

Emacs 4 Life



(by Joel Bryan Juliano)



Emacs for Life

Build It Yourself, Own It Forever

Joel Bryan Juliano

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Contents

Introduction	1
Getting Started	6
Installation	6
Running Emacs	6
Emacs Basics	7
Understanding Emacs Key Notation	7
Cursor Navigation	8
Copy, Cut, and Paste	11
Search and Replace	11
Chapter Summary	17
Emacs Basics: Files, Buffers & Windows	19
Opening and Saving Files	19
Buffers	19
Direc: The File Manager Inside Emacs	20
Splitting the Screen	21
Undoing Mistakes	21
Exiting Emacs	21
Chapter Summary	21

CONTENTS

Your First Configuration	22
Where Configuration Lives	22
Emacs Lisp: The Language of Configuration	22
A Solid Starting Configuration	22
Customizing the Look	23
Variables and Settings	23
Keybindings	23
Hooks: Running Code at the Right Moment	24
Evaluating Configuration Changes	24
The Customize Interface	24
Growing Beyond a Single File	24
Chapter Summary	24
Package Management	25
Package Repositories	25
Installing Packages Manually	25
use-package: A Better Way to Manage Packages	25
Essential Packages to Install	26
Your Packages Section	27
Chapter Summary	28
Org-Mode: Your Second Brain	29
Your First Org File	29
Headings and Structure	29
Folding	29
Todo Items	30
Priorities	30

CONTENTS

Checkboxes	30
Scheduling and Deadlines	30
The Agenda View	31
Tags	31
Notes and Capture	31
Tables	31
Exporting	31
Chapter Summary	32
Where to Go from Here	32
Daily Emacs	33
TRAMP: Remote Files, Local Editing	33
Emacs Server: Start Once, Connect Instantly	34
Spell Checking with Flyspell	35
A Terminal Inside Emacs	36
Chapter Summary	36
Coding in Emacs	37
Language Support	37
LSP: The Language Server Protocol	37
Projectile: Project-Aware Navigation	38
Flycheck: Real-Time Error Checking	38
magit: Git Mastery	38
Snippets: Type Less, Write More	38
A Complete Developer init.el	39
Chapter Summary	39
AI in Emacs	40

CONTENTS

gptel: A Universal LLM Client	40
Local AI with Ollama	41
Inline Code Completion: Copilot and Codeium	42
AI-Assisted Refactoring Workflow	42
AI Inside Org-Mode	43
Sensitive Data and Local Models	43
Your AI Configuration Block	43
Chapter Summary	43
Appendix: Keyboard Shortcuts Reference	44
Key Notation	44
Navigation	44
Editing	45
Search and Replace	45
Files and Buffers	46
Dired (File Manager)	46
Windows and Frames	46
Help and Discovery	46
Configuration	46
Packages (Ivy / Counsel)	47
Org-Mode	47
Magit	48
LSP and Development	48
Projectile	48
AI (gptel)	49
Building Emacs from Source	49

CONTENTS

Glossary 50

About the Author 51

Introduction

We all heard the same story, one is eager to learn and use Emacs, goes through the tutorials, tried to use it for a while, but upon encountering an initial bump, doesn't want to persevere and come up with the realization that a.) it is hard to learn and use, or b.) there are other new editors/IDE that is easier to use, and might look more appealing. In the end, it ultimately results in abandoning Emacs and installing an easy to use and more appealing editor/IDE instead.

That might be your personal experience, at least, it was for me. I have tried to learn to adapt Emacs on several attempts before, trying to use it as my main editor. I have go through the same Emacs tutorial for more than 5 times, in the span of many years. My biggest hurdle is it requires a time to learn and a discipline to stick to it, also, there are many editors/IDE choices that are prettier and easier to use.

And since I'm so used to using those new editor/IDE, learning Emacs will not be on my priority, and being verses on those editor/IDE means learning Emacs would not make any sense. Why would I learn Emacs? It would ruin my workflow and I would need time, effort and discipline to learn it and start all over again. And besides, I am already enjoying my current editor/IDE, why would I bother using Emacs?

Maybe, you have the same sentiments? But, I'd like you to be honest with yourself. Ask yourself this question. Why even that after using an easier, modern editor/IDE for a long or short while, here we go again, contemplating on using and adopting Emacs in our daily life? Why?

One thing is for sure, learning Emacs and adopting to use it in our daily lives is still a better choice, even for today. It would lead us to become much better in our crafts, as well as help us to become a much better person.

When we develop the discipline to follow, adopt, learn, organize our tasks and optimize our workflows, it would help us to become a better mature person. Emacs, helps us to do that, and that is the true Emacs way. Emacs is a mindset, a discipline, shared among the best and there is a great reward awaits for us when we truly live and use it.

Learning Emacs is a phase in your life where you need to choose to invest some time on it, have the discipline to stick to it, and live by it. It is one of those “Let us set things right” decisions.

Remember one of the greatest features of Emacs is that it's free, and using Emacs ensures that there are no strings attached even in the long run, no subscriptions to pay, no paid upgrades whatsoever. You can use Emacs freely, as long as you like. This will save you a lot of money in the long run.

Another great benefit of using Emacs is that it is cross-platform, meaning whatever your OS will be, whatever size, breadth, and width of your OS it may be, whatever kind of OS you might be using or will be using, Emacs is there.

Because none of us can say, I am still going to stick with my OS in the future. Circumstances can change, it might be that a new OS is required in your job, or you just found out that it's suits you much better than the OS you are currently using. Or it just happens that you love to use all your OSes, and you enjoy working on all of them.

Whether that OS use a monolithic kernel, unikernel or microkernel, Emacs is there. And it is responding to the same configurations that you have.

Another great feature of Emacs is it enhances one of the most important

workhorses of this era, and that workhorse is “productivity”.

Emacs great advantage is, it allows it's users to be very productive, by easily modifying texts and performing functions and operations without leaving Emacs. It is referred to as an “Operating System”, where you don't need to exit or switch to another window inside Emacs.

It's easy to create workflows in Emacs, define your tasks in org-mode, edit a text with minimal effort, and switch to a different text file and mode—all without leaving Emacs and without using a mouse or trackpad!

Unlike modern editors, who champions being centric of all things, whether user-centric, content-centric or task-centric, Emacs does not claim to be any of those, but when you learn it well, it would be a productivity haven for its users. When you use Emacs, you will be more productive than ever than using any other editor.

It doesn't force you to not use your mouse or touchpad, but once you understand the productivity benefits of using keys and see how it saves a lot of time, you will skip using your mouse or touchpad, and that is our goal, you need to finish this book using only keys without using your mouse or trackpad.

Another great advantage of Emacs is everything is configurable and customizable, from how it looks, to its functions and behaviors. Everything in Emacs can be changed and extended.

Sure, there are IDE's out there that offers wide-range of plug-ins and bells and whistles, but for a price (or subscription).

However, those bells and whistles found in other editors and IDE can also be implemented in Emacs, and much better, doing so will make you know and appreciate your editor well.

An Emacs editor is like an IKEA furniture. It has a manual, the tools to get you

started and when you set everything up yourself, you will love the furniture more. Setting up Emacs can give you the same level of satisfaction you'll have like setting up an IKEA furniture, and you will get attached to it.

Emacs, like an IKEA furniture, have tools pre-packed in plastic. Those tools like a wrench, Torx screws are needed to perform the DIY operation of setting up your furniture.

Before we begin, I like to be clear on one thing. We don't want our IKEA furniture to be pre-assembled right? We want the boxed version to be delivered so we can assemble it ourselves.

Same with Emacs though, to love and care for it, we need to assemble it ourselves, caring for each of its details, by knowing exactly what we put into it, and knows that those are just for our need and usage. In this book, I will encourage people to use the vanilla Emacs, and we'll go from there.

Some of you might argue, I am very used to the feature that I am using in the *Foo Emacs* configuration, which is provided me by default, out of the box.

The answer is we can configure Emacs to those features that we find useful in other configurations.

In my opinion, vanilla Emacs has great defaults, and if we learn to use it properly, we can mold it to our preference. I prefer Emacs this way, with only the features that I need than having gazillions of plugins and features that I don't know what exists on my Emacs installation, which only slows down the editor. If we need a new feature, plugins or configuration, we can add them later, and configure them to our needs.

Emacs is an editor that needs to be learned and understood. It needs flexing some brain muscles to remember some keystrokes. Emacs for many people is hard.

But that is what this book is for, from a guy who experienced the same frustrations, and understands the struggles of learning and adopting it. Heck, there are a lot of good editors out there, but nothing beats Emacs. You need to have the eagerness to learn and willingness to adapt it in your life.

Before we proceed, there are several notes I want to clear.

It is important to note that several Emacs variants are available for download, but we will refer and use the official GNU Emacs package, and to be clear that on this book, any mentions to Emacs refers to GNU Emacs.

Emacs comes in two flavours: terminal (`emacs -nw`) and graphical (GUI). The terminal version runs inside any terminal emulator. The GUI version adds support for images, PDFs, system clipboard, and a wider range of keyboard shortcuts. Everything in this book works in both – if a feature requires the GUI, I will say so. Use whichever you prefer.

The way this book is structured is we will begin on the important Emacs parts and at the end of each chapter, there is a written exercise. The key here is repetition when you perform each exercise, it will help you build muscle memory to remember the key combinations and strokes. Use the exercises to practice your Emacs skills whenever you want.

I hope you are excited as I am, if you finish this book, you will be an Emacs ninja, and can finally adopt ‘Emacs’ in your daily life.

This book will do its best to guide you in the learning process towards your mastery of using Emacs.

So Let's Begin

Getting Started

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Emacs Basics

Now that you have Emacs installed and running, it is time to actually use it. Before we touch anything else—configurations, packages, or themes—we are going to learn how to move, edit, and navigate. This is the foundation. Everything else is built on top of this.

I want to be honest with you: this chapter might feel strange. Your instincts will tell you to reach for the arrow keys or the mouse. Resist that impulse. Not because those tools are broken, but because you are here to build something better. By the end of this chapter, your fingers will have a new language.

Understanding Emacs Key Notation

Before we begin, let us understand how Emacs describes its key combinations. You will see this notation throughout the book, in documentation, and in the community, so it is worth spending a moment on it now.

Emacs uses two main modifier keys:

- **C-** means hold the **Ctrl** key and press the following key. So `c-x` means hold Ctrl and press x.
- **M-** means hold the **Meta** key. On most modern keyboards, Meta is the **Alt** key (or the **Option** key on macOS). So `M-x` means hold Alt and press x.

When you see two key combinations separated by a space, it means press them in

sequence. For example, `c-x c-s` means: hold Ctrl and press x, then hold Ctrl and press s.

When you see `RET` it means the Return (Enter) key. `SPC` is the spacebar. `DEL` is Backspace.

That is it. The entire notation system fits in a single paragraph. Let us use it.

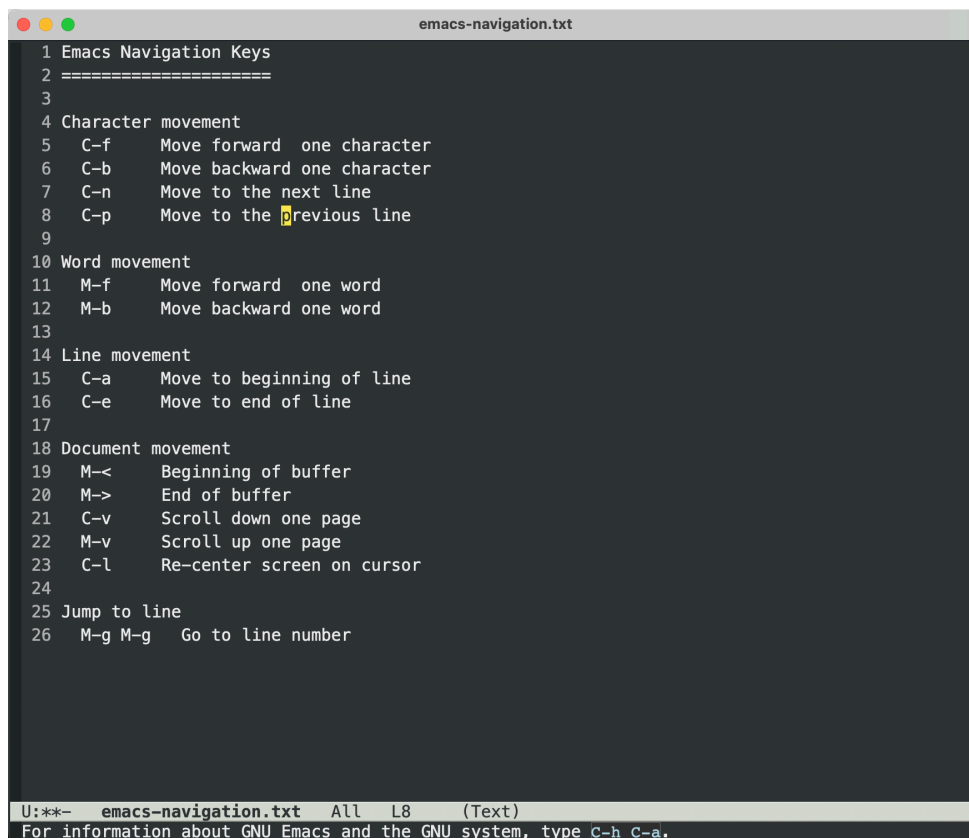
Cursor Navigation

In most editors, you move the cursor with the arrow keys. Emacs has its own movement keys, designed so your hands never leave the home row. This is the heart of why Emacs users become so fast.

Basic Movement

Key	What it does
<code>c-f</code>	Move forward one character
<code>c-b</code>	Move backward one character
<code>c-n</code>	Move to the next line
<code>c-p</code>	Move to the previous line

Think of it as: **f** for forward, **b** for backward, **n** for next, **p** for previous. These four keys replace your four arrow keys entirely.



```

1 Emacs Navigation Keys
2 =====
3
4 Character movement
5 C-f    Move forward one character
6 C-b    Move backward one character
7 C-n    Move to the next line
8 C-p    Move to the previous line
9
10 Word movement
11 M-f    Move forward one word
12 M-b    Move backward one word
13
14 Line movement
15 C-a    Move to beginning of line
16 C-e    Move to end of line
17
18 Document movement
19 M-<    Beginning of buffer
20 M->    End of buffer
21 C-v    Scroll down one page
22 M-v    Scroll up one page
23 C-l    Re-center screen on cursor
24
25 Jump to line
26 M-g M-g Go to line number

```

U:*~ emacs-navigation.txt All L8 (Text)
For information about GNU Emacs and the GNU system, type C-h C-a.

Figure 2.1: “The Emacs navigation keys” - The Emacs navigation key reference open in a buffer with line numbers enabled

Word-Level Movement

Key	What it does
M-f	Move forward one word
M-b	Move backward one word



The pattern repeats throughout Emacs: Ctrl moves one unit, Meta moves one larger unit.

c-f moves one character; M-f moves one word. c-k kills to end of line; M-k kills to end of sentence.

Line Movement

Key	What it does
<code>c-a</code>	Move to the beginning of the line
<code>c-e</code>	Move to the end of the line

Think: **a** for the beginning (first letter of the alphabet) and **e** for end.

Document-Level Movement

Key	What it does
<code>M-<</code>	Move to the very beginning of the buffer
<code>M-></code>	Move to the very end of the buffer
<code>c-v</code>	Scroll down one page
<code>M-v</code>	Scroll up one page
<code>c-l</code>	Center the screen on the cursor

Press `c-l` a second time to move the cursor to the top of the screen, and a third time to move it to the bottom. This is useful when you want to see more context around where you are working.

Jumping to a Line

To jump to a specific line number, use `M-g M-g` (or `M-g g`), and Emacs will ask you which line to go to in the minibuffer at the bottom of the screen. Type the line number and press `RET`.



You do not need to memorize all of these at once. Start with `c-f`, `c-b`, `c-n`, and `c-p`, and use those exclusively for a few days. The rest will follow naturally.

Copy, Cut, and Paste

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Selecting Text (The Mark)

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Cutting and Copying

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Pasting (Yanking)

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Search and Replace

Searching in Emacs is interactive, meaning the results update live as you type. This makes it one of the most pleasant search experiences in any editor.

Incremental Search

Key	What it does
c-s	Start a forward incremental search
c-r	Start a backward incremental search

When you press c-s, Emacs opens a search prompt in the minibuffer. Start typing and the cursor jumps to the first match. Press c-s again to jump to the next match. Press RET to accept and stay at the current match, or press c-g to cancel and return to where you started.

```

chapter-notes.txt
1 Notes on Learning Emacs
2 =====
3
4 Emacs is more than an editor. It is an environment.
5 Learning Emacs means learning to think differently
6 about how you interact with text.
7
8 The secret to Emacs mastery is repetition. Every time
9 you press C-f instead of the right arrow key, the habit
10 grows stronger. Within two weeks, reaching for the arrow
11 keys feels wrong.
12
13 Emacs keybindings follow a logical pattern. C- keys handle
14 frequent operations; M- keys extend reach to a larger unit.
15 C-f moves a character and M-f moves a word. C-k kills a line
16 and M-k kills a sentence.
17
18 Search in Emacs is incremental. As you type each letter,
19 Emacs jumps to the next match immediately. Press C-s again
20 to move to the next occurrence. Press C-g to cancel.

I-search: Emacs [6 matches]
For information about GNU Emacs and the GNU system, type C-h C-a.

```

Figure 2.2: “Incremental search in action” - Incremental search highlights every match; the current match is shown in bright amber



`C-g` is your escape hatch throughout Emacs. Whenever you want to cancel an operation or close a prompt, press `C-g`. It is the universal undo for any in-progress command.

Query Replace

To find text and replace it—with a confirmation prompt for each replacement:

Key	What it does
<code>M-%</code>	Start query replace

Emacs will ask for the search term, then the replacement. For each match it finds, you can:

- Press `y` to replace this one and move to the next
- Press `n` to skip this one
- Press `!` to replace all remaining matches without asking
- Press `q` or `C-g` to quit

Replace All (Without Confirmation)

If you want to replace everything at once without being asked:

¹ `M-x replace-string RET`

Type `M-x`, then type `replace-string`, press `RET`, type the search term, press `RET`, type the replacement, and press `RET`. Done.



Exercises: Movement & Editing

Exercise 1: Set up CUA mode and a starter `init.el`

Your Emacs configuration file lives at `~/.emacs.d/init.el`. Open it with:

```
1 C-x C-f ~/.emacs.d/init.el RET
```

Add the following and save with `C-x C-s`:

```
1 ;; Enable CUA mode for familiar copy/paste/undo keys
2 (cua-mode t)
3
4 ;; Show line numbers
5 (global-display-line-numbers-mode t)
6
7 ;; Highlight the current line
8 (global-hl-line-mode t)
9
10 ;; Disable the startup splash screen
11 (setq inhibit-startup-message t)
12
13 ;; Use spaces instead of tabs
14 (setq-default indent-tabs-mode nil)
15
16 ;; Remember where your cursor was when you reopen a file
17 (save-place-mode t)
```

Here is what each line does:

- `(cua-mode t)` – enables CUA mode so `C-c`, `C-x`, and `C-v` work for copy, cut, and paste the way they do in every other application. This is a bridge while you learn the Emacs keys; you can disable it later.
- `(global-display-line-numbers-mode t)` – shows line numbers in the left margin of every buffer. Error messages reference line numbers; seeing them directly saves you from counting manually.
- `(global-hl-line-mode t)` – highlights the line your cursor is on. When you look away and come back, your eye finds the cursor instantly.
- `(setq inhibit-startup-message t)` – skips the Emacs splash screen on startup. You will see your files immediately instead of a welcome page.
- `(setq-default indent-tabs-mode nil)` – uses spaces instead of tab characters for indentation. This avoids the mixed-tabs-and-spaces mess



Exercise 2: Navigation drill – no mouse, no arrow keys

Open any text file and spend five minutes navigating it using *only* the Emacs movement keys: C-f, C-b, C-n, C-p, C-a, C-e, M-f, M-b, M-`<`, M-`>`. Keep your hands on the home row the entire time.

If you reach for the arrow keys, stop and use the equivalent Emacs key instead.

This one drill, done consistently for a few days, is what builds muscle memory.

Exercise 3: Copy, cut, and yank

Open `~/hello.txt` (the file from Chapter 2, or create a new one):

1. Set a mark with C-SPC, move forward several words, then copy the region with M-w.
2. Move to the end of the file with M-`>` and yank with C-y.
3. Now cut a whole line using C-k. Move somewhere else and yank it back.
4. Cut three separate things in sequence. Then yank them one at a time using C-y followed by M-y to cycle through the kill ring.

Exercise 4: Search and replace

Open any file with several repeated words:

1. Press C-s and search for a word. Watch it highlight in real time.
2. Press C-s again to jump to the next match. Press C-g to cancel.
3. Press M-% and replace one word with another. Use y, n, and ! to control which matches are replaced.
4. Try M-x `replace-string` to replace all occurrences at once.



Track Your Progress

Open your learning journal:

```
1 C-x C-f ~/emacs-journal.org RET
```

Add a new section for this chapter:

```
1 * Emacs Basics: Movement & Editing
2 - Navigation drill (no arrow keys): done / in progress
3 - Kill ring exercise completed: yes / no
4 - Search and replace practiced: yes / no
5 - Notes: ____
```

Save with `c-x c-s`. In the next chapter, you will add file management, buffers, and Dired – and put everything together with splits.

Chapter Summary

Navigation

Key	Action
C-f / C-b	Forward / backward one character
C-n / C-p	Next / previous line
M-f / M-b	Forward / backward one word
C-a / C-e	Beginning / end of line
M-< / M->	Beginning / end of buffer
C-v / M-v	Scroll down / up

Editing

Key	Action
C-SPC	Set mark (start selection)
C-w	Cut selection
M-w	Copy selection
C-k	Cut to end of line
C-y	Paste (yank)
M-y	Cycle through paste history
C-/	Undo

Search

Key	Action
C-s	Search forward
C-r	Search backward
M-%	Query replace
C-g	Cancel / escape

In the next chapter, we will manage files, work with multiple buffers,

explore Dired – Emacs' built-in file manager – and split the screen so you can see everything at once.

Emacs Basics: Files, Buffers & Windows

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Opening and Saving Files

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Opening Files

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Navigating in Dired

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