

In the Classroom 58

Improve Your Writing with Scrivener

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. I certainly appreciate it. I know that you can be doing other things, you're hanging out with me, it certainly means a lot. I'm pretty excited actually because I am getting ready to head to New York City. I will be going to the SUNY Online Summit 2020. Always a learning opportunity and I'm excited to go.

I will certainly brief this out. It'll probably be a couple episodes from now. Today we're going to look at a writing tool that has rapidly become my favorite writing tool and certainly a centerpiece to the things that I use as far as creating documents and all kinds of other things. This tool is called Scrivener and it is a tool that a lot of writers use, fiction writers, nonfiction writers, they use this tool because it allows them to draft their documents and organize them and reorganize them much easier than you can do in Microsoft Word or Google Docs. Those are my other writing tools.

I use this program called Scrivener to draft by podcast episodes, I now use it to do my blog post and I've certainly been using it to write my books. I wish I had this when I was actually writing my dissertation, I think it would've made it so much easier but it is what it is. Before I go any further, I need to let you know that I am an affiliate sponsor of Scrivener. I like the tool so much that I want to let other people know about this wonderful tool.

An affiliate link, what that really means is if you purchase Scrivener through my link, they will provide me with some compensation. This does not increase the price to you but it's their way of extending appreciation to me because I'm telling you about this tool. I would be telling you about this tool regardless because it has served me so well. Let's get to it.

Why use Scrivener or why did I start using Scrivener? Basically, I was looking around for a writing tool that allowed me to write in a way that I had become accustomed to. What this means is I typically go out and do a lot of research and I use a tool called Zotero which I will be telling you about next week, so check that out and basically because of this research, I have all these little snippets of information that I'm trying to make sense of.

I needed a tool that I can pull all those snippets and be able to move them around very easily so then I can craft my paragraphs and craft my sections of whatever document. Scrivener allows me to do exactly that. I was using Microsoft Word and Google Docs to do this but man, they are so time-consuming. It's really hard to keep track of where all these different pieces are and get them moved into the places that are really useful and it was just taking too much time.

I was struggling to get a document that I wanted out of those particular tools. I use those tools to clean things up and do a lot of other things that I could do in Scrivener, but I haven't really figured out the best way that worked for me yet but I'm figuring it out and I use Scrivener more and more and I rely on Word and Google docs less and less. What is Scrivener?

Scrivener is a tool for writers, that's basically it. It has templates for all kinds of writing projects to include fiction, non-fiction, screenplays, dissertations, journal articles, you name it, you can probably find a template for it. Scrivener comes out with some basic templates already loaded but other people have been cool and they have gone ahead and created templates for all these other projects.

It's just a matter of finding and loading it up and going to work. You can also save your own templates, you create something, you like the way it is, you can save it as a template and then use Scrivener for those major projects. While you can use Scrivener for small writing projects, it is especially designed for long writing projects such as books, screenplays, things like that.

It has been a wonder tool for me. I have managed to get through my messy draft, get that all built-in Scrivener and now I'm using-- Going to my method draft and reorganizing things based on-- As I pulled it apart and putting it back together and it's so much easier to do that in Scrivener. Definitely, a huge fan. It has a lot of key features that I want to tell you about.

First of all, the primary piece is called the binder. It's just a three-ring binder that you put stuff in and you can move it around in your binder and this is where you organize all your writing content. This writing content can get very granular that you could be working with just a bullet from a list of bullets and you could have those individually collected or a paragraph and it allows you to move a paragraph around.

I started at a very atomic level, where I have these bullets or pieces of research and I start moving them around and pulling them together in order to then build my paragraphs and Scrivener has been wonderful for doing exactly that. With this binder, you can access different parts of your document. You can see what it looks like maybe as a whole chapter or a subsection of that chapter or even down to the paragraph level.

It allows you to tap into your notes, it allows you to tap into your references and your chapters, a very powerful tool. You can move things around simply by dragging and dropping or you can use keyboard commands to move things up and down and in and out with the keyboard commands. I've started to use those more and more. Really, the cool thing is you can see the whole document as a whole, you can see your whole book as one flowing document or you can, like I said, drill in and focus on one section or sub-part and get down to that paragraph or bullet level.

There's different ways that you can view your document, I've told you about the binder. The binder, that's the tool that I primarily use and it allows me to dive into different pieces and write on those different pieces. Jump to another piece much quicker than

I could ever do in Microsoft Word or in Google Docs. Much quicker. There's another view and I personally don't use it because this is just not my style, I'm not used to it.

It's called the Corkboard and basically you get to see index cards at the level that you're working at. If you're working at a very high level or chapters, you'll see the index cards for these chapters but then maybe in a chapter, you want to see what sections there are at so you can go to that level and they'll show you all the sections. The cool thing is you can move these index cards around, move them from place to place and when you do that it automatically updates your manuscript.

If you went back to the binder view, it would be updated based on how you dragged these index cards around. Definitely a powerful tool and you can also make notes on the index cards which goes into the inspector mode, which I'll tell you about in a little bit. Then finally you have your outlier view or the outlining view I mean. This allows you to see your project in its parts but it also taps into the metadata.

You can label each of these individual parts, you can get word counts, you can see the meta data. It's not something that I frequently use. I'm probably really under-utilizing Scrivener as a tool but every day I find something new and it's like, "Wow, where was that?" It's really helping me put the tool through its paces. I'm definitely under-utilizing it but I'm learning a lot more about it.

Other ways that you can view your document, you can view things side by side. It's possible to have one part of your documents sitting there that you're actually editing and then next to it, you can bring up your research. You can be looking at your research and typing at the same time with the two items side by side, or a top or bottom that you can have that available to you.

I used that all the time while I was working on my first book and tremendously helpful in doing that. Speaking of research, you can-- Scrivener also has a research folder where you can drag all your research. If you have a web page you can drag it from the browser, drop it into Scrivener and it will pull that web page in. If you have a document on your computer, you can drag it and drop it in there.

If you have a PDF document or a word document, you can drag it right into Scrivener and basically have a folder of your research available, so as you're writing that you can do this. As I mentioned earlier, there is a section called the inspector which holds all the metadata. This allows you to add notes referencing each of the different items that you have in your documents.

You can be having notes referencing a paragraph. If you were writing fiction this may be referencing to a scene or maybe referencing to a character or some historical notes, so you can add that. You can also add references to external items, add keywords so you can organize your document that way. You can also create custom metadata. If you've created your own organization, and you want to reference that metadata, you can certainly do that and certainly add comments and footnotes that would show up either as end notes or show up as footnotes in your document when you compile it.

That's very useful. I've personally had mixed results with that. It's not a strategy that I use, but there's been some updates and so I may explore it. It could be because I was very clumsy using Scrivener from the beginning and didn't fully understand how to use it. I was, like I said, clumsy and my document was all over the place. I've gotten better at that.

Then finally, you can take a snapshot of your document and with that snapshot, if you go to do a major revision, you always have that snapshot that you can revert back to or reference in order to clean it up. Another nice feature that I like about Scrivener is you can set writing targets for say, the number of words that you want to write and with this word count you can set it for the whole project or for each section to identify how many words that you've written and it allows you to stay on track.

If you use markdown language, which is a lightweight plain text formatting syntax, so you can do bold with just a couple keystrokes, and then it will format when it gets to whatever platform it's using, HTML or other formats. If that's how you craft documents, you could use the markdown language and so it supports it when it's editing documents.

Speaking of exporting documents, all kinds of ways that you can crank out a Scrivener document. You can send it out as a plain text or PDF. You can certainly put it out as Microsoft Word, which I use all the time. Open Document Format, so if you're using like office Libre, you can send it out in that format. If you want to just push it out as a web page, you can do that.

The other two pieces are, you can send it out as an E-pub or a Kindle mobi file, which allows you to create online books. Tremendously powerful tool for doing that. You can certainly format your output to make it look really the way you want to have a standard look to it. That's cool. Backing up, does it automatically. It also does auto saves as you're working, which I think is nice.

When I first started out using Scrivener, I'm thinking back, "Man, I wish I had this for my dissertation." It would've made life so much easier than how I did it. As I said, I am now using Scrivener to draft podcast episodes, blog posts, writing books. I'm thinking of getting it loaded at work because of the different documents that I have to craft there. It is becoming like I said, my go to tool for doing this type of work. I think you should check it out. Speaking of checking something out, here's a quick plug for my book.