

Mobile Apps for Writers

by Vanessa Kier

Having recently traded in my "dumb" cell phone for a "smart" iPhone, I've become sucked into the wide world of the mobile app. What is an app? Short for application, apps are individual programs you download onto your phone that allow you to perform tasks you might otherwise only be able to handle on your computer. Apps also provide cool functions specifically designed to take advantage of mobile devices—such as apps that map your path as you're hiking and tell you how many feet you've climbed or descended. Just think of the suspense plot possibilities with that one!

An app is different from a mobile-optimized version of a website where the url is prefixed by 'm.' A mobile version of a website still requires an active internet connection, while many apps operate even when you're offline, such as on an airplane.

Here are five categories of apps I consider essential for any writer. Please note: I am not reviewing any particular app here, for the simple reason that I don't have access to a Droid phone or a tablet device such as an iPad to test out apps that run on those devices. The apps mentioned here exist for the iPhone, the iPad and Droid phones except as otherwise noted. *Italicized* apps are iPhone/iPad only. **Bold** means the app works only on Droid or other non-Apple platforms. Check your mobile device's app store to see other options available for your device in each of the below mentioned categories.

Also, I don't include any apps here that involve significant writing. While there are apps that allow you to work on your manuscript and even track your word count, my focus is on reference and general productivity, not manuscript development.

Okay, that said, here are the categories:

1. *Words*. Whether you need to check the definition of a word to settle an argument during lunch, or you're writing in a café and need an alternative to an over-used word and don't want to get out of your manuscript to bring up your browser, there's a mobile app for that. You can find everything from dictionary and thesaurus apps (Dictionary.com, Merriam-Webster, Oxford American, Roget's) to style and grammar guides (*AP Style Guide*). Don't like using your mobile device's keypad for inputting text? Look for a handwriting recognition program such as *FastFinga* or **Graffiti** that will allow you to write on the touch screen with your finger or a stylus.
2. *Organization*. I found it very frustrating to write notes on my phone and then have to scroll through the entire list to find the note I wanted. I'm now using Evernote which syncs customized folders across the web application, the desktop application on my laptop, and my iPhone. This app allows me to create notes at any point throughout the day, file them in the folder of my choice, and then, using the ancillary app *Nimbulist* create To-Do lists with check boxes on my phone. Now when I come up with a new idea for a story while on the go, I can enter it into my iPhone and sync it back to my computer. Or if I'm in a store and see a dress I want my heroine to wear I can snap a picture with my phone, save it in my Writing folder within Evernote, and the image will be viewable when I log onto my laptop.

Evernote is just one of many available organizational apps that exist—from simple To-Do lists to complex filing systems.

3. *Creativity*. Brainstorming apps come in many different forms. I tested Writing.com's *Writing Prompts* app that gives you either three sketches to use in your writing, or gives you a text prompt. *The Brainstormer* has you spin a wheel to come up with a three-tiered writing prompt. *WordDot* randomly selects two words for you, and will also put a random word in front of any noun you type in. This can be a fun way to come up with a crazy title for your book or a cool name for your heroine's rock band.
4. *Reference*. This is probably my favorite category. From various Field Guides, to *Wikipanion* that connects you to Wikipedia, to various apps that let you take a photo of a book and get reviews and/or prices (SnapTell, Google Goggles), there are a ton of fun, useful apps out there. Some of them require an internet connection. Others act more like books, storing the information on your device (Baby Names). Speaking of which, if you have an electronic book reader such as the Kindle app loaded onto your device, you can now take your research books with you. No more lugging all those books to the coffee shop!
5. *Document handling*. Whether you're looking for a way to save e-mail attachments on your phone (*Filer*), print from your phone (HP Mobile Printing) or you want the ability to e-mail the agent your proposal the instant your pitch appointment is over, there are apps to help you with that. You can even get apps that allow you to edit and/or e-mail Microsoft Office documents from your phone (QuickOffice, Documents to Go). Some online programs combine web-based storage with a mobile app, allowing you to share a link to a file stored in your online account (Dropbox). Note: In this era of security threats, make certain that you clear your method of document sharing with the recipient. Many people won't open both attachments and web links, or will open one but not the other. Don't send an agent a link to your proposal if she'll only accept attachments.

Tips for Choosing the Right App for You

Okay, so you know what types of apps you want to explore. Finding the right app involves entering just the right keywords into the search engine. Not finding what you want under writers? Try writing. At some point you'll end up with a list of potential apps.

Now it's time to choose.

I could tell you that App A is the best app ever, but you download it and find it to be the worst excuse for an app you've ever had the misfortune to try. How can you tell if an app is right for you? Honestly, you won't really know until you try it. That's why a lot of apps offer minimalist versions for free. That way you can try the app out, then if you like it you can pay to upgrade to the fully-featured app.

Before you download even a free app, I suggest you do the following:

1. *Read the reviews*. They'll give you an idea about the strengths and weaknesses of the app. If it's a free app, maybe the ads are intrusive. Maybe the app crashes a lot. Or maybe the app doesn't deliver all that's promised. I've backed away from several apps because of multiple

bad reviews. The key word here is multiple. As with all reviews, you're going to have people who love the app and people who hate the app. But if you see the same complaint over and over, chances are it's a legitimate concern, not just one person's gripe.

2. *Check which device/operating system it works on.* I've seen reviews where the reviewer complained that the app didn't work on his/her device or with an older version of the operating system, when it was clearly stated under the product summary that those parameters were not supported.
3. *Has your mobile device's software undergone a radical update recently?* If yes, look for apps that have been released and/or updated since that software update. They're likely to work more smoothly with your device.
4. *Check how much storage space the app will take up on your device.* When I had a choice between two similar apps recently, both of which got good reviews, I went with the one that had half the size. I need that extra room for more apps!

Good luck and have fun. If you find some great apps for writers that are not listed here, I'd love to hear about them!

This article first appeared in the *Tech Talk* column in the April 2011 issue of *Heart of the Bay*, the San Francisco RWA newsletter.