

# At 5,000 Feet: Using Scribus to Publish a Newsletter

How to approach desktop publishing with confidence using Scribus.

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As a newbie Linux user, it seems natural to explore all the great projects you can undertake with free software. One way to show off open source is to use the Scribus desktop publishing (DTP) application. Scribus has evolved into a user-friendly DTP program that captivates attention for home and business use. It's also just plain fun to create a slick-looking newsletter to show what open source can do and subversively allure potential Windows converts to the Linux operating system.

So, to further the awareness and market share of open source, I put together these high-level instructions about the basics of newsletter creation in Scribus. For this mini-tutorial, I used Scribus 1.3.3, which is a developmental version. The change log of version 1.3 notes some significant differences from previous releases. The most important one may be that file format changes make 1.3 incompatible with 1.2. To keep your data in the proper version, you might need to save any work as Scribus 1.2 file.

## GETTING STARTED

The on-line documentation for Scribus includes installation instructions for six Linux distributions, Mac OS X and Windows. Because I used Ubuntu Breezy 5.10 for this article, the base repositories did not include the development release of Scribus 1.3.3. For Synaptic to find Scribus 1.3.3, you must add the following repositories into your `/etc/apt/sources.list`:

```
# Ubuntu breezy
deb      http://debian.scribus.net/debian/ breezy main restricted
deb-src  http://debian.scribus.net/debian/ breezy main restricted

deb      http://debian.tagancha.org/debian/ breezy main restricted
deb-src  http://debian.tagancha.org/debian/ breezy main restricted
```

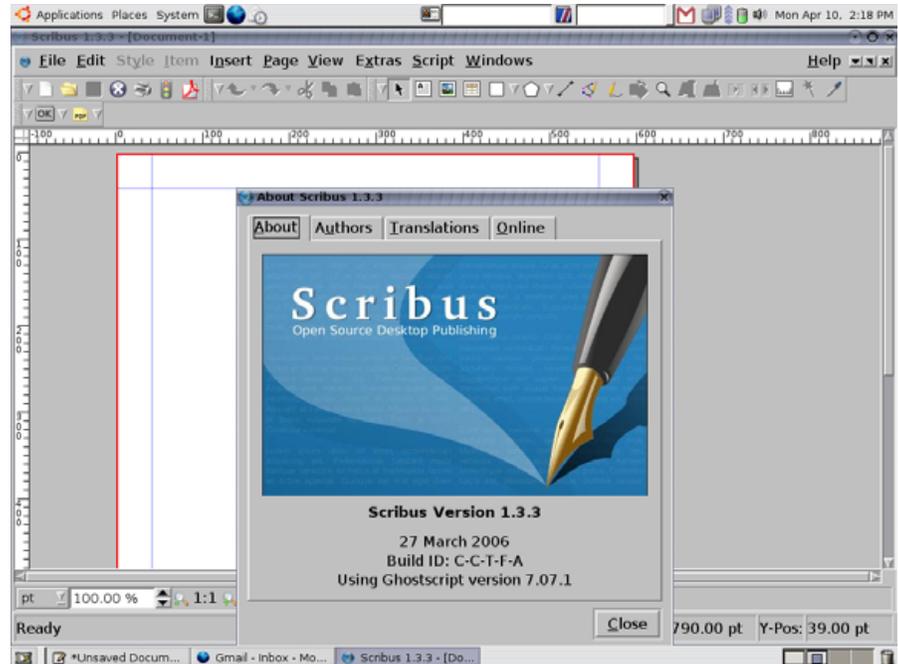


Figure 1. Scribus 1.3.3 about Box

This is a simple procedure, and complete instructions are on-line at <http://docs.scribus.net/index.php?lang=en&page=install-dpkg>. Once you have Scribus on your PC, it's also a good idea to get some templates to use as a starting point for your own projects. You can download a full set of user templates from <http://www.scribus.net>. The templates I installed came from the scribus-temp-all-1.2.1.tar.bz2 file. Read the instructions within the compressed file to learn how to install the templates.

# Little cms

Figure 2. The Little CMS Color Management System

## THE QUICK START TUTORIAL

Scribus is not a word processor. I think it looks like a merger between The GIMP, OpenOffice.org and Dia. If you're familiar with these applications, the learning curve is minimal. Although, it's prudent to understand the depth of Scribus' features to ensure your output looks the best. I suggest that you go through the on-line tutorial, which leads you through creating a fancy (and rather racy) brochure in less than 30 minutes. Following the on-line tutorial will give new users a better understanding of the tools included with the program. It also introduces Little CMS. Little CMS is a color management system (CMS) to help you match screen colors to those that are in the finished publication (Figure 2). You can go to the Little CMS Web site for more information on how to use it correctly (<http://www.littlecms.com>).

## YOUR FIRST NEWSLETTER

After installing Scribus and the template package, you're ready to begin. Start by loading one of the newsletter templates (Figure 3). For this overview, I chose to spin my newsletter from the Newsletter\_1 template. After loading, you should have a four-page template on-screen that looks like Figure 4.

From here, take control of your project by manipulating layers, frames, text and adding colorful vector shapes. Just like other graphic programs, Scribus uses layers of objects to help order your work. You can place frames (boxes) almost anywhere and define them as text, images, tables,

shapes and lines.

Scribus' on-line documentation suggests using pencil and paper to create a first draft of your DTP layout. This can be a real time saver for some projects. As we're working with an existing template, I have only a few variations in mind to tailor it for my needs. Because the principles are similar for each page, let's just look at changing the first page of this sample newsletter.

## LAYERS

Using the layers feature is just like using layers in The GIMP. Activate the layer control box by pressing F6 or by selecting Tools→Layers from the menu. The control box for layers gives you the choice of viewing the layer, locking it and including it in the output. With the control box, you can change your newsletter layout, add a background image or remove unnecessary layers (Figure 5).

For this overview, I added a vertical color bar to a new layer, shaded it to match the theme and used the layer tool to move it to the background of the graphic (Figure 6). You also could add images, text or other shapes defined in other programs or created with the Scribus tools.

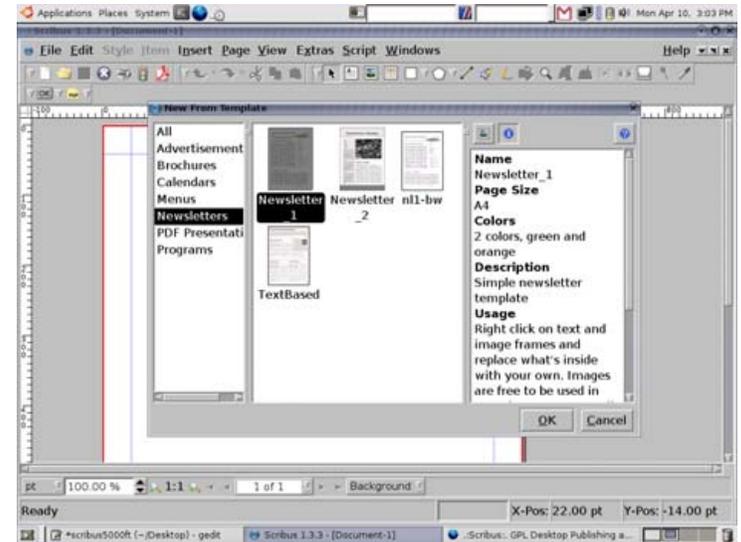


Figure 3. Creating a New Scribus Document from a Template

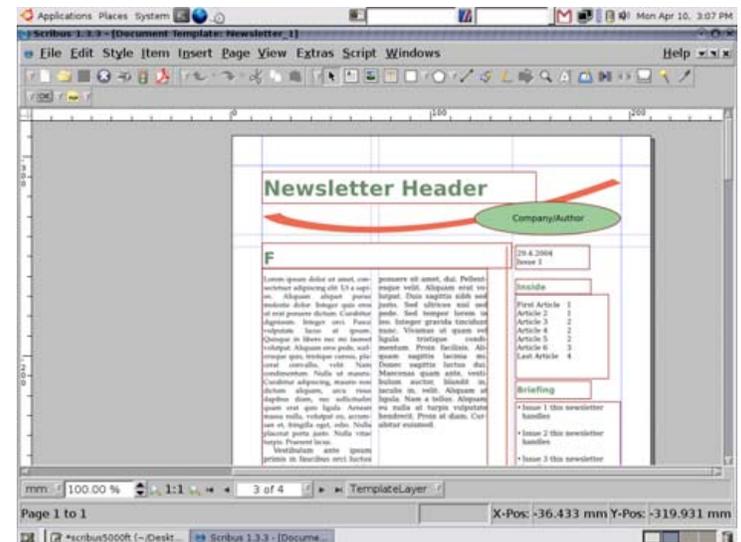


Figure 4. The Newly Created Scribus Document Based on Template Newsletter\_1

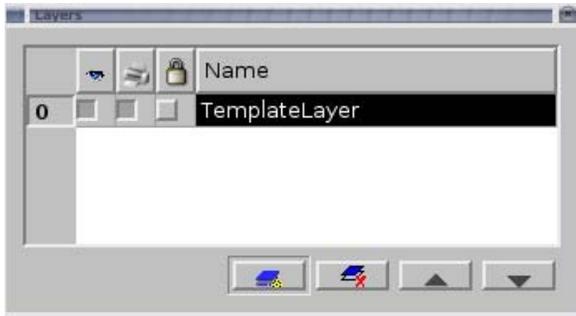


Figure 5. The Scribus Layout Options Dialog

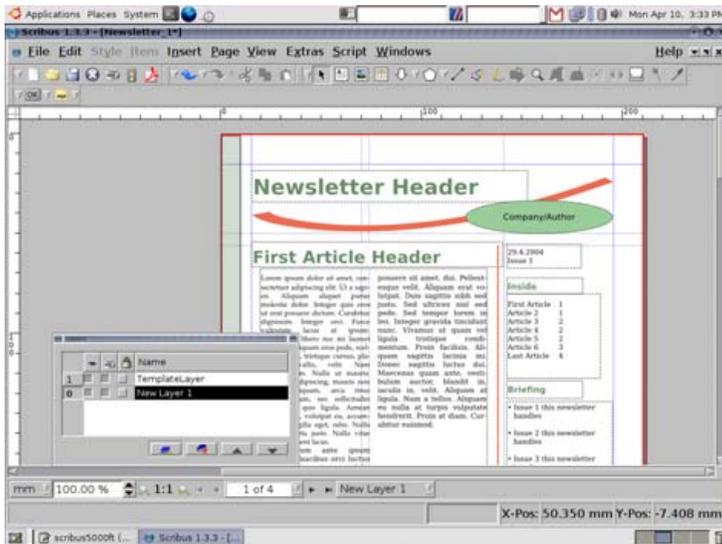


Figure 6. A Newly Created Document Layer



Figure 7. Drawing Tools and Shapes Toolbar

Scribus has several vector-based tools that let you create and change shapes at will. At the top of the screen, you should see several shape samples, which are used to place objects on the active layer (Figure 7). Once placed on a layer, you can adjust their shape, color, opacity and so on.

**FRAMES**

Frames are the primary underpinning of Scribus. With frames, you can add text, images or other shapes into your project. Add frames through the Insert tab or by typing the matching letter: T for a text frame, P for a polygon and so forth. Right-clicking on the selected frame brings up the Properties dialog (Figure 8). This tool lets you select items and work with the various features of the selected item.

The Properties box for text, images and shapes each contain the same functions and layout. Moving through the tabs (such as Color, Line and Text) gives you control over the item's appearance and size. Once your frame layout is complete, you can lock the frame locations to prevent accidental movement and settle in to writing the copy for the document. I'll

mention a tip for frame manipulation later.

If you created the text in another program or text editor, it's easy to cut and paste the information. Another method is to use the internal Scribus Story Board. With Story Board, you add and change the text of the sample newsletter to something more suitable (Figure 9). Long articles or stories are not a problem, because Scribus automatically joins frames on different pages to make text flow smoothly. So all you need to do is focus on what you want to say in the Story Board editor, and let Scribus work with the layout. Scribus also gives you the alternative of inserting faux text so you get a better feel of the overall layout. In this example, I selected a text box and inserted the default "lorum ipsum" characters.

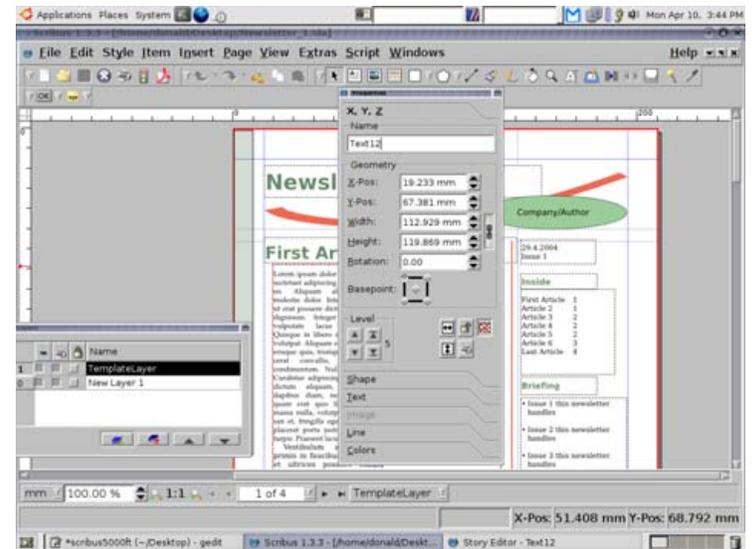


Figure 8. Frame Properties Dialog

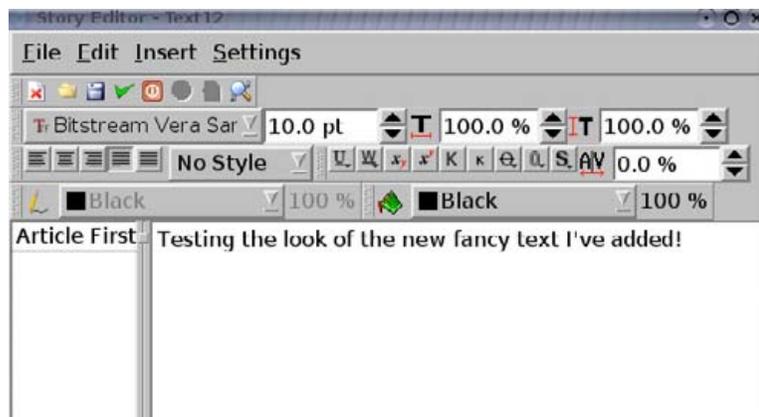


Figure 9. Text Frame Story Board Editor

## PUBLICATION AND PRINTING

After you finish placing graphics and typing text, it's time to see the output. DTP is a bit different from on-line publishing. Image density and resolution have to be superior in printed form to get really professional results. Thus, Scribus can handle image output up to 4,000 dpi.

Nowadays, you can export your data on-line to most print shops. Scribus simplifies this process and uses the PreFlight Verifier to catch troublesome issues with your output before final printing. It catches transparency conversion problems, out of boundary errors, missing image files and similar items rather well. To repair a flagged item, click on the reported error and Scribus takes you directly to the problem (Figure 10).

## HANDY TRICKS

Scribus documentation implies there is a learning curve associated with the application. As the features and functions are similar to The GIMP, I'm never hopelessly lost trying to understand the software. It's

easy to understand the intuitive menu descriptions, and the Properties dialog has buttons for many frame manipulations. Overall, the interface is user-friendly and the documentation answered all my questions.

For added benefit, the Scribus Web site has posted "Top Ten Hints: Tips and Tricks to make better documents faster in Scribus" (<http://docs.scribus.net/index.php?lang=en&page=topten>).

I think the most useful tip is to use your mouse wheel as a tool to spin through selections on the screen. This gives you faster and greater control over the selected item. Another handy trick is learning how to make a backup of your Scribus user preferences in a hidden directory—just in case.

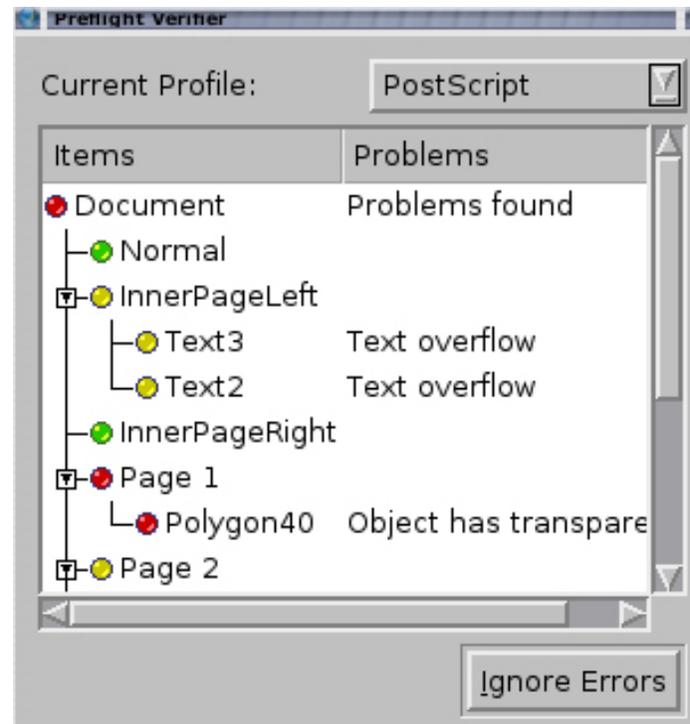


Figure 10. PreFlight Verifier Flags an Issue

For the rest of us, we can pick a few pre-made graphics and cobble them together for decent output. That said, I think you can approach Scribus confidently, knowing you'll get good results without wasting your time. ■



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## CONCLUSION

Using Scribus to produce a newsletter is a straightforward task. After speaking with my commercial print shop, they were knowledgeable and helpful for picking just the right output options (for example PDF 1.4, resolution).

Most of us are not graphic artists, but Scribus contains the fundamental tools required to make your product look good. A short empirical survey of my IT friends suggests that nongraphic people avoid DTP work because it appears complicated.

I still am amazed at what real professional graphic artists produce.