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Google Docs tips for advanced users

BY JACK WALLEN

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For nearly a decade I've spent the majority of my days using Google Docs. I'm a writer, it's what I do. And because I use the tools so much, I've found plenty of ways to make it work for me on a level casual users might not know about.

Let's fix that.

Although some of these tips might not apply to you, you can be sure to find one or two that you not only will use, but you'll depend on to make your work with Google's cloud-based office suite more efficient and flexible.

None of these tips require a paid Google Workspace account, so anyone should be able to make use of them. You do, of course, need to have a Google account. Also, these tips are based on the desktop version of Google Docs, not the mobile option.

With that said, let's get to the tips.

HOW TO QUICKLY OPEN A NEW GOOGLE DOC

If you come away with one tip, let it be this one. Why? Because with this tip you can quickly open a brand new document, spreadsheet or presentation, without having to first open Drive.

To immediately jump to a new document, open your web browser and type one of the following in the browser address bar:

- docs.new (or doc.new) - for a new document
- sheet.new - for a new spreadsheet
- slide.new - for a new presentation

This tip works, regardless of which web browser you use. The only caveat to this is that each new Google Docs file will be saved in the root folder of your Google Drive account. So if you prefer to keep things better organized, you'll need to manually move it after it's created.

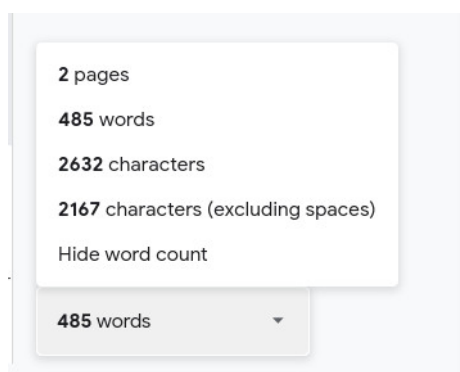
But if you need to quickly create a document, without having to go through the usual steps, this is your best bet. You could even create a desktop shortcut that opens your default browser to those pages, for an even more efficient experience.

HOW TO ENABLE ALWAYS-ON WORD COUNT

I constantly check my word counts. For some of my work (especially novels) that requires me to frequently use the [Ctrl]+[Shift]+[C] keyboard shortcut to display the word count. However, for shorter works (this trick cannot be used for novel-length docs) you can enable the word count to always appear in the lower-left corner of the document. This is a good way to always know the stats of your document, as it includes a count for pages, words, characters and characters (including spaces).

To enable this feature, open the word count popup (again with the [Ctrl]+[Shift]+[C] keyboard shortcut) and check the box for Display word count while typing. Once enabled, click on the word count drop-down to reveal the stats of your document (**Figure A**).

Figure A



THE WORD COUNT OF A DOCUMENT
KEEPS YOU UP TO DATE, IN REAL-TIME,
OF YOUR COUNTS.

HOW TO PASTE WITHOUT FORMATTING

I use this tip all the time. When you copy and paste text into a Google Document, it almost always pastes the content along with the format from the original source. Sometimes that's okay, but most of the time it's not. For example, if I need to copy the output of a Linux command into a Google Doc, I want it unformatted. Or, maybe I copied a quote from an interview subject out of an email. Again, I don't want the formatting.

To paste content without formatting, use the keyboard shortcut [Ctrl]+[-Shift]+[V] (or [Command]+[Shift]+[V] on macOS). This will paste whatever you've copied without any formatting.

HOW TO USE THE VERSION HISTORY TOOL

Google Docs includes a very handy versioning tool that makes it possible for you to revert to any auto-save point of the document. You see, Google Docs constantly autosaves your documents for you, and those autosave points can be used as versions.

As you work through your document if at any point you need to view specific changes you made, go to File | Version History | See version history. The document you are working on will change to show each saved version (**Figure B**).

Figure B



SHOWING THE VERSION HISTORY OF THIS ARTICLE IN GOOGLE DOCS.

Select any one of the entries in the right sidebar to highlight a change. You can revert to any one of the shown versions or return to your current version.

Version history should become a tool you depend on, especially if you collaborate with others.

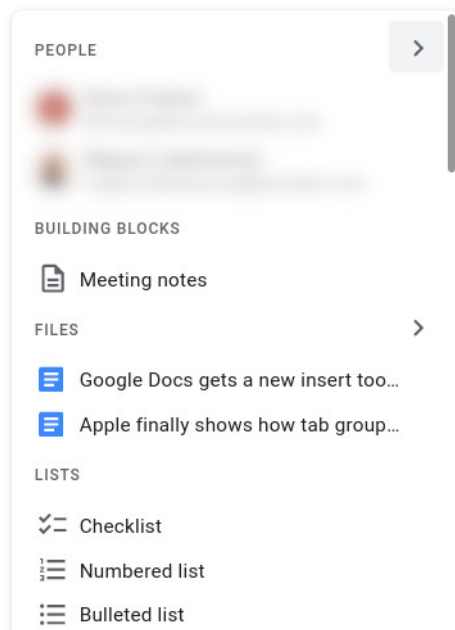
HOW TO USE QUICK COLLABORATION

There's a new feature that was recently added to Google Docs, which helps you quickly collaborate with other teammates. Say, for instance, you need input from a teammate on a particular passage in a document.

As you work through that passage, type an @ character, which will open a new popup. From that new popup (**Figure C**), you can select from or type a username or email address to assign a comment to that user. The collaborator will be notified of the command.

Figure C

ave access to the document, you can easily invite them
action menu. @|



THE NEW INTERACTIVE @ MENU IN GOOGLE DOCS.

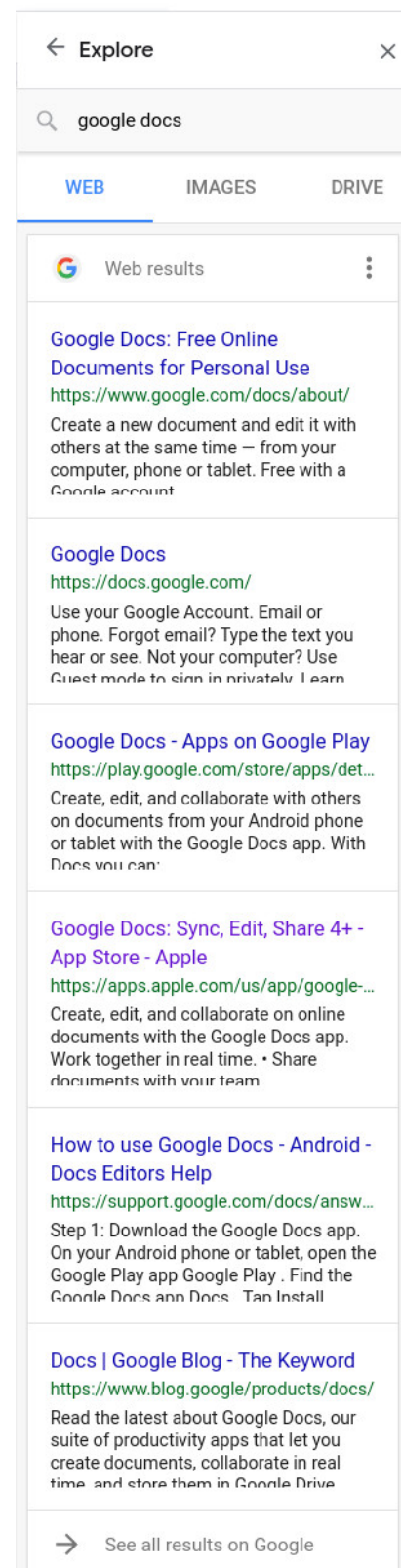
If the prospective collaborator doesn't have access to the document, you can easily invite them from a new popup generated by the @ action menu.

HOW TO USE THE EXPLORE TOOL

You might not know this, but Google Docs has a handy research tool that can help keep your experience a bit more refined and less cluttered. Say, for example, you're writing (or working) along, and you need to look up a word or phrase. Instead of opening a new tab, you can use the built-in explore tool instead. Explore allows you to search either your own docs or the web to research a topic.

To open the explore tool, hit the [Ctrl]+[Alt]+[-Shift]+[I] keyboard combination and then, in the resulting popup, type the word or phrase you want to research. You can then view the results (**Figure D** - which will consist of web, images, or Drive) or click on any links to learn more.

Figure D



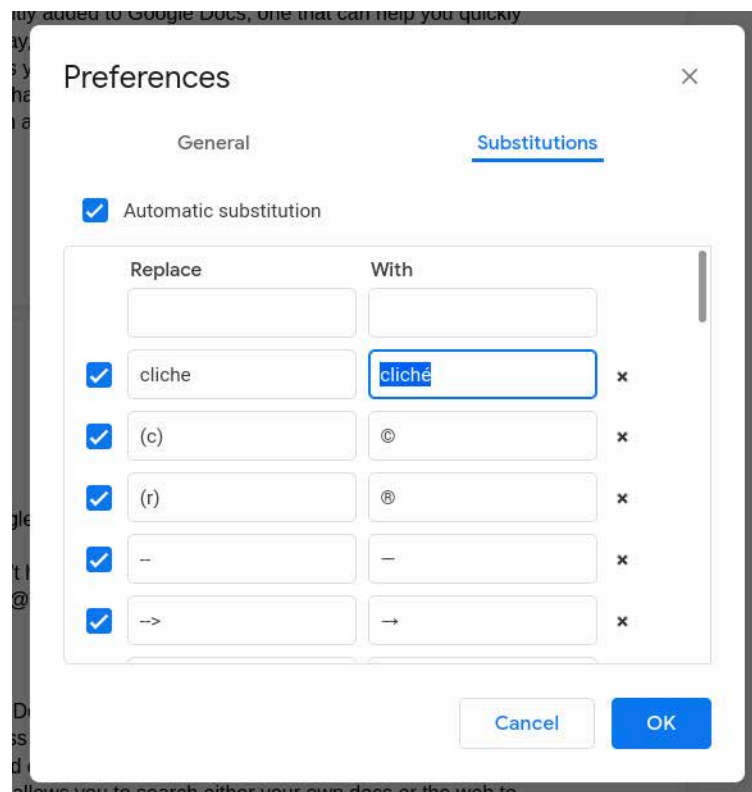
EXPLORING GOOGLE DOCS WITH-
IN GOOGLE DOCS.

HOW TO CREATE CUSTOM SUBSTITUTIONS AND DICTIONARY WORDS

You might have words or phrases that you must regularly use in Google Docs that it either doesn't understand, wants to constantly replace, or includes special characters. For example, let's say you frequently use the word "cliché," but you get tired of typing "clich" and then going to Insert | Special Characters and then searching for the é character. Instead, create a substitution such that cliche will always automatically become cliché.

For that, go to Tools | Preferences | Substitutions. In the resulting window (**Figure E**), type cliché in the Replace column and cliché in the With column. Click OK and your replacement will start happening automatically.

Figure E

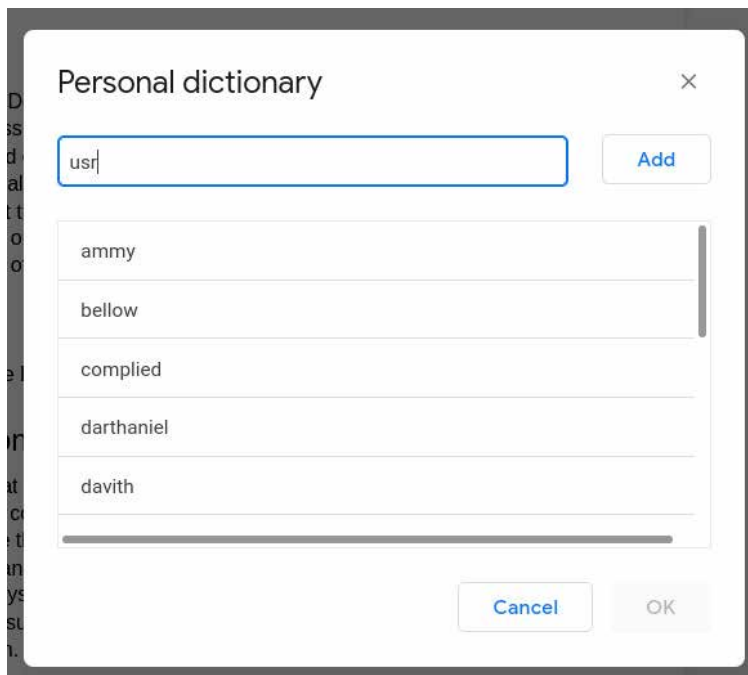


CREATING A REPLACEMENT FOR CLICHE TO AUTOMATICALLY CHANGE TO CLICHÉ.

In the same vein, you can add custom words to your dictionary, to prevent Google Docs from changing unknown words to known words. For example, say you write about Linux a lot and need to prevent Docs from changing “usr” to “user.”

To add usr to your personal dictionary, click Tools | Spelling and grammar | Personal dictionary. Type the word (**Figure F**), click Add, and then click OK.

Figure F



ADDING “USR” TO YOUR PERSONAL DICTIONARY.

At this point, Google Docs will no longer correct usr to user.

HOW TO ADD MEETING NOTES

If you keep notes for meetings and want to add them into a document, Google has you covered. With this feature, you can quickly add all of the details from a meeting, including the time/date, title/ attendees, notes, and action items from a meeting.

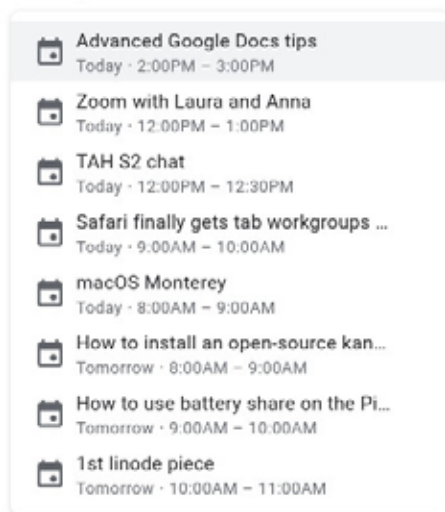
To add meeting notes, place your cursor where you want the notes to be added and then click Insert | Building Blocks | Meeting Notes. From the resulting popup (**Figure G**), select the meeting to be added and everything included in that entry will be added.

Figure G

Add Meeting Notes

If you keep notes for meetings and want to add them into a document, Google has you covered.

Search your calendar



ADDING NOTES FROM A GOOGLE CALENDAR ENTRY.

HOW TO MAKE USE OF EDITING MODES

Google Docs includes three different editing modes you should be familiar with (**Figure H**). The first mode is Editing, which is what you'll use when you write a document. The second mode is Suggesting mode, which is what you use when you're editing (I know, the naming convention is a bit odd). The third mode is Viewing mode, which is what you should use when proofing. Here's how each functions:

- Editing - you can write and edit. No changes are visible.
- Suggesting - you can write and edit, but changes are visible a la track changes.
- Viewing - you can read, but you can't edit.

Figure H



THE THREE EDITING MODES ARE FOUND IN THE DOC SHARING POPUP.

These different modes are very important when you share a document. When you go to share a document, you can change the share permissions to:

- Viewer - the person sees the doc in Viewing mode.
- Commenter - the person sees the doc in Suggesting mode.
- Editor - the person sees the doc in Editing mode.

Just choose the permissions wisely, so you don't give a Viewer Editor permissions.

CONCLUSION

Google Docs is much more powerful than you think. These more advanced tips just scratch the surface of what you can do with the tool. If you add just a couple of these tips into your regular workflow, you'll find Docs to be more flexible, powerful, and usable.

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