Volkswriter word processing for the IBM PC

By John Lombardo

Word processors are a bit like shoes: They print more comfortably when new, but after constant use, they become more comfortable adjusted to their wearer's habits. After testing a dozen word-processing programs, I developed a high tolerance for the sore spots each of them produces.

The perfect word-processing program has yet to be developed, as although there are many contenders, there never will be a perfect program of this genre, because people have such widely varying needs.

Each word processor has its

FEATURES: Volkswriter's design features a flexible and fast full-screen editor and a separate Print module to handle advanced formatting tasks.

The editor permits fast full-screen text manipulation with all the standard editing features, such as block moves, line-word-character deletes, insert or type-over modes, adjustable margins and tabs, automatic word wrap and paragraphing that you can reformulate to match new margins.

The editor also includes a Find and Replace facility, centering ability, block read and write disk, page layout and fast and easy cursor controls.

On a 128K machine, Volkswriter can use no more than 128K RAM, the maximum file size is about 50K when saved on disk.

Volkswriter holds all edited files in memory, and there is no paging of files off the disk. Although this limits the file length, it keeps the editor's operation fast and convenient. Many writers prefer to work on their longer pieces in chapter-length sections anyway, so this may not be a disadvantage.

The editor also includes a useful online Help facility that displays a boxed-with the 26 function keys, which are identified at the top of the screen when you call the program. You can turn the display on and off. The Help facility does not, however, include any of the formatting commands or print commands supported by this program.

With the help of the instruction manual, you can redefine the keyboard to generate any displayable characters with any keys. This allows Volkswriter to display special foreign-language symbols or to implement an alternative keyboard layout. The procedures for redefining the keyboard are not trivial, but the instructions are reasonably clear.

Volkswriter accomplishes printing....

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System Requirements

- IBM Personal Computer
- DOS 3.3
- 64K RAM
- One disk drive

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but once discovered, helps you learn to adapt to its style. Satisfaction is a function of a reasonably close match between your style and the program's logic, as well as the presence or absence of specific features. Often, we place too much emphasis on the multiplicity of features rather than on the appropriateness of a given program to the task at hand.

Of course, when these programs are in the $200-and-up range, it's likely we'll want to have only one program that can serve several purposes, from program editing to letter writing to manuscript preparation—hence the difficulty of reviewing word-processing software.

With these caveats in mind, let me turn to Volkswriter, one of the first of the IBM Personal Computer word-processing programs, now in a third revision (Version 1.3). This program belongs primarily in the category of editor-formatter programs, although it does not yet have an extensive amount of on-screen formatting before you invoke the Print module.

It features a fast and convenient editor, a flexible formatter and several interesting and useful features.

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A backspaced and a diacritical mark. PERFORMANCE: As should be clear from the description of features, this is a good program. Its editor performs well. It is fast, accurate and virtually unbreakable.

When you confront Volkswriter with an overfilled page, it requires you to save it, but it does not crash. If you fill Volkswriter completely, save the file and then try to retrieve it again, however, you won't get all of it. There is a way to split a file into two parts, however.

This is not a 'what you see is what you get word processing program. The paragraphing and line lengths are the same on the screen as the printed page, but the page breaks do not show and right-hand justification may not show, depending on how you choose to implement it.

If you justify on the screen, Volkswriter inserts real spaces to fill the line. Then, you are stuck with justified text because you can't reformat it back and take those blanks out unless you do it by hand, one space at a time. As a result, the manual recommends that you do all justification from within the Print module.

The program can also produce underlining and restriking, but only in a most minimal way. You type the line, ending it with a special character. Type another line under the first, with the underlined characters or the restriking characters. Your end this line normally. Then, when the line is printed, the first line is printed without a linefeed, and the second line is printed on top of the first. Well, it works, but elegant it is not. The program has no provision for automatic hyphenation, does not show page breaks on the screen and does not permit multiple windows or split screens. It does nothing special with columns.

The Print Formatting routines appear to be better suited to some printers than others. Although there is a reasonably complete list of printers supported, I found it difficult to get any Datapal 830 to do what the program said it should do. It may be that Datapal are hard, or it may be that mine is a bit older than some others, but the program didn't do justice to the sophistication of the printer.
Volkswriter would not implement boldfacing and would not print directly, and the installation procedure did not get the Diablo to work without some extra effort outside the Volkswriter program.

The Print module does not allow you to print multiple pages with a single click. The printer driver does not work as well as expected, and its ability to create arbitrary screen-to-keyboard arrangements is a definite plus.

Thus, the performance of this program is mixed.

Volkswriter has an excellent editor with a range of useful print options that are not apparent in other sets of print drivers.

Volkswriter’s editor is easy to use. It does what it’s supposed to do without any fuss or muss. The various functions work swell, the editor is predictable, the key commands are appropriate, and the file management routines are reliable. The editor probably doesn’t rate among the elite, but it is much harder to use. The selection of printer commands is clumsy and often confusing. The print formatter did not behave as described.

The embedded commands work well, and the potential of the print section seems good, but the print section of the program is much more satisfactory than that of most other word processing programs I have used.

ERROR HANDLING: I tried lots of things to mess up the editor, but it resisted most of my efforts. The file-handling section of the program is also solid.

For seasoned users, however, the constant warnings to ask if you really want to do this or that can become annoying. It would be nice to be able to turn them off.

The printing section is not as foolproof. It is possible to do lots of things that will keep your printer from doing what you think it should. Most of this problem relates to my difficulties with the Diablo, but it may be relevant only to this printer.

DOCUMENTATION: The Volkswriter manual is elegantly prepared, well organized, and despite a few typographical errors, is good. It is far better for the complexity of its features, however, and the explanations of the printer driver sections are not adequate.

Moreover, the manual is not clear about exactly what files are necessary to run the program on a hard disk or a RAM disk. If you turn it off, it is easy to run Volkswriter on a hard disk. Furthermore, it greatly speeds the program’s many calls to disk for help screens and the like, as it takes the only way to get to it is the way to figure out what subset of the files you need to run the system.

SUPPORT: To the credit of Lifetext Software, this program is delivered on an unexpected diskette. When you insert your warranty card, you get a second diskette. The first diskette has a disk version of the program with the Print module and a separate disk for the printer. The second disk is for desktop machines and has both the editor and the print module in memory at the same time.

My version of the program is called the International version and has screen and print tables appropriate for major European languages.

I had occasion to call the customer assistance number for help in configuring the program to my Diablo 1280. The people there were kind and friendly but had no solution that worked.

SUMMARY: Volkswriter is a good product. Its editor is fast, but a print formatter is good, but be sure you see it work on your type of printer before you buy this product. You can define the screen, keyboard, and printer through tables, which is a major advantage. This program will not replace Wordstar or other advanced word processors, but it comes close.