What Features to Look for
When Choosing Writing Software - 1

by Vanessa Kier

So, after reading last month's article you've decided to try a writing-specific software program. Congratulations. Now, how do you go about choosing a program?

Writing software is like any other software. There are strengths and there are weaknesses. What's important when choosing software is to understand what features are critical to you and which ones you can do without. Also determine whether you're looking for a program primarily to help with organization and project management, or if you want a program that has tools to aid in project development.

Basic Features

Word processor—I'm putting this first because this is often the weakest feature of writing software. Often you're getting little more than the ability to type and to do very basic formatting such as underline, italic and bold. What to consider: Do you want automatic spellcheck? How robust a spellchecker do you want? Do you want auto-replace—the ability to automatically replace VKK with Vanessa Kier as you type, for example? Do you want to see first line indents as you work? ***A poor word processor is the reason several writers I surveyed use writing software for organization, but actually compose in their standard word processing programs.*** Some programs allow you to open up your standard word processor from within the program to write your pages, and then automatically save the text in the writing software.

Manuscript view —Many programs open one window per scene. This writing area may not take up the full screen, but instead may have a layer of tabs above the screen you're writing in. There may also be a full-screen option, which drops all but the most basic toolbar from view. What to consider: Do you want the ability to scroll up or down within the entire manuscript as you work? Do you want to see what page number you're on? Then look for a program that opens the entire manuscript every time you work. However, if you choose a software this option the tradeoff often is that the program can't then automatically renumber your scenes and chapters after reorganization.

Interface —This might seem trivial, but some writing software program have very dull, almost depressing interfaces. What to consider: Do you notice the screen while you're working? If yes, does it influence your enjoyment of the writing process? I wouldn't want to spend hours working in a dark virtual environment, but I know writers who don't pay any attention to what the screen looks like.

Export—All programs allow you to export your manuscript in industry acceptable format so you can send it to your agent or editor. This is typically rtf format. What to consider: Do you need the capability to export to other formats?

Import—The ability to import your current WIP into the program. What to consider: Is your manuscript currently organized in a way that the writing software can easily adjust to its own format? It may require a particular format for marking scene breaks, chapter breaks, etc.

Organization and Project Management

Quick project overview—There are three typical project views. The project tree, which shows your manuscript, characters, settings, etc. in a tree, like the folder list on your hard drive. The storyboard/cork board view, where you see your scenes as virtual index cards. The outline view, where you see just your chapters and scenes and can add or delete levels as needed. Depending on the program, all or some of these views will allow you to reorganize your scenes via drag and drop. What to consider: How much information do you want to see on these cards? Just scene name/number and a brief description? Or do you want to see POV character, scene word count, etc.? How important is scene/chapter renumbering after reorganization?

Timeline—It's hard to find writing software with a timeline feature. What to consider: Does the linear, number-line style of timeline suit you? I bought WriteItNow because it had a timeline, then after working with the timeline decided the linear view didn't suit me. I switched all my timeline events over to my regular calendar program and am much happier with the results. If a linear view does work for you, how detailed a timeline do you want? Do you want to have to enter both a start and an end time? Do you want to be able to include only certain POV characters on the timeline? Do you want to assign different colors to different characters or events?

Notes/Research—Depending on the program, these might be two features or one. These are pages detailing research that needs to be done, or notes on where you want the plot to go next. What to consider: Do you want the ability to insert comments directly into the document like the standard word processor comment box? Do you want to be able to store urls and be able to access a webpage from within the program?

Goals—Some programs allow you to track your writing goals. What to consider: Do you want to track your goals by page count? Word count?

Minutes? Do you want to see how far you've come toward your goal and how far you've yet to go? Do you want to be able to set more than one goal, such as a session goal and a project goal? Do you want the program to signal you when you've achieved your goal?

Project Development

Character development—Character profiles, with the ability to add images, are standard to most writing software. However, the complexity ranges from a very basic template that asks for name, age, sex and eye color, to more elaborate arrangements where you can choose personality traits and set up relationships with other characters to be shown on a chart. What to consider: Do you want a preset template with character fields to fill out? Or do you want to be able to create your own character template? Do you want the ability to have the program randomly generate a character for you? Do you want the ability to group your characters either via a subcategory on the project view list or by colored icon? Do you want guidance pulling character traits?

Structure—Depending on the program, you may get no help with structure, or step-by-step guidance. What to consider: Do you want to be guided through the key plot points of a structured novel, following a template such as the three-act structure? Do you want to see a chart that shows your levels of conflict based on plot points? Do you want to see a relationship chart that shows you everyone a character has a relationship with in the book?

Wow. You sure have a lot to think about before shopping for writing software, don't you? Take your time thinking about the above choices. Prioritize them. What features of your current software can you absolutely not do without? Are there aspects of your process that frustrate you? If yes, make certain you look for software that will make those tasks easier.

Next month we'll examine some of the most popular writing software and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses so you can compare them to your must-have features list.

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