

Storyist

Mac users rejoice — this writing program gets it

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM tells us there are two kinds of writers — those who outline and those who don't. Even if the truth is that most writers are a little of both, software developers seem to see us as one or the other.

Most programs designed for writers are either supersonic word processors that format scripts and add some production applications or feature-rich outline programs that provide storyboarding, plot development and character building. For sure, the lines of demarcation are beginning to blur, but while there are a couple of newer programs that try to do both, none of them do both things really well.

And few, if any, feel like they're written by someone who actually understands what writers really need.

Until now.

Developed by Steve Shepard, a former Apple software engineer and aspiring novelist, Storyist is

a combination powerful word processor and outlining program that features the kind of intuitive, easy-to-use interface that has made Apple a favorite among creative people. But more important, it's remarkable in its functionality for real-world writing.

I'm one of those writers who hates to outline but often finds it necessary, which is why I've been longing for a program that could help me organize my ideas in a way that would let me better focus on what I'm writing. Two such programs are currently gathering dust on my software bookshelf.

I knew these programs wouldn't magically turn my raw ideas into a fleshed-out outline, but I thought they'd at least help me focus them. Even though I'm tech-savvy, I found both programs overly complex. But the real disappointment was not being able to adapt its features to my way of thinking and working.

I figured Storyist would be more of the same. But less than an hour into trying it, I was more than pleasantly surprised. I actually stopped exploring and began working. I realized that chief among its many attributes is how little effort you have to put into getting it to do what you want. And once

you get the hang of it, you start to see more and more ways it can help you.

The one downside, really, is that it's only available for Mac OSX (Tiger or later). But because the file format is based on open standards, a Storyist file can be imported into almost any script and/or word-processing program — and most certainly will be. (Take that, Final Draft.) By the way, the process works in reverse, too. You can import other program files *into* Storyist. (Shepard has even made a plugin available at (<http://storyist.com/support/developers/plugins.php>) for developers who want to write converters or text-processing tools.)

And yet the real revolution of Storyist is its price. At a struggling-writer-friendly \$59 to download (\$69 if you want the CD), it's hundreds less than the more ubiquitous formatting software. And its word-processing capabilities are every bit as powerful as, say, Final Draft or Movie Magic (minus the production tools).

There's more. Shepard says he developed the idea for Storyist when he left Apple and started concentrating on writing (he's finished a number of as-yet-unpublished manuscripts, the latest of which he plans to serialize online at his blog, www.steveshepard.com). Storyist was born out of his frustration at not being able to find a program that could do both outlining and word processing without having to switch programs or even windows.

The major scriptwriting programs are great at formatting scripts, but they really aren't geared to novelists. Writers like me, who work in both disciplines, are forced to use different programs for each, but because Shepard's writing passion is prose, he's made sure Storyist is as powerful a tool for writing novels as it is for scripts.

And for both scripts and novels, the word-processing and storyboarding aspects work in concert, practically seamlessly. You can import a file and then define a style sheet or use one of the built-in novel or screenwriting formats (all based on gen-

eral submission guidelines — a great feature for new writers). An "import assistant" leads you step-by-step through the style choices, allowing you to define pretty much any parameters (fonts, paragraphs, headers, footers, page margins, etc.) and fit them to your specific needs.

The program can break down scripts and novels by scene and chapter, respectively. These are then listed in outline form in the left-hand pane, where you can drag-and-drop to edit them.

Storyboarding and outline tools are located in windows above and to the left of your manuscript. You can develop and sketch out your story ideas, plot points and characters with a variety of simple-to-use tools that allow you to add your own details, including importing photos and other images. There's also a tool for writers who prefer working with story elements in the traditional outline form. These customizable notes are constantly accessible and searchable (a feature I used dozens of times) through a project manager. Story elements can be displayed in different ways, but my favorite were the "floating" multicolored index cards, which are visible as you're working on the main word-processing pane. You can even rearrange them on a virtual corkboard.

The ability to glance at your outlines and notes without closing the main manuscript window makes it a lot easier to concentrate on, well, the writing. Kind of the idea, isn't it?

The program comes with excellent support and clear and easy instructions and help pages. There's also a searchable forum to help solve issues or learn about the program's features.

Storyist did have some limitations — most of them were formatting related and due to Shepard's desire to use an open file format — but he says many of these will be addressed in future versions. For example, the elements "more" and "cont." are not yet part of the script style sheets, but are coming in Version 2.0 (available in January at MacWorld Conference & Expo). An upgrade will be ready in October — just in time for National Novel Writing month. **CS**

