

# Head over heels for Acrobat

## Software dismantles barriers to printing, sending, and storing information / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

**I**'VE BECOME A REAL BELIEVER in Acrobat, the portable publishing system developed by Adobe.

With Acrobat, I've been able to send files, scanned articles, and photographs to other people on the Internet without asking them what kind of computer they are using. I've been able to rescue old Postscript files that I can't print anymore. And I've been able to create an electronic library that I am confident will be accessible five or 10 years from now.

Acrobat was designed to be a simple, easy-to-use system for distributing electronic copies of printed documents. The IRS uses Acrobat to distribute tax forms. Computer companies use Acrobat to distribute their manuals.

What makes this possible is Adobe's Portable Document Format, which contains all of the fonts, images, text, and formatting information necessary to print the information. Publishers know that each person viewing the file will see exactly the same thing.

Although you can also publish information electronically by distributing files formatted with the Web's Hyper Text Markup Language Postscript, or Microsoft Word, Acrobat has a lot of advantages. The first is size: Unlike HTML, PostScript, and Microsoft Word, all of the fonts, text, and

images in an Acrobat file are compressed. As a result, Acrobat files are dramatically smaller than other kinds of files that hold the same information.

For example, a friend recently sent her thesis for me to read. It was an 800 kilobyte Postscript file. I don't have a Postscript printer, so I converted it into an Acrobat file. The resulting file was only 350 kilobytes. I sent it back to her, so that she could share it with other people who didn't have Postscript printers.

Another Acrobat advantage is safety: The Acrobat file format has built-in support for encryption, and unlike Microsoft Word files, there is no way for an Acrobat file to contain a virus.

Acrobat's biggest advantage is universality: Once somebody has an Acrobat file, they can view it on more than 13 different kinds of operating systems, including Mac, PowerMac, Windows 3.1, Windows 95 and Windows NT, OS/2, Solaris, and even Linux. The Mac and Windows versions work as both stand-alone programs and as plug-ins for Netscape Navigator and Microsoft's Internet Explorer, allowing Web users to view Acrobat files directly in their browsers.

Today, there is simply no better way to distribute a complex document and have it viewable on

so many different platforms.

Although Adobe first released Acrobat in 1993, it wasn't until the 3.0 version came out in November that things really began to take off, says Judy Kirkpatrick, director of marketing at Adobe's Internet Product Division. One of the main reasons was price: Adobe dropped the cost of the Acrobat authoring software from \$695 to \$295. If you look around, you can find it for as low as \$199.

What your money buys is a beefed-up version of Adobe's free reader called Acrobat Exchange, which has the ability to let you add links, create bookmarks and annotations, and even rearrange the pages of Acrobat documents. You also get the Acrobat PDF Writer, which lets you create an

Acrobat document directly from a program such as Microsoft Word or Quark Xpress by simply choosing the print command. Then there is the Acrobat Distiller, which lets you create files from Adobe Postscript files. There is a full optical character recognition system, which lets you convert a scanned image to text.

Finally, there is Acrobat Catalog, which lets you build a full-text database of all of your Acrobat files.

An unexpected developing market for Acrobat is prepress and commercial printing, says Kirkpatrick. To send Adobe's annual report to the printer, Kirkpatrick says, her company's graphic arts department had to assemble more than 80 megabytes of information, containing images, fonts, Postscript files, and often the original Quark file, just in case something went wrong. All this data then has to be shipped to the

printing house, where an operator installs the fonts, combines the Postscript files with the images, and hopes that nothing goes wrong.

With Acrobat, the same information can be put in a single file that's less than 1 megabyte. It can then be proofed on any PC or Mac, or printed directly.

Because Acrobat makes it easier to distribute electronic documents, Kinko's Copies has decided to make the technology the basis of its new electronic documents initiative. Kinko's large customers will be encouraged to electronically submit their print orders as Acrobat files.

Acrobat isn't perfect. In particular, I've had some problems trying to read documents created with TeX, a popular typesetting system used by mathematicians. Adobe says it is aware of the problem and has posted a technical note on its Web site that gives some hints to TeX users for making better Acrobat files.

I have been using Acrobat to save articles, drawings, and photographs that I have collected in electronic format over the years. Some of these documents were created on Macs, some on PCs, and some on an ancient NeXT machine that's in my basement. I'm putting the Acrobat files on my Web server so that anyone can download them. For the first time ever, I am pretty confident that in five years I'll still be able to read the data, no matter what kind of computer I'm using.

Adobe's Web site can be reached at [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com).

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Adobe's Acrobat lets the user save a variety of images and texts.

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