

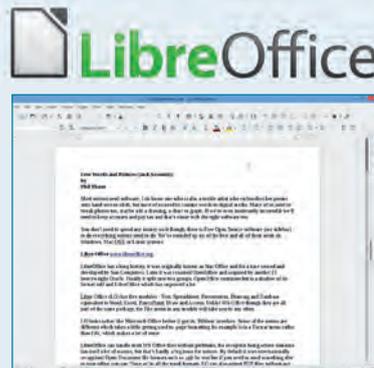
FREE reigns!

You don't need expensive licences for proprietary software from Microsoft or Adobe. **Phil Thane** highlights the best free software for all a writer's needs

Most writers need software. We know of one who is also a textile artist who embroiders her poems onto hand-woven cloth but for the rest of us, the need to commit words to digital media of some kind is a given. Many of us need to tweak photos too, maybe add a drawing, a chart or graph. If we're even moderately successful we'll need to keep accounts and pay tax and that's easier with the right software too.

Free software is very big business, Google uses it, and develops a lot of it. Android is based on a free operating system called Linux. Every social network is built on free software. Amazon and many other e-commerce sites rely on it. Big IT companies give away free software and then sell lucrative support contracts to other big companies. Even Microsoft uses Linux on its own servers, Apple's OSX and iOS are both based on a free system called BSD.

A consequence of all this big business activity is that us humble freelancers can have up to date, powerful, commercial grade software absolutely free. We've rounded up six of the best programs, covering everything a writer needs, and all of them work on Windows, Mac OSX or Linux systems.



LibreOffice

www.libreoffice.org

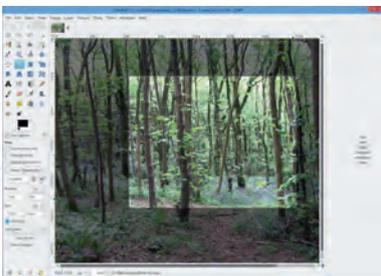
LibreOffice has a long history, it was originally known as Star Office and for a time owned and developed by Sun Computers. Later it was renamed OpenOffice and acquired by another IT heavyweight, Oracle. Finally it split into two groups – OpenOffice continues but is not well supported and LibreOffice, which has improved a lot.

LibreOffice (LO) has five modules – Text, Spreadsheet,

Presentation, Drawing and Database equivalent to Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Draw and Access. Unlike MS Office, though, they are all part of the same package; the File menu in any module will take you to any other.

LO looks rather like Microsoft Office before it got its 'Ribbon' interface. Some of the menus are different, which takes a little getting used to. Page formatting, for example, is in a Format menu rather than File, which makes a lot of sense but could confuse converts.

LibreOffice can handle most MS Office files without problems, the exception being macros, especially in spreadsheets, but that's hardly a big issue for writers. By default it uses Open Document file formats but if you need to send something else to your editor you can 'Save as' in all the usual formats. LO can also output pdf files without any additional software.



Gimp

www.gimp.org

If you illustrate your work, you will need something to tweak photos. Gimp is similar to Photoshop, maybe not quite good enough if you are at the cutting edge of graphic design but fine for writers who provide photographs for magazines, illustrated books and websites.

Gimp is a huge and complicated piece of software. If you do a lot of photographic work it will take you a while to learn how to get the best from it. If you are familiar with Photoshop, don't look for identical menu options and plugins – the interface is different. Think instead what you want to do and find the tool to do it, even if it is called something different.

Fortunately there is a huge amount of advice on the web or if you prefer books then we recommend *Beginning Gimp* by Akkana Peck, published by Apress.

Gimp has its own file format but can import and export any raster image file, including a lot of obsolete ones – handy if you have files from last century.



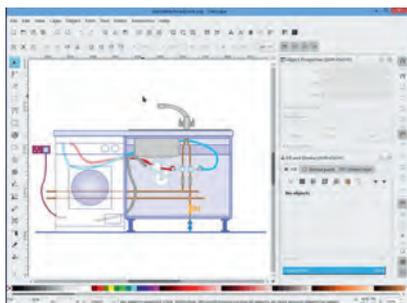
Scribus

www.scribus.net

Scribus is aimed at publishers not writers, but if you are self-publishing it could be just what you need. You can drop a picture into a word-processed page, but it's hard to achieve a professional looking layout. Desktop Publishing (DTP) takes over where Word, Writer etc leave off.

Just like the expensive DTP applications Scribus can work with text and images in a wide range of formats and allows you to create templates and styles so that every page in your work appears as you want.

Most professionals use either QuarkXpress or InDesign and Scribus isn't file compatible with either, but that isn't usually a problem. Scribus saves in its own format while you're working but once you've finished the work you can output 'press-ready' pdf files. Scribus' pre-flight check system will flag up any problems with text overflows, missing images, missing fonts and so on.



Inkscape

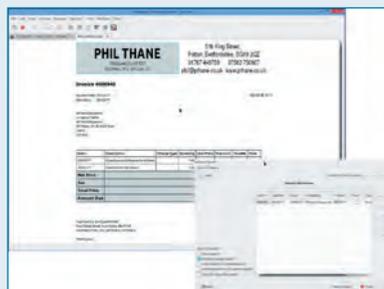
<https://inkscape.org>

Gimp and Photoshop edit pixels – dots of colour you can change and move around. That's great for photos and painting, but not ideal for drawings where you need accurate lines and curves. If you write anything technical you'll probably need a drawing application. Inkscape resembles Adobe Illustrator, Corel Draw or Xara.

As with Photoshop/Gimp, don't expect the Inkscape interface to be exactly the same as other drawing programs. Bear in mind it does the same job with different tools and you'll get used to it. If you are completely new to vector drawing, it is hard to learn but Inkscape is no harder than any of the others!

Our simple tip is don't try to draw anything right first time – everything is editable. Draw a line, curve or circle any size anywhere then move it, re-size it, change the line width, colour and fill. For really accurate work use the keyboard to input precise measurements and co-ordinates. Re-use elements too. Draw a table leg then copy and paste the other three. Keep all your work organised because you can often re-use elements from one drawing in another.

Inkscape uses the scalable vector graphic (.svg) format which is ideal for web design work, but can import and export common vector graphic files. For simple drawings use LibreOffice Draw.



GnuCash

www.gnucash.org

If you get paid for your writing, even if it's a sideline, you really should keep proper accounts, not least because you probably should be paying tax on your earnings.

GnuCash is serious accountancy software for small companies who might otherwise use Sage. You create entries for your customers and suppliers and then generate invoices and pay bills. You can print invoices or output them as pdfs to email to your customers. Invoices and bills are automatically posted to your accounts. GnuCash's Style Editor allows you to create your own bespoke style so that invoices and other documents look professional without you needing to buy headed paper.

The reporting system provides everything an accountant could ask for. For the average writer its most useful functions are Cash Flow and Receivable Ageing. The first run once a year will produce a simple profit and loss report suitable for appending to your tax return. The latter, run regularly, points out which customers owe you, how much and for how long.



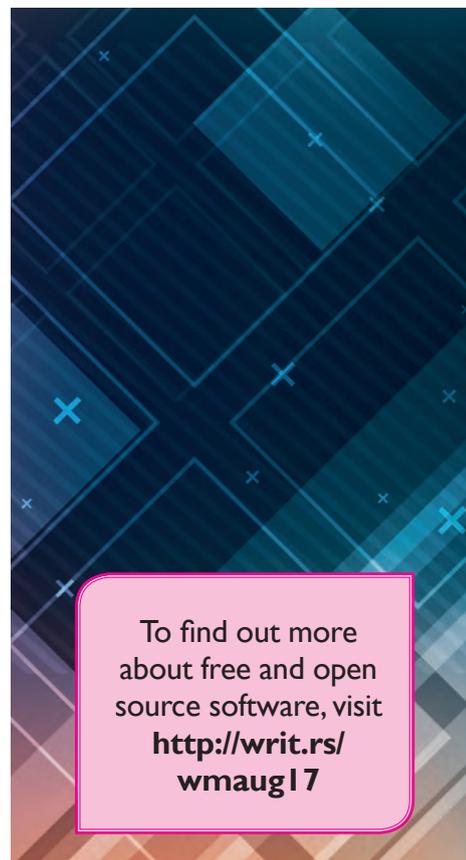
Calibre

<https://calibre-ebook.com>

Writers are also readers and many of us now use e-readers of various types, or read on a phone/tablet. Many of these devices use different formats tied to one particular supplier, if you change your device or want to be able to do detailed reading on a PC for work, but quickly scan something on your phone while you're out, you run into problems.

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