

PEDAGOGIC TECHNIQUES: USING COLLABORATIVE WRITING TECHNOLOGY TO TEACH CONTRACT DRAFTING

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, professors who want to have students edit documents use one of two methods. They either have students make edits in a Word or WordPerfect document that can be sent back and forth between the professor and student, or that can be sent back and forth among students working together in a group. Professors may also have students take a hard copy of a provision of a document or a full document and have students make handwritten edits, either individually or in a group. However, new collaborative tools make shared editing of a document easier and also more interesting to students.

These are online applications, i.e., applications on the Internet rather than on the hard drive of a user's computer. In the past couple of years, developers have authored a variety of online applications—or “cloud” applications—for word processing. These applications work much like a traditional word processing program. Although they are less rich functionally, they make up for this with the convenience of allowing multiple users to collaborate on the same document in real time and with the security of having the most recent version of the document in an online account rather than on a single person's hard drive or flash drive. Two representative applications are Google Docs and Zoho Writer. Both have advantages and disadvantages, and the ultimate assessment of which is better will vary from user to user.

I. GOOGLE DOCS

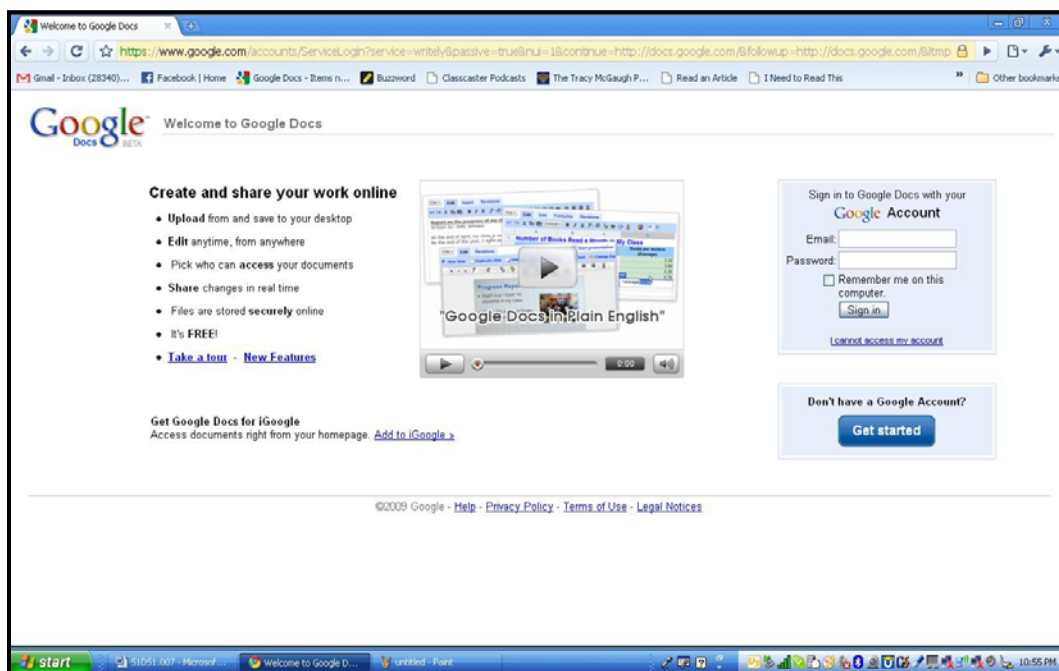
Google Docs is part of the vast Google empire of applications, the most popular of which is probably G-Mail. To use Google Docs in class, you and your students will first need to set up a Google account. This is not the same thing as a G-Mail account; however, if you or your students already have a G-Mail account, that username and password can also be used for Google Docs. The following steps will walk you through the process of setting up Google Docs to use it for in-class or out-of-class collaboration.

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In the past, you might have assigned students to draft a provision together and turn something in. Or you might have brought a hard copy to class and asked students to edit a provision individually, in groups, or as a class. With Google Docs, you can put the content into a Google Doc and then allow students to access your document and make changes directly on it.

Step 1: Create a Google Account

To create a Google account to use with Google Docs, you go to <http://docs.google.com>.

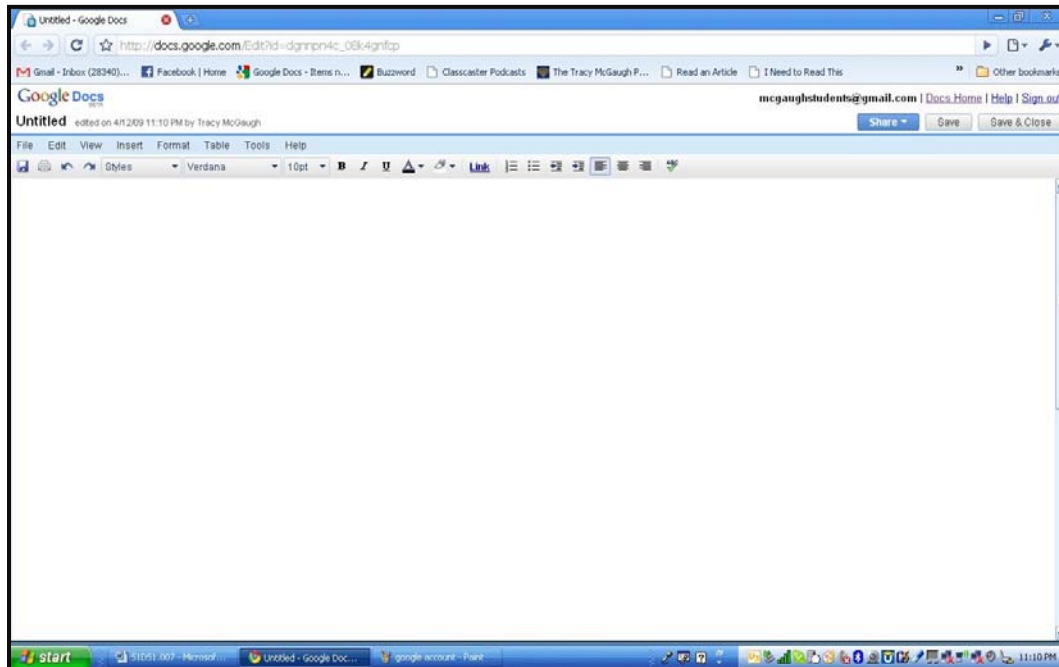


Users can create their accounts through this page. Also, this page offers a simple video tutorial instructing how to use Google Docs. When I use Google Docs in class, I ask my students to create their accounts and view the tutorial in advance of class.

Step 2: Create a Document

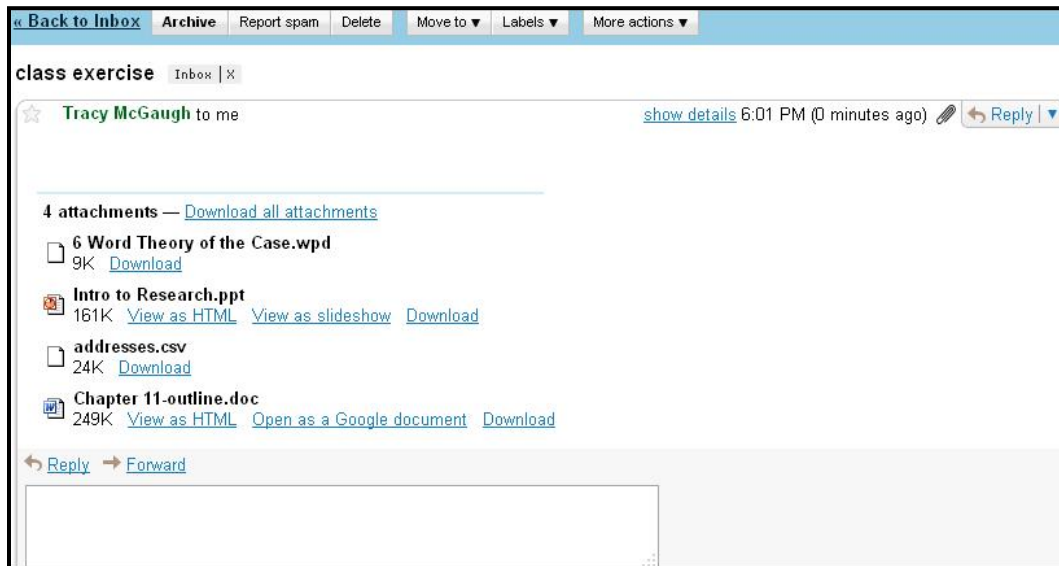
Google offers several types of files to open: a Word-type document, an Excel-type spreadsheet, and a PowerPoint-type presentation. In addition, Google offers a variety of templates that you might find helpful in creating documents. For now, I will assume that you want to use a Word-type document file for an in-class

collaborative drafting exercise. One way to get your content into Google Docs is to type it directly into a fresh Google document. When you open a fresh Google document, it looks similar to a fresh Word or Word Perfect page. If you know how to use Word or Word Perfect, then you can sort out quickly how to work in Google Docs.



Another way to get your content into Google Docs is to upload a Word file into Google Docs. This is simple to do; however, be aware that you may lose the formatting of a document when importing it into Google Docs.

One final way to open a document in Google Docs is to open a Word document attached to an e-mail that you receive through G-Mail. All Word documents that you receive in G-Mail as attachments can be opened directly into Google Docs.



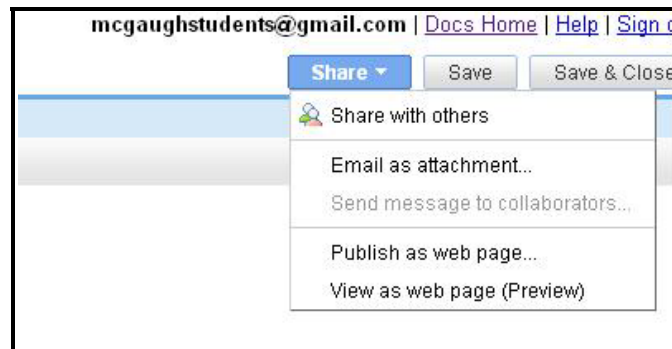
Notice that the Word document has an “Open as a Google document” option. This will open the document directly into your Google Docs account. One way to take advantage of this function is to have students e-mail you a draft of something in Word; you can then open all the students’ work in Google Docs, save it in a common folder, and then share particularly good examples using the Share function described in detail below. Another way I take advantage of this capability to open attachments directly into Google Docs is to open, for example, all of the attachments I receive that relate to a faculty meeting. Then I can save them all in a faculty meeting folder, take my laptop to the meeting, and have all relevant documents available to me with minimal time spent to organize the documents. I can also open up a document for my notes from the meeting, and then I have all relevant documents and my notes or to-do list in one place that I can access from any computer.

After you have created a document, you may want to set up folders to help you organize the documents you will create. On your Google Docs home page, you can create and color code your folders. This is very similar to the folders you might use to organize documents on your desktop or laptop computer. You can currently store as much as 7 gigabytes of information in your Google account. This is more space than many professors have used in their entire career, so it is generally more than sufficient for any collaborative documents you use with your students. Also, Google is constantly adding to the space allocated to each user, so you will find yourself with even more storage over time.

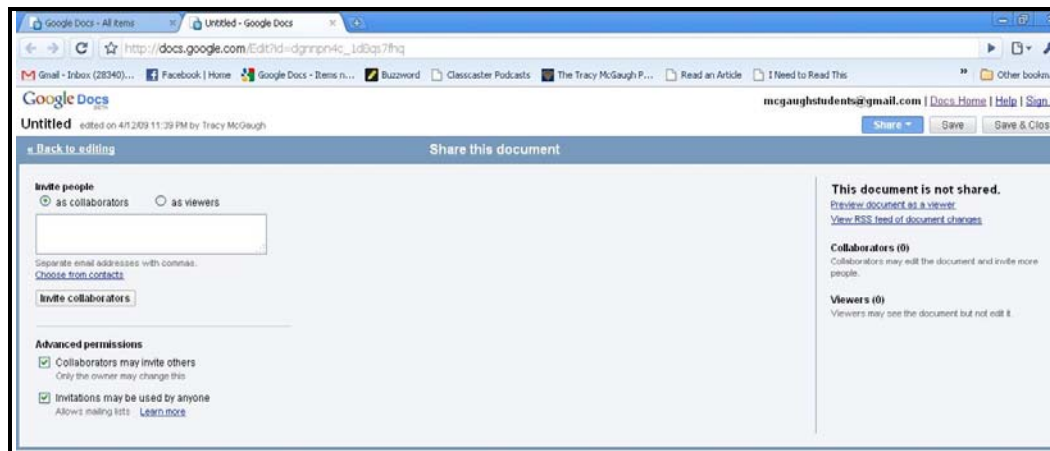
The next step is to invite students to collaborate on the document.

Step 3: Invite Students to Collaborate

When you are ready to invite the students to collaborate on the document, click “Share” in the upper-right corner of the page.



Choose “Share with others,” which will take you to the sharing screen.



To invite the students into the collaboration, you will need to know the e-mail addresses students used to set up their accounts. Therefore, you might find it easiest to use the students’ school e-mail addresses. Most professors can easily access a list of the students’ school e-mail addresses, and school addresses often identify the e-mail owner by name. Personal e-mail addresses sometimes do not (e.g., HuggyBear@aol.com). Once you have each student’s e-mail address entered in the list, you can group them together in your Google Docs settings as a group of collaborators that you can use again and again.

After you have invited the students as collaborators, they will receive an invitation via e-mail to collaborate on the document. The subject line of the e-mail will have the document title as the subject; you can also enter a message such as “no need to read before class” or “please review before class.” I will usually ask students to at least skim the document before class.

However, if there were a couple of documents that I did not want them to access before class, and instead I wanted it to be a surprise when we got there, I could come to class ahead of time, setup the invitation, and as they started walking in the door, I would hit “Send” on the invitation. I would tell them to check their e-mail and pull up the document. They could immediately open it as a Google document, or if they were not in Gmail, through a URL that would allow them to open it as a Google Doc.

Once you have invited someone as a collaborator on the document, that person will always appear in the list of people with whom you have shared documents. This list is under the list of folders that you have set up. This list of collaborators can make finding work from a specific student more convenient.

Step 4: Collaborating on a Document

Let’s assume that you have created an employment agreement for a physician, and you want the students to work in class on revising the agreement. Let’s further assume that the agreement has four main paragraphs, and you have four groups working in class, each assigned to revise and then explain a single paragraph. So Group 1 revises Paragraph 1, Group 2 revises Paragraph 2, and so on.

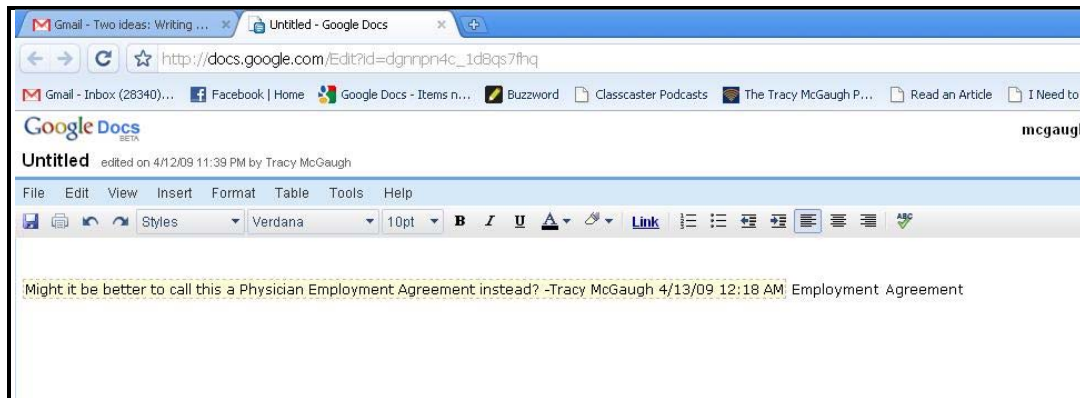
I ask each group to work on a single laptop so that only one person is logged on to the document from each group. Because everyone will have equal access to the revised document at the end of the class, there is no advantage to being the student who does the typing on his own laptop, so students are generally amenable to closing all but one laptop for the group. You can project the document at the front of the classroom using a screen projector and watch the students revise in real time. You can monitor the work of all four groups at the same time without having to circulate and risk disrupting the work of a group.

As the document is revised, Google Docs keeps a history of changes so you can later see what was changed and by whom. In fact, you can view any draft of the document and revert the current document to any prior draft if you please. This prevents you from ever screwing up a document, because you can always go back to the original document that you posted. Students who are continually editing and negotiating and changing can rest assured that if they end up liking the version from

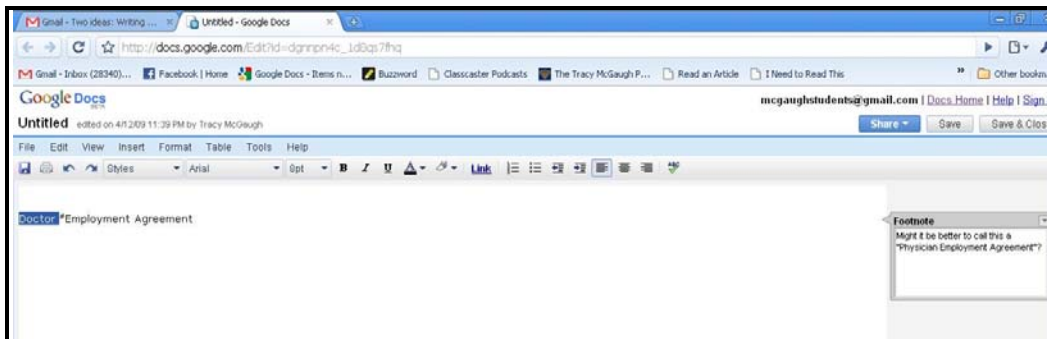
three versions ago, then they can go right back to it. Furthermore, the document saves itself every couple of minutes, allowing changes to be documented.

You do, however, want to exercise some control as to how much is happening to the document. If you have multiple people working on the same document at the same time, then every time somebody makes a change, the page refreshes. This makes things slightly difficult, so you probably want to keep the number down to two or three people at a time. When you have multiple people working on a document, there will be a band that scrolls across the bottom of the page that will show you who is working on the document by displaying the front part of their e-mail address. This is why you want your students to have e-mails that identify them by name.

Additionally, there is a redline or highlight function, as well as a comment feature. However, the comment feature isn't nearly as smooth as the margin bubble comments in Word. Instead, the comments come out as highlighted text that's inline in the document.



One possible “cheat” for bubble comments is to use the footnote function, which does place text into bubbles on the screen. In print, it converts the text into proper footnotes.



In class, I will sometimes have students use the highlight function so that I can tell quickly whether or not they changed something and whether or not this changes the meaning of the contract. I will tell them that I want them to highlight all of their changes. As you go through it with the first group, have them highlight in yellow, group two in orange, and the third group in blue. The only negative with this process is that the transfer back and forth between Word and Google is most effective when the formatting is very basic. Highlighting or anything else beyond basic formatting becomes tricky if you want to export it back into a Word document.

There are a number of other capabilities with Google Docs. There is a find-and-replace function. Although some of the more sophisticated functionality of Word is not here, you do not have to wait for a new version to come out years later for updates. Google is literally making new changes every day. For example, just six months ago Google Docs had no offline capability, but now it does have that capability. Once you go offline, Google Docs will then put the contract on your hard drive or wherever you want it to go. You can then work on it in any place that does not have an Internet connection. Once you get online, you can then sync the documents. When the offline and online documents sync, to the extent that there are contradictions, it is going to assume that the offline changes are the most recent and it will overwrite the online version. This is something you need to warn students about. If this is a document that some students are going to work on offline and some are going to work on online, students may want to make a list of their changes and then change the document online rather than making those changes offline and risking an unintended overwrite.

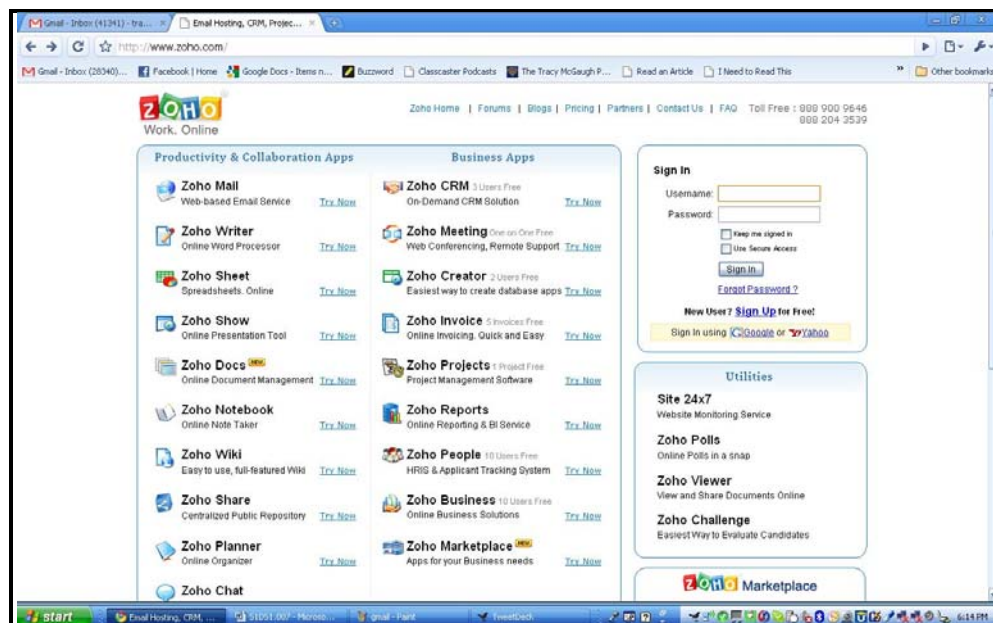
Further, the Google desktop function allows access to your hard drive. Anytime Google wants access to your hard drive a window will pop up that says, "This action allows access to your hard drive. Do you wish for this to happen?" As a result, you are not going to accidentally place things onto your hard drive.

One final caveat is that you should prepare your students for using this collaborative technology. Tell them in advance of the exercise that you are going to use Google Docs, and tell them why you have chosen to do this. Additionally, you need to encourage the students to tell you about any glitches that may occur, because there will undoubtedly be problems that need to be solved.

Once you have finished with an exercise document in Google Docs, you can leave it in that format for students to access later; however, you risk the possibility that a student will accidentally make changes to the document. For that reason, I download the document as a PDF file. You can also convert to a Word or RTF file. However, you cannot currently convert it to WordPerfect. After I download the PDF file, I usually post it on TWEN for students to access later if they wish.

II. ZOHOWRITER

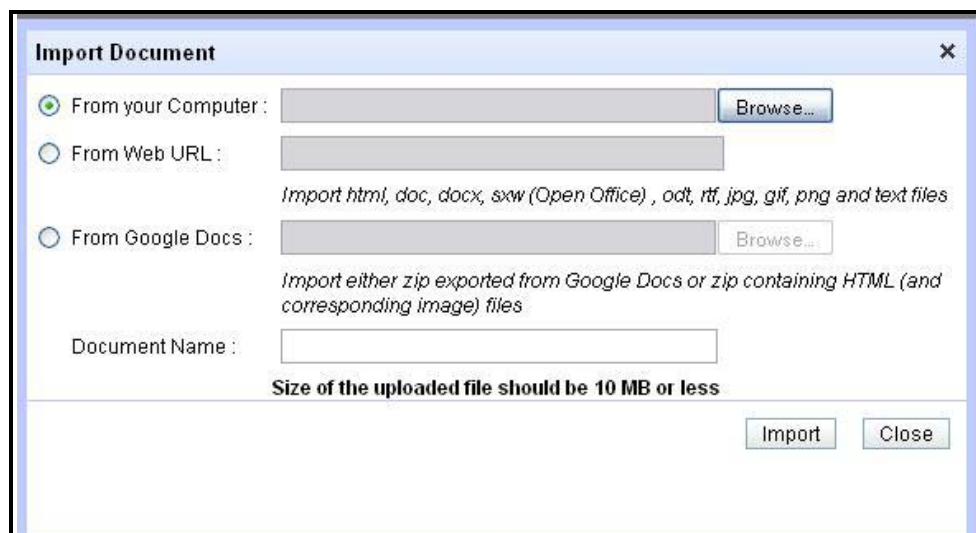
Zoho is a suite of online applications than you can access at www.zoho.com. Like Google Docs, it has a word processing application as well as a spreadsheet and presentations app. Also like Google Docs, you set up an account with a username and password. Although Zoho does not have the G-Mail tie-in advantages that Google Docs does, it's a much richer suite of applications, in terms of both the number of applications and their capabilities.



Zoho's word processing program is called Zoho Writer. Zoho does have an application called Zoho Docs. This is not a word processor; it's a document manager. This means that you can upload documents for others to download rather than e-mailing the documents to them. If you have large documents to share with students or they with you, this can be a useful application.

On the main screen of Zoho, at the top right is the login area. You can create a unique Zoho account username and password. However, if you already have a Google or Yahoo account, you can use that username and password. Many students use one or the other, so Zoho can be an attractive option for ease of setup.

Zoho Writer works much the same way that Google Docs does, but it has some advantages over Google Docs. First, you can import to Zoho from a variety of locations and in a variety of formats.



The screenshot shows a dialog box titled "Import Document" with a close button (X) in the top right corner. It contains three radio button options for where to import a document from:

- ☒ From your Computer : [text input field] [Browse... button]
- ☐ From Web URL : [text input field]
Import html, doc, docx, sww (Open Office) , odt, rtf, jpg, gif, png and text files
- ☐ From Google Docs : [text input field] [Browse... button]
Import either zip exported from Google Docs or zip containing HTML (and corresponding image) files

Below these options is a "Document Name : [text input field]" label. Underneath that, a note states: "Size of the uploaded file should be 10 MB or less". At the bottom right of the dialog are "Import" and "Close" buttons.

It also has history capability in that it keeps different versions of a document that will show you who worked on which version and how many versions have been used. Zoho also has online and offline capability, like Google Docs, so you can work on a document offline and have it synced with the online version the next time you log on to Zoho.

One of the reasons I like Zoho is that it allows you to add feedback as bubble comments, which Google Docs will not allow.

A new word processing application from Adobe (the Acrobat people) is Buzzword, available at www.buzzword.com. Buzzword also allows bubble

comments. The chief advantage I have experienced with Buzzword is that it will allow you to easily organize your documents by the name of the people with whom you have shared documents. This makes it easy to keep class assignments organized by student name. Like Google Docs and Zoho, Buzzword requires an easy-to-setup username and password.

III. TWITTER

Twitter is relatively new and something you might have heard a lot about but not personally used. Twitter was started as a tool for “microblogging.” Users can post 140-character messages. The messages themselves are called “tweets” and are akin to the status messages that might be familiar with from Facebook. While some use Twitter for microblogging, many teachers and students use it for other purposes. To see what others have posted on Twitter, you subscribe to their status messages. This is called “following.” You can either allow free access to your tweets, or you can require your approval before anyone can follow you.

Because it limits content to 140 characters, it can be a useful exercise in concise drafting. You can set up a twitter account and ask students to set them up as well. Then you would make sure that you are all following one another. After that, you could set up an editing or drafting exercise in which you require that students draft a sentence or provision and submit it via Twitter. This forces students to think carefully about word choice and length, something we all usually wish students would think more about. I have done an exercise along these lines. Students were enthusiastic about the challenge and remarked later at how surprised they were by how difficult it was. After all the tweets were in, I copied them all into a document (without identifying the authors), and we discussed whether each was effective and what accounted for our assessment. The document could be distributed via any one of the word processing apps already discussed so that all students could access it at once.

I would recommend that if you want students to use Twitter for these sorts of exercises, you and they should create a separate account for the course. This eliminates inadvertent personal Twitter messages.

Because Twitter is so new, teachers at all levels of education and in all disciplines are developing innovative ways to use it. To find additional ideas, you can simply do an Internet search for “Twitter” and “teachers” or “education.” One resource is a wiki called “Twitter4Teachers” at <http://twitter4teachers.pbwiki.com/>. It’s a listing of ideas by subject matter that can be edited by any user. This means that it is constantly being updated with new ideas.

IV. FACEBOOK

Facebook is a social networking site that allows users to post personal or professional information about themselves and to share that information with friends who are also on Facebook. Users also post “status messages.” The messages can be a reference to an interesting article the person has read or something as mundane as a message that the person had a good day. In addition, users can send one another private messages. Most of the “pages” on Facebook are individual user pages. However, there are also pages for groups a user can join or pages for individuals or causes that users can become “fans” of. When a user joins a group or becomes a fan, that user will then receive status updates from the group or fan page. For example, through my Facebook account, I’m a fan of The Oprah Winfrey Show. So I receive a daily message about what’s on the next episode of Oprah.

For the vast majority of Millennial students, Facebook has taken the place of e-mail; students generally consider e-mail to be too slow and to not offer enough (i.e., it’s only for the transmission of messages). The popularity of Facebook means that many students are on Facebook constantly. Therefore, if you want to reach them, one place you can send messages to your students is on Facebook rather than or in addition to e-mail. You can have a group page for your class, such as the one I have set up for my first-year legal writing students.



Although this is not much different than posting on TWEN or Blackboard, posting on Facebook is a way to allow students to do what you want them to do

while they are in an environment that they are going to be in anyway. Furthermore, it gives you credibility with the students when they see that you understand a little bit better than the average professor how they spend their time and how they prefer to receive information