

Software Review: Microsoft OneNote, an All-Purpose Planner

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If you purchased a recent home version of MS Office, which includes the programs, Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, you also got a lesser known program called OneNote (file extension *.one*). OneNote was created in 2002, and has been a part of some versions of the Office suite since Office 2003. It was, however, a long time before I even opened this program. It was described as being good for “note-keeping and sharing,” which weren’t activities I commonly did on my computer. It was only recently that I decided to find out what OneNote was all about. I was pleasantly surprised. Read on to find out why.



Adding Information to a Notebook

OneNote lets you create notes, gather information, and organize it all using a simple system modeled after a ring binder. You open a new Notebook, add Sections, indicated by tabs, and insert Pages within the sections. You can type notes anywhere on a page. Each ‘note’ will be in its own “note container,” somewhat like a text box, which you can move, resize or merge with other notes. This basic feature makes the program popular with college students who use it to take lecture notes. You can also add items from the web or files from your computer. To capture a portion of a web page, for example, you highlight the section, click ‘Insert Screen Clipping,’ and the web section appears on the OneNote page. Besides text, you can copy and paste photos, drawings, or any file from your computer such as a document or spreadsheet. PowerPoint slide shows appear as printouts. You can create audio or video recordings of meetings or interviews directly in OneNote. One Note saves your work continuously and automatically so nothing is lost. It also keeps a backup copy on your computer or online.

Organizing a Notebook

OneNote gives the user many options for organizing notebooks. These range from practically random to highly structured layouts. You can expand the page size, add, rename, and reorganize pages any time. Page and whole notebook templates are available at the MS website to help with layout of the OneNote content. Just looking through the templates gave me ideas on uses for One Note. Interesting template topics I found included landscape planning, preparing for a residential move, a family reunion organizer, and a cookbook. Practical page designs included address and phone lists, to-do lists, and a health history chart. Just like in Word, you can design your own notebook layout and save it as a template.

To find out how OneNote works, I decided to use it to plan a fall cruise/land tour vacation in the New England – Eastern Canada region. First I opened OneNote and displayed the Ribbon by clicking the small arrow next to the Help icon. The ribbon is not

displayed by default, but contains all the commands and editing tools. Then I opened a new Notebook (File – New) and named it Canadian Cruise. Once I recognized that the Tabs along the top of the notebook indicated Sections and that I could name them and add as many pages as I wanted, I created a few section Tabs to get started: Cruise Itineraries, Land Tours, Budget, and a To Do List complete with checkboxes to keep track of my planning tasks.

In the Cruise Itineraries section, I created three pages. On my Cruise Lines page, I added my favorite cruise lines with contact information and website addresses, each which appears as a hyperlink. Pressing the Tab key after each bit of information automatically creates a table. Pressing Enter adds a new row. On the Ports to Visit page, I listed those stops we wanted to make, knowing I could add more detail later. My last page, Itineraries, was my first experiment in gathering research material into OneNote. Using Insert – Screen Clipping, I captured a specific itinerary offered by Norwegian Cruise Lines which listed dates, times, ports, and a map of the trip. I typed a few notes to accompany this snip, such as the cost of a balcony cabin, and dragged them onto a corner of the map. Then I added a larger map of the New England and Canadian Maritimes area from Google Maps. I did the same sort of captures for two other cruise lines and pasted them in below the first. I noticed that my pages expanded as needed.

Sharing a Notebook

At this point I decided to share my Notebook with our Kentucky friends who often travel with us and might be enticed to accompany us on this trip. I logged in to my SkyDrive page (skydrive.live.com), the Microsoft cloud storage location. I also have a copy of this notebook saved on my computer. (Another option for sharing would have been Dropbox, a free program for file-sharing.) My friends already have access to one folder on my SkyDrive site so adding a new folder was easy. I uploaded my Canadian Cruise OneNote notebook to SkyDrive, adjusted the permissions to let my friends view it, and then notified them by email. It is also possible in OneNote 2010 to create shared notebooks which can be edited by more than one person at the same time. I saved that for another day.

My final step was to add the free OneNote app to my iPad so I could synchronize my work between devices. OneNote has free apps for many mobile devices, including Android cell phones and tablets as well as iPhones, iPads, and Windows phones. It can be synchronized across devices – PC's, laptops, and mobiles – using Live Mesh, a free syncing program from Microsoft. If you don't have MS Office, the stand alone OneNote program can be purchased from Microsoft for about \$80. If you do own MS Office, certainly try OneNote. It is easy to learn and amazingly flexible.