

How to Enter Foreign Language Characters on Computers

Introduction

Current word processors and operating systems provide a large number of methods for writing special characters such as accented letters used in foreign languages. Unfortunately, it is not always obvious just how to enter such characters. Moreover, even when one knows a method of typing an accented letter, there may be a much simpler method for doing the same thing.

This note may help you find the most convenient method for typing such characters. The choice of method will largely depend on how frequently you have to type in foreign languages.

1 The “ALT Key” Method

This is the most common method of entering special characters. It always works, regardless of what program you are using. On both PCs and Macs, you can write foreign characters in any application by combining the ALT key (the key next to the space bar) with some alphabetic characters (on the Mac) or numbers (on PCs), provided you type numbers on the numeric keypad, rather than using the numbers at the top of the keyboard. To do that, of course, also requires your NumLock Key to be turned on, which it normally will be. For example,

On the Mac, ALT + n generates “ñ”.

On the PC, ALT + (number pad) 164 or ALT + (number pad) 0241 generate “ñ”.

A list of three- and four-digit PC codes for some common foreign languages appears at the end of this note.

2 The “Insert Symbol” Method

Most menus in word processors and other applications offer access to a window displaying all the printable characters in a particular character set. With MS Word, for example, you can always click on “Insert”, then on “Symbol”. (ALT+“i”, “s” does the same thing if you prefer to use the keyboard rather than the mouse.) That lets you insert virtually any special character from a choice of hundreds of symbols in different type fonts. Unfortunately, that is also a lot of work if you have to type many accented characters. It is often difficult simply to find a needed character from the hundreds shown on the table.

If you click on a character you want from the table, then click on “Insert”, and then click on “Close”, the designated character appears in the text at the cursor. This method will even allow you to insert East European, Cyrillic and Greek letters in Times New Roman, Arial, Courier and other fonts.

3 Microsoft Word Shortcuts

There is a better way for typing common accents than either of the above two methods. MS Word has certain “shortcuts” for typing accents. For example, to type a vowel that can take an acute accent (á, é, í, ó, ú, ý) one first holds down the CTRL key while typing an apostrophe. Nothing appears to have happened. If you then type any of those vowels, the accented letter appears. Any other key pressed after the CTRL+apostrophe combination makes the computer ring a bell: that combination must be followed by a vowel (to get the accented character). The computer will keep “beeping” an objection each time you press an incorrect key until finally you either type a vowel or a space (to turn off the CTRL+accent request).

There are several other such combinations in MS Word. CTRL+grave accent (the key to the left of the number “1” on the top row of keys) puts a grave accent over the next vowel typed. The tilde (“~”) is the same key shifted, so holding down both the CTRL and SHIFT keys while pressing that key, and then typing “n” or “N” will produce ñ or Ñ. The “6” key becomes a circumflex accent when shifted, so CTRL+SHIFT+6 plus either “a”, “e”, “i”, “o”, or “u” generates “â”, “ê”, “î”, “ô”, and “û”, respectively. To put a cedilla underneath the letter “c”, use CTRL+comma before typing “c” or “C” to get “ç” or “Ç”.

To see other such combinations, choose the “Insert Symbol” method (described above under number 2) and when you choose to a certain character, you will frequently see what keys to depress to get that character without using the “Insert Symbol” method.

4 Microsoft Word AutoCorrect

For writing accents even more quickly, MS Word users can remap their keyboards by clicking Tools/AutoCorrect and then specifying (using one of the previous methods) that certain keys should become other

keys. To follow the pattern on the Canadian English/French keyboard of the old Selectric typewriters, you can re-map

“[“ to “é”,
 “{“ to “è”,
 “=“ to “à”
 “+“ to “ç”

If you really need one of those remapped characters such as an open square bracket (“[“), you get it by typing “[“ and then the backspace key. In other words, when you press the “[“ key, you see an “é” on the screen. When you then press the backspace key, the “uncorrected” or original key replaces the AutoCorrect character, so you end up with the “[“ you wanted.

For persons who must type foreign accents frequently, the AutoCorrect method of remapping the keyboard is easy to do and greatly speeds typing. Once a key is remapped, it then takes only one keystroke to type the most common accented characters. In comparison, to type “é” with the ALT Key method you have to move your right hand from the keyboard to the number keypad, and then type four keystrokes (ALT+1, 3, 0). The shortcut key method requires three keystrokes (Ctrl, apostrophe, e). To type “ñ” requires four keystrokes by either method (either ALT+1, 6, 4, or CTRL+SHIFT+~, “n”). The Insert Symbol takes several more keystrokes or mouse movements as you search for the correct character to insert.

The main disadvantage of the AutoCorrect methods is that it does not work in “Search” or “Search and Replace” dialog boxes, so in those situations you have to use one of the other methods for writing accents.

5 The “Keyboard Remapping” Method

English language keyboards are often called “QWERTY” since those are the first six letters that appear in the top row of the letter keys. Other languages have different arrangements. French keyboards, for example, have “AZERTY” in that row, while German keyboards have a “QWERTZ” arrangement.

If you do not mind adapting to all the other changes implicit in using the keyboard that speakers of French, German, or other languages use, you can change your keyboard into one of those other flavours.

That may lead to confusion. Compare the shifted number keys on English, French and German keyboards:

English: !@#\$%^&*()_+

French: 1234567890°+ [when unshifted, the “number” keys become &é »’(-è_çà)=]

German: !“\$%&/()=?

If you would like to try using one of those different keyboards, click on Start, then Settings, then “Control Panel” and then click on “Keyboard”. You then have to click on the tab at the top of the screen that says “Languages” and then add and remove languages as necessary, and close the window.

If you have more than one language selected for your keyboard, you can choose which language is currently in force by clicking on the language setting in the System Tray (SysTray) at the bottom right corner of your screen. In that way you can rapidly shift between several different keyboards with the click of the mouse.

However, unless you are a touch typist and never look at the keys, you may require a foreign keyboard or some kind of keyboard overlay to show which key is which.

Concluding Remarks

The choice of which of the above method you want to use for entering foreign accents is a personal decision. If you use foreign words only rarely to be *à la mode*, you will probably just use the Shortcut Key method if you can remember it, or the Insert Symbol method if you cannot remember, for example, that an apostrophe stands for an acute accent, while a comma stands for a cedilla. If you have a greater need for writing in another language, you will probably want to try both the Shortcut Key and the AutoCorrect methods to see which one suits you best. (You can have both working at the same time and choose whichever method you want for each accent.) If most of your writing is in another language, you may well prefer to make your keyboard reflect that language, but you should remember that once you have become accustomed to the different keyboard layout, you will have a hard time using other computers without also converting them to your keyboard. Fortunately, that takes only a few seconds and you can easily switch the keyboard back to a standard English layout for other persons.

In any event, typing accents on a computer is not a very difficult task, if you know how to go about it.

Appendix

Here are ALT key codes for typing accents in a few languages. The three-digit key combinations for the accents precede each accent. You get the same character also by typing the four-digit codes in parentheses after the letters in the chart. If there is no three-digit code for a character, you will have to use the four-digit sequence for that character.

FRENCH

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 133 à (0224) | 137 ë (0235) | 151 ù (0249) | 144 É (0201) | 235 Û (0217) |
| 131 â (0226) | 216 Ì (0207) | 150 û (0251) | 210 Ê (0202) | 234 Ù (0219) |
| 135 ç (0231) | 140 î (0238) | 183 À (0192) | 211 Ë (0203) | 174 « (0171) |
| 130 é (0233) | 139 ï (0239) | 182 Â (0194) | 215 Î (0206) | 175 » (0187) |
| 138 è (0232) | œ (0156) | 128 Ç (0199) | 226 Ô (0212) | |
| 136 ê (0234) | 147 ô (0244) | 212 È (0200) | Œ (0140) | |

SPANISH

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 160 á (0224) | 162 ó (0243) | 144 É (0201) | 233 Ú (0218) |
| 130 é (0233) | 163 ú (0250) | 214 Í (0205) | 154 Û (0220) |
| 161 í (0237) | 129 ü (0252) | 165 Ñ (0209) | 168 ¿ (0191) |
| 164 ñ (0241) | 181 Á (0193) | 224 Ó (0211) | 173 ¡ (0161) |

PORTUGUESE

| | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 198 ã (0227) | 199 Ã (0195) | 135 ç (0231) | 128 Ç (0199) |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|

ITALIAN

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 133 à (0224) | 141 ì (0236) | 151 ù (0249) | 212 È (0200) | 227 Ò (0210) |
| 138 è (0232) | 149 ò (0242) | 183 À (0192) | 222 Ì (0204) | 235 Ù (0217) |

GERMAN/SCANDINAVIAN

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 132 ä (0228) | 137 ë (0235) | 231 þ (0254) | 143 Å (0197) | 153 Ö (0214) |
| 134 å (0229) | 148 ö (0246) | 129 ü (0252) | 146 Æ (0198) | 157 Ø (0216) |
| 145 æ (0230) | 155 ø (0248) | 152 ÿ (0255) | 209 Ð (0208) | 232 Þ (0222) |
| 208 ð (0240) | 225 ß (0223) | 142 Ä (0196) | 211 Ë (0203) | 154 Ü (0220) |

MISCELLANEOUS

| | | | | |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| ¶ (0182) | ° (0186) | ‡ (0134) | ¬ (0172) | ž (0158) |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

To type an optional hyphen: Ctrl+“-”

To type ç: Ctrl+“c”

Microsoft provides a useful but unformatted summary of several keyboard shortcuts for Word 2000 at:

<http://support.microsoft.com/directory/article.asp?ID=KB:EN-US:Q211982>

The same information (formatted and with some additional information) can be found at

<http://www.umanitoba.ca/fsi/short3.rtf>