



Using the right tool for the right job

Everybody has something that bugs them...and my bugaboo is when I see someone working way too hard to get something done. Using the right tool for the right job makes the work go easier and faster. It makes the deliverable better. And it even helps the bottom line.

1. Word processing

We all know what word-processing is and the majority of the world uses MS Word to do it. Word documents can be delivered in portable document format (PDF) so they retain their look, carry no viruses and open easily on cell phones and iPads and most devices known to the modern world.

2. Large documents

Tech writers want total control of a large document. We want it to do literally what we tell it to every step of the way and we have massive coronaries if it crashes, so we learn to use Adobe Framemaker or MadCap Flare to create these over-size documents.

3. Graphically-oriented documents

To create a newsletter or brochure that involves layout with images, fancy headings or words going up the side of the page, continuations of content from a previous page, etc. you need Adobe InDesign. It also works great if you need to design huge posters or conference panels.

4. Online help files

I know there are numerous choices for developing online help, but the two primary programs tech writers seem to use are Adobe RoboHelp and MadCap Flare. I've used both. They do pretty much the same thing, I just happen to think that Flare does it faster and easier.

5. Websites

Adobe Dreamweaver is the industry standard. Dreamweaver sites seldom break. Maintenance free suits me just fine. I only go near them when I need to make a change or realize that a site looks a bit dated and should be replaced.

6. Images and graphics

Graphics programs abound. There are free ones and expense ones, bitmap and vector, simple and complicated. For graphics, use a program with which you are comfortable. The biggest help I can be on this is to watch for distortion. Don't take a small image and enlarge it, expecting it to print nicely. Your monitor sees things at 72 dots per inch (d.p.i). Your printer probably prints at 300. Watch out!

In a nutshell, just as you would not use a word processing program to create a spreadsheet, please don't use a graphics program to do online help or an online help program to write a letter. Learn the basics of your tools and when to use each one. You will be happy you did.