

Standard features of applications

Printable handout — keep this next to you the first time you open software you have never used.

What this lesson claims

Nearly every application shares the same window furniture and the same dozen commands. Learn them once and the sentence “I do not know that program” mostly stops being true: you do not know its *menus*, but you do know how it works. The second activity is the test of that claim.

Objectives

1. Identify the interface features shared by nearly all applications: title bar, ribbon or menu bar, toolbars, scroll bars, status bar, view and zoom controls.
2. Use the commands that behave identically everywhere: New, Open, Save, Save As, Print, Undo, Redo, Cut, Copy, Paste, Find, Replace.
3. Read a dialog box: tabs, drop-downs, check boxes, radio buttons, spin boxes, and the difference between OK, Apply and Cancel.
4. Complete a set task in an application you have never opened before.

1 · The furniture of an application window

Feature	What it is	Why it matters
Title bar	Top strip: the file name and the program name, with minimise, maximise and close.	It answers “have I saved this?”. If it says <i>Untitled</i> or <i>Document1</i> , the file does not exist on the drive yet.
Ribbon or menu bar	Every command the program has, grouped by job. A ribbon shows them as tabs of buttons; a menu bar hides them in drop-down lists.	This is where you look first in unfamiliar software. File-type commands are almost always at the far left or the top.
Toolbars	A short row of the commands you use most.	One click instead of three. Most can be customised.
Scroll bars	Move the view, not the document.	Their length tells you how much of the document you are <i>not</i> seeing.
Status bar	Bottom strip: page and word count, cell reference, zoom level, saving indicator.	The most informative strip on the screen, and the one nobody reads.

View and zoom	Change how the document is displayed, without changing the document.	Zoom changes what you see . Font size changes what prints . Confusing the two is the classic beginner mistake.
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2 · The commands that never change

These behave the same way in a word processor, a spreadsheet, an image editor and a browser — including the keyboard shortcuts, because the shortcut is a convention, not a feature of one program.

Command	Shortcut	What it does, and the catch
New	Ctrl+N	Starts an empty file.
Open	Ctrl+O	Loads a file that already exists.
Save	Ctrl+S	Overwrites the file you are in. The first Save behaves like Save As, because there is no file yet.
Save As	F12	Makes a <i>second</i> file with a new name or a new format — and leaves you working inside the new one, not the original. If you want to keep the original untouched, do this before you start changing things.
Print	Ctrl+P	Check the preview and the page count before you commit paper.
Undo / Redo	Ctrl+Z / Ctrl+Y	Steps backwards and forwards through what you did. Most programs remember many steps — this is what makes experimenting safe.
Cut / Copy / Paste	Ctrl+X / C / V	Cut removes, Copy duplicates, and both put the item on the clipboard until you paste it.
Find	Ctrl+F	Highlights every match. Use it before Replace, to see what you are about to change.
Replace	Ctrl+H	Changes every match at once — including inside words you did not mean. Either a great time-saver or a fast way to ruin a document.

Save vs Save As — the one that carries marks

Save overwrites the file you are in. **Save As** creates a new file and moves you into it. After Save As, every further Save writes to the *new* file. The original stops changing at the moment you did Save As — which is why the timing matters more than the command.

3 · How to read a dialog box

A dialog box is the program asking you a question. Every control on it is a different kind of question, and choosing badly here is where most “the program did the wrong thing” stories begin.

Control	Looks like	What it means
Tabs	A row of labels	More settings than fit on one panel. Changing tab does not cancel what you set on the previous one.
Drop-down list	A box with an arrow	Pick exactly one from a list the program supplies. You cannot invent an option.
Check boxes	Square	Independent yes/no switches. Tick none, one, or all of them.
Radio buttons	Round	Mutually exclusive: choosing one clears the others. If the designer used these, only one of the options can be true.
Spin box	A number with ▲▼	A value you step up and down — and can usually type directly instead of clicking twenty times.
OK	Button	Applies your changes and closes the box.
Apply	Button	Applies your changes and <i>keeps the box open</i> , so you can look at the result and keep adjusting.
Cancel	Button	Abandons everything you changed since you opened the box — including settings on tabs you visited earlier.

4 · Sitting down in front of software you have never used

1. **Read the title bar.** What is this program, and is a file open yet?
2. **Find the commands.** Look for a ribbon, a menu bar, or a three-line “hamburger” icon.
3. **Try the universals.** Ctrl+N, Ctrl+S, Ctrl+Z. If those three work, you can already create something, keep it, and undo your mistakes.
4. **Explore safely.** Change something, look at it, undo it. Undo is what makes exploring free.

The question to ask yourself is not “do I know this program?” but “where has this program hidden the things that every program has?” The second question always has an answer, and finding it takes about two minutes.

5 · Check yourself

1. You want to keep the original file untouched and work on a copy. Which command, and at what point?
2. A settings box offers four round buttons and three square boxes. How many of each may you choose?
3. You zoom a document to 200% and print it. Does it print larger? Explain.
4. Where would you look first for “export to PDF” in a program you have never opened?

5. Name three things the status bar can tell you.

Activities for this lesson

Activity 1 — Label the window. An unlabelled screenshot of an application window: name ten interface features and say what each one is for.

Activity 2 — The unfamiliar application. Open an application nobody in the class has used. Six tasks: create a file, save it under a given name, change the view, undo a deliberate mistake, find and replace a word, and export or print to PDF. Done without help.

Neither activity carries marks. The marks for this topic are in the Checkpoint, which assesses Lessons 1–3 together.

Glossary

Clipboard	The temporary holding place for whatever you cut or copied, until you paste it.
Dialog box	A window in which the program asks you for settings before it acts.
Ribbon	A command area organised as tabs of labelled buttons.
Shortcut	A key combination that runs a command without going through the menus.
Status bar	The information strip along the bottom of an application window.