

Book review: *L^AT_EX Beginner's Guide*, second edition, by Stefan Kottwitz

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Stefan Kottwitz, *L^AT_EX Beginner's Guide*, second edition. Packt, Birmingham, UK, 2021, 354 pp., softcover, US\$39.99, ISBN 9781801078658.



1 Introduction

Not unlike Boris Veytsman in his review of the 2011 version of *L^AT_EX Beginner's Guide*, I was initially skeptical.¹ Fortunately, like him, I was positively impressed by how Kottwitz's book was organized. Veytsman emphasized the hands-on approach Packt Publishers encourage ('learning by doing') and how it shuns 'boring theory', thus accommodating the impatient reader.

It has been a hallmark of L^AT_EX resources to front-load theory. This made sense in earlier days when the usual goal was to teach a select number of technology-minded students who wished to become 'superusers' eventually and already knew this from the beginning. However, as L^AT_EX is making its way into more mainstream popularity, probably fueled by an increasing number of low entrance barrier resources and, notably, the online editor Overleaf, we can always use more resources which speak to users who never intended to become 'superusers'.

¹ tug.org/TUGboat/tb32-2/tb101reviews-kottwitz.pdf

Or at least, who don't want to invest the considerable amount of time needed for a 'superuser education' in a technology to which they are not yet sure they want to commit.

Kottwitz's book is a resource for such prospective L^AT_EX users. It is an ideal crash course for self-study. This book gives them all the basics they need to get started and then make an informed decision whether they want to continue their L^AT_EX journey. For a beginner, this book answers the crucial question of how to get started using L^AT_EX and thus serves as a much-needed guide to the jungle of resources out there.

The book is organized in such a way that you are all set to get started already after the first chapter. The author's experience in writing introductory resources is obvious from how well-structured the book is for a beginner's needs. It empowers new users to solve their own problems.² Never does the book just throw a list at readers of all the possibilities L^AT_EX theoretically offers.

This lack of completeness might be considered a fault by some but it takes courage to leave out unnecessary detail. Offering truly accessible entry-level resources is no mean feat. Leaving out detail which is, for the time being, unnecessary for the beginner corresponds to the principle of didactic reduction.³ It functions somewhat like a sun visor, helping learners to focus on what's most important now, while blocking out potentially distracting information until the learner is ready to deal with it.

The chapter structure of *L^AT_EX Beginner's Guide* is driven by what users might need rather than L^AT_EX functionalities. I have described this as a 'buffet-like' approach in a blog post: Take what you need and leave what you don't.⁴ At a time where attention spans, especially for reading physical books, have dropped drastically and few people have the time or desire to sit down and deeply think about a new skill they are learning, a buffet-like approach to teaching is a blessing for the already overloaded minds of prospective new users. It is also somewhat at odds with the mindset of excellence often associated with (L^A)T_EX and its hero, Donald Knuth.

Still, I am convinced that the community should not look down upon gatekeeping-free beginners' resources. They are the heralds of a very welcome

² On empowerment: tug.org/TUGboat/tb41-2/tb128schmoelzer-empowerment.pdf

³ tug.org/TUGboat/tb41-2/tb128lang-didactic.pdf

⁴ latex-ninja.com/2021/10/27/how-to-get-started-using-latex-for-academic-writing-a-book-review-of-s-kottwitz-latex-beginners-guide-2nd-ed-packt-2021/

development: the wider adoption of L^AT_EX. Any resource that can help garner enthusiasm for L^AT_EX in a new generation of users is beneficial for all. And if the L^AT_EX community wants to stay around for future generations, there is no way other than adapting to the needs of newbies today. Kottwitz’s book contributes to that.

Here is the table of contents for the book:

- 1 *Getting Started with L^AT_EX*
- 2 *Formatting Text and Creating Macros*
- 3 *Designing Pages*
- 4 *Creating Lists*
- 5 *Including Images*
- 6 *Creating Tables*
- 7 *Using Cross-References*
- 8 *Listing Contents and References*
- 9 *Writing Math Formulas*
- 10 *Using Fonts*
- 11 *Developing Large Documents*
- 12 *Enhancing Your Documents Further*
- 13 *Troubleshooting*
- 14 *Using Online Resources*

You are truly ready to go after Chapter 2, which is just 64 pages. Chapter 2 is available as a free preview.⁵

This book is neither documentation nor reference. It is not ‘complete’ in any way. But, as I have argued before, it doesn’t have to be. Furthermore, one should judge a book not only by general standards and expectations but also by the goals it sets for itself. This book aims to be a beginner’s guide and fulfils this aim exceptionally well.

The fact that it avoids unnecessary detail also has another benefit: The more detailed a book, the faster it goes out of date. By only including the essentials, Kottwitz’s book can hopefully remain a trusted beginner’s resource for some time to come. In contrast to many other resources, it does not spend a great number of pages on installation. This also is probably a testimony of how the book is ‘modern’. Nowadays, it makes more sense to leave this amount of detailed information which easily goes out of date to the Internet. Here, users can usually find the information they need without too much hassle.

⁵ www.packtpub.com/product/latex-beginner-s-guide-second-edition/9781801078658

The reference-like style common to many other L^AT_EX resources is reminiscent of a time when it was not easy to web-search things and all the necessary information needed to be included in a book. This approach to teaching, common to computer books in general, will likely soon be a relic of the past. Kottwitz’s book is a good example for what L^AT_EX teaching can look like going forward.

Advanced users probably won’t gain much from this book but they are not the target audience. The ideal user is a L^AT_EX newbie with an interest in using L^AT_EX for academic writing. Starting out, it would have been very helpful to me to have a guide like this where I, for instance, could have looked up with ease how to change fonts if my professors were particularly picky about that. The book does not require that one immediately reads all of it. It’s perfectly sufficient to read the first chapter and then come back to the individual chapters when the need for the material presented there arises. I find that this is a practical and useful approach for beginners. If they put down the book to get in some practice after the first chapter, they have the added benefit of understanding L^AT_EX from their own experience before they dive into the following chapters. This might enhance their understanding of the more advanced topics presented there.

Kottwitz’s choice of topics which seemed remarkably ‘modern’ to the 2011 reviewer of the first edition are, of course, not all that modern any more today. I personally would even go so far as to say that the choice of ‘modern’ topics combined with the hands-on teaching approach is exactly what is needed to communicate L^AT_EX as a valuable skill to audiences who might not have previously considered themselves ‘techie enough’ for using this technology. Since this is a matter very close to my heart, I think this book is a crucial resource.

Acknowledgement: I received a free reviewer’s copy of this book in order for me to write a review about it on my blog.

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