Volkswriter's Total Word Is Better but Not Good Enough

Update's features are limited and fall short of other high-end office/professional word processors.

BY JOHN LOMBARDI REVIEW BOARD

A direct descendant of Volkswriter, the first word processing program specifically designed for the IBM PC, Total Word is now falling behind the leaders in the high-end market. The price is in the range of other office/professional word processors; however, its features are limited and don't quite measure up to the standards set by its competitors.

Total Word is compatible with all previous versions of Volkswriter. It uses the same general user interface, with its Ctrl-key/function-key format, similar to that used in Word Perfect. The power and performance of Total Word, Version 1.3 far surpass anything Volkswriter could offer.

Version 1.3 brings continuing enhancements to Total Word. Many new features simply adapt the program to exploit fancy Postscript printers, HP III laserjet printers, expanded memory managers, and local area network requirements. Total Word 1.3 now comes in a network version (a two-user license) and additional network packs are available.

The program continues to be steady and reliable, but shows its age as newer competitors continue to enhance their products and remain ahead of Total Word in the features, performance, and ease-of-use competition.

We have changed the criteria from Total Word's last review (January 23, 1989, Page 62); for updated testing criteria, refer to our product comparison of office/professional word processors (January 29, 1990, Page 89).

FEATURES:

Within the realm of professional word processing, Total Word offers a somewhat reduced set of features compared to market leaders Microsoft Word and Word Perfect. However, the package may well serve small offices that do not have a need for some of the elaborate bells and whistles of the high-power programs. Although Total Word does not have programmable macros, direct import of spreadsheets, or table functions, it does offer a nice math feature for blocking and performing math on rows or columns, a reasonable line-sort facility, and a useful page preview. This version tracks documents with revision marking and redlining. For devotees of this word processing family, Total Word 1.3 remains a fine product with some welcome enhancements.

The power and performance of 1.3 surpass anything Volkswriter could offer.

PERFORMANCE:

As a basic editing tool, Total Word has the essentials, including flexible cut-and-paste functions, good search and replace, full complement of tab stops, and automatic hyphenation with the capability to edit the hyphenation dictionary. It can search for type styles and will insert date or time anywhere in the text. Total Word permits two windows to be open at the same time; however, if both are on the same document, editing is limited to the first window.

The quick and responsive editing that has long been a feature of Volkswriter products remains constant in this version, earning the product a good rating for editing tools.

The thesaurus and spelling checker do a fine job. The thesaurus includes antonyms as well as synonyms with parts of speech. The spelling checker maintains capitalization, catches repeated words, and supports user dictionaries. We rate the spelling checker good.

Total Word's mail-merge facility handles fill-in forms -- on-screen data entry forms that you can use to build data files

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for mail merges. Although not a non-programmable database system, the forms make the entry of data in the required comma-delimited manner much less error prone. Mail merge offers the standard functions for form letters and mass mailing, using comma-delimited files created with forms or imported from external programs that produce this format. There are no selection criteria possible, although you can start the merge at a specific record number. A format for 3-Up labels, to print three columns of labels on an 8½-by-11-inch page, is included. We rate mail merge good.

Total Word supports multiple columns, although it requires that all columns be the same width. Total Word only shows columns side by side in page preview, and you can see only one column at a time while you are editing. There is no column balancing function.

Layout tools include inside and outside margins, and a page preview that approximates WYSIWYG by showing correct line lengths and page elements (but not a model of the type style).

Although paragraphs can be kept together, there is no true widow or orphan control. Total Word supports a formula construction system that takes advantage of 10 "alternative keyboards." (The program will remap your keyboard to be used for a specifically defined purpose — for example, to generate scientific equations.) However, this facility is less effective than a true formula editor. We rate layout satisfactory.

Total Word can only include graphics captured from the screen with the included Snapshot program. This puts severe limitations on resolution and flexibility. Snapshot will permit cropping at the time of screen capture, and Total Word will scale, reverse the image, or change the contrast at print time. Graphic images are usually visible in the preview, but if the resolution of the original graphic can't be reduced effectively, it doesn't appear well in the preview. Total Word will also draw boxes and other graphic elements around text or imported graphics. Graphics earn a satisfactory score.

Total Word includes no outlining functions.

Table of contents, lists, and indexes

REPORT CARD INFO WORLD

OFFICE/PROFESSIONAL WORD PROCESSOR

Total Word

VERSION 1.3

Criterion	(Weighting)	Score
Performance		
Basic editing	(60)	Good
Spelling checker/ thesaurus	(60)	Good
Mail merge	(20)	Good
Layout	(60)	Satisfactory
Graphics	(50)	Satisfactory
Outlining	(20)	N/A
TOC and indexing	(20)	Very Good
Style sheets	(20)	Satisfactory
Font support	(60)	Good
Footnoting	(25)	Very Good
Macros	(25)	Satisfactory
Printer support	(60)	Very Good
Compatibility	(60)	Poor
Speed	(50)	Satisfactory
Documentation	(75)	Satisfactory
Ease of learning	(75)	Satisfactory
Ease of use	(130)	Good
Error handling	(40)	Good
Support		
Support policies	(20)	Very Good
Technical support	(20)	Satisfactory
Value	(50)	Satisfactory
Final score		**5.6**

PRODUCT SUMMARY

Company: Volkswriter Inc., 1 Lower Ragsdale Drive, Building 2, Suite 1004, Monterey, CA 93940; (408) 373-4718.
List price: $495; LAN pack $249 (for 2 users), $149 per additional node.
Requires: IBM PC, PS/2, or compatible, with 410K of RAM; CGA graphics display or better, but use of extended characters requires EGA, VGA, MCGA, or Hercules; hard disk plus one floppy required; uses EMS memory automatically; DOS 2.0; DOS 3.1 or later for the LAN version.
Pros: Very inexpensive; strong indexing and footnoting features; easy to use.
Cons: Very limited import of text and graphics; no outlines; middling speed.
Summary: Total Word 1.3 is a useful upgrade from Volkswriter or earlier versions of Total Word. At only $95 Total Word is a strong value compared to high-power products such as Word Perfect and Microsoft Word, and it will handle most office and general writing chores.

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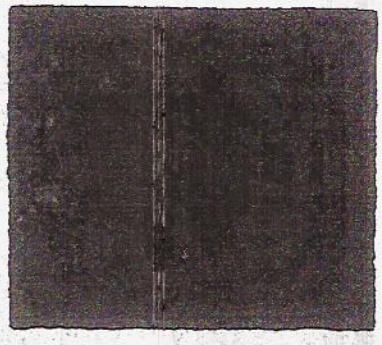

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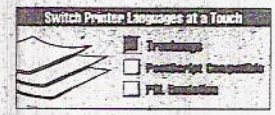

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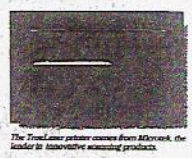

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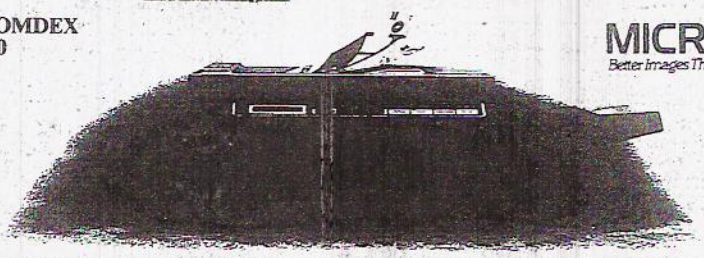

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can all be constructed through the use of embedded commands, similar to the dot commands used in Wordstar.

The program supports several sublevels and complete cross-reference capabilities. Indexes can be constructed across multiple documents, and additional lists of tables are possible. We rate these features very good.

Total Word has a unique method of handling stored styles. Styles cannot be named, but you can store up to 200 "section layouts" with each document. The files that contain section layouts are kept separate from documents, which means you can have one "style sheet" and use it with as many documents as you like. You attach a stored layout file to a document by naming the document with the extension that matches the layout file. Total Word's layout files are, fortunately, easier to use than to explain. Style sheets are satisfactory.

The program supports several sublevels and cross-reference capabilities.

Total Word proved effective at managing multiple fonts, and complex printers. Total Word uses a concept of virtual cartridges to allow users to manage the many fonts available in Postscript printers. In addition, there is a useful facility for creating additional printer drivers based on the information in existing drivers. The utility of this feature for laser printers, with their complicated font metrics, is minimal, but for nonproportionally spaced printers, this system works very well. The program supports automatic downloading of soft fonts and includes a library of six different soft fonts. It also offers considerable advice about network printers. We rate font support good.

Total Word offers footnotes or endnotes but not both in the same document. Note numbers appear in the text and are automatically updated when notes are inserted or changed. Footnote character formatting is independent of the rest of the document. We rate footnoting very good.

Keystroke macros and abbreviation expansion provide considerable power, although there are no variables or conditions, or programming constructs to enhance macros. Useful primarily for text editing shortcuts or for quick navigation through the program, the macro facility is satisfactory.

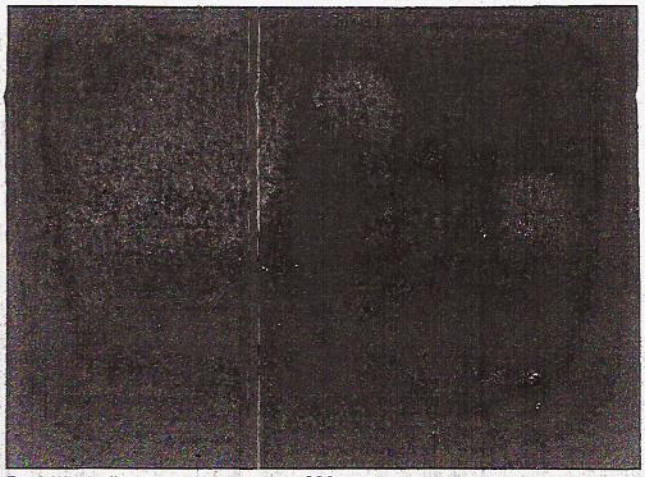
This version of Total Word includes a much wider range of printer support, particularly for soft-font-driven laser printers and Postscript printers. Although we found the documentation about printers somewhat obscure, the large list of supported printers and the capability of developing drivers to approximate nonstandard products earns a very good score.

As a stand-alone product, Total Word's compatibility with other programs is weak, supporting only ASCII transfers. However, for an additional $69 the company will provide a special version of Word for Word that converts a very long list of word processing formats to and from Volkswriter Total Word formats.

Nonetheless, on its own, Total Word's compatibility is poor.

Total Word operates a bit sluggishly in comparison with its competitors in the file load, export, and import portions of our benchmarks. However, its speeds are competitive for cursor movement and search and replace. We rate Total Word's speed satisfactory.

DOCUMENTATION:
Documentation for Total Word, Version 1.3 consists of a manual plus additional booklets for printers, converting from Volkswriter, changes in the new release, and a quick-reference guide. Unfortunately, the main manual is for a version several releases old, so you must always check back to the update booklet to be sure that the information in the main manual is right. Some of the page references are inaccurate. Explanations are reasonably clear except for the tutorial section, which is rather thin on examples. Total Word does offer on-line and context-sensitive help, as well as three levels of help that range from simple to very detailed. We rate documentation satisfactory.



Total Word allows you to use up to 200 section layouts to tag styles to your document.

EASE OF LEARNING:
Total Word's function-key/Ctrl-key system and help format require considerable experience before they become second nature. Although we have used Volkswriter and Total Word extensively, we've never quite found the quick-help template easily intelligible, although the on-line help screens have been much enhanced and improved over the years. We rate ease of learning as satisfactory.

EASE OF USE:
Once accustomed to the various conventions of Total Word, users will find the program relatively easy to use. Editing is crisp and quick, its functions reasonably easy to use, and its interface effective. However, you cannot customize the interface except through the use of macros, there are no pull-down menus, and some will find the function-key/Ctrl-key interface rather clumsy. Total Word earns a satisfactory rating for ease of use.

ERROR HANDLING:
Total Word traps most user errors without causing damage to data. A timed backup facility is available, and the program will keep a backup file when saving changes. There is an undo buffer good for 10 lines or 1,000 characters if they are deleted using F4 commands to delete a single word, an entire line, or part of a line. Unfortunately, the program will not undo backspace or block deletes. We rate error handling good.

SUPPORT:
Volkswriter provides a 30-day money-back guarantee, plus unlimited free, but not toll-free, technical support. Support hours are 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Pacific time, Monday through Thursday, and 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Pacific time on Friday. Volkswriter offers fax support and corporate extended support. We rate support policies very good.

The technical support staff responded quickly, and were reasonably well informed. Our calls about Snapshot, newspaper columns, and graphics problems all received clear answers. We rate technical support satisfactory.

VALUE:
At $495, Total Word is the same cost as other high-powered word processors, such as Microsoft Word and Word Perfect. Although its features list and performance do not match those top-of-the-line products, it's present capabilities make Total Word a satisfactory value. □

John Lombardi is president of a major university and author of five books. He has been working with computers since 1967.

BENCHMARKS — INFO WORLD

Office/Professional Word Processors

	Total Word Version 1.3	Microsoft Word Version 5.0	Word Perfect Version 5.1	Wordstar Version 6.0	Ami Professional Version 1.2	Word for Windows Version 1.0
File[1]						
Load	00:10	00:01	00:02	00:02	00:03	00:02
Save	00:03	00:02	00:01	00:07	00:03	00:01
Import ASCII	00:05	00:02	00:15	00:32[2]	00:03	00:01
Export ASCII	00:21	00:02	00:08	00:23	00:03	00:04
Import DCA/RFT	00:28	01:01	00:14	00:41	00:07	00:25
Cursor movement						
Top to bottom	00:01	00:01	00:07[4]	00:04	00:03/00:04[5]	00:02/00:02[5]
Manual scroll	00:33	00:31	00:49	01:06	00:26/00:36[5]	00:16/00:55[5]
Search						
Last word	00:02	00:02	00:07	00:05	00:02	00:01
Global replace	00:12	00:10	00:12	00:20	00:06	00:10
Append file	00:02	00:02	00:01	00:04	00:03	00:02

Times are in minutes:seconds, unless otherwise noted.
[1]File size is approximately 50K, 17 pages.
[2]Wordstar combines two timings: opening a file and reformatting text.
[3]The first time represents print to disk and the second time represents star exchange.
[4]Second timing was significantly faster in Word Perfect (three seconds).
[5]The first time is using the keyboard, the second time is using the mouse.