

Tired of Email Pinball?

How to Share News, Ideas and Plans without the Email Mess

by Allan Naguit. November 2005.



Recently, I went on a weekend cruise. It was great fun. Very relaxing. What wasn't too relaxing was the lead-up to it, including the number of emails that **clogged my email inbox** about the plans for the cruise: how much to pay, whom to pay, where to meet, time to meet, what to bring, what to expect, who's going, are passports required, what's our cabin number, how to get there, etcetera. As the launch date got closer, it seemed that everyone had something to add and say and was emailing **CC: everyone else**.

"everyone had something to add and say and was emailing CC: everyone else"

It all worked out in the end, of course, but wouldn't it have been nicer if all those bits of information were handily available at just one place and were guaranteed to be up-to-date?

Imagine the same kind of back-and-forth email frenzy that can happen with the following examples:

- Arranging a party (birthday, Christmas, New Year's, presents, etc.)
- Wedding arrangements

In business, similar things can happen with:

- arranging meetings (agenda, attendees, guests)
- collaborative business documents (proposals, requisitions, etc.)

So. How to calm the email frenzy? One way is through "on-line collaboration".

On-line Collaboration

collaborate. *n*
to work jointly with others in some endeavor.

-Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law

Imagine that you can create say, a Word document. However, it's not stored on your computer. Instead, it's somewhere on the net, just like a web page. So that your friends and/or colleagues can read it, you can send them an email with the link that points them to your (web page) document.

You can modify your document at any time by using something like your word processor. To see the latest changes to your document, your readers can

simply click on the link you emailed them, anytime they're connected to the net.

Now, imagine if you gave your readers the ability to update your document. Like you, they could visit that special (web page) document and change it, whenever they wanted. So, the next time you looked at your document, you would see the changes *they* had made.

That's it. You'd be collaborating on-line.

"... you could avoid having details slip through the cracks in the form of forgotten or lost emails."

Since effectively there's only the one document, all the bits of information are captured and are as up-to-date as you and your fellow collaborators make them. You can avoid missing important details in forgotten or lost emails. You can cut down on the email bouncing and juggling: what I call "email pinball".

How I Use Web-based Documents

For personal use, I set up a web document for the strictly-for-fun garage band I'm in. On our page we've listed our band's song list, which used to chop and change wildly. Now we have an "official song list". This web document is helping us focus on the right songs to practice. It's even helping us all play in the same key.

For work-related use, I'm doing a trial of summary "project schedule" pages. This way, my net-savvy clients for whom I'm doing consulting work can check on-line, anytime, to see how their respective projects are going. As long as I keep those pages informative but simple, they're a snap to keep up-to-date.

"my net-savvy clients can check on-line, anytime, to see how their respective projects are going."

How to Collaborate On-line

I've come across two web-based services that allow you to collaborate on-line. Both are **easy to use** and, of course (since this is me talking), **free**.

Let's have a look at **Writeboard** and **Writely**.



Writeboard (www.writeboard.com), on its website, explains what it is like this: "Writeboards are sharable, web-based text documents that let you save every edit, roll back to any version, and easily compare changes. Use

Writeboard to write solo or collaborate with others."



Writely (www.writely.com), on its website, puts it like this: "Collaborate. Publish. Blog. It's FREE! Simple and SECURE web document sharing. The Web Word Processor".

Both work in similar ways. Basically, you need to supply three things:

- email address
- password
- the name of the (web) document to create

You'll be presented with a blank document once you've signed up. Editing is easy. *Writeboard* has some basic text-formatting codes to follow (which may seem a bit strange at first). Meanwhile, the user interface for *Writely* is much more advanced; you'll see why the makers call it the "Web Word Processor". After editing, save your work and you're done. The next time you visit this page, your document will be as you left it. Note that as part of the sign-up, you'll get a welcome email which will include your page's link and password.

(By the way, if you need help keeping track of your passwords, you can have a read of an article I wrote: <http://www.funai.com.au/funai-ezine-passwords.html>.)

The collaborative part comes when you invite others to share in maintaining your document. In *Writely*, this is done by choosing the **Collaborate** tab then supplying the email addresses of those with whom you wish to share your document. In *Writeboard*, you click on the **Invite people** to collaborate link.

Your invitees will get an email with all they need to access the web document (including link and password).

Both services keep track of revisions and can compare different versions of a document. You can revert to previous versions if there's been a mistake or if you don't like the changes. Each service can highlight differences between versions making those easy to spot.

You can export your document. This will allow you to keep a copy of your work on your computer as a backup. (As I've written before, backups are always a good idea - <http://www.funai.com.au/funai-ezine-backups.html>).

Both allow simultaneous editing of documents by different people. If you do this, *Writeboard* pops up a

warning screen (a "proceed at your own risk" type of message) to let you know but will allow you to go ahead with a click. *Writely* doesn't even blink (i.e., no warning pop-up). It'll even tell you who the other person is via a little display on the bottom left of your screen.

There are other differences between the two services. In terms of what you can do, *Writely* really is just like using a word processor. The icons should look familiar. You can change fonts, insert bullets, use tables, change text alignment, etc. Another feature is "Publish". A published document can be viewed by your readers but not edited. You can even use *Writely* to post to your blog.

Writeboard, on the other hand, doesn't try to be a word processor. It's more like using Notepad in Windows; comparatively, it's very basic. For some though, that's enough. It does have the facility for leaving comments without editing the actual *Writeboard* text. This allows people to chat about the text without making changes.

You need to consider the system requirements for each service. Essentially, their support of web-browsers is not universal. Whether you choose *Writely* or *Writeboard* may depend on your intended audience and on which browser(s) you think or know they use.

Writely works on Internet Explorer (IE) 5.5+ (Win), Mozilla 1.4+ (Mac & Win) and Firefox 1.0.6+ (Mac & Win - except for 1.5bn on the Mac). The website states, "Writely is not supported, and probably won't run on" IE 5 (Mac) or IE 4 (Win), Netscape 4, Opera, Safari.

Writeboard requires IE 6.x, Safari, or Firefox. *Writeboard* doesn't work with Internet Explorer 5.x.

Final Words

As for which service is "better", *Writely* or *Writeboard*, it depends. The answer will be according to taste and need. One can do some things the other can't, and vice versa. One's user-interface may be friendlier to you than the other. Still, *Writely* and *Writeboard* are so easy to try and to use, I suggest you do just that. They're both good! Useful, easy and free.

" They're both good!
Useful,
easy and
free "

Allan Naguit is an I.T. Consultant for Funai Pty Ltd, an outfit that provides "I.T. Handyman Services" for small businesses and home offices based in the Sydney Metropolitan Area (Australia). Just like a handyman, but for computers and IT.

For more tips on "how to unblock your computer's pipes", visit our website at www.funai.com.au.