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Inside the Google Toolbox

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Inside the Google Tool Box

Debbie Ginsberg

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Google offers many useful tools in addition to search, Gmail, and Google Calendar. These are some of our favorites.



Google Docs

<https://docs.google.com>

Google Docs offers tools for word processing, presentations, drawings, spreadsheets, and simple forms. Users can convert Office documents – including Word and PowerPoint files – to Google Docs and vice versa.

Benefits

- Access Google Docs documents anywhere with an internet connection.
- Share documents with anyone; users can allow others to edit the document or limit sharing to viewing only.
- Preserve document revisions – no need to save multiple copies of a document.

Drawbacks

- Simplified interface does not include advanced features. For example, Docs offers only limited support for footnotes and Presentation cannot create slides with animation.
- Converted documents may not retain all features from the original document. For example, Word documents will not retain any mark-up edits (although comments are preserved).
- Some users have reported slow editing with multiple tabs open (I haven't experienced this problem myself).



Google Voice

<https://www.google.com/voice>

Use Google Voice to place and receive calls and texts online, organize voice mail, and transcribe voice messages. This isn't a separate phone service, but rather a tool to manage multiple phone numbers.

Benefits

- Users can set up Google Voice as a single inbox for all voice mail.
- Transcribes voice mail messages and can send the transcriptions to an email or text number.

- Low cost international calls (domestic and Canadian calls up to 3 hours are free for now; free texting).
- Can be used to tie several phone numbers together – all will ring when one number is called; advanced features can handle configurations like disabling home phone numbers during work hours.
- Can record calls (all parties on the line are notified).

Drawbacks

- Transcriptions can become garbled.
- The service is free now – but will that change?
- Some services may require a fee.



Picasa

<http://picasa.google.com/>

This free application helps users organize and share photos quickly and easily.

- Includes basic tools to touchup photos (not a full photo editor).
- Can automatically scan and import photos from anywhere on your computer.
- Available for Mac and PC.
- Can automatically recognize and tag faces.

Three Big Caveats

While Google tools are simple and convenient to use, there are tradeoffs:

- **Privacy** – all of these tools are subject to Google’s privacy policies, which can change over time. If the tool includes advertisements, Google may use user-created content to determine which ads to display to individual users. This is an automatic process but has privacy implications.
- **Reliability** – like anything else, Google tools can break and a particular tool or service may not be available when you need it. If this happens, you may not be able to access your voice mail or documents until the problem is resolved.
- **Continued Service** – if Google decides a service doesn’t work within their business model, it may be discontinued or modified. In 2009, Google launched the collaborative tool Google Wave, an application which offered many possibilities for education. In 2010, Google discontinued development on the Wave tool due to lack of interest from businesses. This could happen to any of its other tools and services, too, although the above tools are currently fairly popular.

Find dozens of more Google tools at <http://www.google.com/intl/en/options/>.