In Emacs, how are keystrokes denoted?

Emacs keystroke conventions are very different from the ones used by many other applications and sources of computing information. They also differ from the standards used in the great majority of Knowledge Base documents. However, because Emacs (and all of its documents) adheres rigorously to its own standard, Knowledge Base documents about Emacs observe the Emacs standard.

The Ctrl key

Emacs uses the `C-` prefix to denote holding down `Ctrl` while pressing another key. For example, holding down `Ctrl` and pressing `x` is denoted as `Ctrl-x` in the rest of the Knowledge Base, but as `C-x` in Knowledge Base documents about Emacs.

The Meta key

Because of Emacs' origin on Symbolics Lisp computers, it makes heavy use of a `Meta` key, denoted with the `M-` prefix. This key does not actually exist on most keyboards. In almost all configurations, however, pressing `Esc` once and releasing it is equivalent to holding down the `Meta` key. For example, to enter `M-x`, you would press `Esc` and release it, then press `x`.

A few obscure Emacs commands have an `M-C-` prefix. To handle these commands on most terminals, press and release `Esc`, then hold down `Ctrl` while pressing the final key in the command.

Note: Many computers running the X Window System also have other equivalents for the `Meta` key. On some Linux systems, the `Alt` key may function as the `Meta` key. On most Sun keyboards, the diamond key functions as the `Meta` key.

Other common keys

Emacs also uses two- or three-letter abbreviations for many common keystrokes, as shown below:

Emacs	Meaning	Keystroke
BS	Backspace	`Backspace` or `C-h` (terminal-dependent)
DEL	Delete	`Del` or `Backspace` (terminal-dependent)
LFD	Line Feed	`C-j`
RET	Carriage Return	`Return`, `Enter`, or `C-m`
SPC	Space	Spacebar
TAB	Tab	`Tab`

Examples

Here are a few examples of how to interpret Emacs keystroke conventions:

Emacs command	What you type
C-x C-c	Press and hold `Ctrl`, then press `x`, followed by `c`.
M-x shell	Press and release `Esc`, then press `x`. Then type `shell` and press `Enter`.
M-C-p	Press and release `Esc`, then press and hold `Ctrl` and press `p`.

At Indiana University, for personal or departmental Linux or Unix systems support, see At IU, how do I get support for Linux or Unix?

Related documents
GNU Emacs Quick Reference Guide
For Emacs, how do I get online help?
For Emacs, where can I get documentation?
Where can I find help with Emacs?
In Emacs, what should I do if I don't have a Meta key?
In Emacs, what does "M-x command" mean?

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