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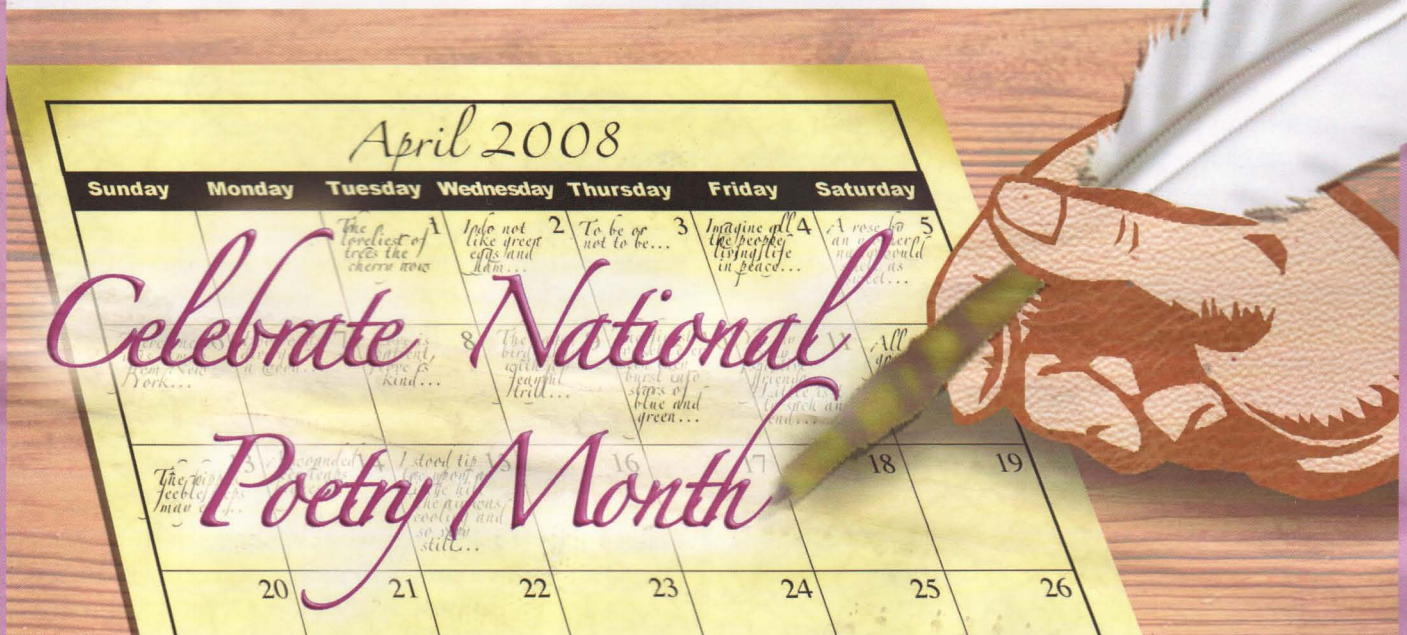
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*Build Your Virtual Office:
Ten Great Online Tools For Writers*
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Build Your Virtual Office: Ten Great Online Tools for Writers

By Dustin M. Wax

I always used to laugh at the image of Hemingway writing with his typewriter propped on top of the icebox—until one day I found myself propping my laptop on a drawer while I grabbed a soda from the fridge. For most of us, writing has to happen wherever we are. Ideas, opening lines, even whole blocks of text might come to you when you least expect it—ideas, opening lines, and whole blocks of text that get lost, sometimes forever, if we can't get them down and start developing them when they're fresh in our minds.

Unlike Hemingway, today's writer has a massive number of technological tools at our fingertips. It is possible—and growing more likely—to propose, work on, revise, share, submit, and see published an article, story, or novel without ever committing a word to paper.

With the leaps that Internet technology has taken over the last couple of years, we can do this wherever we are, with very little specialized equipment (I'm writing this on a sub-\$500 laptop in my garage). As high-speed broadband connectivity becomes commonplace, it makes more and more sense to create and store our work "in the cloud"—in the nowhere and everywhere of the Internet.

There are many reasons why it makes sense for writers to use online tools. Most importantly, online tools are always there; you can work on the same document from a dozen different computers, regardless of their operating systems or other software, without worrying about moving files from computer to computer, or

about whether the computer at your mother's house will have Word or if your database will open on your work computer.

Online services also offer convenient off-site storage. If a disaster should strike—a house fire, computer theft, or yet another of the random glitches that our computers torment us with from time to time—your work is still there, safe and sound in the bosom of the Web.

Finally, it's cheap—the services I will discuss

below are free or offer free "starter" services that are more than adequate for the needs of most writers. If you do need to upgrade, their services are still fairly inexpensive. And when a new version comes along, you won't have to shell out more money for an upgrade. It will simply be there waiting for you the next time you log in.

With these reasons in mind, here is a list of ten online services that should be in every writer's toolbox.

As you will see, I am partial to Google's services, but I'll include alternatives where comparable services are available.

1) Word processing: This is the big one for writers, of course—the ability to log in and write from wherever you are, at any time, using any web browser. Google's free service, Google Documents and Spreadsheets (docs.google.com), offers most of the formatting features you expect (bold, italics, underlining), several font and style options, and the ability to collaborate with others. It stores all of your revisions so you can go back to an earlier version if the need arises,

You can create an online "virtual office" that you can access from anywhere.

and you can save either to your hard drive in several formats, including Adobe's pdf, or post directly to your weblog. Google Docs allows you to store up to 5,000 documents, so unless you are unhumanly prolific, you can store a whole career's worth of work in one place.

Zoho's Writer (writer.zoho.com) offers basically the same feature-set, plus a plugin to integrate with Microsoft Word, which is pretty handy.

2) Spreadsheets: This is especially useful for freelance writers who use a spreadsheet to keep track of assignments and publications—now you can look that information up anywhere! Again, Google Documents and Spreadsheets offers the ability to create and edit basic spreadsheets online, in the same interface that Google's word processor uses.

Since I do not demand much of my spreadsheets, Google's service is more than adequate for me, but for people who do more with their spreadsheets, Zoho's Sheet (sheet.zoho.com) is probably the better bet.

3) Calendar: Google's Calendar (calendar.google.com) will help you keep track of deadlines, appointments, writing goals, and important events—and you can check your agenda or add upcoming events from anywhere.

You can keep multiple, color-coded calendars (say, one each for home, work, and writing) and give others access to add or view them. 30Boxes (30boxes.com) offers an equally good alternative, and both are free.

4) E-mail: Chances are your Internet service provider offers you several e-mail accounts, which you can access online or download to a desktop e-mail client like Outlook or Thunderbird. If you've ever tried to access your e-mail through the Internet, though, you know how awkward and unsatisfying this can be.

Google's free Gmail (gmail.com) offers over two gigabytes of online storage and the ability to "tag" your e-mail—kind of like sorting it into folders, except each item can be assigned to two, three, or more categories.

For instance, one piece of e-mail might be

tagged with the name of the publisher it came from, the name of the project it relates to, the type of submission it represents, and so on—then you can look at all the communications you had with a particular publisher, everything you've sent regarding your latest book, or all the e-mails you've received about all your articles, and the same e-mail would come up in all three.

With its recent upgrade, Yahoo's webmail service (mail.yahoo.com) is also quite attractive.

5) Notetaking: Ideas can come at any time, and you want to get them down fast. Another Google application, this time Google Notebook (google.com/notebook), provides an excellent repository for your thoughts, as long as you can get to a PC. Notes can be categorized, and a handy Firefox extension allows you to add clippings from the Web while you surf.

Zoho has just launched a notebook feature (notebook.zoho.com) that looks interesting; both are, of course, free.

6) Project Management: Writers juggle a lot of balls and it can be pretty hard to keep track. Online project management systems allow you to set up your project, set deadlines, store notes, and keep track of your progress—ideally, as simply as possible. 37Signals has two great project management tools, Basecamp (basecamphq.com) and Backpack (backpackit.com) that are unrivaled for project management.

Basecamp allows you to set up milestones, add collaborators, and assign tasks—ideal for an edited volume or collection where you'll be working with several authors, but also very useful for the solo writer who might think of herself or himself as wearing many hats.

Backpack is more focused on to-do lists and calendaring—think of taking a backpack with you when you leave the base camp.

Both offer e-mail and SMS reminders to help keep you on track. Backpack and Basecamp are useful for different sorts of projects, so it's worth checking out both; their free accounts

offer quite a bit of flexibility, and can be upgraded fairly cheaply.

7) To-do lists: A full-fledged project management system might seem like overkill to you—maybe all you really need is a place to store your to-do list. The folks at 37signals have you covered with Ta-Da lists (tadalist.com), a stand-alone to-do list. You can keep an unlimited number of lists in your free account, and you can share them online or via e-mail.

Remember the Milk (rememberthemilk.com) offers a similar service, with the addition of reminders via text messaging.

8) Online file storage: Although Google Documents and Spreadsheets will store documents, and Gmail and Yahoo Mail both offer tons of storage for files sent as attachments, neither is ideal for day-to-day file storage.

Box.net offers 1 gigabyte of free online file storage for files of any kind: music, documents, images, or video, and they can be accessed from any computer. You can also use the service to share files, which is great if your e-mails bounce back because of large attachments.

9) Homepage: Remembering what site to go to for what can be a hassle, so it's a good idea to set up a customized homepage with plugins for the various services you use. My page at iGoogle.com has modules listing my most recent documents at Google Docs, my to-do list, my calendar, several news feeds, new e-mail at Gmail, my Google notebooks, and search windows for Google Books and Google Scholar (specialized search engines).

NetVibes (netvibes.com), PageFlakes (pageflakes.com), and Windows Live (live.com) all offer similar services, though I've found [iGoogle](http://iGoogle.com) to be the easiest to get my head around.

10) Remote desktop access: Imagine being able to access your own computer, with all your programs and files exactly where you want them, from anywhere. LogMeIn Free (logmein.com) allows you to install a program on your home computer and log in from anywhere, as long as you leave your home computer on.

In full screen mode, it is exactly as if you were sitting in front of your own PC!

With these online tools, you can create an online "virtual office" that you can access from anywhere. Even if you don't travel or move around much—heck, even if you write at home in your pajamas—the security of online backups and the convenience of consolidating all of your tools in one place is still immensely useful.

If you do a lot of online research in the course of your writing, you can easily shift back and forth from whatever website you are looking at to your writing space without changing programs by using the tabbed browsing available in most current browsers. And since most of these tools are available at no cost to you (other than the occasional browser ad in some services), they can fit into even the tightest budgets.

Remember, too, that this technology is still in its infancy. The Internet has developed at an astounding rate, even during the lull after the collapse of the late 1990s tech boom. Writers have fairly simple needs—we take notes, contact publishers and agents, do research, and write—so it's difficult to imagine what new features might await us over the horizon.

Certainly we'll see these services become easier to use and more integrated with our desktop computers, as well as with each other. Already the services above are simple to use and well-designed for their intended purposes, proving a valuable asset to writers at every stage of our work.

So why wait for tomorrow? Go online and start building your clean, well-lighted place on the Web today.

Dustin Wax is a Las Vegas-based university instructor and freelance writer with several academic and mainstream publications, mostly online, as well as a forthcoming book on the Cold War due out Spring 2008 from Pluto Press.