Basic Emacs Keyboard Shortcuts

Use of the Emacs text editor is enhanced by knowing a few keyboard shortcuts. In the X-windowing version of Emacs (XEmacs), knowing these shortcuts is not necessary since all of the operations are available through the use of the drop-down menus, however, effective programming will require that you learn some of the tricks of the trade, and those tricks include the keyboard shortcuts for your text editor of choice.

Here is a list of the most basic, and most frequently used, keyboard shortcuts for the Emacs text editor. One can be very effective in Emacs by knowing less than a dozen shortcuts. A dozen shortcuts is not a daunting task, and the truth is that few people use more than these basic dozen. Hence, you will quickly be on your way to becoming an "Emacs Expert".

The key to using the Emacs shortcuts is to remember that each shortcut is initiated by using the Control key (Ctrl) or the Meta key. In the old days the Meta key was its own key and denoted by a black diamond. On modern keyboards the Meta key will be assigned to a specific key on the keyboard. On a PC keyboard the Meta key is the Alt key, and on a Mac keyboard the Meta key is the Command key.

To begin, you will initiate Emacs from the command line by typing Emacs followed by the file name. If the file already exists, the Emacs is opening an existing file. If the file does not exist, then Emacs will create a file with that name. For simplicity it is best to open Emacs from within your 'working directory', i.e. the directory where you would like to save the file. Beginners should always adhere to this practice.

> :> emacs mySASfile.sas &

> :> emacs myRfile.R &

Note that we will include an ampersand at the end of the line so that Emacs will 'run in the background' and allow us to continue to use our command prompt to enter other Unix commands.

Users should note that in the modern XEmacs (using X-windowing) these keyboard shortcuts are easily used in conjunction with the mouse.

Saving Your File:

    Save: Ctrl-x, Ctrl-s

    Save As: Ctrl-x, Ctrl-w

    Quit: Ctrl-x, Ctrl-c

Editing Your File:

    Cut Line: Ctrl-w

    Copy Line: Meta-w

    Paste: Ctrl-y

    Copy Selection to Numbered Clipboard: Ctrl-x r s [#]

    Paste Selection from Numbered Clipboard: Ctrl-x r i [#]

Searching Your File:

    Forward Search: Ctrl-s

    Reverse (Backward) Search: Ctrl-r

    Replace: Meta-%

Moving Your Cursor:

    Move Forward 1 Word: Meta-f

    Move Backward 1 Word: Meta-b

    Move to Top of Buffer: Meta-<

    Move to Bottom of Buffer: Meta->