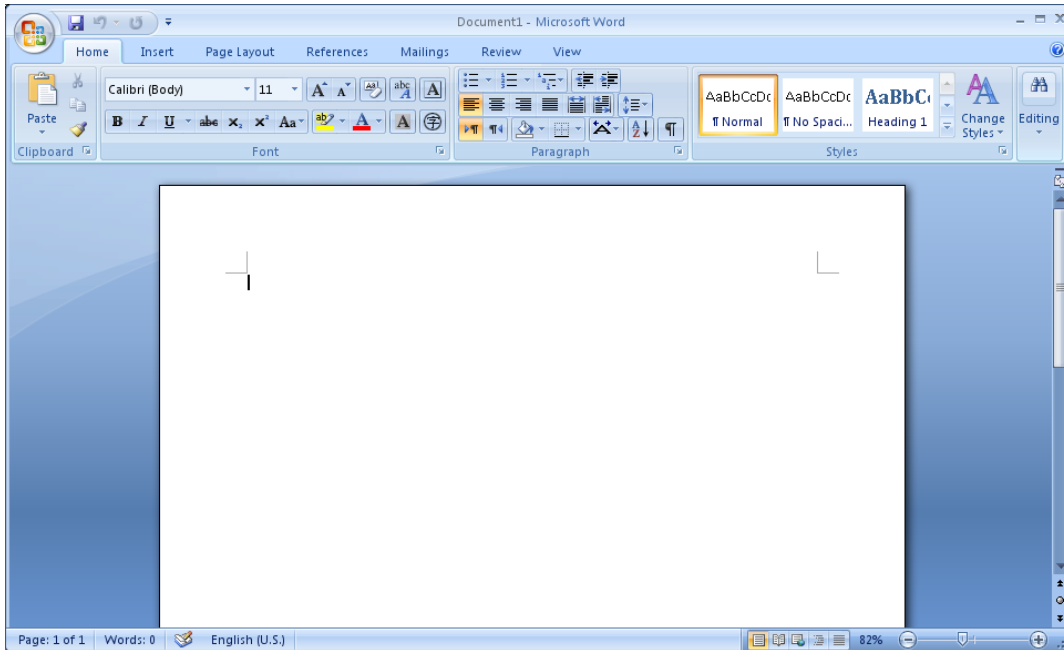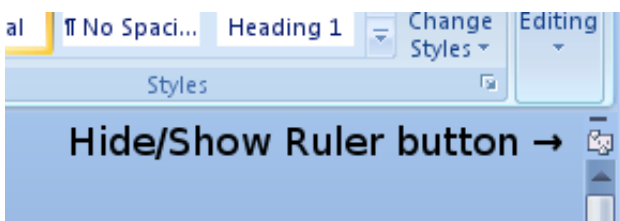# A plea for hidden rulers in OOo Writer

Despite the fact that a vast majority of users don't use the rulers in OOo/LibreOffice Writer, they are displayed by default, wasting precious vertical space on small screen resolutions. In this article I explain why I think that the rulers should be hidden by default in Openoffice.org/LibreOffice Writer.

Let's start with the number 1 competitor. You probably noticed that Microsoft Office 2007 was shipped with the rulers hidden by default:

To compensate, they added a new button to activate the rulers.

The great thing about the new button is that it is placed exactly where a normal user would expect it to be: at the exact "altitude" where the horizontal ruler is.

This afternoon I asked 7 random people, 4 of them were able to find how to show the rulers very fast. The other 3 did not, because they didn't know what I was speaking about. All 7 were musicians, and they can't make the difference between Windows and and Microsoft Word, or between e-mail and Hotmail. And yes, they are the kind of people I actually enjoy living and working with.

And I'm sure that Microsoft had enough usability testers to validate the location of the 🖼 button as "smart", with reference users other than musicians.

So let's assume that people are capable of finding how to show the rulers easily, if they want to, or are asked to do so.
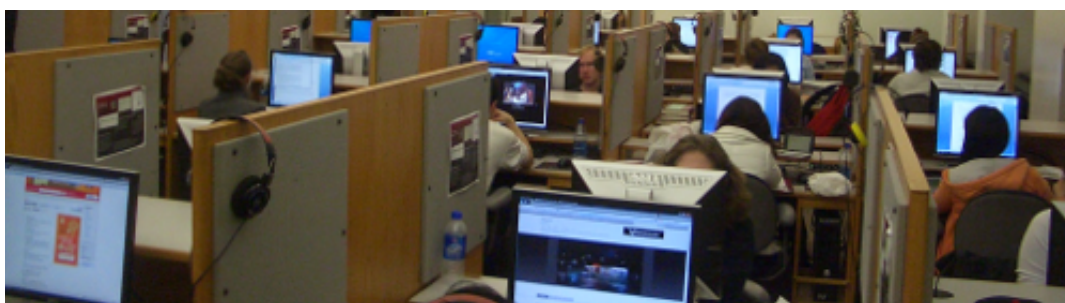

The question remains open: why did the UI staff at Microsoft decide to hide the rulers by default? Well, one explanation could be: their new ribbon wastes so much vertical space (115 pixels) that they couldn't affort to loose even more vertical space (24 pixels) due to the horizontal ruler.
(115 pixels are 15% of the vertical space of a 1024x768 monitor.)

While this could be true, in my opinion, the real explanation is even easier:people don't use the rulers. Well, most of them don't. And the people who do use the rulers will be able to find the new 🖼 button anyway.

Usability testing

I'm studying at the Jacobs School of Music. It is a great place to make small usability tests on "normal" people. In the Music Library, where I spend several hours a day, there are about 100 Windows Vista and 30 MacOS X workstations. My own laptop is probably the only computer running Linux in this building.
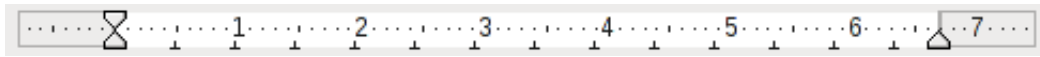

The IU Music Library - On the right of the picture, two people are using Word 2007.
Of course, they don't use the ruler.

Most of the time, all workstations are occupied, with users from a pool of more than 1600 music students. Music students are the most non-technically-aware users you can possibly imagine. They waste most of their time watching Youtube or going on Facebook. Then they write some e-mails before going back to practice. Almost none of them have ever heard of neither OpenOffice.org nor

Linux. They are exactly what I like to consider as an average user.

Let's do some statistic!

About 4 to 12 times a day, I discreetly pass behind people using computers at the Music Library. (Don't think that I would do it on purpose: it's only my normal way to the place I like to sit.) I always take the time to catch a glimpse at the monitors. Each time, I see at least 15 students. And each time, 3 or 4 of them are using Microsoft Word 2007. Sometimes, music students have to write papers, too, and we also have many music theory and doctoral students here.

I come here every day and week-ends, I've just figured out that I have been here about 120 days since September.

120 (days) x 4 (times a day) x 3 (people using word) = 1440

At least I have seen 1440 people using Word. Probably much more. Guess what? Despite paying high attention to it: never, ever, I have seen ANY of them using the rulers.

You may say "it's only that music students are not the kind of people using rulers." A somewhat strange affirmation, but if you landed on this page, you are probably a rather uncommon person ;-)

In my opinion, music students are in reality very representative of the average user. "The more than 1,600 students who study at the School of Music come from all 50 US states and as many as 55 countries" (source). Their age range goes from 18 to 30 years old, but quite often, faculty members use these workstations too.

But I do use the ruler!

Some of my dear readers might be horrified by this ruler-less vision of word processing software, and shout loudly:
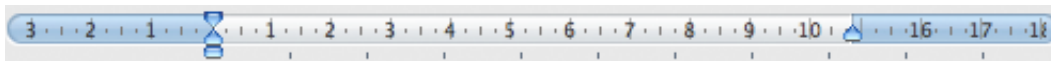
« But I use the ruler! And so do many of my colleagues and friends! »

Now don't understand me wrong: I know that any advanced or professional user will need the rulers. I use them myself, though I don't even consider myself as an advanced user. But a vast majority of users do not, and don't even have a clue about what rulers are here for! So it seems pretty fair that the rulers should not be displayed by default.
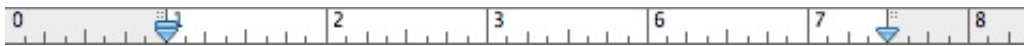
What about other software?

As you already know, in Microsoft Office 2007, the rulers are hidden by default, and a handy ruler button appeared. In OpenOffice.org until version 3.1, both rulers are visible by default. But what about other software?

In Microsoft Office Mac 2008, both rulers are shown by default. There is no ruler button as in Office 2007.

In Apple Pages '08 (3.0.2) and '09, only the horizontal ruler is visible by default.

In RedOffice 4.0, both rulers are hidden by default. A ruler button appears at the same place than in Microsoft Office 2007. When displayed, the rulers are the same than in OpenOffice.org. (RedOffice is built upon OpenOffice.org. See here for a review of RedOffice 4.0)

In IBM Lotus Symphony 1.2, both rulers are visible by default.

In AbiWord 2.6.6, both rulers are displayed by default. In KOffice 2.0, to be released soon, the rulers seem to be hidden by default.

Conclusion

1. A vast majority of users do not use the rulers.
In the best case the rulers are useless to the average user, in the worst case confusing.

2. Advanced users are able to find how to display the rulers anyway, if they need

it.

3. The horizontal ruler is wasting precious vertical space!
This is very important to people using small resolutions. Most laptops sold these days have a 1280x800 resolution. 1024x768 is by far the most used resolution, and the the netbook market, with its very small vertical screen sizes, is still growing (30% market share in Europe).

4. Some other office suites already ship with their rulers hidden by default, this includes the market leader Microsoft Office 2007, but also RedOffice 4.0 and KOffice 2.0.

5. Hiding the rulers by default and making a new hide/show ruler button would be a huge improvement for OpenOffice.org, compared to the relatively small amount of programming/development needed.

And now, what?

I have filled up two bug reports:
Issue 99284: The ruler should be hidden by default in Writer.
Issue 99286: Implement a ruler button to show/hide the ruler in Writer.

YOU can make the difference: please vote for these bugs!
It will take you only 5 minutes. If you don't have a login, here is the page (update: dead link, removed) where you can join OpenOffice.org. (You will need to join to vote for bugs.)

After joining, go to the issue page, and follow the "Vote for this issue' link marked in the following screenshot. You can use up to 2 votes for an issue.

Total	0 vote(s) used out of 5 allowed.		
Word processor	15938	Horizontal scrollbar displayed without a need for it	1
→	99284	The ruler should be hidden by default in Writer.	2
→	99286	Implement a Ruler Button to show/hide the rulers in Writer.	2
Total	5 vote(s) used out of 5 allowed.		

And who knows, maybe you will soon be feeling in your stomach the warmth of having done something useful to the community... To save the world, though, you'd better start here or here (better links are welcome).

By Johannes Eva, February 2009

About the author:I have been using OpenOffice.org since it was called StarOffice 4.0, back in 1998. The same year I made my first steps with Red Hat Linux 5.1 "Manhattan", and soon became a strong partisan of Free Software. Nevertheless, and despite using a Linux environment as my main platform, I am preoccupied by the slow progress of the FOSS movement, and its lack of unity.

Disclaimer: I'm not affiliated with Sun or Novell. The opinions exposed here are only my points of view, and do not necessarily reflect any consensus in the OpenOffice.org community.

PS. This post is NOT about copying Microsoft Office. It is about making OOo a good and usable piece of software.

This article has been linked on Tuxmachines, LXer and Linux Today.

COMMENT FROM RAMBO TRIBBLE (09-02-28 05:46:35)

"Hidden rulers"? Is that like "shadowy overlords"? Microsoft has those, alright.

COMMENT FROM DARRYL (09-02-28 06:53:55)

I studied music and like you I am quite computer literate, as well as programmer, systems engineer and electonics engineer. (military trained).

You have OO ruler up do you actually use it, I happen to use Off7 and would turn off rulers as the default margin settings should be correct by default.

You know if yo make OO.org more and more like window, people will start to think they are simply copying what MS has done in MS office.. .. oh wait !!!

And i too believe linux and FOSS could be much more popular and better than what it is today.

FOSS has had years and years to craft excellent code and top quality products and apps. but they dont, insted they tend to write applications more for programmers as well and forking yet another distro, or desktop.

When was the last time the linux kernel was scraped and re-written from scratch ?

Instead of the patch upon patch mess it seems to be now, talk about bloat, exponential size growth and over 5million lines of code !!

No real quality assurance system, and it shows.

FOSS has all the tools and skills to re-write the kernal and many of the applications. Craft the code make it great.

the other reason as well why FOSS is not going anywhere is the GPL in it they talk freedom, sure your free to veiw or modify the source code, but fact is next to NO ONE cares about the source code or the ability to view it or modify it.

And thats the only freedom GPL is offering.

Quality of Linux, quality and functionality of apps, community support, better license, 1 or 2 distro's one modifiable desktop and everyone working on making it a polished and finished product that would be commecially viable.

And guess what do all that and people will even pay to for it.

After 17 years it should be clear to FOSS that FREE is not what the world wants.

They want quality and consistancy, and FOSS does not deliver on either

Actually the vast mayority of people that do not use wordprocessing software for their work basis, do not even notice this rule is there.

people who depend on wordprocessing software for work actually care that the rules are in place, or at least the horizontal rule, this provides users with better formatted documents.

as you described on your article, the vast mayoralty of word processing software have the horizontal rule.

I do not use the rules, i started using the rule after i read this post. now my documents actually look pretty, and my resume has proper borders.

Sorry, but does OO have a way to vote *against* your hidden ruler bug report? Personally, the first thing I do in Word 2007 is get my bloody ruler back. Of course, I only use 2007 when I have absolutely no choice. I wish they'd add a "Word 2003" option for the interface. You wait, the next thing you know, they'll be adding ribbons all over Windows itself. All the interface changes in 2007 are stupid, so why copy it?

You're spot on. I use to ruler only in advanced mode (when I'm writing a project report, for example) and not in the normal mode; e.g. when I'm writing letters etc. I have never used the vertical ruler in my entire life. I turn off the ruler in OOo whenever I encounter a fresh install.

Why should OO.org copy Office 2007. Office 2007 is getting WORSE; it is becoming harder to use.
Darryl - Why do you even bother with linux. You do not support what it stands for. Some of us like the freedom that lots of distros provide. And the idea of a finished product? you must be a serious windows and microsoft supporter if you do not like the fact that what we refer to as linux, is constantly changing developing. Another point I would like to make to you is that you cannot dictate what people work on when they develop software, it takes away their will to

work on it and therefore drops the quality and creativity which is so vital.

COMMENT FROM L. S. COLBY (09-03-02 06:43:16)

Open office provides two ways for enabling or disabling rulers.

From the view menu, check or un-check rulers to view them or not.

From the tools->options->openoffice.org writer->view panel, check rulers (and the specific ruler you wish to enable, horizontal, vertical or both) or un-check rulers to disable their display.

Are you aware of this?

If you are not, I am curious as to why you have not used openofice help(rulers;using rulers) to obtain additional information or why you have not "worked with" the interface to see what options are available.

I'm curious because I've been programming for 42 years and am interested in how users arrive at their definition of - problems - in a user interface.

If you are aware of these ways of enabling or disabling the display of rulers, why did you not mention them in your article?
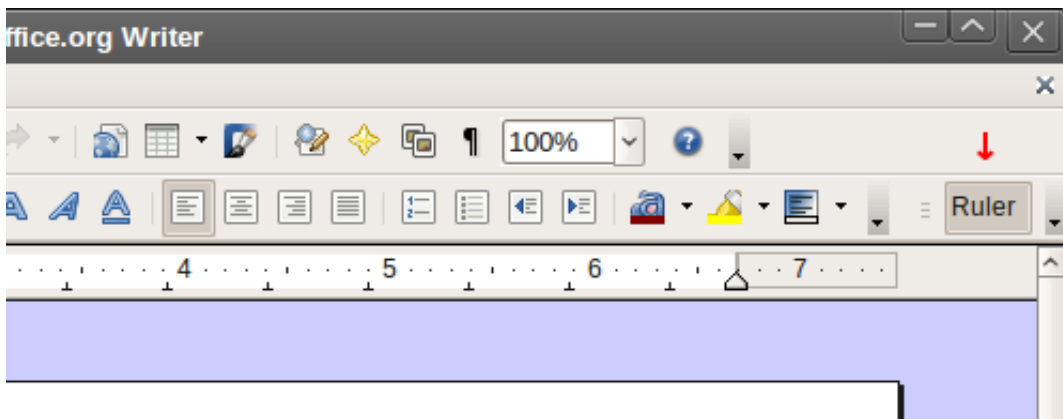
Why do you think that programmers who have already thought through the possibility that an option is necessary to allow users to display rulers or not should now address the issue of the default for this option.

Finally why should this be a "voteable" to be given, for example, preference over providing a tabbed interface for document display as opposed to the multiple window display currently used

COMMENT FROM JOHANNES EVA

@ L.S Colby: I have been using OOo/StarOffice fore more than 10 years... so yes, I know the ways to display/hide the rulers.

There is even a third way: you can create a toolbar with a "Ruler" Button that will hide / show the rulers. A pity that it has no icon, it would be much better! Here a screenshot:

For your last argument: I don't pretend this ruler issue should be given the preference over anything else. That's not my point: I just think it is a relatively important issue, and it would have great results for a small amount of work.

If you want to write an article showing the importance of a tabbed view in OOo, please do it. I'll be pleased to comment it!

Note than a tabbed view in OOo would maybe make the UI more complex, insted of more simple, as I wish it would be - not for me, but for most of the users.