

An OPCUG Product Review

OPCUG



Users helping users
for over 40 years

PDFgear

by Chris Taylor

Why would anyone use anything but *Adobe Reader* to view PDF files? As I outlined at the May 1st Q&A session, Adobe Reader is the Typhoid Mary of the Internet with an endless stream of security flaws. Sophos's *Naked Security* blog reported in 2018 [Adobe fixes 85 serious flaws in Acrobat and Reader](#). In a single update! SonicWall reported that 1/5 of all new malicious files are PDFs. The combination of Adobe's atrocious security record and the prevalence of malicious PDFs led me to remove *Adobe Reader* from my computers. I started using the free [Foxit Reader](#) many years ago.

The other reason one might look for a replacement PDF program is a need to edit PDF files. Some vendors have capable PDF editors, at prices far below *Adobe Acrobat's* perpetual licence at \$470 or subscription at \$17/month! However, there are not many free PDF *editors* available.

I received word about a free PDF editor: PDFgear. I was skeptical. The PDFgear website wanted me to click a big orange button labelled *Free Download*. I have often found this to be code for *Free Demo Version*. But a little research proved this to be wrong. PDFgear is truly a full featured, totally free PDF editor. The company intends to bring out a paid version in the future that will include premium features.

What do you get for the cost of a free download? A substantial array of interesting features. Along with some rough edges.

Using PDFgear as a PDF reader

When I compared how PDFgear and Foxit Reader render PDF files, I found that both generally did a very good job at displaying PDF content. However, there were a few cases where PDFgear did it better.

Sometimes, Foxit Reader does not indicate if text is a hyperlink. While you can hover your mouse over the link and the cursor will change, just looking at the text does not show a link exists. PDFgear always displays links in blue text. I could not figure out why Foxit Reader sometimes highlighted links in blue and sometimes didn't.

Typefaces: Lato, Epilogue

Read more in our article "Exploring typefaces with multiple weights or grades."

Even better: It has multiple widths

An often-overlooked variation within a single type family is width. From a narrow typeface that allows us to fit more words per line, to an extra wide face that adds personality, multiple widths offer the typographer more ways to work with type without the need to use more than one family.

Text as it appears in Foxit Reader

Typefaces: Lato, Epilogue

Read more in our article ["Exploring typefaces with multiple weights or grades."](#)

Even better: It has multiple widths

An often-overlooked variation within a single type family is width. From a [narrow](#) typeface that allows us to fit more words per line, to an [extra wide](#) face that adds personality, multiple widths offer the typographer more ways to work with type without the need to use more than one family.

The same text displayed in PDFgear

Foxit Reader is far more configurable in its *Preferences* dialogue box, but this can be a double-edged sword. At some point, when trying to get Foxit Reader to follow my Windows choice for *Show accent colour on title bars and windows borders*, I must have chosen the option *Replace document colors > Use Windows color scheme* and all text was being displayed as black. If you have a PDF with white text on a black background, this is a real problem!



White text on black in Foxit Reader



White text on black in PDFgear

By the way, PDFgear honours my choice to display the title bar in my chosen accent colour. Foxit Reader always displays the title bar in white, making it more difficult to know which window has the focus. Programs over-riding the choice for the title bar colour is a long-standing gripe of mine.

While both Foxit Reader and PDFgear do a very good job of rendering PDF files, I give a slight nod to PDFgear.

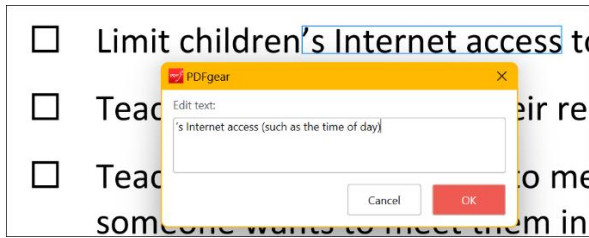
And PDFgear can do something Foxit Reader does not even attempt: edit PDF files.

The ability to edit PDF files is a stand-out feature, especially in free software. Unfortunately, PDFgear offers a very mixed bag. While the website says you can *Edit PDF text like in Microsoft Word*, the reality is somewhat less than the promise.

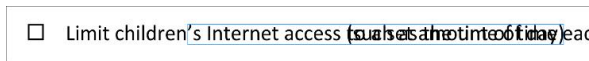
What PDFgear struggles with

PDFgear allows you to edit any text within a PDF file. But with complex layouts, it is an exercise in frustration. I could drag a text placeholder to a different location on the page. If I added text, the placeholder would extend vertically, but I couldn't change the width of any placeholder.

Choosing *Edit Text* allowed me to do in-line edits. Choosing *Edit Object* allowed me to select strange snippets of text in blocks scattered throughout the page. In the example below, moving the mouse around caused the blue box showing *'s Internet access* to appear. Why this selection was part of a sentence in the middle of a paragraph is a mystery. I chose the option to Edit and the text opened in an edit box rather than allowing me to edit in-line *like in Microsoft Word!* I added the text (*such as the time of day*).



After clicking the *OK* button, I ended up with the following:



Suffice it to say, simple small edits *may* be possible without ending up with a total mess, but don't count on it.

Given PDFgear can convert PDF files to several formats, including Microsoft Word, I thought maybe I could convert the PDF to Word, edit the text there, and save it back as a PDF file. Unfortunately, PDF files with any sort of complex layout tend to convert into Word documents that are a total mess. In most cases, Microsoft Word itself does a more credible job opening a PDF file and allowing you to edit it. But complex layouts in PDF files will stymie Word too.

PDFgear can convert a lot of document formats, such as Word and PowerPoint files to PDF. It generally does a decent job, but I found using the *Microsoft Print to PDF* virtual print driver built into Windows always did at least as good a job and sometimes much better. In the following example, a PowerPoint text box with graduated background and bevelled edges shows correctly when using *Microsoft Print to PDF*.

Two-way firewall problem

If you use a two-way firewall

- you may get a popup asking if a program should be allowed to access the Internet
- *and you won't know the right answer*

But when converted by PDFgear, the shading & bevelling are lost, and the text is not aligned well.

Two-way firewall problem

If you use a two-way firewall

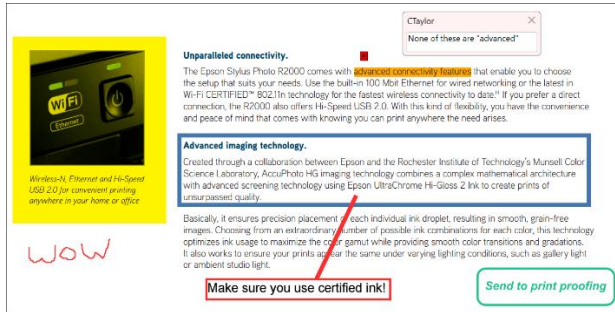
- you may get a popup asking if a program should be allowed to access the Internet
- *and you won't know the right answer*

When filling forms, PDFgear did not honour data type restrictions. On a CRA fillable tax form, while Foxit Reader would not allow alphabetic characters in the SIN field, PDFgear didn't care. Then I discovered that filling in the PDF form using a web browser (Edge, Firefox, Chrome, or Opera) also allowed letters in the SIN field. Go figure.

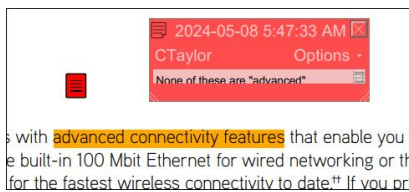
I filled out the CRA T1 tax form in PDFgear, saved it, then opened it in Foxit Reader and all the fields I had filled in were blank! Opening the PDF file in a browser displayed form data correctly. Chalk this one up to a problem with Foxit Reader...I guess?

What PDFgear does well

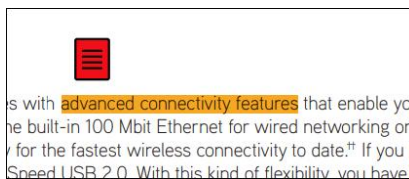
PDFgear has strong annotation features. You can easily highlight text, add lines, stamps, and more. Unfortunately, while it allows handwriting, it doesn't support pens. Rather than using the pen with my Wacom Cintiq display, I had to write *WOW* in the example below using a mouse, with the expected poor result!



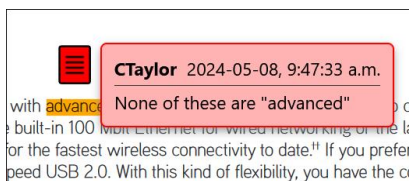
I found an issue with *Comments*. While the comment box labelled *CTaylor* above looks nice, when I opened the PDF file in other programs the comment box was far less attractive. I don't know if this is the fault of PDFgear or the other readers.



Foxit Reader



Comment missing in Edge



Comment overlays text in Firefox

PDFgear allows you to easily move pages around, insert additional pages from other PDFs or Word documents, and extract images & entire pages. You can insert and edit hyperlinks. You can even crop and rotate pages.

The program can perform optical character recognition of text within images, but I found it to be somewhat hit and miss. If you use the feature, be sure to proof what it produces.

PDFgear can compress PDF files with three different compression levels. It resulted in impressive size reductions with resulting files between 15% and 50% the size of the original file. The quality of

embedded images was virtually indistinguishable from the originals when using low compression. There were noticeable artifacts when using high compression.

You can add watermarks and headers & footers. I ran into a problem with headers and footers when trying to have page numbers formatted as *Page x of y* on the right for odd pages and on the left for even pages: a common enough thing. It put *Page 1 of 17* at the right of page 1, *Page 1 of 17* at the left of page 2, *Page 2 of 17* at the right of page 3, *Page 2 of 17* at the left of page 4, etc.

Copilot

Every program wants to include AI features and PDFgear is no exception. Clicking the Copilot icon that appears in the bottom-right of the program window opens the Copilot pane and the document is analysed. You can ask Copilot to do things like *Summarize this PDF file* or query about things that may be in the document such as the following in a security threat report. It finds related information anywhere in the PDF, pulls it all together, and provides links to the relevant sections.

How is ransomware evolving?

According to the 2023 SonicWall Cyber Threat Report on page 7, while some criminals are slowing or abandoning ransomware in favor of cryptojacking and other attack types, others are abandoning the "ware" but keeping the "ransom." This refers to the rise of extortion groups, which gain illegal access to a target network and then threaten to leak the information if victims don't pay up. This distinct form of extortion needs to be tracked by vendors despite a lack of encrypting endpoints. Additionally, while attacks are down 21%, 2022's ransomware volume is still much closer to the sky-high totals seen in 2021 than to what was seen in 2018, 2019 and 2020. If we remove 2021 as an outlier, ransomware is still on the rise.

Pages: [7](#) [5](#) [8](#) [19](#)

On occasion it threw its hands up in defeat yet still linked to pages that had the information:

How are mobile threats increasing?

I don't know.

Pages: [20](#) [19](#) [4](#) [9](#) [2](#) [3](#) [8](#)

Rephrasing the question returned better results:

In what ways are mobile threats increasing?

Mobile threats are increasing in various ways, including the increasing volume of malware apps that are designed for Android and iOS devices, targeting users of mobile devices with malicious activities like malware apps that may compromise sensitive information. Malicious versions of popular apps were also discovered by gaming the system and appear in Google Play Market and Apple App Store, putting users at risk. In addition, phishing-in-the-app tactic has been adopted by criminals to bypass the Play Market's source code checks, whereby the user is directed to a phishing site via a browser window disguised as a legitimate app. (Page 20)

Pages: [20](#) [2](#) [4](#) [19](#) [23](#) [21](#)

When I asked Copilot to *Add a bookmark called “Ransomware” to page 7*, it responded *Would you like to add an annotation to current view?* It appears Copilot is a work in progress.

Late breaking news: Microsoft is set to replace the code in Edge that allows it to read PDF files with the Adobe engine. I highly recommend you make sure Edge is **not** the default to read PDF files!

I had one final issue with Foxit Reader. They sell *Foxit PDF Editor*, so when you install or update Foxit Reader, an option to *Install a free 14-day trial of Foxit PDF Editor* is “helpfully” preselected for you. Of course, if PDFgear releases a premium, paid version, they may pull the same stunt.

Conclusions

PDFgear and Foxit Reader render PDF files well. While I had some minor issues with Foxit Reader, if my only aim was to display PDF files, I probably would not have changed to PDFgear.

The ability to edit text in PDF files is hit and miss. Simple layouts don’t cause many problems, but complex layouts are guaranteed to frustrate.

Features including annotation, hyperlinking, rearranging pages, and extracting pages & graphics, are all quite good, even though there are some rough edges.

When it works, Copilot can do a stellar job of helping you find relevant information in a PDF file.

Bottom line:

PDFgear v2.15

Price: free

Website: <https://www.PDFgear.com/>