

Is Writing Software Right for You? - 1

by Vanessa Kier

If you're like most writers I recently surveyed, you probably use a standard word processing program such as Microsoft Word or Corel's WordPerfect to compose your manuscript. Maybe you also use a spreadsheet to handle character outlines, GMC charts, and plot analysis. You have a system worked out. It's familiar. You're productive using it.

Yet there's a multitude of companies offering software specific to writers. Why do writers spend the money on a new program and take time out of their busy schedules to learn how to use it? If your current system isn't broken, it would be crazy to switch. Wouldn't it?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Project management

Both Rachael Herron (*How to Knit a Love Song*, March 2010) and Monica McCarty (*The Chief*, March 2010) cited project management as the main reason they chose Scrivener. Herron, who also uses Power Structure, wanted to "get a bird's eye view of the whole novel, and be able to see how I could move scenes around to change the arc of the novel without having to read over the whole dang draft."

One of the biggest benefits of writing-specific software is that you can see your chapters and scenes as virtual index cards in a storyboard (such as in WriteItNow) or cork board (such as in Scrivener) view. This overview shows you how many scenes make up each chapter. Too many scenes in Chapter 1? Drag and drop a couple of scenes into Chapter 2. Want the first kiss to appear later in the story? A few clicks of the mouse and it's relocated.

The downside of this is that most programs require you to give the scene a title or a brief description to help you quickly distinguish the scenes. Some writers might find this extra step annoying.

Organization

Other writers switched because they wanted a place to easily keep track of characters, or to store images and notes that they could then pull up and view alongside their manuscript.

With most writing software you can view multiple pieces of your writing project on the screen at the same time. Using Storyist, I can see my character list on the left, have the manuscript open in the middle, and have my heroine's profile, with her photo, open on the right. This means that as I work I can see with a glance what name I gave to that annoying aid worker I introduced in Chapter 2, or take a peek at my heroine's photo as I describe her from the hero's point of view. All without leaving my manuscript. Or, if I want to see only my manuscript as I work, I have that option as well.

Okay, so project management and organization are the two main reasons writers switch. Should you? Honest self-assessment is the key to deciding whether or not writing software will benefit you.

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Here are some questions to consider:

- Do you get frustrated moving back and forth between different documents and/or programs in order to access the information you need on your story? Would seeing multiple pieces of information on one screen be helpful?
- What's your current writing process like? Do you fill out character charts? Keep track of scene purpose and POV? Follow a three-act structure? Would you like to be able to have all of this information quickly accessible? Are you adaptable regarding the format of this data? I've yet to see a writing program with the ability to mimic the look of an Excel chart.
- If you don't currently have templates or charts you work from, would you like access to preset templates? Would you take the time to fill them out?
- Are you willing to take the time to transfer your handwritten notes into the program? To import your photos? To give the scenes names, etc.?
- Are you at a place in your writing where you have the time and patience to learn a new software? Even though many writing programs are easy to learn, there's always a bit of time required before you're up and running.
- Do you need clear, step-by-step instructions when learning a new program? Do you want a robust help menu and/or a strong online community where you can ask questions? Some programs have better support than others.
- If you don't currently do much in the way of logging details about your story as you write the first draft, would being able to drag and drop scenes during the revision process be helpful?
- Are you willing to commit the time and effort? As with all tools, writing software is only as powerful as the effort you put into it. If you're the type of person who loves to buy products that advertise nifty new ways to get you organized, but after a day or two of use you stop performing the necessary steps because you don't have the time or it seems like too much work, then writing software might not be worth the money. The more bells and whistles a program offers, the more data, such as plot points, you have to provide in order for the tools to function.

On the other hand, if you answered yes to more than one of the above questions, then a writing program might be helpful for you. Next month we'll take a look at the overall strengths and weaknesses of writing software, helping you decide how complex a program you should consider, before moving on to an evaluation of the most popular writing programs.

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