

## **Digital Tools for Writing**

The following is a curated list of digital tools for writers of theses and dissertations. The list is not exhaustive, definitive, or ranked. Consider it a friendly introduction to various software tools that may help you develop your writing practice.

You may find that you like one tool for a certain part of the writing process (like drafting an outline or jotting down new ideas), and another for a different phase of writing (like editing or finalizing citations). For example, I use Scrivener for drafting chapters and articles, then transfer my writing to Word to finalize formatting and share with readers. Or—perhaps you’re nothing like me—and prefer to use one program from start to finish. That’s great! Each writer will have their own rhythms and preferences. Here are some [additional tips](#) for discovering the best writing tools for you.

— Amanda Martin-Hardin, PhD candidate in History

## The TL;DR Snapshot

### For the Overwhelmed MA Thesis Writer

- **Who:** Writers tackling a big project in just a semester or two
- **Suggested Tools:** Word, Evernote, Freedom
- **Why:** You've got a lot to do in a short amount of time—keep it simple, organized, and focused.

### For the Bright-Eyed Prospectus Writer

- **Who:** Writers who are just getting started with their dissertation projects. They may even still feel excitement!
- **Suggested Tools:** Evernote, Scrivener, Zotero
- **Why:** You're not yet bogged down from years of writing and are open to learning new things. You're motivated to set up systems that will serve you throughout your dissertation writing process.

### For the Beleaguered 7th Year Dissertation Writer

- **Who:** Writers who burned out, uninspired, or seriously resistant to writing
- **Suggested Tools:** OmmWriter, Forest, Pomofocus
- **Why:** Trying a new interface or three may shake you from your zombie-like writing malaise.

### For Anyone With Writer's Block

- **Who:** Writers who can't seem to put anything new on the page
- **Suggested Tools:** OmmWriter, Forest, Evernote
- **Why:** Taking a break from your primary writing software can make writing feel lower-stakes and less intimidating. Setting and meeting small goals helps you rebuild writing momentum.

## The Full Report

### **Best for: Drafting and Revising**

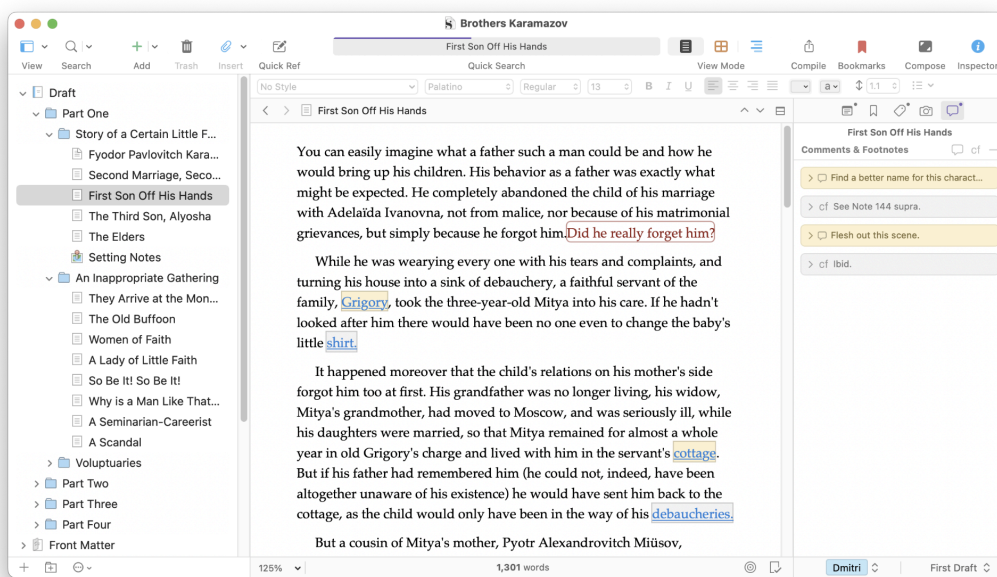
#### **Word**

You are probably already familiar with Word, the definitive software used by most academics for writing. Many graduate students exclusively use Word, since most faculty expect writing projects to be submitted as Word documents. Additionally, because graduate students are often busy enough with courses, research, writing, and teaching, the ability to navigate a writing software without having to complete a tutorial is a sufficient reason for many academic writers to stick with Word. So if Word is working well enough for you, that's great, and you may have no need to find a different writing software. That being said, there might be some Word features you don't yet know: for example, [here are some helpful tips](#) for formatting Word for a thesis or dissertation. Plus, [the Writing Studio has video tutorials](#) available for navigating [Columbia's own Word template](#) for GSAS dissertations.

Word works well for shorter projects like seminar papers and theses, but it may not be ideal for a lengthy project like a dissertation. Writing multiple chapters in Word requires juggling different documents that you will eventually have to compile (or run the risk of creating one long, unwieldy document that might crash your computer). Further, anyone who has attempted to insert images, tables, charts, equations, or any sort of visual component into Word has likely been frustrated with its clunky formatting options. In short: while Word certainly has its strengths, it may or may not be the best writing tool for you. If you deal with images, charts, or equations; want to compile your writing project into one document without having one massive Word file; or prefer being able to break your chapters into separate visual sections, you may want to consider another writing software.

#### **Scrivener**

Although Scrivener has garnered popularity among novelists, a growing number of academics prefer it to Word. (Read testimonials from academic Scrivener-users [here](#).) Scrivener tends to suit more visually-inclined writers, as it allows you to break single projects into smaller chunks, organized by folders that you can easily move around. This means that you can write your entire dissertation as a single project in Scrivener, and break the project into separate chapters that you toggle between. Further, in Scrivener you can divide these sections into smaller subsections. Writers may appreciate the ability to customize these chapter subsections with any title they wish, such as "Introduction," "Literature review," "Chapter cuts," etc. This can give Scrivener a sort of nesting doll effect—which some writers may find keeps them more organized, but others could find visually cluttering.



Scrivener’s main strength lies in its ability to simultaneously store various aspects of your project in one place, while keeping it all organized in discrete sub-sections. The software allows you to store notes and research documents alongside your writing, and includes a customizable “cork board” outline view so you can think big picture. One of my favorite Scrivener features is a split-screen function, which allows you to pull up different sections of your project—whether a note, research document, or a different section of the project—at once. If you work with visual sources, tables/graphs, or archival documents and want to have access to them as you write, this can be an extremely useful feature. Scrivener has myriad other features, depending on how deep you want to get—including the ability to label sections with different colors to indicate anything you like (i.e., “draft,” “revise first,” or “finished”). Again, for many, Scrivener’s customizability is its major asset. But some may find learning its many features intimidating.

The one major obstacle for academics using Scrivener is [its treatment of footnotes](#). Scrivener is not compatible with citation management tools (e.g., Zotero or Mendeley), so writers must manually copy their citations into the footnotes. Unlike Word, Scrivener’s footnotes are not visible on the page itself, but are organized on a separate column that is visually difficult to distinguish from any “Notes” you take (i.e., the equivalent of making a comment on Word about a section of writing). Additionally, converting a document from Scrivener to Word can sometimes necessitate manual editing to format the Word document.

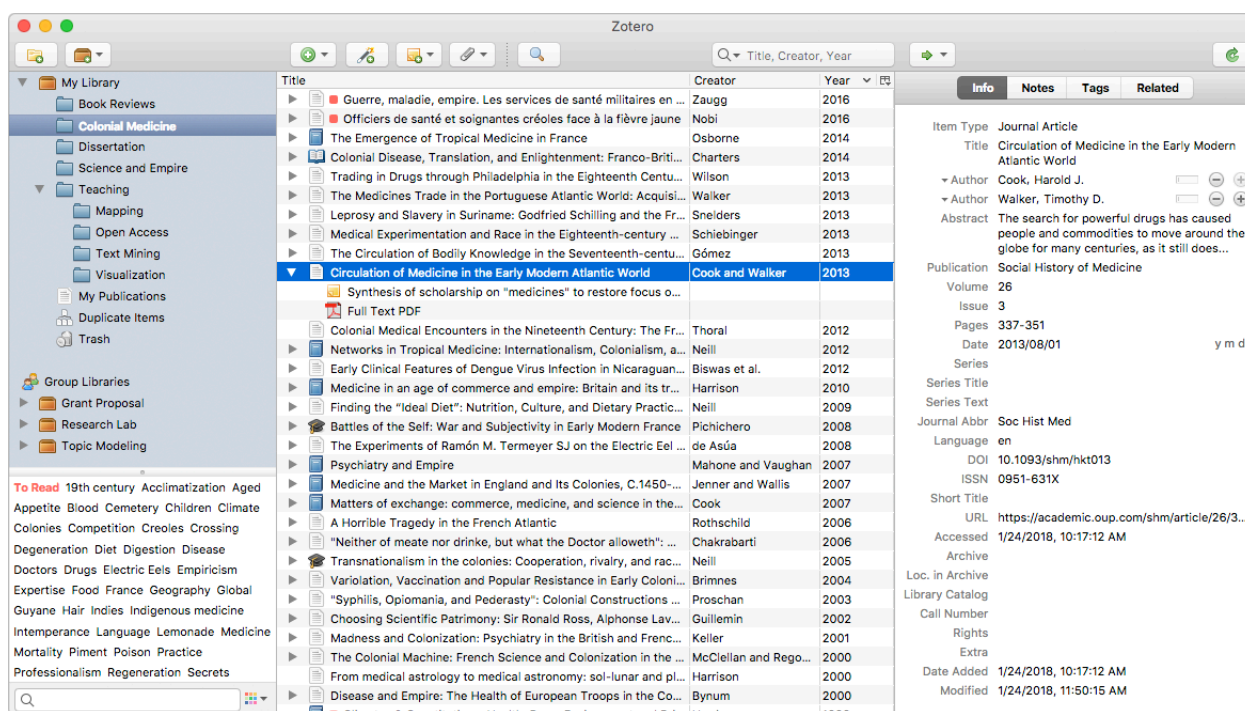
Speaking as someone who mainly writes in Scrivener, I have attended two tutorials to learn how to best navigate the software. The learning curve may be a deterrent, but I found the time investment worthwhile. You can find a number of [helpful tutorials on the Scrivener site](#), and may consider watching this 20-minute YouTube tutorial called “[How I Set Up Scrivener for my PhD Dissertation](#).” In a nutshell: while the flexible

functionality and visible format of Scrivener delights some writers, others may find the options overwhelming.

## **Best for: Citation Management**

### **Zotero**

Zotero is a free tool that allows you to collect, organize, and create citations for your research in one centralized space. The software can serve various purposes: whether you need to save and annotate PDFs; compile book sources to build out a bibliography; or simply create citations for your research as you're writing, Zotero can help. With a lengthy research project such as a thesis or dissertation, most people find a citation management tool essential, and Zotero is a popular choice.



One of the main attractions of Zotero is its ability to save sources from the web through its "[Zotero Connector](#)." If you're totally new to Zotero, you may consider watching this concise [tutorial](#). If you use Chrome for your internet browser, you can download a Zotero button that appears beside your browser's address bar. When you want to add a citation (for example, if you searched for a book or article through CLIO, or have a news article you want to cite), you simply click the Zotero Connector button, and it will automatically save to your Zotero library. You can also add sources manually if they don't exist on the web.

Once sources are added, you can organize them in customizable folders (with subsections, if you like). This is extremely useful, whether you want to organize your

sources by courses, chapters, articles, reading groups, etc. I primarily organize my Zotero library by dissertation chapter, with subfolders in each for primary and secondary sources. When using the Zotero Connector button, you can also select what folder you want your source to be funneled into. This comes in handy whether you want to cite while you write, or if you just need to bookmark a source to get back to later. If you create a free Zotero account, you can save and access your library from anywhere by syncing it across devices. You can also join groups (allowing multiple people to access and edit) and back-up any attached files (such as annotated PDFs). You can also take notes within Zotero and attach them to sources—an extremely useful feature for taking notes on books that you may want to access years later (which happens more often than I anticipated).

Another popular Zotero feature is its ability to automatically generate citations in multiple formats. When you are ready to create a citation, you simply right-click your source and select “Create Bibliography from Item.” From there, you can select from a list of citation styles, including Chicago Manual of Style, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, etc. You can also add various citation styles if you don’t see what you need from the first list. Once you select your style, you choose the “Output Mode” (whether a footnote or bibliography), and “Output Method” (how you want your citation generated). I almost always select “Copy to Clipboard,” which means you simply have to “copy/paste” your citation into your writing document. For Word and Google Doc users, Zotero has a nifty “cite as you write” plug-in that allows you to click an “Insert Citation” button directly from your writing software.

Learn more [here](#).

Zotero has a few downsides. Despite all the time-saving automation, you should still manually check each of your citations generated by the software. I often notice formatting errors (such as not italicizing book titles, adding extra spaces, incorrect punctuation, etc). These are typically minor errors and Zotero still saves me a great deal of time and labor. If you aren’t sure Zotero is the best option for you, you may consider checking out this [comparison table](#) that highlights Zotero’s capabilities in comparison to other popular citation tools: Mendeley and Endnote.

## **Best for: Drafting, Notes & Outlines**

### **Evernote (Free and paid version)**

Writing a thesis or dissertation is so much more than drafting paragraphs. The final written product is the culmination of many things: years of coursework; reading and annotating books and articles; and of course, conducting research. This years-long endeavor can easily lead to a disorganized set of notes scattered across various media—physical notebooks, Google Docs, Word documents, sticky notes—that can be difficult to access when you need to revisit them. If you would like to avoid this scenario, Evernote can be a great tool to consolidate the myriad notes, ideas, and research documents related to your writing project.

Evernote's main feature is in its title: it's designed for taking and organizing notes. Evernote is an online platform, which gives the benefit of backing up your notes automatically and saving your computer storage space. The interface is organized by "Notebooks," which you can break down into different subsections. Within the notebooks, you can write conventional notes (like you might on Apple Notes, for example). Evernote, however, also integrates other handy features. You can record audio within a note, customize your own "tag" for notes to label and search for them, connect your Google calendar to a note, share with colleagues, insert tables, sketch, and more. In the paid version, you can also create a task list with rankings to denote priorities. A useful research feature on Evernote is the ability to store images or clip items from the web (using their "[Web Clipper](#)" extension, also a paid feature). I have organized my Evernote with a notebook for each chapter, and have a "to-do list," informal notes (with my current thoughts or new ideas about the project that I'd rather not muddle my Scrivener or Word documents with); and an outline that I revisit and update as my chapter evolves. Previously, I had these all as separate files on Google Docs, which I never seemed to actually consolidate into one folder. Evernote helps me keep my thoughts organized in one easily navigable space.

Conceivably, someone could begin using Evernote at the beginning of graduate school and use it to keep track of just about everything—whether coursework notes, oral exam readings, and ideas for various types of writing (essays, articles, dissertation chapters, etc.). Evernote also has a variety of features and an entire "Template Library" to help writers manage their projects. For example, there is an audio recording template that allows you to simultaneously type notes—a great tool for meetings with advisors or chapter workshops, where I can never seem to remember everything that was discussed, despite taking my own notes. Most of the templates aren't designed for academic writing, but I could envision possible creative applications for graduate students. While the "Project Overview" and "Monthly Calendar" templates seem fairly self-explanatory for writing purposes, you could also use the "Daily Mental Health Journal" to track how writing is impacting your wellness. Similarly, the "Daily Reflections" template could be customized to contemplate your writing process from day to day, and reflect on writing successes and challenges from a more holistic perspective.

Evernote may be unnecessary for writers who already use a tool like Apple Notes. I find it frustrating that Evernote only allows you to sync across devices with its paid version, which has limited my use of it. Finally, Evernote can also become visually cluttered and disorganized if you don't have a thoughtful organization system. For some, this could lead to more procrastination than productivity. Still, I enjoy using Evernote for specific functions, and I recommend checking out the following resources if you'd like to learn more: [Evernote tutorial for beginners](#) to get started; [Evernote for Notetaking](#) if you're currently taking courses, and [Evernote for Academics](#) for a general overview.

## **Best for: Minimizing Distractions**

### **Freedom (\$3.33 per month paid annually)**

If you've found that you simply can't peel yourself away from digital distractions—social media, checking the news, reading emails, online shopping—you may consider investing in Freedom. Freedom is a website blocker to help keep you focused by preventing you from accessing certain apps or sites within a given “session.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, Freedom was started by a PhD student who had trouble focusing on his work. Here's how it works: you decide the amount of time you want to work (whether 5 minutes or 5 hours), and begin your session. Then, Freedom will block digital distractions based on your preferences. You can create a specific list to block only certain sites, or you can use one of Freedom's presets to block common distractions (like news sites, social media, and Amazon). If your attention span is feeling particularly stretched thin, you can even block “All Websites” and/or all “Desktop Apps,” and turn on “Locked Mode,” which prevents you from customizing your list during a focus session. I have personally found Freedom to be enough of a productivity boon that I don't mind paying roughly \$3 for it each month, but the site also offers regular discounts.

### **Pomofocus (Free and paid version)**

This [pomodoro timer](#) can keep you on task and help limit distractions with the knowledge that a short break is never more than 25 minutes away. A pleasant recess bell alerts you to the start and end of each work session and break. There's a place to set tasks, make notes on each task, and estimate the number of pomodoros you think will be needed to complete each task. Once you're done, you can complete the task. List makers everywhere will rejoice to see that completed tasks appear attractively crossed off. Pomofocus also shows you how many pomodoros you actually needed to complete a given task, so you can compare your expectations with reality—always useful information for future goal setting. The paid version offers a handful of additional functions, but the free version's timer and task list will be sufficient for most writers.

### **Forest (One-time cost of \$3.99 for iOS; \$1.99 for Android)**

[Forest](#) allows you to visualize progress and minimize distractions by growing your very own forest full of brightly-colored trees and flowers. Select a plant, set a timer, and watch your forest begin to grow. While the timer is running, you must not use your phone; otherwise, your tree will wither and die. As you complete more work sessions, you'll grow a lush forest of digital trees. The app allows for some degree of customization. For example, you can choose which apps are off-limits. You can also color code different kinds of tasks or projects and set a timer for a specific activity. Forest can also be used collaboratively, so that you and your friends or writing group can grow trees in the same forest. This ratchets up the stakes: if any one person uses their phone, they kill the tree for everyone!



Finally, Forest partners with the organization Trees for the Future to plant real trees around the world. As you spend time focusing, you accumulate virtual coins, which you can “spend” in the app. Forest will then donate to Trees for the Future to support reforestation. It’s not every day you can say you planted a tree by working on your writing project, so count this as extra motivation to stay focused!

You can use the app on your phone or tablet, and there’s also a [Chrome extension](#) for computer work.

## **Best for: Writer’s Block**

### **OmmWriter (Suggested price \$4.11)**

If you want to feel like you’re on a virtual retreat while you’re writing, try OmmWriter. I turned to it in a moment of desperation when I was feeling a strong emotional aversion to working on my dissertation. In those moments, pulling up Word or Scrivener gave me immediate dissertation-related anxiety, so I wanted to find something that felt unrelated to my usual writing routine.

The goal of OmmWriter is to facilitate concentration by creating a digital writing landscape that evokes the natural world. You can pick from a variety of minimal nature-esque scenes like a landscape covered in snow with a few barren trees, a waterscape with boats in the distance, or a foggy mountain range. You can also select accompanying music or nature sounds. My favorite optional feature is the ability to customize typing noises. You can select various pleasant tones to sync with every time you press on your keyboard, which helps keep my attention focused on typing, in a satisfying, ASMR sort of way. If these features sound distracting, don’t worry: you can also opt for silence.

When in use, OmmWriter expands to fill your computer’s entire screen, which blocks out visual clutter and other possible distractions. You have to leave OmmWriter to do anything else on your computer, which prevents me from having multiple tabs open for email, social media, etc. while I’m writing. (I am often guilty of this when I use Word or Google Docs.) I find OmmWriter useful for when I feel particularly stuck and need to resort to something like a stream-of-consciousness freewrite. Getting away from my usual writing routine and just focusing on producing new words has proven helpful for me in moments of writer’s block. If you do end up getting some substantial writing done, OmmWriter allows you to either copy/paste your text, email it to yourself, or convert it into a PDF.