

Putting real signatures on PDF documents

By Jonathan Berger

It's pretty well established at this point that you don't have to put an actual signature on documents that you e-submit, e-file, or e-serve. The courts seem to accept them just fine with the signature lines blank, and the AG does theirs with a typewritten "/s/ Sam S. Shyster," which seems to work just fine too. However, for those of you who might want to use a real, handwritten signature, either because you don't hold with these newfangled substitutes for signatures or just because you can, here's how to do it with the Adobe Acrobat "stamp" feature.

Note, first off, that when I say "Adobe Acrobat," I'm talking about actual Acrobat (the expensive one), not Acrobat Reader (the free one). You can't do this in Acrobat Reader. You probably *can* do it, or something much like it, in any PDF processing software that purports to compete with Acrobat. If it has a "stamp" feature, and it lets you define a custom stamp, you're good. But here's how it works in Acrobat. You'll also need a scanner - or just a friend with a scanner, because you only need to use it once.

First off, grab your favorite blue-ink pen and just sign a blank piece of paper. Pop that down on the bed of your scanner. Start up a photo-viewing program that has an "Acquire" feature. I use (and adore) IrfanView, and the price is right: free. If you don't have anything that knows how to scan things and turn them into pictures, and you're a Windows user, you can download IrfanView here:

http://www.irfanview.com/main_download_engl.htm

For Macs, there's XnView, which you can get here; also free:

<http://www.xnview.com/en/downloadunix.html>

So, now you've got a page with your signature on it scanned in. Use your photo viewer to crop out everything but just the signature. Then save it in transparent GIF format.¹ In IrfanView, you do that by clicking "File->Save as..." and selecting "GIF - Compuserve² GIF" from the "Save as type" pulldown

¹ And that, in answer to the question you've been agonizing over for the last four paragraphs, is why you can't just scan it in with Adobe Acrobat. Acrobat doesn't know how to create transparent GIFs.

² If you remember what Compuserve was, you've been using computers for far too long.

menu. A "JPEG/GIF save options" dialog box will pop up; check "Save transparent color" and "Choose transparent color during saving." Then navigate to wherever you want to stick this file, enter a name for it, and click on "Save." A little window with your signature/picture in it will pop up. Click on any white space, i.e. anywhere but on the actual inked signature itself. What you've just done is create an image file which, when it's displayed, will display any white space as whatever is *behind* the image. That's what "transparent GIF" means. I don't know how to tell you to do this in anything but IrfanView, but it's probably pretty similar in XnView and its various brethren.

Close your image viewer; you're all done with that. Start up Acrobat. Click on Comments->Comment and Markup Tools->Stamps->Create Custom Stamp. Click on "Browse." Select "Compuserve GIF (*.gif)" from the "Files of type" pulldown. Browse to wherever you stored that transparent GIF file, and double-click on it. A little window will come up displaying your signature. Click on "OK." Another window will come up. Create a new "Signatures" category by entering the word "Signatures" into the "Category" field, and give your stamp a name; I call mine "JEB signature." Click on "OK."

To use your signature, create a PDF however you like to create PDFs. A lot of word processors have the feature built in; I personally like CutePDF, which creates a phony-baloney "printer" which shows up in the list of printers on your computer, but which, when you "print" to it, instead creates a PDF. Open up the PDF in Acrobat. Scroll down to the page where the signature goes. Now click on Comments->Comment and Markup Tools->Stamps->Signatures [or whatever category you chose when you created the stamp]->[name you gave the stamp].

What this will do, or at least what it does for me, is put a ginormous version of your signature on the page. Use your mouse to position it so that the lower left corner (or any corner, really) is visible on the page. Click on the signature; a frame with little grabbable squares will surround the signature. Grab one of the corner squares with your mouse, and shrink the signature down to a reasonable size. I usually make mine so the frame goes from the colon after "Signature:" to the end of the line that follows it. Position the signature so it lies nicely on the signature line. Click outside the frame. There you go. Note that if your signature intersects with any text that's already on the page, it covers up the text where the ink line is, but you can see the text behind the signature, just like with a real signature. That's why you had to make the GIF transparent.

If you're like me and your documents also have a "Date: ____" line that's intended to be filled in by hand, you can fill that in in the PDF with the "Typewriter" tool. Click on Tools->Typewriter->Typewriter, and your cursor will change to a little text cursor with an "A" next to it. Position the text cursor where you want the date to go, and type it in.

Save your PDF and you're ready to e-file.