

Getting started

When you know you'll need someone else's input into a document you're writing, consider using a web2tool before opening a new Word document. Remember, you can always export the written content to a full wordprocessor to do final editing and style setting!



Taking your first steps is straight-forward! The first glance interface and functionality should be recognisable, with commonly-used buttons (for bold, italic etc.) and menus. In fact, many people's reaction, once they get started, is that they prefer the simplified workspace, free from the 'feature bloat' found in most word processors.

Ten things to try

1. Write your next conference abstract using a web2tool for collaboration
2. If you write up minutes, share them using Google Docs rather than emailing them
3. Subscribe to the RSS feed for a shared document to be alerted to changes
4. Ask your class to read a key text and co-author a 1000 word review
5. Are you organising an event or conference with people from different institutions? If so, share planning documents using Zoho or an alternative web2tool for collaboration
6. Arrange your next departmental social event (Xmas meal, coffee morning etc.) using Google Docs and Spreadsheets
7. Set different levels of control for different contributors to a shared document
8. Copy the text from your organisation's homepage and rewrite it. Invite colleagues to review your text and to make changes
9. Write a list of 5 things you could do with Google Docs & invite colleagues to add more
10. Away at a conference? Need to continue editing a document? But don't want to carry a

Collaborative Writing

Use the web as platform to share and co-author documents

Web2practice: Guides to emergent technologies & innovative practice

When writing a document, most people's common practice is to use a Word Processor, such as Microsoft Word or Open Office. However, when it comes to sharing that document with collaborators and co-authors, problems can arise. Typically, the first author will send a copy of the document to collaborators as an email attachment. Each individual will then work on their own copy and email it back to the first author, who is then faced with the arduous task of evaluating the changes and amalgamating them into a new version of the document, before the whole cycle begins again.

An alternative is to partially or entirely write documents using web2tools specifically designed for use across multiple authors, such as Google Documents or Zoho Writer. These tools look, act and feel like normal word processors, but documents can easily be shared with selected individuals and any changes made to a document are immediately viewable by all.

Web2tools for collaborative writing save previous versions of a document and allow roll-back at any point to a prior version. Individual authors can also select to be notified when changes are made to documents they are contributing to, either by email or RSS. Additionally, all online collaborative writing tools support a range of file formats for import and export (.pdf, .txt, .csv, .html etc.) and some even allow users to continue working when offline!



In Practice

"I've used Google Docs to work with colleagues in other physical locations on the same document without having to constantly email versions back and forth - it's much more dynamic!"

Selecting the right tool for the job is an apt statement in today's digital age where knowing the benefits of a particular software package or web2tool for a particular purpose can improve efficiency and save valuable time.

Researchers are always seeking new opportunities to collaborate, often with other researchers situated around the world. However, they are familiar with the frustrations of incompatible file formats, multiple versions of a document attached to an email or lack of clarity re. the latest version of a document.

Activities ranging from bid writing, conference preparation (abstracts, presentations, posters etc.) or authoring a joint journal article are examples where use of an online collaborative tool can help.

Administrators find that using web2tools to write and distribute documents is a faster way of working collaboratively, with no individual held back from adding their content by somebody else holding onto the file. They also benefit from the simple ability to share documents with colleagues within and external to their institution.

Teachers are using collaborative writing tools to promote group work and peer review amongst students. They can monitor progress, provide feedback on assignments, and review document histories to view the evolution of a piece of work and who contributed at different stages.

"Some academics were initially critical of Google Docs because it isn't as fully-featured as Word, but now they are gathering the content using Docs, then transferring it to Word for final layout."



Who's using it?

The JISC-funded **APTSTAIRS** project tested collaborative technologies to create a common space where users (students, teachers, administrators and researchers) with different skills could work online together. They ran six demonstrator projects to examine how the latest online collaborative tools engage users in supporting and developing learning, teaching, administration and research.

Find out more: <http://www.bloomsbury.ac.uk/apt/>



What are the risks?

For each web2tool you use, find out who retains ownership of the content. Many web2tools enable a high level of privacy, allowing you to nominate who can view, comment upon or even edit the specific media document or file. Web2tools are generally robust, however they can suffer service interruptions from time to time. Never rely solely on a specific tool and consider what support you will receive (from the service or your institution) if there's a problem.

IP, copyright and legal issues should be taken into consideration when writing documents in an online environment. Be sure to read and understand the terms of use for any web2tool you begin to use and rely upon in your practice. For further guidance, visit the web2rights project website:

<http://www.web2rights.org.uk/>



Find out more...

<http://web2practice.jiscinvolve.org/>