

PSA: Scrivener, Data Integrity and You. Or, How To Avoid Data Loss Heartbreak

 reddit.com/r/writing/comments/62hr7o/psa_scrivener_data_integrity_and_you_or_how_to

EDIT: I'll leave my original post below but I want to stress that my experiences with Scrivener aren't universal. While I found similar reports while googling for help with my issues (*finding problems when searching for problems isn't exactly a difficult task*) these comments are full of people who haven't had a single problem in years of using the program. *I* found the program to be a bit finicky but other's haven't and if you follow proper data protection guidelines you'll be fine. For the record, you **should** be backing up your data regardless of what software or OS you use. I'd really hate if this post was the reason someone didn't try out Scrivener, because it really is a unique, useful tool for writing.

I want to take a few minutes to talk about the elephant in the room when it comes to Scrivener: data integrity (or the lack thereof). This is not a problem unique to Scrivener of course but I feel it is worth noting given the relatively irreplaceable content of most writer's notebooks, digital or otherwise. Please know the intent behind this post isn't to disparage Scrivener or its creators but simply to provide a few tips that may help other users avoid the data loss problems I've encountered.

If you are unfamiliar, **Scrivener** is a pretty unique writing tool in the field, combining a myriad of features useful to writers into a single program. It is generally beloved by those who use it and is a perennial entry on most writing software suggestion lists, for good reason. I certainly like and recommend it still, despite its flaws.

In case you're wondering, no, this isn't a sneaky sponsored post (which should become much more apparent in the next paragraph).

There is, however, a dark shadow to be found in the periphery of Scrivener's golden praise. The custom database format Scrivener projects are stored in appears to be quite complex and fragile. If you're not careful, it seems a slight breeze can cause data corruption in your Scrivener projects. I'm not a heavy Scrivener user, having only worked on around 3 (still-ongoing) book projects so far. These aren't complicated tomes, just a handful of text files in different categories. On each of these projects I've had to deal with situations where Scrivener lost a good chunk of my work despite me being obsessive about invoking Ctrl+S every few minutes. In one instance I was able to find the missing files but ended up having to create an entirely new project and copy/paste my work to recover from whatever corruption occurred within my original project. Just yesterday I lost a final draft of a book introduction when Scrivener closed unexpectedly, despite the project having been fully saved prior to that many times. As I tend to hibernate my computer to avoid needing to set up my workspace anew each day, the most recent backup file created by Scrivener was from when I last closed the

program... a week ago. I'm certainly not the only person to have experienced problems like these with their Scrivener projects. It's not difficult to find accounts online of users who have lost work unexpectedly.

So, in hopes of helping others avoid data loss, here are a few tips that might help you use Scrivener's awesome features while keeping your work safe.

1. Be wary of where you keep your project files. Scrivener is very particular about this and projects can become corrupted if you store your files on a network share or in a synced folder using Google Drive or OneDrive. DropBox is apparently a bit better but still not completely recommended. Scrivener support recommends copying archives of your project to these kinds of syncing services if you wish to use them.
2. Make sure you check the Scrivener backup settings (*Tools-->Options-->Backup*) and ensure that the backup folder exists and is where you expect it to be. Also ensure the auto-backup setting you want is enabled - I wish there was a setting to enable a backup after X minutes or hours of use as I think this would make it much easier to recover recent work. I save so often the only good option for me is backup-on-close which can backfire in situations where you don't actually close Scrivener that often. In this section I also changed the number of backups to be unlimited. It would be tragic to accidentally overwrite a good backup because you open and closed Scrivener multiple times trying to get a project file working.
3. After a marathon writing session, take a second and manually back up the project (*File-->Back Up-->Back Up Now*) just in case. You might also want to copy the resulting zip file to a different location for extra protection.
4. Use a backup service that provides you with file and folder versions/revisions! This is really a general purpose backup tip but I can't even count the number of times my bacon has been saved by an archived file revision. For the lost introduction text I mentioned above, a backed up folder version was the only way I could have restored my work. I use iDrive and it keeps up to 10 copies of a file in most cases. I'm pretty sure most cloud backup providers offer the same thing, but check yours to make sure. Also ensure that the Scrivener backup folder is backed up! The default backup location is in a local appdata folder which may not be backed up by default. Not using a backup service at all? Well you *need to be using one* so stop what you're doing and find one right now! Many of these services exist (CrashPlan, iDrive, Carbonite, BackBlaze, SugarSync, etc) so I'm sure there's one that will fit your criteria. Having a safety net for your work (and other files like family pictures or videos) is more than worth the yearly cost. Don't wait until it's too late.

5. Close your Scrivener projects when you are finished a writing session. Even if a project is fully saved it seems that it can be corrupted to some extent if Scrivener closes unexpectedly (eg power loss or system crash). Closing Scrivener with *File-->Exit* when you are done for the day is a good way to help ensure the integrity of your project files. Plus this will also back up your project if you have backup-on-close enabled.
6. Every now and again, actually extract one of the backup zip files to a folder and check it out to make sure the archive is valid - eg open the project file with Scrivener to make sure it looks how you expect with no errors. In this case be absolutely sure to re-open your actual project file afterwards (I'd probably delete the extracted project files after opening them to make certain I'm using the right project the next time I open Scrivener). This is actually another general purpose backup tip - always check your backups. In that vein, also periodically check that your cloud backups are working: try to restore a good chunk of files somewhere and make sure you can open them/you don't get any errors. More than one company has been pushed to ruin because they thought their backups were working properly but oops, turns out they weren't.
7. *EDIT* As a few others have pointed out, it's also very important to generate a human-readable copy of your work on a regular basis and back it up somewhere safe. You want to have a copy of your work available in a format you can read and utilize without relying on additional software. Scrivener has a powerful feature that enables you to compile your work into many digital formats. I haven't used this feature much yet but it's something I'm definitely going to start learning about.

| TL;DR

Scrivener is awesome, definitely look into using it. However take steps to prevent losing data (in-app backups, independent backups, check your backups) in case something goes wrong with Scrivener.

Good writing everyone!

40 comments

94% Upvoted

This thread is archived

New comments cannot be posted and votes cannot be cast

Sort by



level 1

[deleted]

46 points · 3.years ago

I'm a professional software engineer, so take this worth a grain of expertise.

If you are not exporting your work into human readable (and potentially easily copyable) files every now and again and using THAT as a backup, you're asking for a painful experience. Yes, backing up the scrivener project files SHOULD have you covered, but proprietary formats can go bad, can be altered, and can have their hosts programs obsoleted at any time for any reason.

level 2

This is a very good point. For text, Scrivener appears to store each file separately as a numbered .rtf rich text file that can be opened by Word/WordPad. The *search.indexes* file is XML and contains plaintext copies of the text files in the overall hierarchical structure (though this seems hit or miss - my restored copy was mostly empty so I needed to regenerate it from the *Tools* menu). Higher level organization/details of the Scrivener binder seems to be stored in a binary format so unless it's just a renamed common database format, info within these could be difficult to recover on their own. This is from a simple text-only project so it could get more complicated for larger projects.

level 2

This. The last step every time I finish a novel is exporting in all formats so I have a PDF, a docx, an epub, and a mobi. I've never have a problem with scrivener, but being a software engineer I take precautions anyway.

level 1

If you really want to be safe, you should not only "backup" your work, you should **COMPILE** it.

- With my short fiction ebooks, I always compile into an updated ebook file (.mobi) at the end of the session.
- With my long fiction, I compile into PDF and/or Word. (I also compile long works into ebook, but that's just for review purposes.)

level 2

That's a great point. I'm really early on in the development of my books so I'm mostly still using Scrivener as a glorified hierarchical notepad, haven't played around much with the compile functionality. Definitely a good idea to create a standalone human-readable copy of your work though.

[Continue this thread](#) →

level 1

I've written seven novels and not had a data loss, although I've had a near-miss. I work on Macs, and all of my Scrivener files are synced via multiple computers with Dropbox. My near-miss involved opening the same project file at the same time on multiple computers prior to the file finishing syncing.

Since then, the lesson that I've learned is to always exit Scrivener when I'm done writing in a given writing session (with Clover-Q on the Mac), and then wait for the files to sync before closing my laptop. (A few seconds at most). This ensures that all files are written out, and synced, and that if I start up a second computer, I'm guaranteed to have the most up to date version of my manuscript.

level 2

charleytaylor

4 points · 3.years ago

I second this. The only time I've ever had a problem with Scrivener/Dropbox was when I had the file open on two computers simultaneously. My golden rule with Scrivener (or any other file saved on Dropbox) is **never have the file open on more than one device at a time.**

level 1

Fireslide

8 points · 3.years ago

If you care about your data and you should, invest in a solid data backup solution and develop good habits

1. Pay for Dropbox with packrat (which gives unlimited versioning) so even if your file gets corrupted, you can revert it back to a version that isn't
2. Manually save versions of your work as new files on a daily/weekly basis etc. This prevents one file becoming corrupt and that corrupt version overwriting all your backups
3. Have a couple of online storage systems that mirror whatever is in your dropbox folder.

If you combine all 3, it is unlikely you'll ever lose much work at all if any.

level 2

BeechM

1 point · 3.years ago

Oh nice, I didn't realize Dropbox has add on pricing for versioning.

level 1

steelerfaninperu

4 points · 3.years ago

For the record, I've never had a problem with the program. Having said that, there are some odd moments where I've gone from one device to another and it seems to not remember my edits.

A great way to prevent this from becoming a problem is to take a snapshot **before and after** you work. So you're on draft #2. Make a snapshot before you start draft 3. Name it 2nd draft or whatever. When you're done, make another and name it 3rd draft.

If you reload the program and for whatever reason your edits aren't there, you can just "roll back" to the last snapshot, which is what you edited, and it'll be right as rain.

As far as backups, I take them into my own hands. Go to the *.scriv folder, where your data is saved. Copy that whole bastard and paste it where you want to backup, whether it's cloud or an external drive. You can double-click the scriv file inside and boom, your project is loaded.

level 1

Thank you for this post! I've been considering picking up the program for a while now, and this does turn me off...

Mainly I would use it for organization purposes, so I am wondering, would it be possible to write all my scenes in openoffice and then copy paste them into Scrivener? Conversely, would copy pasting the Scrivener text into a regular document writer and saving it there be an adequate backup method?

Currently I just shuttle my documents on over to a flash drive every so often. Since you seem knowledgeable about such things, do you think this is a safe way to backup my writing?

Can you elaborate on cloud backup services? I'm paranoid and have always considered such methods to be particularly unsafe, not just with respect to data decay but with respect to privacy/hacking. What makes cloud services better than a flash drive, in your eyes?

level 2

Scrivener has a free trial so there's no reason to not at least try the program. Like I said, I actually like it. There are a lot of useful features for all different kinds of writers.

Mainly I would use it for organization purposes, so I am wondering, would it be possible to write all my scenes in openoffice and then copy paste them into Scrivener?

You could do this but it seems like a duplication of effort. As long as you're careful about backing up your Scrivener project you should be able to recover from any potential problems.

Conversely, would copy pasting the Scrivener text into a regular document writer and saving it there be an adequate backup method?

I wouldn't consider it a "backup" method per se, though files in other programs may be more stable (as they're single files vs the project database/set of files used by Scrivener). For instance, I've had Word unexpectedly close but since I had saved the file before that, the file was fine. Scrivener seems to keep the database/files in a more "open" state that can be prone to corruption. Again, proper backups of your files will likely be your saving grace here.

Currently I just shuttle my documents on over to a flash drive every so often. Since you seem knowledgeable about such things, do you think this is a safe way to backup my writing?

Not particularly. If you lose the drive or it malfunctions, what happens then? A proper backup strategy needs to be multifaceted. It's a good idea to have local backups at your house (a usb drive, burned DVDs, etc), backups somewhere else (a hard drive at your parent's house or in a safety deposit box) and a cloud backup for convenience never hurt anyone.

Can you elaborate on cloud backup services? I'm paranoid and have always considered such methods to be particularly unsafe, not just with respect to data decay but with respect to privacy/hacking. What makes cloud services better than a flash drive, in your eyes?

Any good cloud provider will store your data in an encrypted form and allow you the option of using a private encryption key. If you use a private key, even the cloud storage provider cannot decrypt your data - they would need the key to do so. There's a tradeoff with this though: using a private key like this (1) makes it more difficult to do things like directly share files you've backed up and (2) if you ever forget/lose your copy of the key your data is as good as gone. CrashPlan talks about [the differences in encryption here](#). I use iDrive with a private key and for me the benefits outweigh the downsides.

If you go with a trusted cloud storage provider it's likely their security precautions exceed your own and in most cases even if a "hacker" got a hold of the data it would be an amorphous encrypted blob. Bit rot is a lot more likely with your local hard drives than those in a datacenter since cloud providers are going to be storing data redundantly, either with something like RAID or just copies on different physical disks. If your usb drive were to fail, you'd be SOL. And believe me, flash drives can fail.

It's not advisable to rely *solely* on a cloud backup provider though. It's entirely possible they might go out of business or experience some kind of devastating failure. However unlikely that might be, it's still a good idea to keep copies of your really important/irreplaceable data in physical storage locally and also somewhere safe.

[Continue this thread](#) →

level 2

[NoodleDrive](#)

4 points · 3.years ago

For what it's worth, I've been using Scrivener for years and have never experienced any of the problems the OP listed. It might be an operating system thing though, as I'm on a Mac. It'd be interesting to hear what windows version OP is using.

Also the compile feature means that you can create a word doc version of your whole project at any time with two clicks. If you do that every so often (put a date into the file name and you've got version control) and keep the docs in something like Dropbox or Google Drive you should be fine.

level 1

jcastp

2 points · 3.years ago

IT guy here. Some tips, not only for Scrivener.

- Try to save everything (or export) in plain text mode, if possible: txt, xml, tex, or whatever format is available that you can open with a notepad-like application. If your main program crashes or the closed format file you are using gets corrupted, you can always recover your work from there.
- Backup: Get another copy of your work in another place. If possible, get multiple copies along the week or the month. There are automated solutions for this, but if you can't get one, do it manually. Believe me, it pays off in the long run.
- Time Machine/Back In Time: Get snapshots of your work at regular intervals. Back In Time does that for Linux, but you have alternatives for other OSs.
- Version control: **This is an advanced advice, not for everyone.** If you are using plain text formats, version control is your friend. It has its own problems, but the gains overweighs the problems. Git is usually the preferred tool.

level 1

JasonMHough

Career Author2 points · 3.years ago

For what it's worth, I've written 6 books and a number of short stories with Scrivener. The only time I've had problems was the one time, early on, when I thought I'd be clever and store the project on Dropbox. Corruption almost immediately. People say it has improved, but I'm not willing to risk it. Storing locally and backing up to zip files frequently, I've never had a single issue with Scrivener.

Worth noting as well, I did write one novel with Word instead. File was stored on OneDrive. Got corrupted. So, OPs cautionary tale is not limited to Scrivener.

But this is all anecdotal of course. Back up your shit, that's all there is to it.

Last note: although Scrivener saves projects in a proprietary format, your actual prose is in relatively simple rtf files within the project. It's not hard to get at those and extract your words if you're really in a bind.

level 2

JasonMHough

Career Author1 point · 3.years ago

Also, one tip if you insist on cloud storage for your project. By default Scrivener has a "automatically save when idle" setting that set by default to something really short (2 seconds?). My suspicion is that because this means Scrivener could in theory save your project twice in just 4 or 5 seconds, it's possible Dropbox hasn't finished syncing one change before the next comes in. I changed this setting to 120 seconds and didn't have any issues after that, but in the end I couldn't stomach the risk so I went back to local storage anyway. Ymmv.

level 1

SolongStarbird

Aspiring Author2 points · 3.years ago

How is this? Here is my backup startegy:

Short term saves: I have autosave enabled.

Medium term saves: Every so often, I will make a .zip backup file of the .scriv project and store it on an external hard drive I have.

Long term saves: I also, at larger intervals, copy paste the main narrative text into google drive and word and store the word document on both my computer and dropbox in both word and pdf formats.

level 2

mumblingstumbler

1 point · 3.years ago · edited 3 years ago

Hoping to see some thoughts on this, as I only use your short and medium save options. I store it on Dropbox and I've got that auto save feature on. I rarely close the program, I'll leave it open for months at a time at a guess. Then I'll do a backup, save and close scrivener, and copy the entire thing onto one or two hard drives.

Been using scrivener for 5 years and have a project that I have been using that entire time. It's not a book, it's everything. Thoughts, poems, plots, journal, financial stuff, everything that makes me tick for the last 5 years is in that one project that I update every 1-5 days.

Now I'm a bit worried. Maybe it's time to either start a new one or to compile it and save it. I'm lying in bed but I don't think I'll be able to sleep until I do something.

Edit: currently compiling 950,002 words into a backed up mobi version. Will probably do ePub as well

level 1

drevolution

2 points · 3.years ago

I swear by it all the same. I use iDrive to keep versions of my project backed up so I feel like that mitigates pretty much all the risk since that goes daily.

level 1

[deleted]

2 points · 3.years ago

PSA: Libre Office is great, free, and saves to docx format if needed.

If you absolutely cannot afford a word processing software, I highly recommend it. Been using it for years on projects both large and small, and I've never once had a file get lost due to a data integrity issue.

level 2

jcastp

2 points · 3.years ago

LibreOffice tip: you can save in fodt format, that is an xml file, "human" readable, so you can do version control with an external application, and recover information in case of disaster.

level 1

[deleted]

1 point · 3.years ago

This is gold. Cheers.

level 1

Captain Stairs

1 point · 3.years ago

Thanks for reminding me to create a new backup from google drive, to my PC. Never hurts to have a backup just, in, case!

level 1

mindfu

1 point · 3.years ago

Do you save to Dropbox?

If so you might be able to recover the previous version.

level 1

joaovc

1 point · 3.years ago

Although I think this is a fair warning and makes sense. There are not many instances of this reported in the community. I for one have been using scrivener w dropbox for almost ten years for relatively complex projects and this has never happened to me. Nevertheless I take all of the precautions listed by the OP.

DO NOT be turned off buying scrivener because of this.

level 1

[deleted]

1 point · 3.years ago

I commit my scriv projects to a remote bitbucket hosted git repo at the end of every writing session. Additionally backup backup files with crashplan automatically and monthly to glacier. Long term version control, several backup locations, and peace of mind.

level 1

d2ogm

1 point · 3.years ago

I have been using Scrivener for Windows for many years and have not had a single instance of this issue. I back up and save to Dropbox automatically. I strongly recommend that you close your program when you are done for the day though. It only takes a few seconds to reopen it and Scrivener will do so at the spot you left off. The only issues I have heard of people having is where the project was opened on different computers, back and forth. IOW, a shared writing situation or if you use the iOS version as well as the pc or mac version. This is an outstanding and stable software and I highly recommend it. It's far more stable than many others, such as Word (for example).

level 1

RigasTelRuun

1 point · 3.years ago

Grandma always said if it's not backed up to Atleast three separate places then it's not backed up.

level 1

In nearly 10 years of use, the only time that I've had any issues with Scrivener + Dropbox is when I tried to bounce from computer to computer before the files were fully synced. I'd lose the most recent work but not the whole file. That was five years ago. So I now make sure that the folder is synced (green check) before doing anything.

Otherwise, Scrivener has been solid for me. Sorry that you've lost work. I'd reach out to them to determine if it is an issue specific to you and your computer(s).

level 1

Gadsden6771

1 point · 3.years ago

Although I've only been using Scrivener for a couple of weeks, I haven't experienced any data corruption issues. I do have my primary 'save' folder in a second folder inside of my primary directory that I use for writing, which is where the .bak saves to. Occasionally I'll clean out the .bak after I'm certain that I have saved my work. I use a personal cloud at home and thus far, it's worked great.

level 1

metronne

1 point · 3.years ago

Never used Scrivener, but reading this makes me wonder why anyone considers it a good tool. Reminds me of way back in college when you had to save all your heavily researched papers to a floppy that you prayed wasn't defective, and then at least a quarter of the time, it was, and you lost everything.

level 2

Scrivener **is** a good tool for writing and I still recommend it. In *my limited experience* with it I've found it to be a bit finicky, but as mentioned by [/u/mwsorr](#) there are many people in this thread who *haven't* had any issues at all with it. Most of the points I made in this post are applicable to any piece of software (backup, backup, backup).

Perhaps it was a mistake to call out Scrivener in particular because, as I mentioned a few times, I think the software really is useful. I chose to do so because I'm relatively new to writing and Scrivener was the tool I chose. In my googling I saw others who had the same problems I was having, so I thought a post reminding people to be careful would be useful given how precious people's writing is to them.

level 1

katfletcher

1 point · 3.years ago

I've been syncing between a Mac and PC for 4 years now and never had a problem with corruption unless I shut off a laptop before it had synced and opened the document on another computer.

Even then, it wasn't corrupt. It was just me overwriting changes and needing pull something off of a backup.

Given that by default Scrivener makes multiple zip files of you entire project, it seems really hard to lose your work.

level 1

Blecki

1 point · 3.years ago

Scrivener does NOT support having your project files on a synched drive like Google Drive? Seriously? How? This is such a simple thing that you almost have to actively prevent it.

level 1

patfour

1 point · 3.years ago

Scrivener lost a good chunk of my work despite me being obsessive about invoking **Ctrl+S** every few minutes.

I understand a lot of people think Ctrl+S is a good safety habit, but I'd say it's a **big ol' risk with the *illusion* of safety**. Some other comments mentioned incremental saving, and to highlight the point:

If you just overwrite the same files over and over again, it's hard to version down if need be, and data corruption becomes catastrophic instead of just frustrating.

In most programs, this means "Save As..." is preferable over just "Save." For Scrivener in particular, (as others have said) compiled text documents and backup zips are much more secure than "Ctrl+S" on its own.

→