How to Write Using Markdown[1]

Markdown is a markup language created in 2004 by John Gruber as a simple way to add formatting to web documents without using HTML. Once primarily used by technical professionals, the simple syntax and easy readability of Markdown have led to its adoption far and wide among those who write—whether that be blogs, email, documentation, forum posts, novels, newsletters, notes, scripts, or anything else. All Markdown requires is knowing how to type and use the humble plaintext (.txt) file.

Perhaps you're easily distracted by all the deep functionality of word processers and want an easy, readable way to format your text without getting hung up on the details. Maybe you frequently write in environments that won't allow you to format text, but still would like your intention to come across. Or perhaps you simply want to jot down notes without hassle. Whatever the reason, learning Markdown is easy!

If you're unfamiliar with Markdown, this document will teach you how to use it in your own writing. You will need a general understanding of word processing. Some syntax requires simple computing knowledge, like understanding what URLs and file paths are.

For those who have previously used Markdown, see Basic Functions below for a syntax quick reference.

What You'll Need

There are many computer, mobile, web, and tablet applications you can utilize to get started using Markdown. These include, but are not limited to:

- PC:
    - Writemonkey
    - Ghostwriter
- Mac:
    - Ulysses
    - iA Writer
- iOS/Android:
    - Jotterpad
    - iA Writer
- Web:
    - Dillinger.io
    - StackEdit

However, one of Markdown's convenient features is that you don't need a dedicated Markdown application to get started. You can use a program as simple as Notepad and save your files as plaintext (.txt) or Markdown (.md) files and it will be readable by any Markdown application.

In addition, Markdown is supported by various websites and applications for adding content or comments, such as Reddit, Squarespace, and GitHub. It's possible you've used Markdown without realizing it already.

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[1] Note to Instructor: This document is intended for writers or those whose job often requires writing and are looking for a simple way to create readable documents without needing to tinker with font and formatting options. They understand how to use word processing software, but don't need to be well-versed in the more technical functions. They must be a competent typist. They need to know how to install software or applications and understand some of the basic shared language of such. They know what URLs and file paths are. They understand the restrictions of plaintext files (.txt).

How Markdown Works

Markdown is essentially an extremely simplified version of HTML. In fact, Markdown files are typically "read" in browser as HTML. Having a cursory understanding of HTML is useful, but not necessary.

Markdown operates using various forms of syntax entered directly into the text. For instance, if there is a passage you want to appear in italics, you accomplish that by adding an asterisk (*) on either side of the segment you want italicized, like so:

Markdown: `You have *got* to be kidding me.`

Rendered: You have *got* to be kidding me.

Markdown, with its use of simple syntax, allows for several advantages:

- Few commands to remember
- Quicker than typing out code, such as `<i></i>`
- Easy readability when not rendered
- Platform independency—due to the types of files Markdown is written in, it can be shared across devices without worry
- Application independency—Markdown is not tied to proprietary file formats
- Preservation—if a program stops being supported, you won't have to worry about being unable to open old files

Basic Functions

Below is some of the most commonly used Markdown syntax:

Emphasis. Markdown supports italic and bold text. They have a similar structure and utilize asterisks (*).

Create italics by adding 1 asterisk (*) to either side of the desired passage.

Markdown: `Whatever you do, *do not look under the bed.*`

Rendered: Whatever you do, *do not look under the bed.*

Create bolding by adding 2 asterisks (**) to either side of the desired passage.

Markdown: `**Danger:** Do not attempt to feed the crocodiles.`

Rendered: **Danger:** Do not attempt to feed the crocodiles.

Create italics and bolding simultaneously by using 3 asterisks (***) on either side of the desired passage.

Markdown: `If you mess this up, ***I will never forgive you.***`

Rendered: If you mess this up, ***I will never forgive you.***

Note: You can add emphasis in the middle of a word too! For instance, `incon*ceiv*able` would render as "incon*ceiv*able."

Headings. Add headings by placing a hash symbol (#) at the beginning of a line of text. You can use multiple hashes (#), the number of which indicates the heading level that will be rendered. For instance, 3 hashes (###) before text indicates Heading Level 3.

Markdown: `# Heading 1`

`## Heading 2`

```
### Heading 3
```

Rendered: # Heading 1

Heading 2

Heading 3

Note: Be sure to add a space after the hash symbol (#).

Paragraphs. Create paragraphs in markdown by inserting a blank line between paragraphs of text.

Markdown:
```
Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2
```

Rendered: **Paragraph 1**

Paragraph 2

You can also create simple line breaks by pressing **Enter** or **Return**.

Markdown:
```
Line 1
Line 2
```

Rendered: **Line 1**
Line 2

Note: Do not tab or otherwise indent paragraphs in Markdown. It will not properly render as many Markdown editors have options for rendering indents.

Lists. Markdown is capable of rendering ordered and unordered lists.

Create ordered lists by adding a numeral and a period (i.e. "`1.`") to the beginning of a line of text and every line thereafter included in the list. You may indent portions of the list by using the **Tab** key.

Markdown:
```
1. Item 1

2. Item 2

    1. Indented item 1

    2. Indented item 2

3. Item 3
```

Rendered:

1. Item 1
2. Item 2
    1. Indented item 1
    2. Indented item 2
3. Item 3

Create unordered lists by adding a hyphen (-) to the beginning of a line of text and every line thereafter included in the list. You may indent portions of the list by using the **Tab** key.

Markdown:
```
- Item 1

- Item 2
```

```
        - Indented item 1

        - Indented item 2

    - Item 3
```

Rendered:

- Item 1
- Item 2
  - Indented item 1
  - Indented item 2
- Item 3

Horizontal Line. Create a horizontal line break by adding three hyphens (`---`) in its own line with blank lines above and below.

Markdown: `---`

Rendered:

Links. Insert hyperlinks to other websites by placing rectangular brackets (`[]`) around the desired text to be linked, immediately followed by the URL in parentheses (`()`).

Markdown:
```
You can read about advanced Markdown functions
[here.](https://www.markdownguide.org/extended-syntax/)
```

Rendered: You can read about advanced Markdown functions here.

If you wish to insert the link directly, place the URL in brackets (`<>`).

Markdown: `<www.wikipedia.org>`

Rendered: www.wikipedia.org

Images. Similarly to adding links, insert an image into your document by placing an exclamation mark (`!`) followed by the desired image alt text in rectangular brackets (`[]`), followed by the image URL or path in parentheses (`()`).

Markdown:
```
![Los Angeles' Koreatown
KFC](C:\Users\Drew\Pictures\kfc.jpg)
```

Rendered:

[1]

Block Quotes. Add block quotes by placing a right-pointing bracket (>) at the beginning of a line of text. Include a right pointing bracket (>) for every paragraph and empty line in a block quote.

Markdown:
```
>All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway,
are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in
Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I
knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies
killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've
changed all the names.
>
> I really *did* go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money
(God love it) in 1967. It looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio,
more open spaces than Dayton has. There must be tons of
human bone meal in the ground.
```

Rendered:

All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names.

I really *did* go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it) in 1967. It looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio, more open spaces than Dayton has. There must be tons of human bone meal in the ground. [2:1]

Note: Appearance of block quotes will differ depending on your application.

Code. You can display text as code in a portion of regular text or in a block.

Insert code in regular text by adding backticks (`) to either side of the desired phrase.

Markdown:
```
Create italics in HTML by adding `<i></i>` around the
desired text.
```

Rendered: Create italics in HTML by adding `<i></i>` around the desired text.

Insert code blocks by adding backticks (`) to the beginning and end of the code, then indent every line in the code block by pressing the **Tab** key.

Markdown:
```
`Line 1
Line 2
    Line 3

Line 4`
```

Rendered:
```
Line 1
Line 2
    Line 3

Line 4
```

Character override. To override syntactical formatting (for instance allowing an asterisk (*) to be rendered), place a backslash (\) in front of the desired character.

Markdown:	`I want this asterisk\* to show.`
Rendered:	I want this asterisk* to show.

Advanced Functions

There is advanced syntax which is not supported by every Markdown application. Refer to your individual application's documentation for a list of accepted functions. Below is a common list of advanced syntax:

- Tables
- Footnotes
- Definition lists
- Strikethrough
- Tasks
- Emoji

Viewing Rendered Text

Every Markdown application is different. All will allow Markdown to be exported, some can show you the Markdown rendered in application.

Exporting. Applications differ, so explore yours to find the function that will allow you to export your unrendered Markdown to its final polished HTML version (typically, some variation of file/export). Markdown is typically exported to your default browser, but most programs allow for exporting to other files such as .pdf or .docx.

In application. If you wish to view your rendered Markdown before exporting, some applications, such as Dillinger.io, will display your rendered text side-by-side with your unrendered text (see Figure 1).
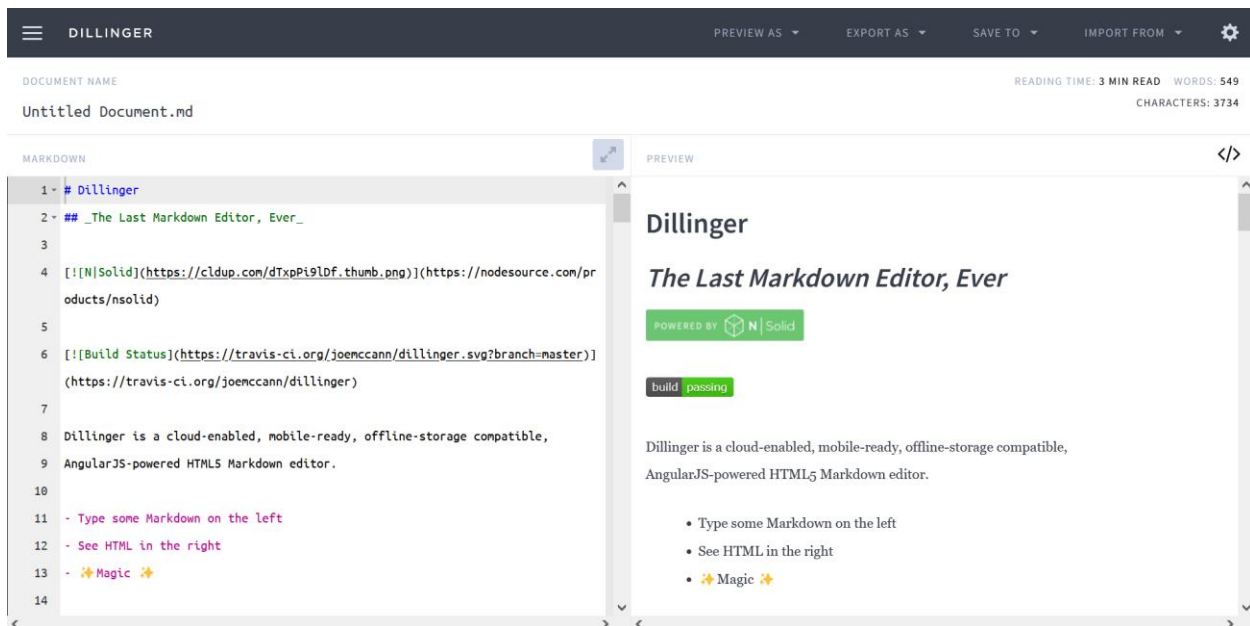

Figure 1. Screenshot of the default document for Dillinger.io.

Others, like Writemonkey, will display an approximate render directly on the text itself (see Figure 2).

```
▾  # Slaughterhouse-Five
   or
   THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE
   A Duty-Dance With Death
   by
   Kurt Vonnegut

▾  # One

   All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty
   much true. One guy I knew really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a
   teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really *did* threaten to
   have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so
   on. I've changed all the names.

   I really *did* go back to Dresden with Guggenheim money (God love it)
   in 1967. It looked a lot like Dayton, Ohio, more open spaces than
   Dayton has. There must be tons of human bone meal in the ground.
```

Figure 2. The opening passages of *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut as typed in Writemonkey.

References

[1]   Los Angeles Conservancy, "KentuckyFriedChicken_ARGJPG," [Image File]. Available: https://www.laconservancy.org/sites/default/files/styles/hero_partial/public/images/heroes/KentuckyFriedChicken_ARG.JPG?itok=IHwTG-ds [Accessed: Nov. 28, 2021]

[2]   Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1969.