Getting Started with Netscape Composer

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Prepared for the
Southern California OS/2 User Group's
Warp Expo West
18 September 1999

In this presentation and paper, we'll get you started with using Netscape Composer. This is not intended to introduce you to all the functions of Composer, just those that we find are most necessary while learning to write web pages or to use Composer to write web pages. We assume that you have Netscape Communicator installed on your PC. Every so often in the written text, we'll have an instruction that says: ***Try this now.*** After you carry out the instructions, you should normally press **Enter** so that the action will be completed. That's your free clue to work on building a web page with Composer as we proceed through the paper.

First, some things belong in an "Annoyances" book for Composer. When you first fire off Composer, it will create an empty window, standard enough. However, with the empty window still sitting there, if you want to open a file that already exists, Composer will open another window for you with the preëxisting file. It will continue this behavior throughout your use of the program.

Another annoyance is that if you execute an "undo", the window will reposition itself at the top of the page, regardless of where the "undo" was executed (and the "undo" will have executed correctly). Only one level of "undo" exists while we know from writing a white paper on graphic editors that the minimum number of undo levels should be at least 42.

The last really annoying issue is that, when you "re-edit" the file, extra blank lines may be inserted, sometimes in very unexpected places.

However, the price is definitely right! So, we'll get on with identifying the various pieces and parts that you'll need to know about.

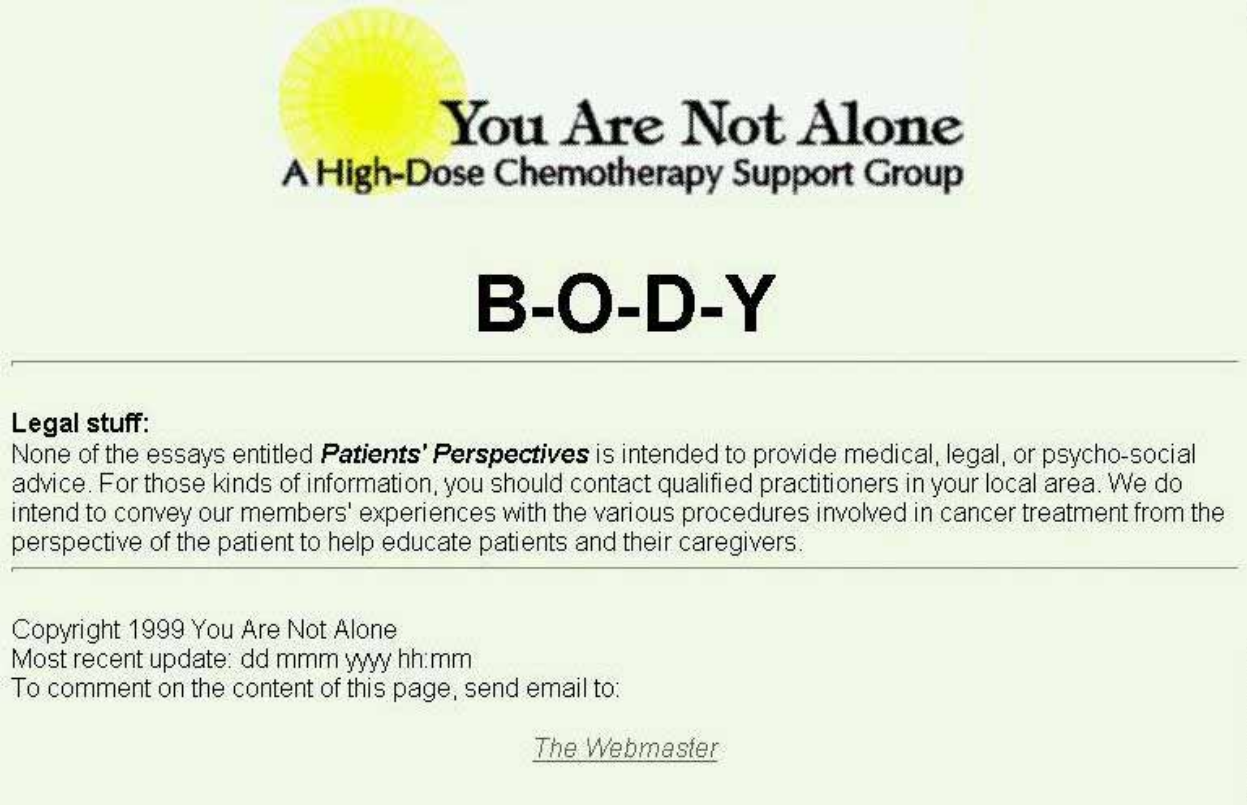
Web site design

First, I strongly discourage the use of frames simply because of the length of time it takes to load them over a dialup line. Even if everybody on the planet were connected by T1, I'd still discourage frames because even at those speeds frames are perceptibly slower. It's interesting to note that Composer only can create frames if you actually write the HTML code by hand!

Before you start, it's best to prepare a template to guide your work. With other software, this can be easily done with Cascading Style Sheets which take an extension of .css when the files are created. But, Composer doesn't have that option directly. So, the next best thing is to create a model of the page with things in the appropriate position. Why is this necessary? Probably the most important reason is keeping the readers on your web site for as long as possible. Having each page with a different style makes the readers uncomfortable so it's best to prepare a template containing the main structures

that you'll be using on most of your pages. As an example, the template I use for one of my websites is shown at the top of the next page. My template's components are:

- the logo (we use the same logo on all pages except the front page),
- the "Legal Stuff" section that's separated from the body of the page with a horizontal rule,
- the copyright section separated from the "Legal Stuff" section with another horizontal rule, and
- the contact section which is combined with the copyright section at the end of the page.

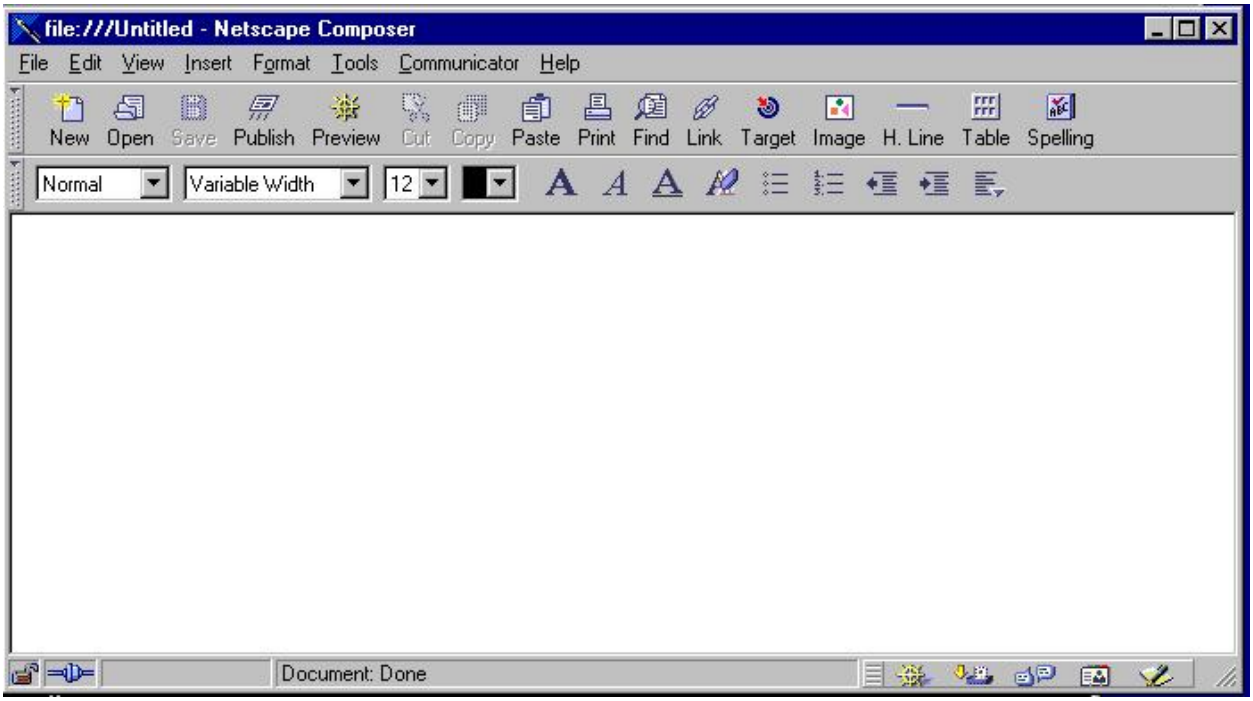


Composition

Composer is very like a standard word processor. But, when I'm writing, I find that things go faster if I get everything typed in before I begin making the document pretty. So, when I use Composer, I normally get most of the content typed in before working with the fonts and illustrations. The one exception is when I'm putting together a paper like this one to serve as a handout. In this situation, I normally put together one large paper with just the illustrations (and their filenames) in it so that I'm certain to cover all the topics. You may prefer to work differently.

If I'm simply writing, I usually type in my favorite text editor to insure that I don't get involved formatting. This insures that my thoughts get properly expressed and then

that they're properly organized. As an example, I'm presently working up an oral history of our family in preparation for my Mom's 90th birthday, and just capturing the text is a long process. By just typing in the text as it was dictated, I find that I'm able to go through the formatting process very quickly at the end of the typing. ***Try typing now.***



A good many of the formatting functions I'll talk about today are those common to word processing systems, so that you are probably already familiar with the hotkeys and other ways to format your pages. If you have a question on the text formatting options, please ask, because I won't discuss them in detail.

Two things that are a little different are the increase/decrease indent icons and the alignment icon. The two icons on the left in the picture show the **decrease indent** and **increase indent** icons. When one of these is clicked with the left mouse button, the currently selected text will be indented less or more, as appropriate. ***Try this now.*** The **alignment** icon is the third icon on the small bar. By a left mouse button on the arrow, the various ways that text and objects can be aligned on the page are available. ***Try this now.***

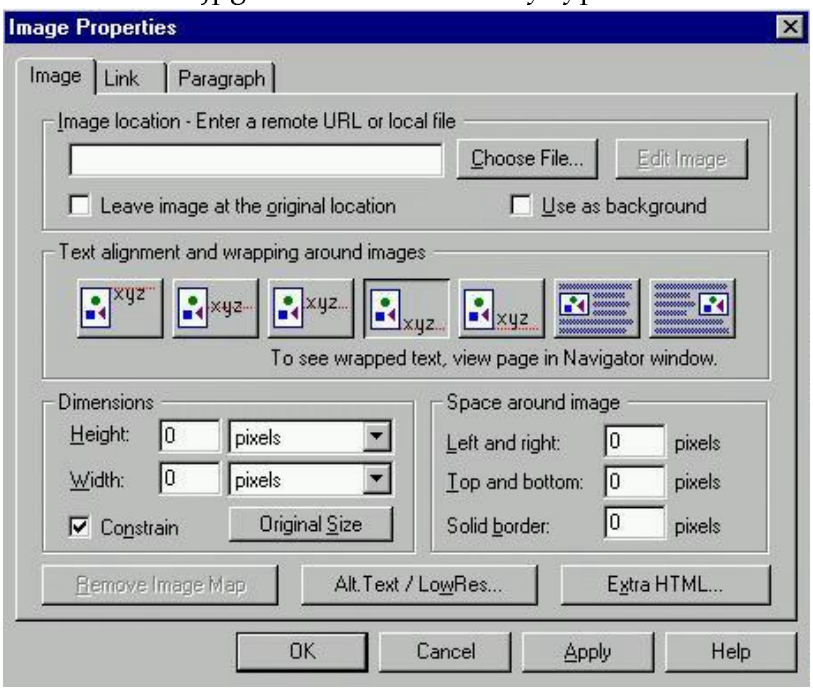
Next, we'll look at the various elements in the template page. A general rule with any

element is that if you select the element, either by click or by marquee, clicking the right mouse button will pop a menu that includes the object's properties. Simply click on the Properties item to get access to these characteristics.

Horizontal line. The first object we'll look at is the horizontal line. As it happens, a reasonable horizontal line from margin to margin is easy to create. You should begin by positioning your cursor where you want the horizontal line to separate things. Then, by clicking with the left mouse button on the **H. Line** icon appearing on the toolbar, you'll have a horizontal line. If you don't like the thickness of the line or you want the line to be shorter than the full width of the page, you need to change the **Properties**. In all cases, the **Properties** for an object can be seen by a right mouse button click on the object. ***Try this now.***

Image. Nearly everybody has a picture on the first web page. Technically, three forms of images are supported on the Web. However, well over 99percent of them are .gif files and, to be sure as many browsers as possible can read your web pages, I strongly recommend using .gif files. The only exceptions are when you really truly need to have more than 256 colors in your image, which is not likely to be very often, and when you need to minimize the size of the file to transport it somewhere else, either electronically or by sneakernet. In these instances, you should use either JPEG files which take the extension, .jpg, or PNG images which take the extension, .png. These formats will be visible on most systems.

Once I have the image created, the only task remaining for an images is probably some light formatting such as cropping. To do these tasks, I use **WinJPEG**, which also converts images to and from other formats, i.e., .jpg files are not the only type handled by this software. (PMView would work equally well.) WinJPEG 2.84 runs in Windows and OS/2 because it is a 16-bit Windows application. It also contains a screen capture feature which is how the illustrations for this paper were created.



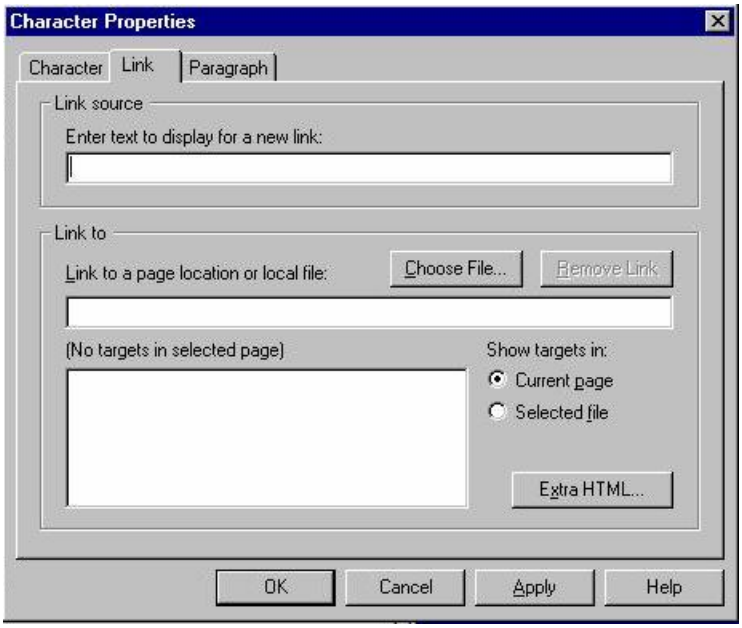
To insert an image, click with the left mouse button on the **Image** icon on the toolbar. This will pop up the **Image Properties** window shown at the right. Simply type the name of the image file into the

space at the top or use the **Choose File** function to browse your directories. ***Try this now.***

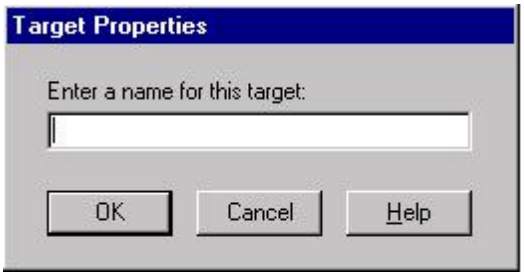
The check box labelled **Leave image** at the original location should not usually be checked because you'll want to have the image and the web page containing the image in the same directory. You can also use a particular image as a background for your web page by choosing that check box. In general background images should not be full-color objects. You should reduce the saturation of the image, a process called desaturation, so that it will have the effect of a watermark, i.e., visible but not intrusive.

The final thing I usually do to the picture itself is selecting some type of text wrapping around the picture. Composer simply shows the picture inline with the text, not in the position it will occupy in the finished page. So, if you choose to have the text wrapped around the picture, you should be certain to preview the page in Navigator or another browser before actually putting it out on your web page. ***Try this now.***

Please be certain that you include alternate text for all of your pictures. ***Try this now.*** When you have people with vision handicaps visiting your web site, this is frequently the only way they can "see" what you have for your pictures. Having worked with people in the Disabled Computing Program at UCLA, I've found that the simple act of adding that text makes the page accessible to many more people. Also, people are now starting to advertise that their web pages are designed to include visually handicapped readers.



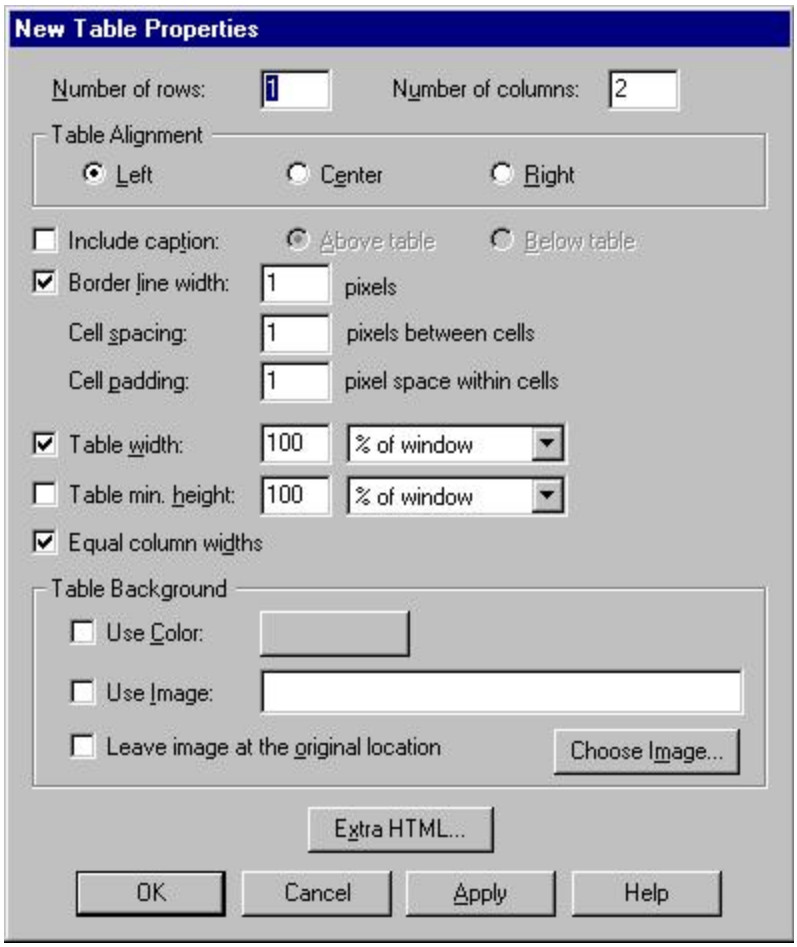
Links. Links are the mechanism by which you make it possible for somebody to access other web resources. Note that I did not say "only web pages" because it's possible to have a number of different kinds of web objects as targets of a link, even though pages are the most common kind of link. To create a link, select a piece of text or an image in your test page. ***Try this now.*** Once you've done the selection, right mouse button click on the selection to pop up the **Link Properties** window shown at the right. Then, either type in the location of the link in



the **Link to a page location or local file** slot or use **Choose File…** to select the object to be linked to the current object. ***Try this now.***

Targets. Targets are locations within a page that are referenced by links elsewhere on the same page. To be certain that I have these properly referenced, I usually go through and create them before I create the corresponding link that points to each target. The name of a target is totally arbitrary though I usually use something that is suggestive of what's being targeted. ***Try this now.*** To reference the target in the link and to be certain that the target is accurately linked, you should simply enter the name of the page, followed by a pound sign, #, and then the name of the target. So, for a page named **tester.htm** with an internal target named **first-target**, the entry in the link window would be typed in as **tester.htm#first-target** to get the reference.

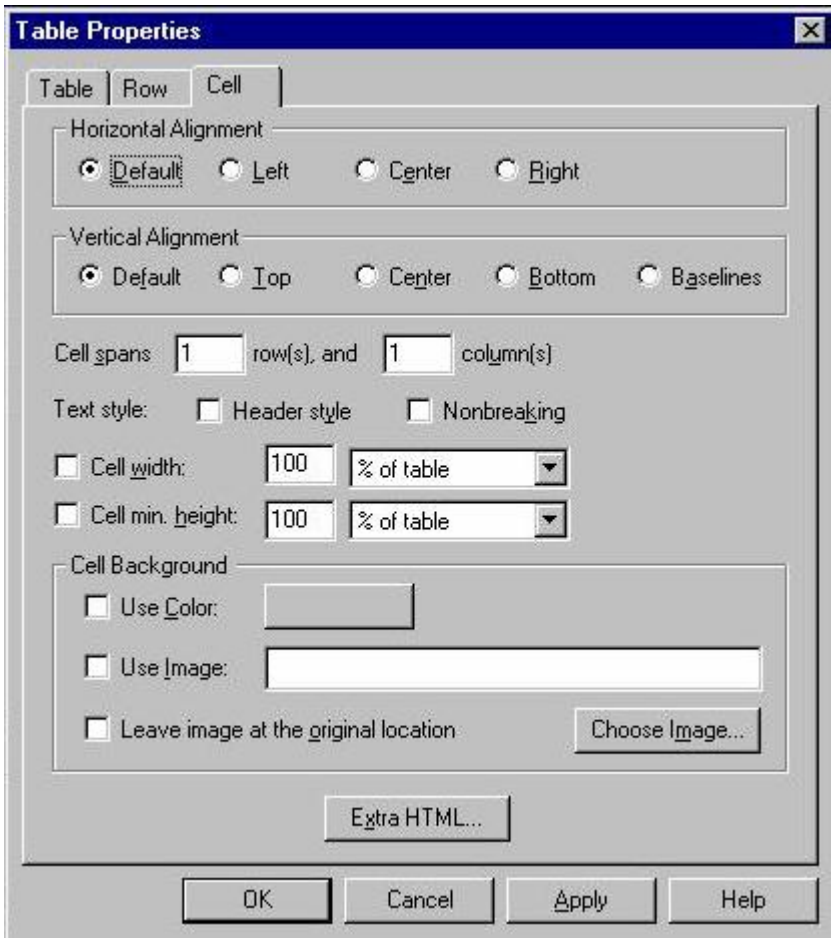
Table. Tables are widely regarded as being complicated and, in some sense, Composer doesn't make it much easier. But, using Composer to design tables will reduce the likelihood that you'll have errors in your web tables. One thing that tables are useful for is forcing a particular layout on your page when you can't seem to accomplish it in any other way. This is the method a number of the "commercial" WYSIWG editors, such as NetObjects Fusion, use to structure pages. Of course, it's also the reason such products have a severe case of code creep!



To start creating a table, left mouse button click on **Table** which will pop up the **New Table Properties** window shown at the above. Generally, I only fiddle with the **Number of rows, Number of columns,** and **Equal column widths** when I'm first setting up a table. Enter 6 for the number of columns and 3 for the number of rows to see how this works. You may want to uncheck the equal column widths as well. ***Try this now.***

If you don't want to have the grid showing, you should be certain that the **Border line width** checkbox is not checked. Sometimes you'll want a table only to take part of the width of the page and this is the window where you should change it. Note that you can have a special picture as the background of the table. If you decide to do this, be certain that you have a picture that will not make your table unreadable AND that will not intrude on the readers' active use of the page. The same criteria apply as for a page background image. In general, I try not to make tables wider than my notebook PC's screen so that they'll fit anybody's screen. ***Try this now.***

Once you have the initial structure of the table, you can go in to change things. The most common properties you may want to change are the horizontal alignment of objects within a cell, joining two cells either horizontally or verticallyto create a single wider or taller cell, or the kinds of objects, such as a picture, in a cell. Most of these properties can be changed by selecting the cell you want to operate on, then clicking with the right mouse button on the selection to pop up the **Table Properties** again. This time, though, you should click on the **Cell** tab shown in the illustration at the right. ***Try this now.***



To align things horizontally or vertically within the cell, click on the radio buttons for the alignment values you prefer. The default horizontal alignment is left while the vertical default is center. If you're going to have a very tall cell, you may want to have the vertical alignment set to top rather than center. ***Try this now.***

To make a cell span either columns or rows, position the cursor in one of the cells you want to join with its neighbor(s), then pop the **Table Properties** again. You should have the **Cell** tab on the top. Change the number of cell spans to 2 rows, leaving the 1 columns alone for now. ***Try this now.***

You'll notice that the two cells joined, but that there's a very small cell to the right. To get rid of this very small cell, position your cursor inside the cell and click with the right mouse button to pop a little menu. Click with the left mouse button on **Delete**, then with the left mouse button on **Cell** and the very small cell should be gone. ***Try this now.***

The next thing to try is joining two cells vertically by positioning the cursor in the top of the two cells to be joined. Then, click with the right mouse button to pop up the **Table Properties** window. Change the number of columns to be spanned to 2 and leave the number of rows to be spanned at 1. You should see a taller column in your example. ***Try this now.***

Finally, for tables, you may want to insert a picture into one of the cells. You can do this by positioning the cursor in the cell, then clicking **Image** on the toolbar with the left mouse button. From that point, inserting the picture works exactly like inserting a picture anywhere else on your page.

In conclusion

This should get you started with Composer. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me using the information on the front of the handout.