Don Lancaster

What is PostScript: A Tutorial
[Editor’s Note: this article is an introduction to the PostScript language. In it, Don discusses PostScript features and its advantages, fonts, speed and the costs, how to get started and how to buy a decent PostScript printer. Copyright (C) 1990 by Don Lancaster and Synergetics, 3860 West First Street, Thatcher, AZ 85552. All commercial rights reserved. Personal use permitted so long as this header remains present and intact. Write or call for free PostScript “insider secrets” brochure and product list. Free PostScript help line 8:5 weekdays, mountain standard time: call (602) 428.4073.]

What makes Adobe System’s PostScript™ language so great? Why has it become the page description language for practically all serious desktop publishing? Maybe we should start off with a simpler question, namely, “Just what is the PostScript language?”

Well, PostScript is a new computer language which is normally provided as firmware that is already built into a PostScript-speaking laser printer or phototypesetter. You usually do not go out and buy a copy of PostScript. Instead, you purchase or lease a ready-to-go PostScript-speaking laser printer or phototypesetter. Or else you bolt a new PostScript-speaking firmware lid onto an older and more primitive printer or phototypesetter to upgrade it. Or you can buy PostScript emulator software for use on non-PostScript printers.

To use PostScript, all you need is some way of sending ordinary ASCII textfiles to it. These textfiles contain the words and numbers that make up the program. This can be done with any old word processor, editor, or comm program on any old computer. There are also higher level “power” programs that will automatically generate PostScript code for you, as well as emulation software that lets PostScript imitate virtually any other computer or phototypesetter to upgrade it. Or you can buy PostScript emulator software for use on non-PostScript printers.

One key point that most beginners miss is that PostScript is a totally general purpose computer language. So, anything you can do in “C”, or in BASIC, COBOL, Fortran or Pascal, can also be done with PostScript. As with any other general purpose computer language, there are some things that do get done very well and some not so well. PostScript happens to excel at putting nice looking marks onto a printed page.

Thus, beside its being a totally general purpose computer language, PostScript also turns out to be an absolutely outstanding page description language, or PDL, for desktop through high-end publishing.

PostScript usually has three different ways of outputting its answers. One is to make marks on a page and then print that page. The second is to send the results back to your host computer via the serial, AppleTalk or SCSI comm channel. And the third is to write files to and from a SCSI hard drive or CD-ROM compact disk.

Many beginners often assume that PostScript can only output printed hard copy. And thus they miss two thirds of the richness of what PostScript can really accomplish.

For instance, I routinely use the PostScript in my LaserWriter NTX with its 12 megabytes of RAM and its 68020 as the “mother’s little helper” slave co-processor for the 65C02 in my Apple IIIe. Which really does snap things up a tad. At one time, the controller card in the original LaserWriter was far and away the most powerful computer that Apple built.

What Are The Main Features Of PostScript?

PostScript is a totally general purpose computer language, so has the three thirds of the richness of what PostScript can really accomplish.

For instance, I routinely use the PostScript in my LaserWriter NTX with its 12 megabytes of RAM and its 68020 as the “mother’s little helper” slave co-processor for the 65C02 in my Apple IIIe. Which really does snap things up a tad. At one time, the controller card in the original LaserWriter was far and away the most powerful computer that Apple built.

What makes Adobe System's PostScript™ language so great? Why has it become the page description language for practically all serious desktop publishing? Maybe we should start off with a simpler question, namely, “Just what is the PostScript language?”

Well, PostScript is a new computer language which is normally provided as firmware that is already built into a PostScript-speaking laser printer or phototypesetter. You usually do not go out and buy a copy of PostScript. Instead, you purchase or lease a ready-to-go PostScript-speaking laser printer or phototypesetter. Or else you bolt a new PostScript-speaking firmware lid onto an older and more primitive printer or phototypesetter to upgrade it. Or you can buy PostScript emulator software for use on non-PostScript printers.

To use PostScript, all you need is some way of sending ordinary ASCII textfiles to it. These textfiles contain the words and numbers that make up the program. This can be done with any old word processor, editor, or comm program on any old computer. There are also higher level “power” programs that will automatically generate PostScript code for you, as well as emulation software that lets PostScript imitate virtually any other computer or phototypesetter to upgrade it. Or you can buy PostScript emulator software for use on non-PostScript printers.

One key point that most beginners miss is that PostScript is a totally general purpose computer language. So, anything you can do in “C”, or in BASIC, COBOL, Fortran or Pascal, can also be done with PostScript. As with any other general purpose computer language, there are some things that do get done very well and some not so well. PostScript happens to excel at putting nice looking marks onto a printed page.

Thus, beside its being a totally general purpose computer language, PostScript also turns out to be an absolutely outstanding page description language, or PDL, for desktop through high-end publishing.

PostScript usually has three different ways of outputting its answers. One is to make marks on a page and then print that page. The second is to send the results back to your host computer via the serial, AppleTalk or SCSI comm channel. And the third is to write files to and from a SCSI hard drive or CD-ROM compact disk.

Many beginners often assume that PostScript can only output printed hard copy. And thus they miss two thirds of the richness of what PostScript can really accomplish.

For instance, I routinely use the PostScript in my LaserWriter NTX with its 12 megabytes of RAM and its 68020 as the “mother’s little helper” slave co-processor for the 65C02 in my Apple IIIe. Which really does snap things up a tad. At one time, the controller card in the original LaserWriter was far and away the most powerful computer that Apple built.