; in fact, a carefully balanced contrast between serif headings and sans-serif text can be very visually appealing (see below).

AVOID TIMES NEW ROMAN

Many people use Times New Roman—it’s the font you see in this sentence—and it’s often closely associated with the standard ugly layout I described above. With new Word versions, this is slowly

changing to Cambria—you see it here—which doesn’t strike me as a great improvement. They’re not the worst typefaces in the world, but Microsoft Word provides lots of alternative fonts you can use which look equally good or better. I’m partial to Palatino and Constantia, but tastes will naturally vary.

JUSTIFIED TEXT

Text should always be justified—that is, it should have clear boundaries on its right-hand side as you can see throughout this document. This follows the “clear visual lines” approach I described above. Headings need not (in fact, should not) follow this, as you see here:

MARGINS BETWEEN PARAGRAPHS, AND HEADINGS AND TEXT

Paragraphs should not be “glued” to each other. There should be a clear visual gap between two paragraphs. I’ll later explain how to do this in Word. Do under no circumstances, however, provide space between paragraphs by pressing “Enter” twice. This generally misunderstands how to use Word, and also creates too much space. The same remarks apply to gaps between section or subsection headings and text.

SET HEADINGS APART VISUALLY

Your reader should be able to immediately identify *visually* (i.e., not through reading) where sections and subsections start. To achieve this, all headings and subheadings should be set apart through clear layout choices. They should have a different size than normal text, and have greater gaps before them. Think also about using indents, or bold text. Clever layout doesn’t need underlining. Different hierarchical levels of headings should also be clearly set apart from each other.

INDENTING SIGNIFICANT MATERIAL

You should also consider ways to visually set apart long quotes, formulas, thought experiments and other significant material. A standard way to do so is through using block quotes, that is, text which has extra margins to the left and right:

You are very likely to have come across this in good academic writing.

USE COLOUR (MODERATELY)

Another feature the standard layout seems to forget about entirely is the existence of colour. Many of the layout aims I have described so far can also be achieved through using colour.

Dark colours are usually good choices—e.g., dark blue, dark red, dark green. These colours also do not diminish printability. Usually you want to stick to only one colour though. From my own experience and skills, it strikes me that philosophers aren't the best at choosing colour combinations.

Another Look

If you follow this advice, you might get a layout like this:

Justificatory Liberalism

Rawlsian emphasis on the reasons given for a law has distorted the debate about justificatory liberalism. Concern for public reason and a duty of civility are *not* core features of justificatory liberalism.

2.7.2 Justificatory Neutrality

There is another connected debate about whether a liberal state should be a *neutral* state, in particular between different conceptions of the good. Neutrality is often understood in terms of

Justificatory Neutrality (JN). A government ought not to appeal to any conception of the good, or any metaphysical or religious doctrine, in justifying public policy.³¹

(JN) differs from (JL) in several respects. First, (JN) is phrased in terms of what the state ought to do. It is not always clear whether advocates of justificatory neutrality want to make a claim about legitimacy or about some other normative property. Second, (JN) singles out "conceptions of the good", a term which does not appear in (JL).

Nevertheless, the concerns underlying (JN) are similar to those that guide many liberals in accepting (JL), and we find a substantial overlap between advocates of (JL) and (JN). A reason for this overlap is that many liberals accept

(CG) (a) Conceptions of the good, as well as metaphysical and religious doctrines, are *inherently controversial*; (b) any law based on such principles is not publicly justifiable.

In other words, (JN) focusses on conceptions of the good because they are held to be *paradigm cases of the publicly non-justifiable*. If we add (CG) to (JL), it is natural to accept something like (JN) (cf. Caney 1998, 21). However, there are three reasons to treat (JN) as independent from (JL).

First, part (a) of (CG) is false, as can be seen in forms of moderate perfectionism (cf. Clarke 1999; Chan 2000). For example, claims about the advantages of physical exercise, the disadvantages of being addicted to heavy drugs, or the joys that family life can provide are not controversial, or at least they are not more controversial than claims in other areas.

Second, the idea of "conceptions of the good" is too vague to be of much help. While philosophers in the anti-perfectionist vein often assume that we have some good idea of what that idea means, this is far from clear. If "conceptions of the good" are simply meant to capture principles that are not publicly justifiable, then (JN) collapses into (JL) (cf. Klosko 2003). (Indeed, this

³¹ For formulations and debate of (JN), see Arneson 2003; Klosko 2003; Gaus 2003; Lecce 2008.

23

To repeat, I don't think this is the best layout there is, or the only way to have a nice layout. Still, I believe it's clearly superior to what we started out with. Most papers I read are formatted in an absolutely awful way. If we move only a bit towards this style, much will be gained.

Minor Gripes

There are a couple of other features I tend to observe in academic papers which also should be avoided in my opinion, but which are more minor (and subjective). Still, let me highlight a few which bother me.

First, many authors use underlining for emphasis, rather than italics. This might come from the dinosaur age when people still wrote on typewriters, where this was the main way to emphasise that you really meant something. There's no reason, however, to use underlining when italics are available. They are more pleasing to the eye, fit neater into the text, and use up less attention than an underline does. The same remark applies to **bold text**.

Second, indenting the beginning of a paragraph, as you can see here, also strikes me as unnecessary. Such indents are useful to highlight where a new paragraph begins if there is no other way to visually identify such a beginning. This is necessary in the ugly layout we encountered in figure 1, but in the layout I have recommended, hanging indents become superfluous, and in fact start to look a bit silly.

A third phenomenon which I find mostly curious is that a small minority of authors insist on putting several blank spaces between sentences, usually two. (Derek Parfit tends to do it.) You might vaguely notice this in the gap between the last two sentences. Or here. It's subtle and often not noticeable, but in my opinion hurts the visual coherence of a paragraph. This convention might also stem from the age of typewriters. You can just drop it; no style guide requires or recommends it.

Using Word Appropriately

If you agree so far, let me get to some practical matters as to how to use Word. If you know what formatting styles are and how to use them, you can skip this section and the next entirely. This section provides only a short sketch of their advantages, so you might consider googling for a proper how-to guide as well. I focus on Word 2007 and later.

Most people, when they want to layout their document, highlight a certain amount of text, and then apply whatever layout they wish to apply—e.g., they change font size, or spacing, or margins. As a general rule, on the level of paragraphs, *you should never do this*. Why? Word provides a useful and highly flexible way to organise your document's layout. The idea is

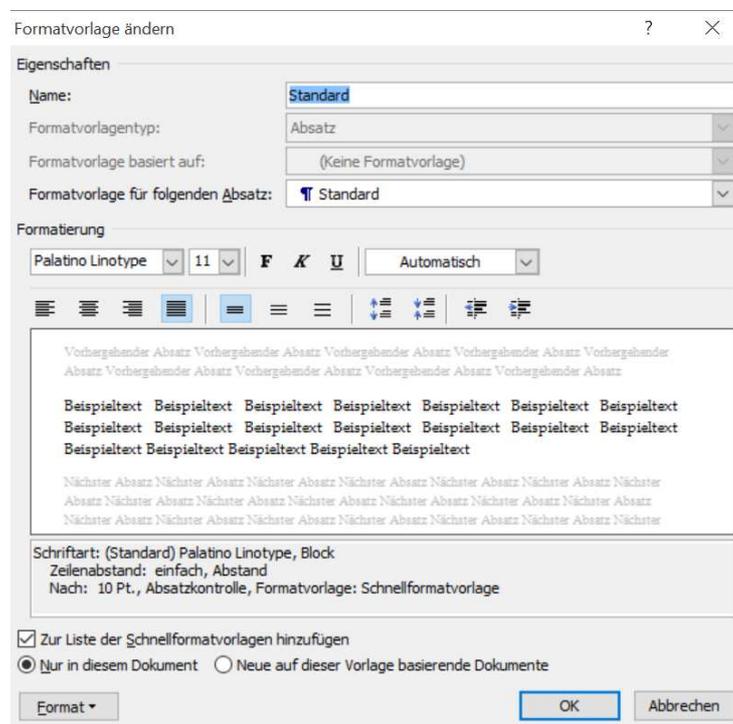
that all formatting information for your document is saved at one central place. Each individual paragraph or heading then “inherits” its layout from this central place. The great advantage of this system is that if you change the layout saved in this central place, all paragraphs in your layout change automatically.

This tool Word provides through the idea of formatting styles. On your “Home” tab, you should see the following toolbar:



(Screenshots in the following, unfortunately, will be in German.) Each of the five squares you see—you can press the down arrow to see more—saves some central layout information. “Standard”, for example, saves the format in which a standard paragraph in the document is layouted.

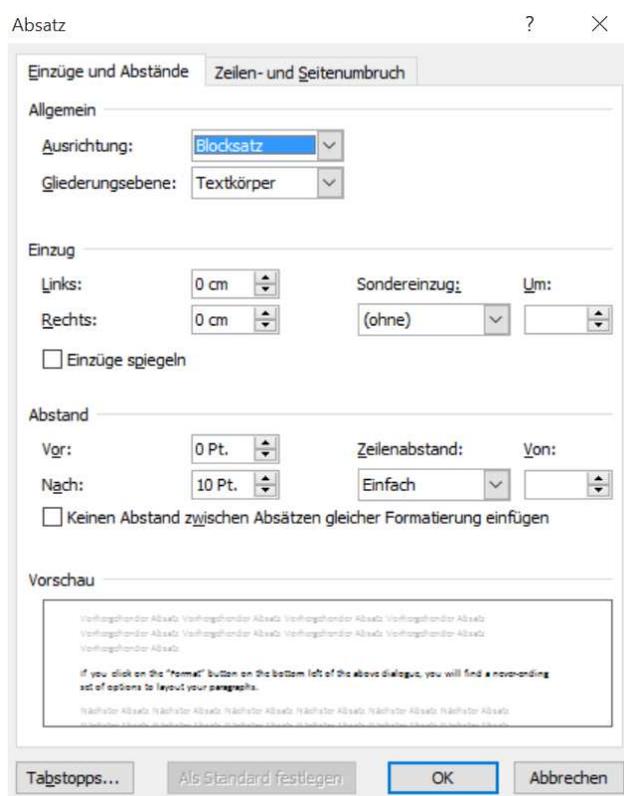
Let’s first look at how to change styles. Right-click on the square, and choose “Change”. You should get the following dialogue:



It is *here* that you should apply all the changes you wish to apply. If you were to change, for example, the font size to 12pt in this dialogue, *all* paragraphs throughout the document based on the “Standard” style will change to 12pt. See the appeal?

Most importantly: if you have manually reformatted individual paragraphs—e.g., if you have manually set them to 11pt, then this new central change will not apply to those paragraphs! This is why I insisted that you never manually format paragraphs.

If you click on the small “Format” button on the bottom left of the above dialogue, you will find a never-ending set of options to layout your paragraphs. If you were to click, for example, on the second element (“paragraphs”), you will get the following dialogue:

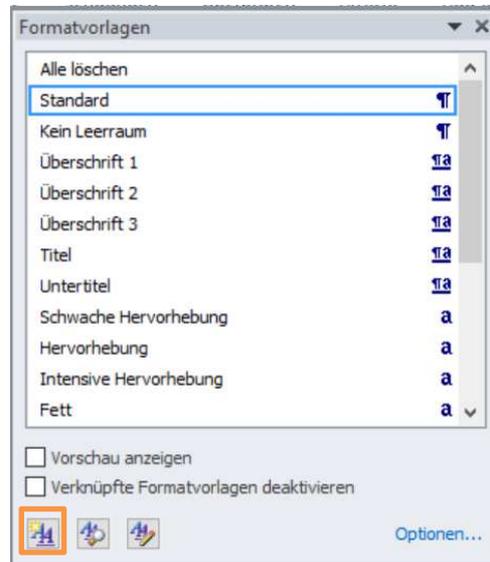


It is here that you can edit line spacing (“Zeilenabstand”—a totally useless word for your German vocabulary), for example. I also said above that you should never hit Enter twice to create margins below paragraphs. Now we can see the proper way how to do so: we modify the “distance – after” (“Abstand – nach”) category. You’ll find that all your paragraphs now move away from each other slightly.

I’ll leave playing around with the layout options to you. Some more features I will briefly highlight. First, you can create new layout styles at your leisure. This is unfortunately a bit hidden in Word. First, you will want to click on the tiny arrow, highlighted in orange, at the bottom right in this dialogue:

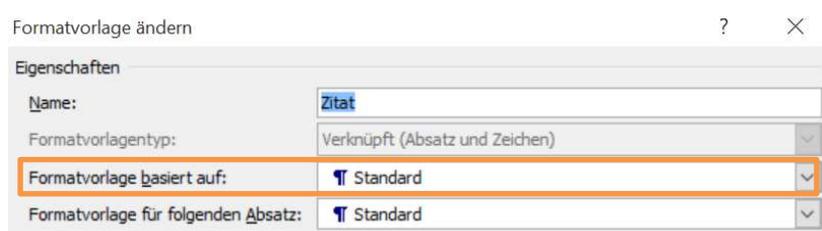


This should bring up this dialogue:



Here, in turn, the bottom left button creates a new style (again orange). This should bring you to the menu you we saw on page 8. You can give your style a name of your choice, and then change it at your heart's desire. Afterwards, it should appear in the dropdown menu of your Home tab.

Note that formatting styles are hierarchically organised. This can be seen here:



You can see—or guess perhaps from the German—that this style (“Zitat”, i.e., “Quote”) is based on the “Standard” style. This means that changes made to the Standard style will automatically apply to the “Quote” style, unless the “Quote” style explicitly makes other provisions.

Applying a formatting style to a paragraph is easy. Move the editing cursor (“|”) anywhere to the paragraph to which you wish to apply a style. Then click on the style in the Home tab. If you open a new document, every paragraph should automatically be already formatted in the “Standard” style.

Working with layout styles will take you some time to get used to, and you might want to set an hour or so aside to play around with it. But it pays off in the long run. It means that you can change the entire layout of your document quickly, painlessly, and most importantly, consistently, with just a few clicks.

Automatic Headings

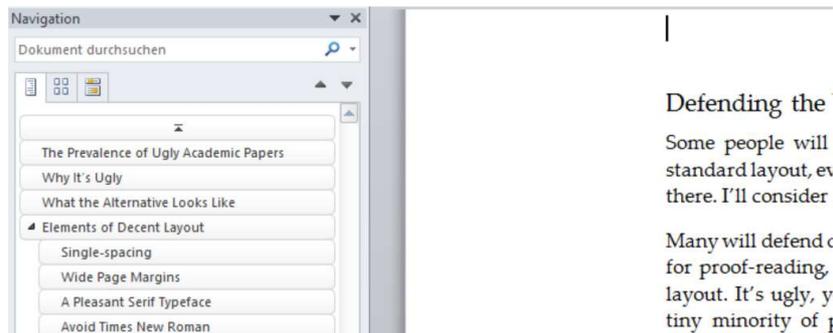
One other advantage of using formatting styles I briefly wish to highlight are headers and subheaders. Three layouts in the Layout tab should be labelled “Header 1”, “Header 2” and “Header 3”:



A first advantage is that if you use layout styles, you can use Word to more easily browse your own document. Go to the “View” tab. There you should have the following three options:



If we click on the third, Word suddenly adds the following sidebar to your document:

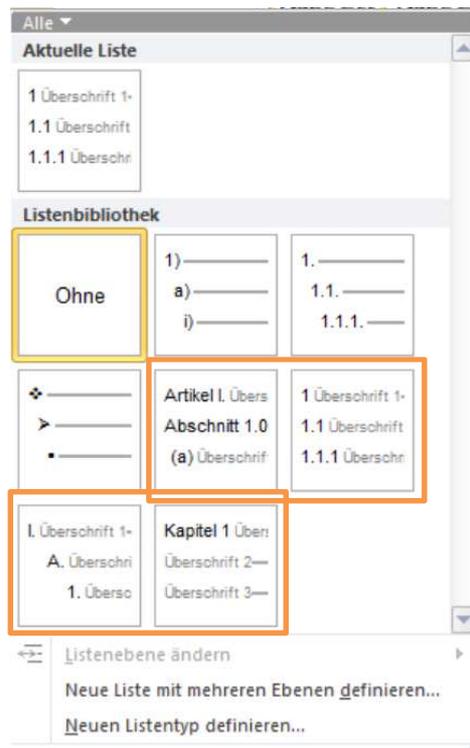


This shows, in hierarchical order, the contents of my paper. Clicking on each heading directly jumps to the relevant section. Moreover, if I click and drag, I can move the entire sections around—e.g., if I feel that “Wide Page Margins” should come before “Single-spacing”, I can just drag it where I want it. This is a small but tremendously helpful tool, but it relies on using formatting styles.

Another thing is that formatting styles allow you automatic chapter numbering. Put the cursor on one of the headings formatted in a “Header” formatting style. Then use this symbol from the Home tab:

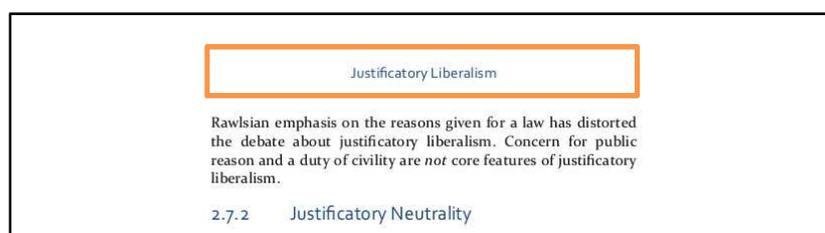


This should give you the following menu:

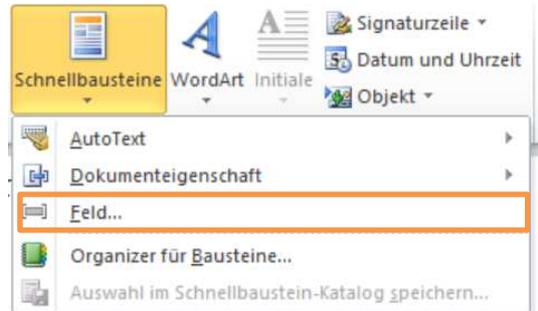


Your attention should be on those styles which have small, grey inset text (I highlighted them). If you were to click on one of them, all headers in the document would automatically be numbered in the suggested style—e.g., if you choose the bottom left style, top-level headers would receive roman numerals, and so on. Googling will reveal ways to you how you can individualise these formats as well.

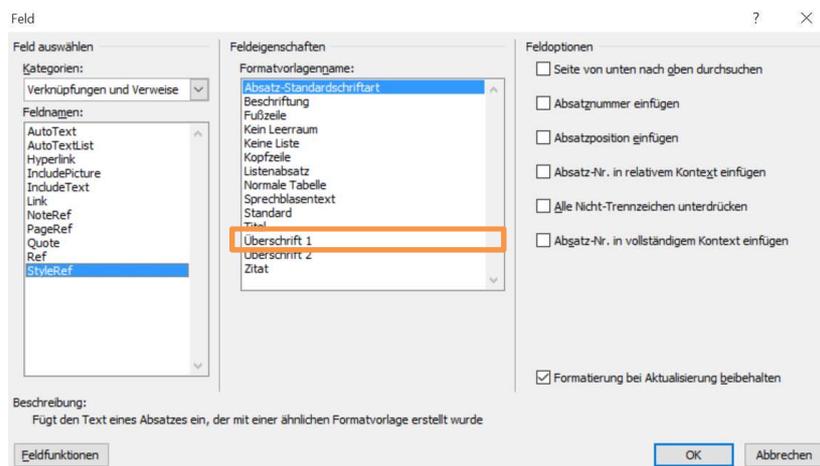
Another nifty thing which using formatting styles allows you is to put chapters into your running header, like this.



The top of this document contains the name of the chapter we're currently in (that is, the name of the current top-level header). To achieve this, click on the header of your document. Then go into the "Insert" tab, and here on "Quick Parts [they're probably not called that] > Field":



This will lead to the following dialogue (it's so hipster, you might have never seen it before):

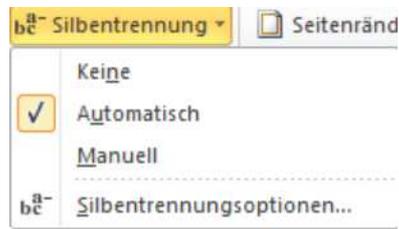


What you want is the "StyleRef" field. If you were to select "Header 1" (here in orange), and clicked okay, then the head of your document would from now on contain a field which contained whatever the current top-level header caption was. Along analogous reasoning, you can select the second-level headers as well. This is a useful tool for longer documents, especially a thesis or book.

A Last Bit of Advice

Strangely enough, Word has switched off line breaking by default. (This is what you have just seen: the word "default" is distributed across two lines.) Without automatic line-breaking, text can be distributed unevenly across lines, which tends to look ugly. So you want to always switch it on.

Go on the “Page Layout” tab, and there find your way to “Silbentrennung”, or whatever they call it in your language. (Your language is unlikely to contain the beautiful word “Silbentrennungsoptionen”, however.)



“Automatic” is doing everything you want.

More could be said about both layout and how to use Word. Most people only use a tiny amount of the functionality Word offers. This is curious, as modifying text is one of the main activities of an academic in the humanities. I’ve hinted here at the various possibilities Word offers. It’s a powerful tool and should be used well.

Defending the Ugly?

Some people will want to defend some aspects of the standard layout, even if they might make concessions here and there. I’ll consider some of these replies now, though I should say that I don’t have much patience for them.

Many will defend double-spacing by saying that it’s necessary for proof-reading, and that this is the origin of the standard layout. It’s ugly, yes, but a necessity. I suspect that only a tiny minority of people actually use this layout for proof-reading, but let’s put that aside. I have two simple responses. First, even if you sometimes need to proof-read and this is a good way to do so, you shouldn’t impose that layout on other people. It takes thirty seconds to undo double-spacing and reformat for lush wide margins (if you use formatting styles!), restoring readability for everyone else. So format for proof-reading if you must, but don’t impose it on everyone.

Second, the alternative format I have suggested allows for proof-reading all the same. You just underline the word to be changed and write the necessary change on the left or right side. In fact, the current layout is *more* conducive to be used in such a way, as you have *more* space for comments to left and right. It’s also easier to get a sense for whole paragraphs and the overall flow of a text.

Another reply defending the standard layout is that it, well, is standard, and that standards fulfil important roles. One might say that scholars are not out to impress; they should try to convince with their arguments, not their layout. By having a simple, if admittedly dull, standard layout for articles, we can focus our attention on contents, not the ephemeral. The objector might add that this becomes particularly important in blind reviews, where flashy layout might bias reviewers. This, then, is a 'levelling-down argument' for ugliness.

It's true that standardising layout can sometimes be important, particularly in contexts of blind review. I wouldn't advocate nice layout if I didn't think it had an effect on me! But if you want to standardise layout, just standardise it to something nice. If you run a conference, don't tell people to send in their papers in 12pt double-spaced Times New Roman. Tell them to submit papers in 11pt single-spaced Palatino with two-inch side margins instead. There's no reason to make life awful for your blind reviewers. So there might well be a need for a standard, but there's no need for the standard to be this awful. And there are little to no transaction costs as well: changing the layout of a document takes very little time.

Another thing you might find hard to get used to are the wide margins to the left and right. Are these not a waste? First, in my experience, they're not generally a waste of paper. I usually find that documents layouted in the style of this paper are not much longer or shorter than double-spaced papers. They will take more pages, admittedly, than single-spaced papers with narrow margins. But given that lots of reading happens on the computer nowadays, we shouldn't obsess too much over how many pages our papers take.

Another argument is that our papers should be dull, so that we only focus on content, not form. I think many philosophers revel in the idea that theirs is a deep, intellectual, difficult profession. It's *serious* stuff, you know. This might be a good sociological explanation of why ugly design is so prevalent in philosophy papers, but it's not a justification. Of course philosophy is serious business. But something can be serious without being ugly.