

Keeping Control

Revision Control in OpenOffice



Keeping on top of the amendments made to your documents is an uphill struggle unless you happen to have some sort of Revision Control to fall back on. Luckily OpenOffice offers just that.

BY COLIN MURPHY

When I am sitting in front of the computer waiting to work in an office suite application I haven't got time to start reading online documentation,

I need to get that invoice out or some such similar job instead. Because of this I am sure there are lots of neat features I am missing out on purely because I don't know they are there.

Revision Control

Just one of the many features that can be so easily overlooked is that of 'Revision Control'. Should a piece of text need to be created by more than one person,

there will be a need to see who has added what text and where.

Without this ability to keep track of additional text, you run the risk of duplicating, or worse, contradicting, your co-authors work. Luckily, some office packages like OpenOffice come with 'Revision Control' built in, but the functionality is less than obvious unless you know exactly where the controls for this feature are and how best to make it work for you in practice.

The key to using revision control in OpenOffice (and StarOffice obviously) is the 'Changes' control, which can be found in the 'Edit' drop down menu. From here you get to control how the revision control will work for your particular document.

By selecting 'Edit / Changes / Record' you turn on the feature which will record any changes that are made to a document, including additions and deletions. This setting is saved when you save the actual document, so, if you start your document off with this function turned on it will stay in that state until turned off again.

You may not want the feature turned off, so you have the opportunity to protect this setting with a password,

otherwise anyone could turn the feature off as the document winds its way from author to author.

Any changes to the document are preserved and you can view them at any time by selecting the 'Show' function from the same 'Changes' drop down menu. When you are viewing these changes you will see that they are highlighted in the document.

By default, text which has been deleted is crossed through while additional text will be underlined. The text color also changes depending on who the author of that piece of text is.

As the document is passed from person to person, details of who made the changes and when they made them are kept. Depending on the nature and extent of the changes you are making you can save a new version of the document, controls for which you can find in the 'File / Versions...' drop down menu. While you are saving this new version you even get the opportunity to add comments about the amendments you have made.

Keeping Control

Let us have a look at an example of a piece of text that is going between three people.

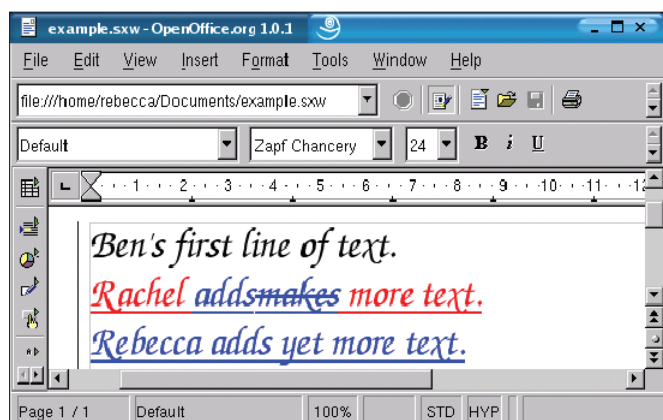


Figure 1: Amended text is highlighted

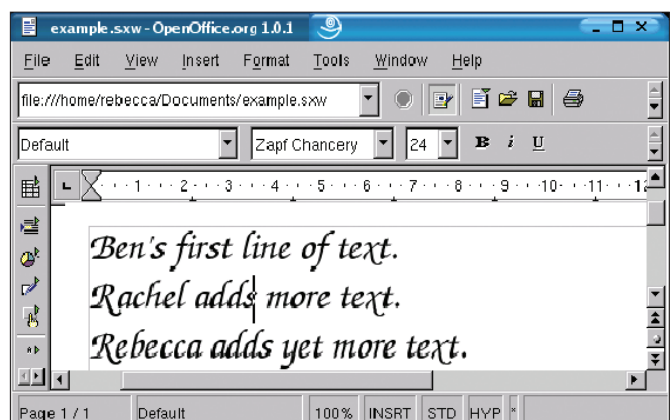


Figure 2: Change viewing disabled

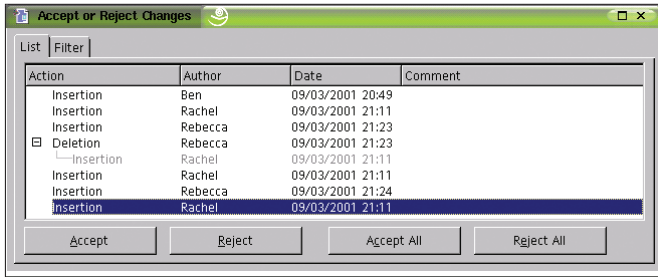


Figure 3: This menu allows you to Accept or Reject changes

Ben starts off the document by adding his 'first piece of text'. Realizing that this document is going to go through changes he selects the 'Record' option before saving the document. It's important to note that the file needs to be in a OpenOffice (or StarOffice) format for revision control to work. Had Ben received a plain text document it would be necessary to save it first in an appropriate format.

The document is then passed on to Rachel who just adds a line of text. Rebecca now gets to see the document and decides to amend the text which Rachel added and also to add a line of her own.

Ringing the Changes

In the 'Changes' menu you can toggle whether or not to 'Show' the changes in a text. Normally, if a text has been changed and that change has been recorded then the 'Show' feature will be turned on.

If your document is going through lots of changes then all the change highlighting will make the document very difficult to read, hence the ability to switch it off, something you will be able to see in Figures 1 and 2.

Viewing the Changes

Even with the 'Change Viewing' disabled you can still see who is responsible for a passage of text by hovering your cursor over the piece you are interested in and you will find that a balloon pops up telling you who and when that text was changed. This is true also for the 'high-lighted' version of the text.

Along the left hand edge of the text in Figure 1 you will also notice a bar. This is yet another form of highlighting, showing you that something has changed on this line. This is very helpful in locating small changes in a large block

of unchanged text, say the removal of an erroneous comma.

Once the text has done the rounds, being amended along the way, decisions need to be made as to which changes to keep or not. This is where you get to 'Accept or Reject Changes' selected from the option you can again find on the 'Changes' dropdown menu.

Clicking on 'Accept or Reject' brings up a directory of changes that have yet to be fixed, see Figure 3 for an example.

By double clicking on an entry in this menu the actual change will be highlighted. Changes to text which has previously been amended are also listed in the 'Accept or Reject Change' menu in a tree directory. This list can become very long, and so to help you easily navigate the changes, you can filter the list by certain criteria, by date and time, by Author or by type of amendment, insertion or deletion.

Most usefully, you can also filter by Comment. And with judicious use of this feature and a little teamwork planning you can find changes very quickly.

Filters

There is a system of color coding between the list of changes and how they might relate to any filtering criteria. If shown on the list in Black then that change matches the filter and can also be changed. Blue entries are also found on the filter, but only as a subentry, an amendment of a previous change.

With the help of your 'Shift' and 'Ctrl' keys you can make multiple selections which you can then Accept or Reject en masse. Alternatively, you can Accept or Reject All changes with one click.

Once you have Accepted (or Rejected) an amendment it is then fixed to the document and it's history is removed. Up until this point all of the changes are held within the document, something

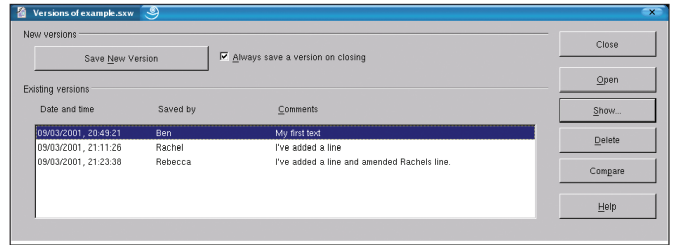


Figure 4: A single OpenOffice file can hold multiple version of that document, a little piece of history

which is clearly reflected by both the file size and by things like the line and character count – which you can find in the 'Files / Properties....' menu.

Version Management

Briefly mentioned previously, Version Management allows you to keep entire versions of documents, but still held in one file. The controls for this can be found in the 'Files / Versions...' dropdown menu, see Figure 4.

By checking the 'Always save a version on closing' box a new version of the document will be added to the file when you close it down. This is different to just saving the file, which, obviously, saves the changes you have made, but less obviously, doesn't save them as a version. It is the version saving that allows you to add the comments to the range of saves that you have worked so hard at and might usefully want to search later on.

You can also open discrete versions of a document, allowing you to see how it was in a previous form. The 'Show' button allows you to see the full comment text, you're not limited to just one line here. The 'Compare' button allows you to view the differences between the version of the document which is open and the highlighted version.

The file size is also heavily impacted by having multiple versions stored, hence the 'Delete' key, which should be called upon when previous versions are no longer of interest. As an example, the file shown here, still containing the 3 versions and multiple amendments was 18.9KB long. Once the old versions had been deleted and the amendments accepted, the file size dropped to 9.7KB – still a big file for 3 lines of text, but then that's the price you pay for functionality. ■