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Online Software & Services

Type and travel: Web-based word processors

Who needs to buy desktop software when free online word processors let you write all you want, access your files anywhere, and invite other people to get on the same page?

By Elsa Wenzel (August 11, 2006; updated March 9, 2007)

Who said you need to spend hundreds of dollars on the latest [word-processing software](#)? While Microsoft is selling its new [Microsoft Word 2007](#) for a pretty penny, plenty of free word processors have cropped up that invite you to write and edit whatever and wherever you want, without touching your pocketbook or installing any software (comparison chart below).

Online word processors let you save your work to the Web, which can save the day whether you're a mobile student or a small-business owner, a freelance journalist or a scientist in the field. You can start a file in, say, San Francisco and perfect the prose later in Paris. The portability of Google Docs & Spreadsheets (formerly [Writely](#)), Zoho Writer beta, ThinkFree, and Glide Write beta allow you to invite other people to view and edit your work. All you need is a secure and speedy Internet connection.

Not only do these four free tools let you import and save files that will work in Microsoft Word and with [OpenOffice](#), but they also let you create PDF files or post a blog entry with the click of a button. You can even download [Zoho Write's free plug-in for Microsoft Word](#) that lets you save work to Zoho's servers from Microsoft's software. Unfortunately, none of the writing tools we've reviewed imports from or exports files to [Corel WordPerfect X3](#) desktop software, a veteran rival to Microsoft Word. (You can however cut and paste text from any WordPerfect file into Google Docs, Zoho, ThinkFree, or Glide documents.)

If you're looking for a seamless online suite that lets you integrate charts and presentations into your text files, don't hold your breath. [ThinkFree](#) online comes closest. [Zoho Office beta](#) offers even more tools to make spreadsheets or presentations, and even manage customer databases, but it's no snap to integrate those apps. While Glide Write can integrate multimedia files and provides strong tie-ins to Glide's calendar, chatting, and e-mailing tools, the lack of a spreadsheet maker limits Glide's usefulness for a small business. And Google Docs beta is a breeze to use, but its integration with [Google Spreadsheets](#) is pretty much limited to a common sign-in page. Another option for working with several people and projects at once is the [JotSpot wiki 2 \(now owned by Google\)](#), a user-friendly collaboration system that lets you share image, text, and spreadsheet files.

REVIEWS



Google Docs & Spreadsheets
Google Docs & Spreadsheets beta gracefully merges word processing, spreadsheets and basic presentations within an online service that lets you collaborate with other users.

7.3 out of 10

▶ CNET editor's take

▶ [Check prices](#)



Zoho Writer beta
If you enjoy steady Internet access, Zoho Writer beta offers intuitive controls and can replace Microsoft Word for basic editing and formatting, if you can tolerate its beta glitches.

6.6 out of 10

▶ CNET editor's take

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ThinkFree Office 3
ThinkFree Office 3 for the desktop is a decent, low-cost alternative to Microsoft Office. Its free online component has more storage and a few more extra features than competing, browser-based services.

7.3 out of 10

▶ CNET editor's take

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Glide Write 1.0 beta
If you want to share files and stream media within :

Should you seek the security of a desktop companion to your online word processor, ThinkFree offers both (although you could download the better, free OpenOffice instead). Our review of ThinkFree focuses more on its \$50 desktop version, but you don't need to install that to use its Web-based component at no cost. Corel is offering users a free test of its new [WordPerfect Lightning, a lightweight word processor](#) that syncs online files with those on your hard drive. Glide provides mobile editions and lets you sync PC and online versions of your documents, but it offers no desktop software.



secure social-networking environment, Glide Write 1.0 beta makes a good, g anywhere word processor but its rivals are easier to set up for stand-alone writing and editing.

6.3 out of 10

▶ CNET editor's take

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So which online word processor should you pick? Most of these applications remain in beta testing, so expect their features to change. Overall, we were partial to Google Docs' quick setup and easy-on-the-eyes interface, but check the chart below to find the tool that best fits your personal needs.

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	Google Docs & Spreadsheets beta	Zoho Writer beta	ThinkFree Write Online (ratings are for suite)	Glide Write beta
Rating	7.7	6.6	6.7	6.3
Setup and interface	8	6	6	6
Features	8	6	8	6
Service and support	7	8	6	7
Cost	Free, unlimited storage; 500K limit per file	Free, 1GB of storage	Free for 1GB of storage; 10MB limit per file	Free for 300MB of storage; up to \$149.95 for family account; registration requires credit card
Compatibility	Internet Explorer 6, Firefox 1.0.6+, Mozilla 1.4 +; Windows, Mac	Internet Explorer 6, Firefox 1.5; Windows, Mac	Internet Explorer 6, Firefox 1.5; limited Mozilla support; Windows, Mac	Internet Explorer 6, Firefox 1.0.6+, Mozilla 1.4 +; Windows, Mac, Linux
Backbone	Ajax	Ajax	Java, Ajax	HTML, Ajax, Flash
Imports files	Word, OpenOffice, RTF, text	Word, OpenOffice, ODT, RTF, text	Word, RTF, HTML, XML, text	Word, OpenOffice, RTF, Pages, text
Exports files	Word, PDF, HTML, RTF, OpenOffice, ZIP, text	Word, OpenOffice, PDF, ODT, RTF, HTML, text	Word, PDF, RTF, text	Word, PDF, RTF, ZIP, text
Invite other people to edit	Yes	Yes, from your personal e-mail address.	Yes, from your personal e-mail address	Yes, unlimited users; set specific permissions and time bomb
Create public URL of document	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Insert images	Yes	Yes	Yes, from clip art files and Flickr.	Yes
Insert multimedia				Yes

into files				
Fonts	18	15	65	20
Insert international characters	Yes, Roman alphabets	Yes, Roman alphabets	Yes, Roman alphabets as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean	Yes, Roman alphabets
Post to blogs	Google Blogger, MetaWeblog, MovableType, BlogHarbbor, LiveJournal, SquareSpace, BlogWare	Google Blogger, LiveJournal, WordPress, TypePad	Blogger, Typepad, WordPress, Squarespace; Atom and Movable Type support	Glide Blogs only
Tag documents by topic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Spell check	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Dictionary, thesaurus				Yes
Insert bookmark for long documents	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Integrates with other apps	Limited integration with Google Spreadsheets	Zoho offers apps for spreadsheets, presentations, and many business uses, but integration is limited	Calc for spreadsheets, Show for presentations	Glide Effortless suite; Calendar, Mail (presentations and spreadsheets apps not built yet)
Desktop version		No, but Zoho offers a plug-in for Microsoft Office 2007	Yes, \$50	No, but Glide Sync synchronizes desktop and online documents
Access documents on mobile devices			Portable edition (iPod edition for Show)	Glide Mobile
	Google Docs & Spreadsheets beta	Zoho Writer beta	ThinkFree online	Glide Write beta

Read the CNET editor's take

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