

# GREAT SOFTWARE that won't cost you a dime

And you don't  
have to be  
a techie to  
put these  
applications  
to work

By Scott Rhoades

**W**HETHER YOU'RE a seasoned techie or a reluctant newbie, you can use your computer to manage your writing projects like a pro, from inception to submission. Free professional-grade software can help you capture that first flash in your mind, plan your work, write it, share drafts with your writing group, and submit your beautifully crafted prose so that the rest of us can enjoy it.

Building your software toolkit can easily cost you more than most writers make in a year. If you know where to look, however, you can find everything you need without spending a cent.

This article introduces seven free applications that work on Windows, and sometimes on other platforms. And while you do have to read the instructions carefully, you do not have to be a geek or technical guru to use them.

## PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

### FreeMind

[http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)  
(Windows, Mac OS X, Linux)

In *Plot & Structure*, James Scott Bell recommends mind-mapping as a way to tap your creativity. If you're not sure how mind-mapping works, visit the Mind Map Library at [www.mappio.com](http://www.mappio.com) for some fun examples. (And see the article about using mind-mapping to develop personal essays in the March 2009 issue of *The Writer*.)

Even if you don't have a story yet, FreeMind can help you find one. Start with a word that means something to you, then write down connections and associations. Before long, you'll probably have several ideas.

You can use FreeMind to storyboard your plot, plan your characters, and think through troublesome parts of the story. I even used it to help plan this article.

### KeyNote

[www.sourceforge.net/projects/keynote](http://www.sourceforge.net/projects/keynote)  
(Windows)

I bet you have stacks of notes on your desk, notebooks with pictures and bits of paper jammed between the pages, and dozens of bookmarks in your Internet browser.

You can use KeyNote to place your notes, pictures, Web links, and all that other stuff scattered all over your hard disk into a single

computerized notebook. KeyNote can help you plan your work, or even write first drafts of your scenes. When done planning, you can easily export your notes to a word processor.

Although it's starting to show its age, KeyNote is my favorite of several similar programs. If you want notebook software that is newer or that runs on your Mac, search for "tabbed notebook" to find something that meets your needs.

### yWriter

[www.spacejock.com/yWriter5.html](http://www.spacejock.com/yWriter5.html)  
(Windows)

yWriter's developer, writer Simon Haynes, calls his creation a "word processor for authors." Although it can be used for writing your novel, I find it most useful in the planning stages because it forces me to think in scenes.

yWriter makes you consider what your characters do and why they do it, as well as the conflict and the outcome of each scene. You can plan your characters and view a storyboard of your scenes, organized by viewpoint. You can even set up yWriter to slap yourself on the virtual wrist when you write those troublesome words you always overuse.

Plot-development software can easily set you back a couple hundred bucks or more. When it comes to plotting your scenes and sketching that first draft, yWriter is all you need, and it's free.

## KEEPING REVISION NOTES TOGETHER

### Stickies

[www.zhornsoftware.co.uk/stickies](http://www.zhornsoftware.co.uk/stickies)  
(Windows)

You're a writer. That means your desk and monitor (and probably your walls, your keyboard, and maybe your cat) are covered with sticky notes. You probably have so many that you no longer notice them. They've become part of the scenery in your work area.

Stickies doesn't merely transfer the mess from your desk to your desktop. It kills the chaos and puts your notes where you need them.

You can attach Stickies to specific documents, directories and even Web sites. When you open your current chapter in OpenOffice.org Writer (or in Word, if you insist on spending your money on software while your cats circle hungrily), your chapter notes pop up. When you close your file, the notes go away and stay gone until you open your file again. Try doing that with those paper stickies.

## WRITING THE THING

### OpenOffice.org Writer

[www.openoffice.org](http://www.openoffice.org)  
(Windows, Mac OS X, Linux)

A good word processor is the most important tool in any writer's toolbox, and Open Office.org Writer has everything you'll need. You can't always say the same about Word, the industry leader.

Writer is the word-processing component of OpenOffice.org, a professional-quality office suite containing a word processor, spreadsheet, database, presentation program and more. It is compatible with Microsoft Word and other popular word processors.

Journalist and author Bruce

Byfield insists that every author should use Writer. "Writer has Word beat on all the basics," he says. "It's more stable, able to handle larger documents, and better integrated into its office suite. It also has a stronger support for styles, using them not just for characters and paragraphs, but also for pages, lists and object frames, all of which, when used with templates, can save professionals hours of time."

I have both Microsoft Office and OpenOffice.org. I prefer Writer's customizable interface, the way Writer handles templates and styles, and a master document feature

that doesn't corrupt my files.

Writer gives you a choice: Plop down hundreds for the right to use one copy of Microsoft Office, or download OpenOffice.org, install it legally on every computer in your home and office, and give copies to your friends. Save your files in Word format and you should not have any trouble exchanging them with Word users.

As if a free deal needed sweetening, the OpenOffice.org community provides good support, and you can download extensive documentation and how-to guides. All for free, of course. Plus, you can

add several extensions to Writer, such as Writer Tools ([www.nothickmanuals.info/doku.php/writertools](http://www.nothickmanuals.info/doku.php/writertools)). Its 18 tools can look up or translate words, time the length of your writing sessions, back up your work in multiple file formats, and a lot more.

"With these benefits," Byfield says, "what Writer really means for professionals is peace of mind. I've been using Writer for over six years for everything from letters to 900-page manuals, and it's never given me a tenth of the frustration Word has. It's not only a superior tool, but it's designed for writing professionals."

## WORKING WITH OTHERS

### Collanos Workplace, Basic Version

[www.collanos.com](http://www.collanos.com)  
(Windows, Mac OS X, Linux)

What writers groups do in places like Yahoo! Groups can be done in a more organized and secure fashion in Collanos Workplace. A critique group or collaborators can share their files, exchange messages, work together on tasks, and track changes.

Workplace uses peer-to-peer technology to synchronize your projects between computers. Even if you don't have a writers group, you can use Workplace to keep your projects current on more than one computer.

According to Franco Dal Molin, president of Collanos, Workplace is ideal for managing all of your writing in one place. Your most recent document files, notes and group discussions are always ready for you, no matter which computer you're working on.

It only takes a few minutes to set up a project on several computers and start working together. It doesn't matter if some group members use Windows and others use Mac or Linux.

Perhaps best of all, you're not tied to your desktop. If you use a laptop or dial-up connection, or if you simply want to avoid the barrage of distractions from the Internet, you can work off-line.

Any changes that you or others in your group make while you're writing in that secluded cabin on the coast—hey, we can dream, can't we?—will be automatically updated next time you go back online. You don't have to remember to upload and download files like you do for your Yahoo! Groups.

## SENDING IT OUT

### Sonar

[www.spacejock.com/Sonar3.html](http://www.spacejock.com/Sonar3.html)  
(Windows)

You've planned and written your magnum opus, and your critique group has declared it a classic the world can no longer live without. Now all you have to do is submit it.

Tracking submissions can be a nightmare. If you're trying to track your novel, several short stories, a few poems, and a couple of magazine articles, the task feels impossible. How do you keep track of all those markets you've found and the dates when you sent each manuscript?

You can use OpenOffice.org to create a spreadsheet or database, if you know how. Doing it yourself means you can record exactly what you want, the way you want. Most of us aren't database designers, though, and learning to be one takes too much time from our writing, even for us masters of avoidance techniques. Fortunately, a few programmers have made their work available to the rest of us.

My personal favorite is Sonar, from the same developer as yWriter. Sonar tracks market addresses and submission dates for each project and lets you record exchanges between yourself and your editors in notes. It's a basic solution that works.

If you've read this far, you already know the price.

These seven applications can help turn your computer into the ultimate project organizer so you can concentrate on the creative stuff. And with the money you'll save, you can afford some champagne the day your masterpiece hits the streets.

### Scott Rhoades

Scott Rhoades has been a technical writer and editor since 1988. He is currently working on a novel using the software mentioned in this article.