Writing Tools

As an author, you should write with the tool that you are most comfortable with. Don’t let anyone tell you should or shouldn’t use this or that tool. Everyone has different preferences. I have used a wide variety of tools for writing. They all have strengths and weaknesses.

Whatever tools you choose to use for your writing, however, your goal should be to focus on content and structure, and not on formatting. Any formatting that you apply to the manuscript should communicate the structure and meaning of what you are writing. There is no reason for you to spend any time or thought at all on what fonts you should use, or whether your headings should be bold or italic, large or small.

All of the tool-usage scenarios that we discuss, therefore, will focus on structured writing. The goal is to enable writers to produce manuscripts that clearly communicate the content and the structure of the writing, and which can easily be brought into a professional publishing workflow when the draft has been completed.

## Microsoft Word

I have seen many people express hatred for Microsoft Word. If you don’t like it, you don’t need to use it. There are a variety of other viable options now.

If your editor requires you to submit a Word manuscript and you don’t use Word, most word processors can export your manuscript as a Word document. Use the “Word .docx” format, which is widely supported. If you use a text editor or blogging software to do your writing, there are ways to convert plain text formats or blogs to Word documents (see below, “Plain Text Formats and Editors” and “WordPress and Other Blogging Platforms”).

However, some people do prefer to write in Microsoft Word. I am one of them, probably because I have been using it in my editorial work for almost 20 years, and I know exactly how to use it for writing and publishing. (In fact, I am using it right now to write this section.) It doesn’t get in my way, it gets out of my way. It has all the features I want for writing anything, and I turn off or hide or ignore the features that don’t.

If you are going to use Microsoft Word to write, learn and use the features it provides to make writing better and easier. The chapter entitled “[Writing and Editing in Word](Writing-Word.docx)” discusses in depth getting the most out of Word as a writing and editing tool.

## Plain Text Formats and Editors

In the past few years, “plain text” has seen a resurgence of popularity as a writing and editing format. Formats like Markdown, which had their genesis in the world of software development, have slowly been spreading in popularity. As a result, nowadays there are a lot of good tools availabel to make plain text a viable professional writing and editing format.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Before the computer age, authors either wrote by hand or used a typewriter. These are plain-text authoring environments. We have become so used to word processors that we forget how recent an invention they are.

When using a typewriter, an author could not italicize or bolden text; underlining was just about the only way to indicate emphasis, and it required back-spacing over the text and making a second pass using the underscore key.

When we all started using email in the 1990s, for the first few years emails were all written in plain text. So a number of conventions for indicating formatting arose: \_underscores\_ around a word or phrase would indicate emphasis/italics, \*asterisks\* would indicate bold, and so on.

Even after email moved into an era of rich-text/WYSIWYG composing, a lot of people still use these conventions in writing email and a variety of other kinds of documents. For example, Facebook comments can be quite long, but (as of this writing[[2]](#endnote-2)) they have no formatting capabilities — if commenters wants to indicate bold or italic or the like, they will use underscores and asterisks in these same ways.

There are now several popular plain text formats that can be used to produce rich-text output. The most popular of these formats is called Markdown.[[3]](#endnote-3) Markdown has the distinction of being very easy to create and easy to read in a plain-text editor. So, you can author your manuscript using a plain-text editor, then convert it to rich text during intake to the publishing workflow that you are using.

Another benefit of using plain text is that there are excellent text editing apps available on every platform, and you can use a file syncing service like Dropbox or iCloud or OneDrive to sync your manuscript files between your computer, your tablet, and your phone. This makes it easy to work on your writing wherever you are, with whatever computer you happen to have—the one in your pocket, the one in your satchel, or the one on your desk.

I am providing a very short, very opinionated list of “Recommended Text Editors” (see table, below). This list only provides one or at most two choices per platform, the focus is on quality and usability, and price is not a factor in the decision. If you are publishing professionally, then my assumption is that you can afford a good text editor.

Recommended Plain-Text Editors

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Platforms | Description |
| Sublime Text ([www.sublimetext.com/](https://www.sublimetext.com/)) | Windows, macOS, Linux | One of the most capable and high-performing text editors, easy to use and configure, and available on all major desktop platforms. |
| iA Writer ([ia.net/writer](https://ia.net/writer)) | iOS (iPhone, iPad), Android, macOS | Provides a clean and simple writing environment, with Markdown preview, and syncing via iCloud and Dropbox. |

## WordPress and Other Blogging Platforms

If you want to write your manuscript online and invite others to interact with what you’ve written along the way, one approach is to use a blogging system for your writing. Most of the popular blogging software providers will allow you to create a new free blog and use their platform to write your manuscript. You don’t have to make your manuscript blog public if you don’t want to—it can be private, and you can invite only the people you want to invite. When you are ready to publish your manuscript, you should can then export it from your blog, and a good publishing workflow should be able to import it directly as a manuscript, retaining all of your formatting and so on. One thing to keep in mind, of course, is that blogging platforms are designed for creating webpages, so they don’t really have any support for things like footnotes and endnotes. They are therefore best used for simple writing, such as fiction, that doesn’t contain those features.

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   I should clarify that, when I say “plain text,” I am talking about Unicode text in general and UTF-8 encoding in particular rather than ASCII or Latin-1 or any other lesser encoding. “Plain text” used to mean ASCII, but nowadays it means Unicode text as opposed to XML or some other “rich format.” The ecosystem has matured to the point where all text should be edited in Unicode and stored as UTF-8, because this is the encoding that the software industry and the publishing ecosystem has rallied around, and all the major tools support it, including all of the “plain” text editors that I am recommending. To learn more about Unicode, visit <http://www.unicode.org> or <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unicode>. UTF-8 is explained in clear terms at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UTF-8>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. October 12, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Markdown>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)