



MIDDLESEX Community College

Tools and Technologies for Tech Writers 2022

Tips and Tricks

Notices

This document was prepared as a handout for the Middlesex Community College Tools and Technologies for Technical Writers class, Winter semester 2022.

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Introduction

Over twenty years of techwriting, I've learned a thing or two that doesn't always fit into nice, discrete categories.

Open source tools

There are a ton of great free tools available for you to use.

Always, check with your employer to figure out what their policy is for third-party open source tools. You may not be allowed to use them, or only tools under specific licenses (GNU vs Apache, for example), or they may have a special place to download 'blessed' versions.

These are the tools I'm aware of. There may be newer ones or better ones available, but these should get you started.

7zip

A zipping tool with a command line.

Once upon a time, Windows did not come with the **Send to compressed folder** option. There was WinZip, but you had to pay for it.

7zip is a free tool that makes zip files. Windows now has a built-in utility, but it doesn't have a lot of options. If you install 7zip, you can make zip files and also update contents of zip files. 7zip includes an integration with File Explorer, so it's easy to zip up or extract files.

The big plus is that it comes with a command line. If you want to get into scripting, being able to automatically zip up files is extremely useful. Most real scripting languages such as Python include zipping libraries, but Windows scripting options didn't. (Unix generally comes with `zip` or `gzip` commands.)

Reputable download

<https://www.7-zip.org/>

Audacity

If you get into making videos with an audio track, you may want some additional audio editing tools beyond what comes with your video tools. Audacity is a decent free audio editing tool.

If you need to edit audio, Audacity is great. I was introduced to it when I got a USB turn table and I was converting record albums to MP3s. I could use Audacity to divide up the record into tracks.

If you're doing video with a voice over, you can use Audacity to clean up your audio clips.

Reputable download

<https://www.audacityteam.org/>

Gimp

If you want a free image editing application, this one has a bunch of features.

Photoshop is one of the standards, but Adobe products are not cheap. I have not used gimp much because I have spent money on other tools, but many folks I know have used it and are very happy with it.

Reputable download

<https://www.gimp.org/>

Imagemagick

This is a command line tool, so may not be your cup of tea, but if you have to do bulk conversion, it may be worth looking into.

This is a very, very powerful tool. It can work with many different types of files and convert them to other types. It can do all sorts of resizing, resampling, etc.

I've used this tool to automate resizing images. If you want to have different sized images with different resolutions for PDF vs online, you can use this tool to automatically take one image and create the different versions you need, or for making thumbnails. It's also great for conversion work if you have to update a whole bunch of JPG files to PNG files.

Reputable download

<https://imagemagick.org/index.php>

Inkscape

Resizing images is pain, so having a good vector image editor is useful.

There are two major types of images, bitmaps and vector diagrams. Oversimplified, bitmaps images are files that save the information as color information and pixel position. Vector diagrams are image files that save the information as shapes and math with properties. In general, photos are bitmaps. Illustrations are probably vector diagrams. Photoshop and CorelPhoto edit bitmaps. Adobe Illustrator and Corel Draw are vector editing applications.

Inkscape is an open source vector drawing program. You can save them as SVG files. Today, most browsers can render SVG images. Because SVG images are vector based, you can zoom into them and they will always look good.

Reputable download

<https://inkscape.org/>

kdifff3

At some point in time, you will be working text files. Your going to need to compare text files to figure out what's going on.

There are many different comparison tools out there. This is one I found years and years ago that I have been very happy with.

Reputable download

Source: <https://invent.kde.org/sdk/kdiff3>

If you go to the README, you can find the link to the download.

<https://download.kde.org/stable/kdiff3/?C=M;O=D>

Notepad++

You have to edit text files. Or tidy up stuff that's easier to work with as text. Or change a file's encoding. Notepad++ is a fantastic text editor.

You are going to need a text editor. Sometimes you will be working with text files, such as properties files or raw HTML. Other times you will be cutting and pasting between applications that add extra bits. (Have you ever copied something from a web page and pasted it into a Word file and got extra junk?) Yes, all computers have some sort of text editor, but plain old Notepad doesn't have extra features. Having a good text editor is invaluable.

Notepad++ is my favorite text editor. It's familiar with a whole bunch of common coding languages and provides highlighting. You can change file encoding (e.g. English vs Russian) and also change line endings. You can search and replace across files. You can perform searches using regular expressions.

Reputable download

<https://notepad-plus-plus.org/>

Pencil

This tool was introduced to me as a UI mockup tool. You can also use it to make basic diagrams.

Being able to throw together a UI design is sometimes part of your job. Being able to put together basic workflow diagrams is a common requirement for techdocs. This is a nice tool to be aware of and can be worth using.

Reputable download

<https://pencil.evolus.vn/>