

# Tech Tips To Help You Collaborate

BY RON VITALE

Looking to collaborate with another writer, but want to find a better way to work than sending documents back and forth through e-mail? Two new websites can help you solve your problems. Google Docs (formerly [www.writely.com](http://www.writely.com)) and Avvenu.com ([www.avvenu.com](http://www.avvenu.com)) both offer free website services.

Before I begin, here's an important news item that occurred in the middle of my writing this article: Not surprisingly, Google purchased Writely.com early in 2006 and has re-opened the site. You'll now need a Google account to access the Writely.com features as the service is now called Google Docs. For up-to-date information on Google Docs, read the official blog at: <http://writely.blogspot.com/>. With that important disclaimer out of the way, let's start off with what you can do with Google Docs. First, visit the Google Docs website, create an account, and you can then start collaborating with up to 50 people. It's that simple. With Google Docs, you can upload a document of up to 500 K (approximately 100 pages of single-spaced text) and images up to 2 MB in size. According to the site's FAQ, there is no limit to the number of documents you can upload, but the limitation of 500 K per text file is strictly enforced. For those of you working on a novel-sized manuscript, I would suggest breaking the piece into multiple documents and then combining the files into one large Word file once you're finished.

But what can you actually do on Google Docs? You have two choices to begin with: Create a document online and save the file on Google Docs's servers, or you can upload documents (MS Word, OpenOffice, RTF, text, or even HTML) directly to their servers. An important point for everyone concerned about security: Your files are encrypted so that only those people you wish to collaborate with can see/edit your files. Here's a direct quote from the Google Docs site concerning security: "A layered security architecture ensures that only people you authorize can view or modify a document." Google Docs is marketing their product

to businesses so that individuals who work at various offices can easily collaborate on documents. Their goal is to offer free services to all.

After you have created a document, select the "collaborate" feature for the file and then add in your collaborator's e-mail address. Your writing partner will receive an e-mail that contains a link to access the file online. If you have more than one collaborator, add in the rest of their e-mail addresses. Up to 50 people can access a single file. Once you're finished adding your collaborators, you and your partners can begin working on the same file online.

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I tested this feature and discovered some interesting results: Both you and your collaborators can click on the same document and begin editing the file online at the same time. Here's how editing works: When you click on the document, a separate web browser window opens that contains a text editor box with the document inside the text field. The editing box looks very similar to using MS Word and contains all the familiar functions (spell check, bold, italics, bullets, left justify, center, etc.).

You and your collaborators can work on the document at the same time, but there are limits. When trying to edit the same line of text in a manuscript as the line that my collaborator was working on, I received an error message when I tried to save the file: "Your most recent changes conflict with changes just made by a collaborator, and have been discarded. This should only affect what you have done in the last few seconds." I would recommend that you and your writing partners clearly

mark out ahead of time which sections of a document each of you will work on so that you're not in constant conflict. To help notify you when you're working on a document at the same time as a collaborator, Google Docs added a small box on the bottom left of the document edit text field that normally reads as: "No one else is editing this document." When a collaborator opens the same file, you'll see a message telling you who is now working on the file with you. If you're concerned about editing the same sections, a quick phone call to your writing partner could solve this problem.

What about data loss? At some point in our writing careers, we've all lost edits due to a computer rebooting mysteriously or a power outage. The good news is that while you work and edit a document online, the automatic save feature is initiated every minute to help protect you from any loss of data. If you make a mistake to the online document and want to revert back to an older revision, simply select the revisions tab and cycle through all your saved files. What I liked about the revision feature is its clear labeling of which changes were made by you and by your collaborators. You can revert back to an older version of a file that you had been working on only minutes ago or several days ago. Once you select the older file you want, click on the "Revert to this one" button and then continue working.

Let me be frank with you: Google was wise to snatch up Writely.com, but they will be in beta testing for at least a year or more. I suspect that great things are in store for the service since Google acquired the service. However, if you choose to use Writely.com, work smart and be sure that both you and your collaborators save the latest version of your document onto your local computer after each work session. Having an extra backup will save your lots of trouble in case of any problems.

Next on our list of websites to help you collaborate more efficiently is Avvenu.com ([www.avvenu.com](http://www.avvenu.com)). The Avvenu.com service advertises itself as al-

lowing you to: "Access your home or office computer, from around the corner or around the globe. With Avvenu, your mobile device (or any Internet-connected computer) gives you secure remote access to every document or image, whatever its size or file type. You can share access to specified content, too, with colleagues and customers...wherever they are. All for FREE!" Does Avvenu deliver on its promise? Yes and then some! With a little imagination and creativity, you can use the service for a variety of work. Want to share your digital pictures from the latest writing convention with your friends? Create a folder on your computer, share the contents with specific people (using their e-mail address), and you're done. The people who have access to your folder will receive an e-mail with a link to your files. They can click on the link and be brought directly to your computer, with access only to the folders/files that you selected.

If you wish to collaborate with one or more writers, create a folder and give your colleagues access to your files. That's all there is to it. However, setting up the Avvenu service is more complicated and restrictive than Google Docs. In order for Avvenu to work, you must have the Avvenu software running on your computer and your PC must be on. Essentially, your computer is being turned into a server that only select individuals can access, but your PC needs to be on for them to access the files. At the present time, Avvenu cannot be installed on a Mac and your PC must be running Windows XP with at least Service Pack 1. And of course, a broadband internet connection is required.

To use Avvenu's service, download the software (it's approximately 4 MB in size), install it, log into the Avvenu system online, search through the files on your computer via Avvenu's site, and select a folder that you want to share with others. Note that all of your computer's files remain on your PC. You're not uploading files to Avvenu's servers. The Avvenu software that you installed on your computer allows others direct access to your PC. Once you find the folder you wish to share with others, click on the "share folder" link and then add your collaborators' e-mail addresses to your contact list. You can also set up an expiration date after which the files will no

longer be accessible. Once you click on the "share now" button, your collaborators are sent an e-mail with a link that will allow them to access the files on your computer. Your collaborators do not even need to be signed up to Avvenu.com for them to have access to your files. They simply click on the link they received in the e-mail and a new web browser opens, showing them your files. The collaborator can then download any of the files in the folder you gave them access to. There are no file size limitations. Large files will take a long time to download, but that's the only drawback. However, keep in mind that Avvenu lets you share files on your computer only one way. A collaborator would be able to obtain all the files from you, but couldn't upload any new files to you or edit a document online and save a revision to your PC. She would have to e-mail you any revised MS Word files and then you would need to put the updated files into the correct folder.

Keep in mind, though, that Avvenu is not only a tool that lets you share files with anyone in the world who has a high speed internet connection, it's also a tool that will allow you to access all the files on your computer while you're away from home. Being able to pull any file off your computer and download it to a local machine could be a life saver. Imagine being at a writing convention and someone needs to see a manuscript of yours that you left home. All you'd need to do is access your computer via Avvenu, download the file to a local PC by logging into Avvenu's website, and then copy it to a USB pen drive and you'd have your important file with you in minutes. Remember, that your files reside on your PC. The Avvenu service is simply allowing you to access your files from the web.

If you're concerned about strings attached to this free service, Avvenu's response is: "The basic Avvenu service is free...and there is no 'catch.' We will not put advertising messages in your e-mails or reveal your registration information to third-parties. You will not be bombarded with spam because you have signed up with Avvenu."

Both Google Docs and Avvenu are good tools, but each one has specific uses. For a simple collaboration between sev-

eral writers, Google Docs is the tool to use. Each writer can work on the document online and then save their versions to Google Docs's servers. All versions are saved so you can go back and review different revisions to solve any missing threads that come up. On the other hand, Avvenu is a great tool to help you obtain your files when you're away from home, or to share any number of files with collaborators. Granted Avvenu does not allow for collaborators to upload files to you, but you can work around this obstacle.

For the low-low price of free, both Google Docs and Avvenu are services worth looking into for any writer who wishes to collaborate with others. Granted file transfer protocol (FTP) software is available (Serv-U at <http://www.serv-u.com/>) for \$50, but some technical knowledge is required. Not only would you need to install the FTP software on your PC, but you would also have to configure the software, ensure that you have a static IP address (or use the [www.no-ip.com](http://www.no-ip.com) service, faking a static IP), and then create accounts for each individual collaborator with specific rights and permissions. If you're not interested in all that rigmarole, then Google Docs and Avvenu are the tools for you—they're both straightforward and easy-to-use. Next time you're considering a collaboration with another writer, keep Google Docs and Avvenu in your tech toolbox. Both services will save you time, money and help increase your efficiency. ■

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