

Ink: Handwriting Recognition

In the same way that your grandmother turned yesterday’s dinner into today’s sandwich (and tomorrow’s soup), Apple recycled the handwriting technology of its failed Newton handheld and added it to Mac OS X. It’s now called Ink, and it does exactly what it used to: turns your handwriting into “typed” text in any program.

You can’t very well write directly on your Apple Cinema Display (although that would be cool). So Ink appears in Mac OS X only if you have a graphics tablet, one of those stylus-and-pad devices found generally only on the desks of graphic artists. (Wacom is the best-known tablet company, but there are a couple of others.)

Can Ink really replace the keyboard? Not for anything more than quick notes, that’s for sure. But it can be handy when you’re Web surfing, sketching, filling in database forms, and so on.

Note: Why on earth did Apple go to all this software-writing trouble just to satisfy the tiny community of graphics-tablet owners? That’s exactly what the GICPWBAMBDOPTC (Great Internet Confederacy of People Who Believe that Apple Must Be Developing a One-Piece Tablet Computer) wants to know.

Write Anywhere

Open System Preferences and click the Ink icon. (It appears only if you’ve hooked up a tablet.) Turn on handwriting recognition by setting the “Handwriting Recognition is” button to On (Figure 1, top). Right away, you see a change on your screen: The Ink toolbar appears (Figure 1, bottom).

Now visit a program that accepts typing—TextEdit, for example. As you start to write on the tablet, a translucent, yellow, lined overlay appears, magically expanding if necessary to accommodate your writing. A moment after you stop writing each word, the Mac turns your writing into text and “types” it into the current document (Figure 2).

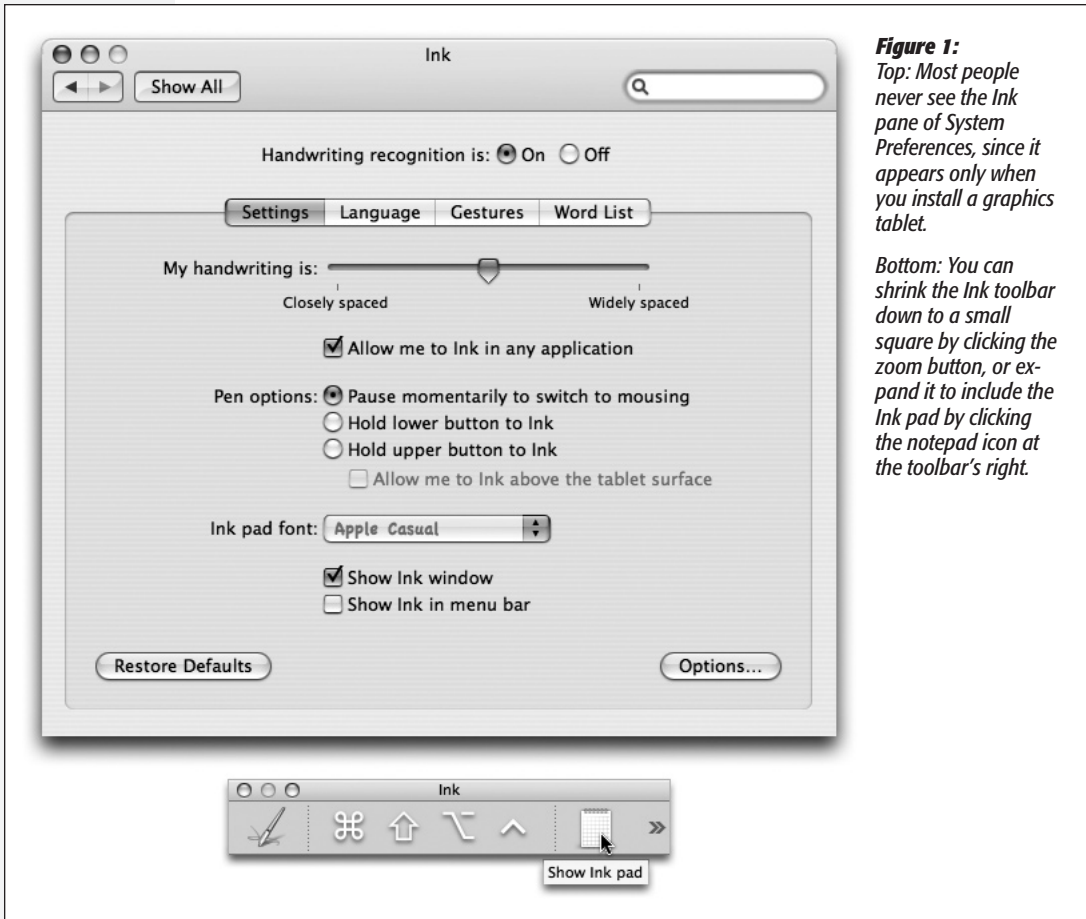


Figure 1:
Top: Most people never see the Ink pane of System Preferences, since it appears only when you install a graphics tablet.

Bottom: You can shrink the Ink toolbar down to a small square by clicking the zoom button, or expand it to include the Ink pad by clicking the notepad icon at the toolbar's right.

Writing vs. Mousing

So when is your stylus a mouse for pointing and clicking, and when is it a writing implement? When “Write Anywhere” is turned *off*, your stylus is just a mouse.

You can find this switch in three different places:

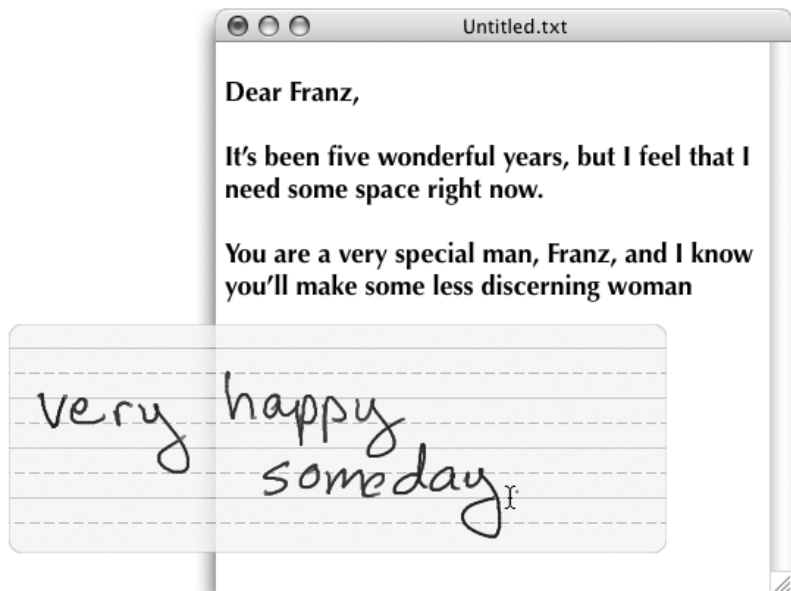
- The first icon on the Ink toolbar is the on/off switch for “Allow me to write anywhere.” When the icon looks like an arrow cursor, your pen is just a pointing device; when it’s a fountain pen, it’s a writing device.

Tip: The next few buttons on the Ink toolbar let you “press” the keys for menu commands: ⌘, Shift, Option, or Control. For example, to trigger the Shift-⌘-H keystroke (for Replace) in Microsoft Word, you’d tap the ⌘ button, tap Shift, and then write the letter H.

- An “Allow me to Ink in any application” checkbox also appears on the Ink pane of System Preferences.
- Also in System Preferences, a checkbox called “Show Ink in menu bar” adds a fountain-pen icon (a menulet) to your menu bar. Its commands include Write Anywhere and Show Ink Window (meaning the Ink pad, described next).

Figure 2:

As you write, your penstrokes appear on screen. They disappear as the Mac recognizes your writing and inserts it at the insertion point. Print neatly on the overlay—don’t use script—and make capital letters distinctly larger than lowercase letters. It’s OK if the yellow writing area extends beyond your document window.



The Ink Pad

The “anywhere on the screen” mode described above is only one place that Ink can detect what you write. If you click the rightmost icon on the Ink palette (highlighted in Figure 15-1), or choose Show Ink Window from either System Preferences or the Ink menulet, you can also summon a floating “note pad” window called the Ink pad.

Limiting the writing area to the Ink pad is a useful arrangement when you’re working in a graphics program and want the Mac to distinguish between penstrokes that draw and penstrokes that write. The Ink pad is also handy because it recognizes *gestures*, described below.

At the bottom of the Ink pad, you see two buttons, labeled with the letter A and a star. Their functions are described in Figure 15-3.

Tip: If Ink makes a mistake in the Ink pad, tap the word while pressing the Control key. You get a pop-up list of alternate transcriptions.

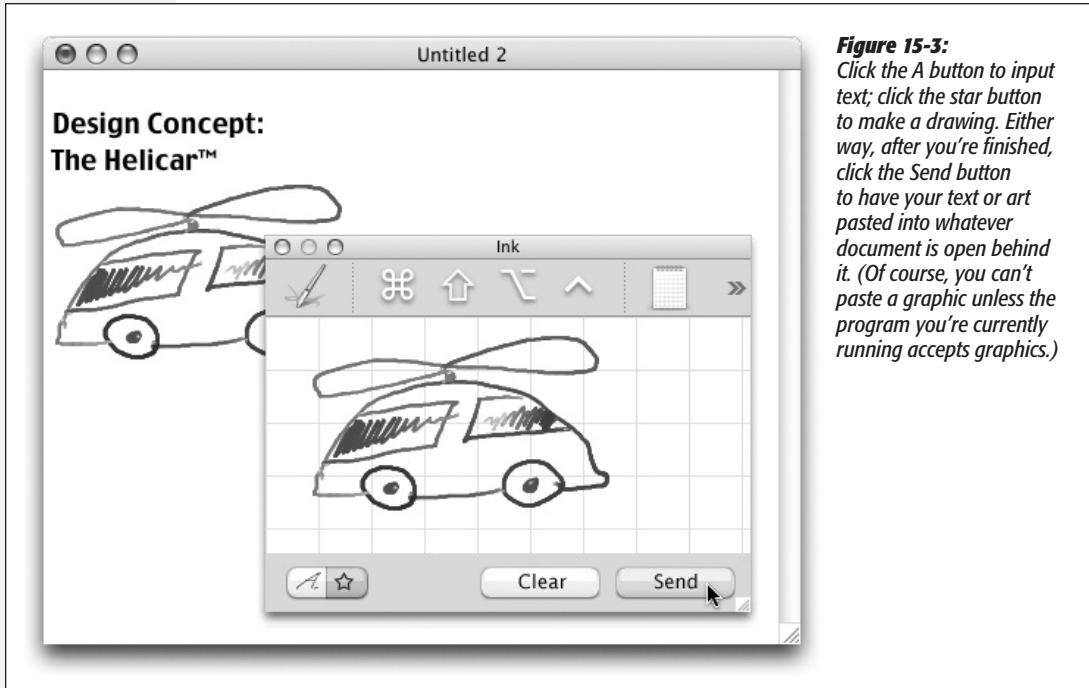


Figure 15-3: Click the A button to input text; click the star button to make a drawing. Either way, after you're finished, click the Send button to have your text or art pasted into whatever document is open behind it. (Of course, you can't paste a graphic unless the program you're currently running accepts graphics.)

Improving Ink

If you find that Ink doesn't translate your handwriting well (you write *Millennium* and Ink thinks you wanted *Mill E Numb*, for example), return to the Ink pane of System Preferences. Adjust the "My handwriting is" slider (Figure 1, top). If your writing is loose and airy, for example, sliding toward "Widely spaced" can dramatically improve Ink's recognition of your chicken scratch.

Another way you can help is to teach Ink terms it may not know, such as your friends' names and any professional jargon you use. To do so, click the Word List tab (of the Ink pane of System Preferences). Click Add, type the word you want Ink to consider legitimate, and click OK. Adding uncommon words to the Word List tab dramatically improves recognition.

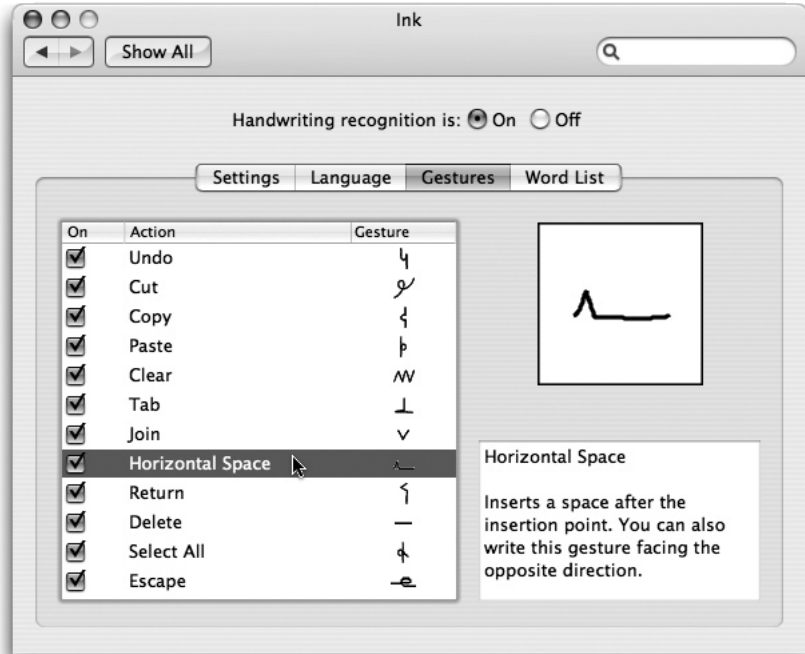
In other words, don't give up if Ink doesn't perfectly recognize your handwriting right away. After working with it for a little while, you'll get the hang of using Ink—and it'll get the hang of understanding you.

Gestures

Ink also recognizes *gestures*, a strange but logical concept: When you draw certain shapes on the tablet, Ink performs commands like Undo, Copy, Paste, and Select All. There are also written characters for keys like Delete, Space, Tab, and Return.

To view the list of gestures that Ink knows, click the Gestures tab of the Ink pane of System Preferences, as shown in Figure 4. By learning these characters, you can maximize the time you spend using your pen, and minimize the effort of pressing keys and pulling down menus.

Figure 15-4:
Do these gestures look more like hieroglyphics? No problem. When you click a gesture, the large box at the right of the screen displays a small animation, showing you how to properly write the gesture. Most of them are pretty easy to remember: Undo is a U with an extra leg, Paste is a modified P, and Clear—as all Newton users will remember—is a zigzag line, as if you were crossing something out on a pad of paper.



Editing Your Transcriptions

Since your stylus can serve as either your “keyboard” or your “mouse,” editing your transcribed text, as you might guess, can be a tad tricky. Use these techniques:

- Switch the pen back into mouse mode (so that you can drag across text to highlight it) by pausing momentarily. Drag to select the botched word, and then write the replacement word. (You can also tap the first Ink toolbar icon to switch into, or out of, writing mode.)
- To insert punctuation after a word, you’re supposed to highlight the last letter, and then rewrite the letter *and* the punctuation.
- In Inkpad, you can use gestures to edit, as described above.