first look: office 2008 elements, entourage

In the first part of our multi-part look at Microsoft's long-awaited release of Office 2008 for Mac, we touch on the components shared across every program, including the elements gallery and its related components, SmartArt, and themes. We also examine the two programs built to serve as the cornerstones of the new productivity suite: Entourage, the e-mail and project manager, and My Day, Microsoft's new scheduling tool.

elements, SmartArt, and themes

One of the aspects of Office that most frequently trips up new (and sometimes experienced) users is the attempt at complex formatting; the sheer variety of options frequently results in writers or presenters who either use just the most basic layouts or who spend hours just refining the most basic components of their documents. While programs have had templates before, adding or changing item has sometimes been daunting or limited to the start of a project rather than a change in mid-course.
This is likely why Office's core production tools -- Excel, PowerPoint, and Word -- all include a new interface known as the Elements Gallery that focuses entirely on adding new elements. Using a strip that appears directly underneath the main button bar, the gallery lets one create just about any element by picking it visually rather than making an educated guess.

![Adding a table of contents through the Elements Gallery in Word](image)

The elements that are available are always dependent on the context. In Word, the option lets users create cover pages or bibliographies; in Excel, it changes the sheet layout or adds charts; in PowerPoint, it can add transitions or slide layouts. No matter which circumstance, much of the initial work is already done. Complex items such as tables of contents or presentation text are already in place and usually only needs the most basic of editing tricks, such as inserting original
text or dropping an image into a blank field.

This also applies to a new concept in Office 2008 dubbed SmartArt. Instead of relying on hand-drawn boxes, the three main programs can auto-generate objects whose only constant is user-made data. With a text box, for example, users can change the element color, layout, or style knowing the text will remain intact.

![SmartArt text boxes in PowerPoint](image)

In many cases, the philosophy behind SmartArt extends to the theme of a document itself; if a particular page or entire document needs to change themes, the Elements Gallery allows users to set a consistent look without reworking the content. For some, this may prove to be an essential feature that lets them wait until the end of a project to apply a final theme or attempt an experiment partway through a project.

### Entourage and My Day as organizational hubs

Previously, Entourage has been used primarily as an e-mail tool; while many workers have used its calendaring tools, others have simply used the software as a more powerful alternative to Apple's built-in Mail client.

The latest version of Entourage is meant to solve this in part by making the calendar easier and more tightly integrated with the rest of the program. Creating events is now possible in an entirely visual manner: an event can be created simply by dragging from the start time until its end. Both these and tasks can also be categorized quickly by colors, similar to the way the Mac OS X Finder allows different-colored icon labels.
Microsoft has also taken a cue from Apple's Spotlight feature and instituted a Favorites bar that quickly narrows e-mail results. Similar to the smart folders in Mail, any message search possible in Entourage can be translated into a favorite, such as particular keywords or messages only intended for a single recipient.

Completely new to Office, however, is a single-purpose program known as My Day. The program effectively serves as an extension of Entourage that tracks events and to-do lists for those who only periodically use Entourage proper; Microsoft aims the tool as much at home users tracking their daily chores as workers completing projects. Most editing tools are consciously locked out to focus only on a day-by-day view, with basic tasks being the only items that users can create or delete without calling on Entourage. Unlike the larger program, though, My Day is designed to be simple and persistent: it can always sit on top and requires only a few seconds to add a new memo.
My Day's standard view