How to Use Tab Stops in Word

Set Up and Use Tab Stops in Word to Align and Position Text on a Page

This article shows you:
- Align columns of text in Word using tab stops
- Add or remove tab stops using the ruler
- Quickly adjust the type and position of a tab stop

If you've tried to use tab stops to align text in Microsoft Word, there's every chance you've come unstuck – or at least found the settings a little confusing. Not only are there five different types of tab stop available, but if you're not careful you can find that your tabs have inexplicably disappeared and you apparently have to set them up all over again!

In this article, I'll show you how to set up and use the different types of tab stop, and how to avoid that annoying problem.

Contents:

What are Tab Stops?

Tab stops are used to align columns of text in lists

Traditionally, tab stops are used when you need to type short items of text in columns. On a typewriter, the stops are metal prongs that are slotted on to a horizontal bar: when you press the Tab key on a typewriter, the carriage leaps to the right until it reaches one of these prongs and then stops. You type a word or two and then press Tab again to jump further across the page to your next tab. As you do this on line after line, you're producing perfectly-aligned columns of items.

Set the positions of tab stops, then press the **Tab** *key to jump between them*

All good word processor programs have their own equivalent of this mechanical tab stop, and Microsoft Word is no exception. Just as you do on a typewriter, you press the **Tab** key (which is immediately to the left of the letter 'Q'), and the flashing text cursor jumps across the page to the point at which the next tab stop has been set, ready for you to continue typing. The result gives you neatly laid-out columns of items that might look something like this:

	Type	Expires	Renew	Price
1	Car insurance	5th January	Yes	£212.58
2	Home insurance	19th June	Probably	£98.14
3	Health insurance	1st August	Yes	£164.55
4	Travel insurance	22nd October	No	£44.70

Apart from the bold text I've used for the captions of each column, this is no different to the result you'd produce using a typewriter. However, with a typewriter you really do need to think carefully about the spacing of those tabs before you start, making sure the gap between each tab position is enough to contain the widest item of text you'll be typing in each column. In Word there's no such problem: you can change the tab positions at any time if you find you've misjudged them.

One other difference between Microsoft Word and a typewriter is that Word offers five different types of tab stop. The normal, typewriter-style tab stop is known as a 'Left tab', and it produces columns of text that are aligned to the left, as in the example shown on the opposite page, but tabs can be used that align the text in other ways, such as to the centre or right. I'll explain those later in this article; for now, let's deal with the basics of using tab stops.

Word offers five types of tab stop

As you read this article, you'll find it useful to have Microsoft Word running, with a blank document open, so that you can try out some of the examples I'll be covering.

If Word isn't already running, click **Blank document** at the Start screen if you're using Word 2013 or later; Word 2010 will take you straight to a blank document when you start it. If you've just been using Word, save the document you're working on, press **Ctrl+W** to close it, and then press **Ctrl+N** to create a blank document.

Using Default Tab Stops for Regular Spacing

As a quick introduction to tabs, try this in Microsoft Word. Starting at the beginning of a line, press **Tab** and type something short (a number, for instance), then press **Tab** again and type another number, and then do the same a third time. The result should look like this:

```
1       2       3
```

The numbers you typed appear at neatly-spaced intervals across the page. These are Microsoft Word's 'default' tab stops at work: since you didn't specify any

Word sets tab stops at regular intervals

particular tab stops before you started typing, Word sets tab stops for you automatically, spaced at the curious figure of 1.27 cm apart.
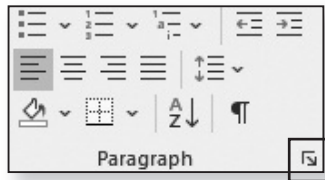
Using these default tab stops

For many uses these default tab stops are good enough. If necessary, you can press the **Tab** key two or three times to generate a wider gap between columns. If you followed the example above, you can try that now: click somewhere between your first and second number and press **Tab**, then between your second and third number and press **Tab** again, and the gaps between the columns are now twice as wide.

Alternatively, you can tell Word that you want the tabs spaced at particular intervals, rather than the default 1.27 cm, by following these steps:

1. Find the 'Paragraph' group on the **Home** tab of the Ribbon and click the tiny embossed arrow in its bottom-right corner.

2. In the dialog that opens, click the **Tabs** button in the bottom-left corner.

Change the default tab spacing to something different

3. Now you'll see the Tabs dialog pictured in the next screenshot. The box labelled **Default tab stops** ① is where you specify how far apart the tabs should be spaced: you can do this by highlighting the text it currently contains and typing a new figure (such as **3** for three centimetres), or by clicking the tiny up/down buttons at the right of the box to increase or decrease the figure, or (most simply) by clicking inside the box and then using the up/down arrow keys on your keyboard to raise or lower it.

4. After changing the figure, click **OK** ②. Word will apply the new tab spacing to the paragraph you're working on, and will adjust the positions of any tabbed text you've typed in that paragraph.
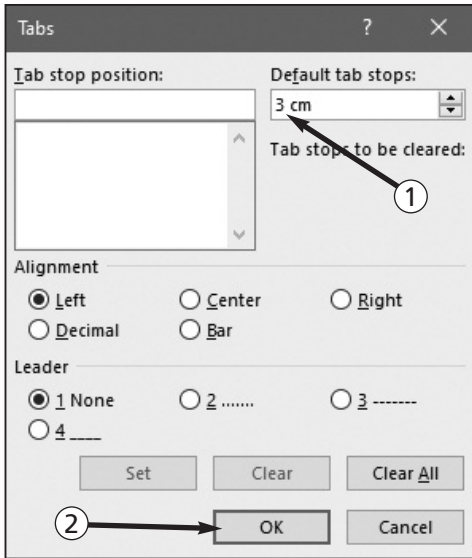
When you simply want to create a few left-aligned columns of text, these default tabs should be good enough. If necessary, you can follow the steps above to set the spacing between each tab stop to something small, such as 0.5 cm, and use multiple presses of the Tab key between each column to achieve fairly-precise spacing.

Set Up Your Own Tab Spacing Using the Ruler

Rather than using Word's default – but regularly-spaced – tabs, you may prefer to set up your own tab stops. That allows you to specify the exact spacing between

Set up your own tab stops

one tab stop and another, and (as I'll explain a little later) also lets you use Word's other types of tab stop.

Make sure you can see the ruler

The simplest way to set up your own tab stops is to use the ruler, so the first step is to make sure the ruler is visible. If you can't see the ruler running across the very top of your document, switch to the **View** tab on the Ribbon and in the 'Show' group tick the box beside **Ruler**.

Click the ruler where you want tab stops to be placed

With the ruler visible, you add tab stops by simply clicking the bottom section of the ruler at the point where you want a tab stop to appear. At each point you click, you'll see a little L-shaped symbol appear marking the position of the tab stop. These L-shapes are the computer equivalent of the metal prongs used on a typewriter. Once you've placed tab stops in the required positions, just start typing, and each press of the **Tab** key will make the cursor jump to the position indicated by the next tab stop symbol.
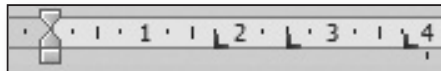
How to change the positions of your tab stops

Need to move a tab stop?

With the best will in the world, you won't put your tab stops in the right position first time, every time! When you start typing, you may find that two tab stops are further apart than you want them, leaving an oddly-wide gap between columns, or that two tab stops are too close together, so that the text you type into one column continues past the position of the next tab stop. Fortunately, you can easily change the positions of your tab stops.

A vital point to note about tabs is that every paragraph has its own tab positions. A paragraph is everything you type between one press of the **Enter** key and the next, and when you're creating tabbed columns this

almost always means that every line is a separate paragraph. Before you make any changes to the tab set-up, make sure you've selected all the 'paragraphs' whose tab settings you want to alter.

To change the position of a tab stop, simply click the appropriate little L-shape on the ruler and drag it left or right to a new position. As soon as you let go of that little symbol, Word will realign all the tabbed text you've typed with the new tab positions, as shown in the before-and-after screenshots below:

Drag the tab stops along the ruler
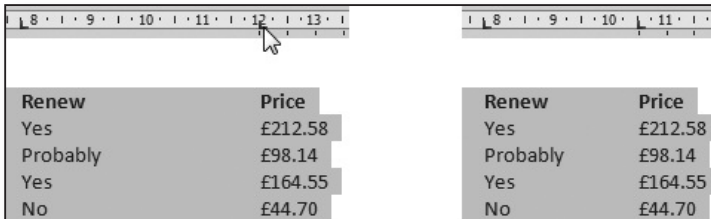
If you want to remove a tab stop completely, drag its little L-shape upwards or downwards off the ruler and then let it go. As soon as you do so, the L-shape will disappear.

Remove a tab stop from the ruler

Align Columns Differently Using Other Types of Tab Stop

Up to this point, we've used only the ordinary, typewriter-style tab stop which aligns all your tabbed columns to the left. As I mentioned earlier, this is what Word calls a 'Left tab', but there are five types of tab you can use to align particular columns in different ways, each of which has its own symbol:

The five types of tab stop

	Left tab	The left edge of the text is aligned with the tab position.

|		
⊥	Centre tab	The text is centred at the tab position.
⌐	Right tab	The right edge of the text is aligned with the tab position.
⊥	Decimal tab	Used for entering figures (such as currency) containing a decimal point: the decimal point is aligned with the tab position with the figures (and any other characters) to either side of it.
❘	Bar tab	A different type of tab stop that doesn't position text. It places a vertical bar in this tab position on each line, as a dividing line or border between columns.

The tab types in action The example pictured in the next screenshot shows all five tab types in use. The 'Type' column uses the ordinary Left tab; the 'Expires' column uses a Right tab; the 'Renew' column uses a Centre tab; and the 'Price' column has a Decimal tab. Between the last two columns, a Bar tab creates the vertical line.

```
· 1 · 1 · 1 · 2 · 1 · 3 · 1 · 4 · 1 · 5 · 1 · 6 · ⌐ · 7 · 1 · 8 ⊥ 1 · 9 · 1 · 10 · 1 · 11 ⊥ 1 · 12 ·
```

	Type	Expires	Renew	Price
1	Car insurance	5th January	Yes	£212.58
2	Home insurance	19th June	Probably	£98.14
3	Health insurance	1st August	Yes	£164.55
4	Travel insurance	22nd October	No	£44.70

You can set up all these different types of tab in just the same way you added the Left Tabs to the ruler earlier, but there's one extra thing to do. If you look at the top left corner of your document, where the

horizontal and vertical rulers meet, you'll see a small box. It should currently show the familiar L-shaped symbol that indicates a Left tab, and it's this box you use to choose between the other types of tab. Simply click this box repeatedly until it shows the symbol for the type of tab you want to use, and then click the ruler at the point where the tab should be placed.
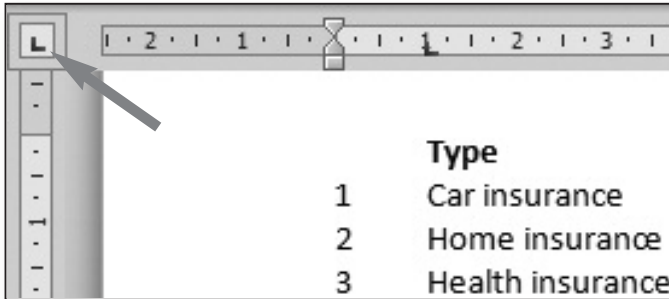
The same rules and tips apply to all these other types of tab stop. If you place one in the wrong place, you can drag it along the ruler to move it; if you place the wrong type of tab stop on the ruler, you can drag it upwards or downwards out of the ruler to remove it. Remember that if you've already started typing your tabbed text when you make changes to the tab set-up, you need to select all those tabbed 'paragraphs' first: if you don't, the changes will only apply to the paragraph (or line) containing the cursor.

## Adjust Your Tab Settings in the Tabs Dialog

We met the Tabs dialog on page 4 of this article, where we used it to adjust the spacing between Word's default tab stops. However, when you've set up your own tabs on the ruler, the same dialog can be used to make several adjustments to them:

Fine-tune positions or swap tab types

- Switch from one tab type to another, such as changing a Left tab to a Centre tab.

- Fill the blank space before one tab with dots or dashes.

- Adjust the position of one of your tabs.

Select the tabbed text, then open the Tabs dialog

When you need to adjust your tabs, start (as always!) by selecting all the tabbed lines you've typed. Next, follow the first two steps on page 4 to open the Tabs dialog. When the dialog appears, it will look similar to the next screenshot, containing a list of the positions at which you've set tabs in the box at the top-left:
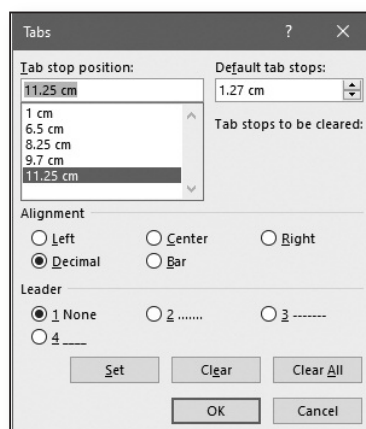
Depending on what change you want to make, follow the appropriate steps below. After making all the changes you need in this dialog, click **OK**.

Switch from one type of tab to another

1. In the list of tab positions, select the position of the tab you want to change. As you select a tab, you'll be able to tell which type of tab it is by the item that is selected in the 'Alignment' section below the list: in the screenshot above, I've selected the tab

positioned at 11.25 cm, and I can see that it's a Decimal tab.

2. Next, in the 'Alignment' section, click the tab type you want to use for this tab instead.

3. Click the **Set** button to confirm the change.

Fill the blank space between tabs with dots or dashes

This is something you can do only in the Tabs dialog, and it produces a result similar to that used in tables of contents: when you press the **Tab** key to jump to your next tab stop, the space between the text you've just typed and that tab stop is filled with dots (or dashes, or underscores).

1. As in the previous steps, begin by selecting the tab position you want to precede with dots or dashes.

2. In the 'Leader' section lower down, click the style of fill you want to use.

3. Click the **Set** button.

Adjust the position of one of your tabs

The best way to move a tab is to drag it along the ruler, as explained on page 7, but you can only move tabs in rather-large quarter-centimetre jumps. If you need finer positioning, you can do it in the Tabs dialog by following these steps (which effectively involve adding a new tab and then removing the old one):

1. Select the tab whose position you want to change.

2. The position will be shown in the **Tab stop position** box just above the list.

3. Type a new position for this tab stop in the **Tab stop position** box (just the number – don't type 'cm').

4. Click the **Set** button, and your new tab will be added to the list.

5. Next select the now-unwanted tab you selected in step 1.

6. Click the **Clear** button, and this tab will be removed from the list.

Two Vital Points to Remember when Working with Tabs!

With a little experimentation, tab stops are quite straightforward to set up and use, but there are two points worth remembering about them.

Select text before adjusting its tabs!

The first I've already mentioned, but it's important enough to be worth repeating quickly. Whenever you want to make adjustments to your tab settings (whether on the ruler or in the Tabs dialog), be sure to highlight all the lines of text you've typed that use those tab settings first.

*Press **Enter** between each tabbed line*

The second point is to make sure you press the **Enter** key at the end of each line to begin the next, rather than (for example) clicking the mouse at the beginning of the next line or using the down arrow key on your keyboard. This ensures that the tab settings in use for the 'paragraph' (or line) you've just typed are carried over to the next.