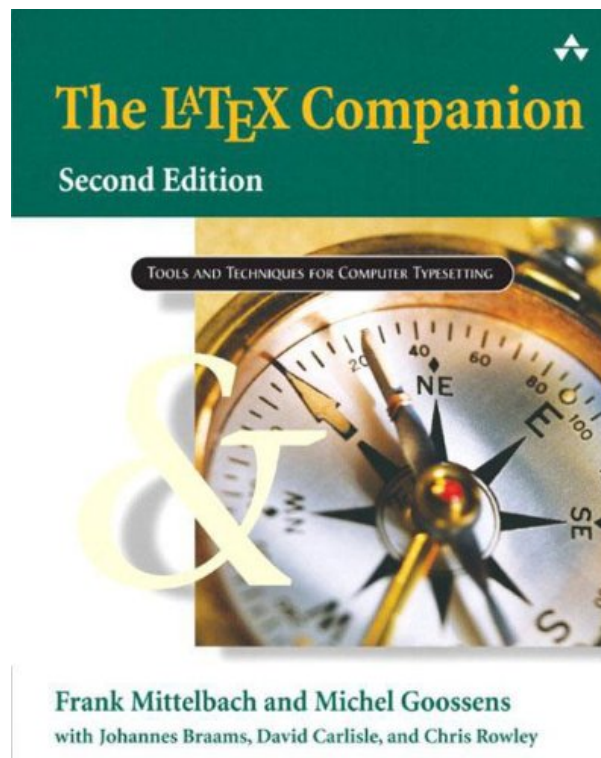


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Frank Mittelbach  
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February 2004

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A True Companion

By Dave Thomas

Pocket Review: \*The\* bible to keep on your desk if you use LaTeX.

I love type. Ever since I got into computers, back when high resolution was a 132 column printer, I've tried to find ways to play with typesetting and fonts. I wrote a basic layout system in OMSI Pascal that drove daisywheel printers. I got to be quite an expert at nroff and troff. I used to hunt (without success) for a free copy of Scribe. I played with Lout, and a dozen other packages. But nothing, ever, held a candle to TeX when it comes to the quality of the output it produces.

Ignore for the moment some of the uglier fonts than some TeX users employ, and look instead at the pages. Hold them up at a distance and admire the uniformity of the gray: no rivers of white to be seen. Look at the bottoms of the page: if the typesetter didn't totally goof off, they'll be vertically balanced: an open spread is the same height on both pages (TeX'll add tiny amounts of leading to make it happen). Dig into the line-breaking, and you'll find optimization algorithms, which shuffle words back and forth trying to minimize the badness of the appearance.

The output of TeX gives me a lot of pleasure.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for its input. Don Knuth is clearly a genius, but as with all wizards, his creations can be tricky. In the case of TeX, we have a typesetting engine driven by a macro processor whose interpretation of syntax can be changed while it is in the middle of processing individual commands. Raw TeX is scary to deal with, so people don't deal with it. Instead, they use its power to write macro packages, abstracting the low level commands into something more palatable (and tractable). The most widely used of these is Leslie Lamport's LaTeX. LaTeX is at its heart a logical mark up system, documented in an admirably short and lucid book, LaTeX: A Document Preparation System.

But when you want to use LaTeX to do serious work, you need more than this small book. When you want to set complex tables, or handle floating material a certain way, or get your index looking just right, you need the real scoop. And you turn to just one book.

The original LaTeX Companion was one of those books that never got returned to my bookshelf. I used it almost every day for 4 years during the typesetting of five books. Thanks to its wealth of detail, I was able to create press-ready files straight from my computer to the exacting specification of the production departments of three separate printers.

But now, that worn old book has been retired. Mittlebach and Goossens have produced a second edition of The LaTeX Companion, and it's better in every possible way. In the ten years since the first was published, a lot has changed, and the book captures it all. New packages, improvements in encodings, font handling, xindy: the book describes it all. My copy arrived a couple of weeks before Mike Clark's Pragmatic Project Automation book was due to go to the printers. I devoured it, and immediately used its advice to improve the appearance of ragged-right text, fix up some font issues in the code listings, and improve the handling of included graphics. Since then, it's been a true companion as I've worked with the typesetting of the new edition of Programming Ruby.

I don't often gush, but if you use LaTeX, or if you'd just like to produce great looking typeset output, you owe it to yourself to get this book.

44 of 45 people found the following review helpful.

Finally here - GET YOURS TODAY

By PAUL A. Thompson

I have been a TeX/LaTeX user since 1982, and have authored several classes and styles (newlfm). I just got my copy of the new The LaTeX Companion (2nd Edition). I just love it!! Why? 942 pages of text, 94 pages of the index (YEP!), wonderfully clear examples, 136 pages on fonts, a whole appendix on debugging, 72 pp on mathematics, etc. The book is well-written and uses clearly distinct fonts for user commands, internal commands, etc. There are 138 pages about fonts. In the mathematics chapter, there are 104 examples in the Math chapter alone; one REALLY COOL section shows 10 different font choices and their impact on the typesetting of a small page of mathematics. HOT STUFF!!

In short, there is only 1 limitation to the book: It does not have LaTeX/TeX lion on the front. That is hard to accept. However, everything else is really good. I highly recommend this.

51 of 54 people found the following review helpful.

An Outstanding Book

By Torsten Rohlfig

This is, by far, the most useful book I own. The first edition was great, the second edition is nothing short of spectacular. The two-color print is very helpful. Compared to the first edition, which I've been using for just about seven years, the updated package descriptions in the new edition improved my typesetting substantially within only a few days after I got it. Well worth it's price. I hope the authors make a good buck on this, since they are making my life so much easier.

The stated intention of the book notwithstanding, I think this is all you'll ever need to use LaTeX, no matter how serious a user you are. Well, maybe a two-page primer of the basic commands in addition. Anyway, I've never used Kopka's book and I never touched Lamport's. Not because they're bad, but because I never had to.

The one small issue I have with the second edition: where did the cute pooch on the cover go?

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