
The DuckBoat — News from T_EX.SE: Formatting posts

Herr Professor Paulinho van Duck

Abstract

Prof. van Duck carried on a survey regarding the non-canonical reasons to upvote T_EX.SE posts; in the first part of this installment, he will show you the most meaningful results of his research. In the following Quack Guide, you will find some tips & tricks for quickly formatting T_EX.SE posts and attaching images to them.

1 Quack chat

Hi, T_EX/L^AT_EX friends!

Many things have happened since last time. The most important one is undoubtedly that Paulo Cereda finished his thesis, now he is a Ph^Duck! It should have been a secret, but how could Paulo keep *that* secret?

All the T_EX.SE friends were very happy with it, but soon we missed a reason to make fun of him. So we started reminding him to publish the new version of `arara`, but he also did that: `arara 4.0` is now available, with the coolest manual ever!

So, if you find a new topic to scoff at Paulo, please let me know.

In July, the most highly-anticipated event of the year, the T_EX Users Group meeting, took place at the gorgeous location of Rio de Janeiro. I am very glad that the presentation of `tikzducks` was declared the best talk, quack!

However, the occurrence that actually turned the T_EX.SE Community upside down was the new site theme, gone live in August. Unfortunately, it is rather awful and less convenient, compared with the previous layout, and few people like it. The Powers (the people who manage all the Stack Overflow site) did not take into account any suggestions made previously by the T_EX.SE Community, and it made many people angry. The post which announced the change got (at the time of writing) 69 downvotes — a record — and only 12 upvotes. If you want to know the whole story, just visit the T_EX.SE Meta site.



Before going on, let me thank Claudio Beccari, from G_JIT, the Italian T_EX user group. He appreciated my first article very much and asked me to make an Italian version of it.

He also found an error in my first Quack Guide: the file extension must be specified in the `BibLATEX` macro `\addbibresource`. In my MWEB example on page 305 in *TUGboat* 38:3, it should have been:

```
\addbibresource{jobname.bib}
```

(extension `.bib` included).

Finally, I would like to thank Ulrike Fischer and her husband Gert, who allowed me to meet Bär, and spend a nice day together with them.

2 Upvoting behavior

Some time ago I suggested to my friend Carla that she post a question/poll on the T_EX.SE Meta site about the “wrong” reasons to upvote.

It was welcomed by the Community, many answers arrived, and some results even surprised me, quack!

I will comment on only a little of the feedback here; you can find the complete list at tex.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/7627/poll-wrong-reasons-to-upvote.

Of course, all the listed reasons are not *per se* always “wrong”, but they are if you upvote *only* because of them.

According to the help pages of the site, voting up is how the community indicates which questions and answers are most useful and appropriate. In particular, the best answers should receive more votes so that good content rises to the top.

I would have expected that the first “wrong” reason to upvote would be “the post contains a stunning image or a beautiful typographical object” and users vote for it *only* because they love the picture, in the same way they put a “like” on a kitten photo in a social network. Many TikZ posts, for example, get votes due to this reason.

But, contrary to my expectations, it is only third in rank; the gold medal goes to “the post is by one of the top users, I upvoted on trust.”

Of course, if the answer is by a top user, it is likely to be excellent. However, it is “wrong” to upvote *only* because it is by a top user, without even reading it, and without reading the other alternative answers, which could be even more refined.

Also, sometimes top users can give a bit overly complex answers to show their skills; there are cases where the same result can be obtained with simpler methods.

There are even (rare) situations when a top user does not understand the question, so the answer is gorgeous, but it does not solve the OP’s problem.

So, please remember to upvote the answer, not the answerer, quack!

Going back to our rank, the second place goes to “the answer is the first of the list, it solves my problem, I have no time/will to read the others, even if they could be better.”

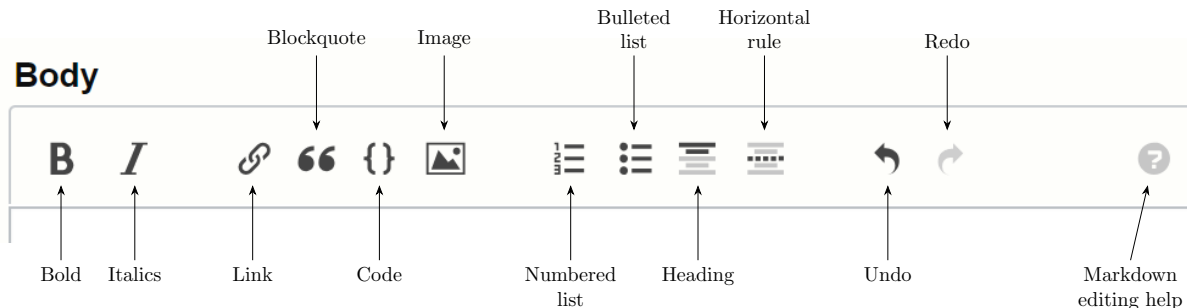


Figure 1: Formatting toolbar buttons

It is also likely that the first answer gets more votes than others simply because every time an answer is added the post goes on the Top Questions list. Indeed, “the post is in the top charts” is “wrong” reason no. 7.

I would add that timing matters on many occasions, for example, an answer posted when it is evening in Europe surely earns more reputation than one posted when it is afternoon in Honolulu (sorry for Hawaiian (L)T_EX friends, maybe it is a punishment because they cook pineapple pizza).

Reason no. 4 is one which I find it difficult to call “wrong”: “the post has some duck-related content.” I know it could be unbelievable, but there are users who hate ducks, there are also users who eat ducks, I have to pay attention, quack!

Some time ago the duck mania reached a peak, and every time you entered our chat you saw a TikZ ducks picture; hence some users got bored of it.

Now the situation is quieter, so feel free to use the new package `duckuments`¹ (by Jonathan P. Spratte, alias Skillmon, one of our best users) or the new `example-image-duck` when you build your MWEs.

Recently also marmots (after the nickname of our speediest TikZ expert) have caught on, and they have their own package `tikzmarmots`.² We are also waiting for `tikzlings`, the new TikZ collection of animals and beings.



Anyway, remember that upvoting is important because it is the way to show best answers to future users and to thank people who posted them, quack!

3 Quack Guide No. 3

How to format a post in T_EX.SE

This time my Quack Guide does not strictly concern L^AT_EX, but T_EX.SE.

¹ ctan.org/pkg/duckuments

² ctan.org/pkg/tikzmarmots

I will try to explain how to format a post on our site and attach an image to it. A very special reader of mine (Peter Wilson) asked me to treat this topic, and how can I not please my readers?

3.1 Formatting the text of the post

T_EX.SE uses Markdown, a very simple markup language. Table 1 shows the formatting basics.

The more common “commands” also have buttons in the formatting toolbar placed above the body frame of your post, see Figure 1, and some shortcuts, listed in Table 2.

To apply them, just select the text you want to italicize/bold/etc. and press the specific button or its keyboard shortcut. Please note that the button and the shortcut for formatting code work both for inline code and code blocks.



Unfortunately, T_EX.SE does not allow you to attach a `.tex` file. The quickest way to add your MWE is to copy it from your editor, paste it in the body frame of your post, select it and press `Ctrl`+`K` or click the curly brackets button.

On the other hand, adding links is allowed. If the link refers to another question from T_EX.SE, you can simply copy-paste it, and its clickable title will automatically appear.

For the other links, to make them more readable than the simple site address, you can put a description within square brackets and the url within parentheses:

```
[<link description>](<url>)
```

The description will appear in red, as a clickable link.

The same result can be obtained with reference-style links:

```
[<link description>][<urltag>]
```

putting the tag resolution after an empty line:

```
[<urltag>]: <url>
```

The tag can be a number or a word.

Table 1: How to format the text of a post on T_EX.SE

Markdown syntax	Result
Use <code>_one_</code> , <code>__two__</code> or <code>___three___</code> underscores or asterisks to get <i>*italics*</i> , **bold** or ***bold italics*** .	Use <i>one</i> , two or <i>three</i> underscores or asterisks to get <i>italics</i> , bold , or <i>bold italics</i> .
For <code>`inline code`</code> use backticks. Indent four spaces (after an empty line) for:	For <code>inline code</code> use backticks. Indent four spaces (after an empty line) for:
<code>Code</code> <code>blocks.</code>	<code>Code</code> <code>blocks.</code>
Add two spaces <code>␣␣</code> at the end of a line to have a linebreak.	add two spaces at the end of a line to have a linebreak.
Leave an empty line for a new paragraph.	Leave an empty line for a new paragraph.
For bulleted lists, leave an empty line and: - use a minus sign + or plus sign * or an asterisk.	For bulleted lists, leave an empty line and: • use a minus sign • or plus sign • or an asterisk.
For a numbered list, leave an empty line and type: ␣1. a space ␣2. a number ␣3. and a dot.	For a numbered list, leave an empty line and type: 1. a space 2. a number 3. and a dot.
Add a <code>></code> to the beginning of any line <code>></code> to create <code>></code> a blockquote.	Add a <code>></code> to the beginning of any line to create a blockquote
Underline text to have First Header ===== Second Header ----- or use # # First Header ## Second Header ### Third Header	Underline text to have First Header Second Header or use # First Header Second Header Third Header
Leave an empty line and type ---	Leave an empty line and type to get a horizontal rule.

Table 2: Formatting shortcuts on T_EX.SE

Description	Shortcuts
Italics	Ctrl + I
Bold	Ctrl + B
Code	Ctrl + K
Bulleted list	Ctrl + U
Numbered list	Ctrl + O
Heading	Ctrl + H
Horizontal rule	Ctrl + R
Link	Ctrl + L
Image	Ctrl + G

The following three examples all give as a result the clickable word `CTAN`:

```
[CTAN] (https://www.ctan.org/)
[CTAN] [1]
[CTAN] [ctan]
```

```
[1]: https://www.ctan.org/
[CTAN]: https://www.ctan.org/
```

For images, it is the same but with a `!` at the beginning:

```
![<image description>](<image url>)
![<image description>][<imgtag>]
```

```
[<imgtag>]: <image url>
```

Of course, usually you do not have a url for your image, but no need to worry about that, the Stack Exchange network has an image hosting platform via `imgur.com`.

To upload your image, just press the specific toolbar button or **Ctrl** + **G**, and drag and drop it or click to select it from your computer path. Remember the maximum loadable size of the image is 2 MiB.

The problem is T_EX.SE does not allow you to attach a `.pdf` file; you have to somehow transform your output into `.png`, `.jpeg` or another uploadable format. We will see how to do it in the next subsection.



Returning to the formatting methods, a limited subset of HTML syntax can also be used, Table 3 shows some examples. Note that superscript or subscript text can be used for a whole sentence if you want to write it in a smaller font size.

A useful trick is to put an empty comment: `<!>` within two empty lines to separate a list and a code block, otherwise, Markdown does not understand where the list ends and the code begins and makes a mess.

**Table 3:** Examples of HTML syntax allowed on T_EX.SE

HTML syntax	Result
<code><kbd>Ctrl</kbd></code>	Ctrl
<code><sub>subscript</sub></code>	subscript
<code><sup>superscript</sup></code>	superscript
<code><s>cancelled</s></code>	cancelled

The syntax of Table 1 does not work in titles of questions; they cannot be formatted, and must be written in plain text only.

In comments, you can use only bold, italics, inline code and links. The rest is not supported, but you can contact the users who commented before you by writing `@username`. This way of pinging, on the other hand, does not work in posts.



For more info, please look at the T_EX.SE help page: `tex.stackexchange.com/help/formatting`.

3.2 Creating the image to attach

Now let us see how to create an uploadable image format starting from our `.pdf` file.

If only a little piece of your document is needed, such as a mathematical formula, a TikZ picture, or a small table, the quickest way is just to make a screenshot and crop the image with some graphics editor, or copy only a subrectangle of the screen and save it as an image. The way to do these depends on your operating system.

You can also transform your `.pdf` into a `.png` file, and crop it, via `imgur.com`, even without an account. From the home page of that site click on “New post”, upload your `.pdf`, choose “Edit image” from the drop-down menu which appears if you pass the cursor over your uploaded image, crop it, save it and then download your `.png` by choosing “Download image” from the same drop-down menu.

For cropping, there is also the tool `pdfcrop`, included in your T_EX distribution. This calculates the bounding box of each page of your document and generates an output PDF file with margins removed. It could be useful to add `\pagestyle{empty}` to your MWE to switch off page numbering, if page numbers are not relevant for the post topic.

Another very easy tool included in your distribution, `pdftoppm`, converts PDF files to color image files in Portable Pixmap (PPM) format, grayscale image files in Portable Graymap (PGM) format, or monochrome image files in Portable Bitmap (PBM) format.

It creates an image file for *each page* of your PDF file and also has the options `-png` and `-jpeg` to respectively generate a PNG or a JPEG instead of a PPM file.

The syntax is:

```
pdftoppm [options] PDF-file PPM-root
```

For example, suppose you have to convert a document which contains only a little table and has no page numbers, named `yourdoc.pdf`. If you run:

```
pdfcrop yourdoc.pdf
```

```
pdftoppm -png yourdoc-crop.pdf yourdoc
```

you will get a document with your table only, no white space around it, in PDF (`yourdoc-crop.pdf`) and PNG (`yourdoc.png`) formats.

If your `documentclass` is `standalone`³ or your output is not affected by the class of the document, you can use the `convert` option of `standalone` to transform it into an image format (`.png` is recommended, but others are also supported); see Section 5.6 of its documentation.

The `standalone` conversion is done by an external image converter program, which you need to install, and when you compile your document you have to use the `-shell-escape` option. By default, ImageMagick's conversion program is used.

The tools of ImageMagick can also be used directly and can be useful if you need to convert more than one piece of a document, for example running:

```
convert -density 300 yourfile.pdf yourfile.png
```

you will get a `.png` file for each page of your `.pdf`. Of course, the `convert` command has many options to improve the quality of your image, for more info see www.imagemagick.org/script/convert.php.

If your document has many pages and it is useful to attach all of them to your post, the `pdfpages` package may help you. It can arrange more than one page of another PDF document on one sheet of paper.

Suppose you have a document of four pages, let us call it `duckument.pdf`. You can create a new one-page document in this way:

```
\documentclass{article}
\usepackage{pdfpages}
\begin{document}
\includepdf [pages=-,nup=2x2]{duckument.pdf}
\end{document}
```

and then include this one page document (see Figure 2) to your post with one of the methods shown above.

³ <https://ctan.org/pkg/standalone>



Figure 2: Example of `pdfpages` output.



For more info, see the posts “How does one add a LaTeX output to a question/answer?”⁴ on Meta and “Compile a LaTeX document into a PNG image that’s as short as possible”⁵ on the main site.

4 Conclusions

I hope TeX.SE formatting rules don’t worry you any more. However, if you are in trouble, remember:

♪♪♪ *All we need is duck!* ♪♪♪

◇ Herr Professor Paulinho van Duck
Quack University Campus
Sempione Park Pond
Milano, Italy
paulinho dot vanduck (at) gmail
dot com

⁴ tex.meta.stackexchange.com/questions/2781/how-does-one-add-a-latex-output-to-a-question-answer.

⁵ tex.stackexchange.com/questions/11866/compile-a-latex-document-into-a-png-image-thats-as-short-as-possible.