

By Jack Wallen

One of the most important things I do as a writer is collaborate. Whether this is with my editor, with another writer, or with a team, the ability to collaborate takes my work from pedestrian to professional like no other aspect of writing. But to gain those benefits, I need to use collaboration tools that enable me to work successfully with others. Here's a list of tools worth checking out.

You might notice that not all tools listed were actually designed specifically for the task of collaboration. Some are communication tools, whereas others serve a much broader purpose. No matter their original purpose, each one makes collaboration much easier. In the end, all that matters is that you can work with your collaborators without having to leave town, host a face-to-face meeting, or run up your phone bill.

1: Google Docs

That's right. The mighty Google has finally added a level of collaboration to its documents. [Google documents](#) now have a discussion feature, which allows the creator of a document to invite participants to collaborate (discuss) on it. What's nice about this feature is that it is in real time and can be saved for later reference. Google docs are gaining ground, people!

2: Track Changes

In both [Microsoft Office](#) and [LibreOffice](#), anyone who is collaborating on a document can take advantage of track changes. If you're collaborating on a document in either of these office suites and you aren't using track changes, you have no idea what you are missing. The ability to show what has been changed (and by whom), as well as to easily accept or reject those changes, goes a long way toward streamlining the collaboration process. The only downfall to track changes is that it is not in real time. But not many tools allow you to collaborate in real time on documents.

3: Comments

Another collaboration feature in both Microsoft Office and LibreOffice is the ability to insert comments into text. This is often used in conjunction with track changes to explain a change or ask a question. Anyone who plans on collaborating must have this feature in their toolbox. If you don't use comments, you wind up sticking notes inline -- which often ends badly when the comments are not removed before publication.

4: Gobby/Kobby

[Gobby](#) and [Kobby](#) offer the same function -- real-time collaboration on text documents in Linux. These tools serve as a sort of chat client with a built-in text editor. The primary audience for both Gobby and Kobby is the developer, but that doesn't mean they can't be used for ordinary document collaboration. The downfall? Neither one supports the most popular word processor formats (such as .doc, .rtf, .and odt).

5: Instant messaging

I know, I know. IM isn't technically a collaboration tool. But if you really think about it, how is it not? You can fire up your document, log on to your instant messaging client, and start chatting with your collaborators in real time about the work. No, you do not see changes as they are made, and any updates to the document are not

10 tools that simplify collaboration

made for all to see. But the truth of the matter is, the primary function of collaboration is communication, and using an instant messaging tool is a fantastic way to communicate.

6: Zoho

[Zoho](#) is an incredible Web-based collaboration tool. With Zoho, you can collaborate via chats, discussions, email, meetings, projects, wikis, and more. There are so many ways that Zoho helps you to collaborate, it would be serious feat to actually use them all for a single project. Although Zoho has a free plan for its service, you get only 1 GB of space for files. But its premium service is only \$5 per month, so if you are a frequent collaborator and you're looking for a great Web-based tool to facilitate collaboration, Zoho might be the perfect fit.

:7 Campfire

[Campfire](#) is another Web-based collaboration tool, but it's aimed at the corporate or enterprise-level crowds. With plans that reach all the way to 100 chatters and 25 GB of storage (a plan that costs \$99 per month), Campfire can enable collaboration in larger settings or even classrooms. Campfire also packs in other enterprise-friendly features, such as searchability and an iPhone app for mobile collaboration. An extra benefit of the pricier plans is that they incorporated SSL for higher security.

8: MindMeister

[MindMeister](#) is a Web-based mind-mapping tool. Not all collaborators are familiar with (or comfortable with) mind-mapping tools. But for those who are, there is no better way to brainstorm an idea than a mind-mapping tool. Having a tool for mind-mapping available online is a brilliant way to get those ideas out of your head and into reality. MindMeister has three plans: Free (three maps), Premium -- \$59 per year (unlimited maps, enhanced security, upload files), and Business -- \$9 per month (unlimited maps, edit maps offline, branded subdomain, auto backups). MindMeister also has an app for iPhone and iPad.

9: TextFlow

[TextFlow](#) is an online document comparison tool. It allows you to generate change reports from Word and PDF documents. You can compare up to seven documents at once, see the changes in context, view the changes in a summary report, and even view the change history. Although the layout of the changes can take a bit of acclimation, the benefits of using such a tool far outweigh the somewhat awkward layout.

10: Kablink

[Kablink](#) is a set of open source, online collaboration tools. The set consists of Teaming, iFolder, and Conferencing. Teaming includes document management, workflow, expertise location, federated search, and a custom Web form generator. ifolder is a secure storage solution similar to that of Dropbox, but it also allows you to invite other iFolder users to share your folders. Conferencing is a real-time meeting solution that allows application sharing, whiteboards, presentations, and more. All three of the Kablink tools are cross platform.

The right tools

If you try out the tools on this list, you should be able to find a collaboration solution that meets your needs. Although you may have to use a combination of tools, you should be able to find everything you need to get your collaboration up and running with very little effort.