

6 open source tools for staying organized



A productivity guide for notes,
kanban, mind mapping, and more
By Kevin Sonney

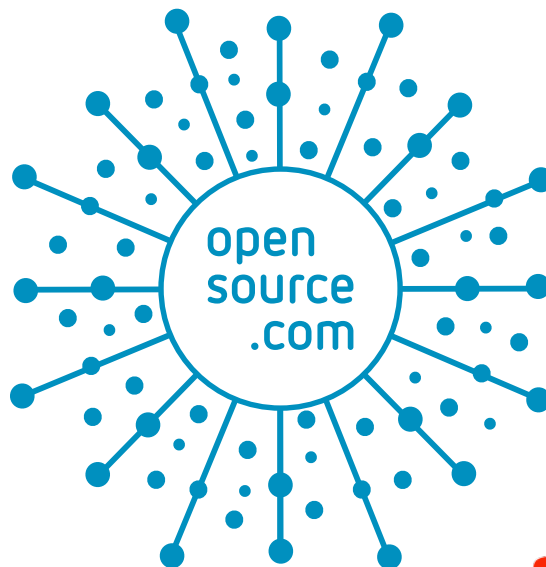


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KEVIN SONNEY IS A TECHNOLOGY PROFESSIONAL, MEDIA PRODUCER, AND PODCASTER. A Linux Sysadmin and Open Source advocate, Kevin has over 25 years in the IT industry, with over 15 years in Open Source.

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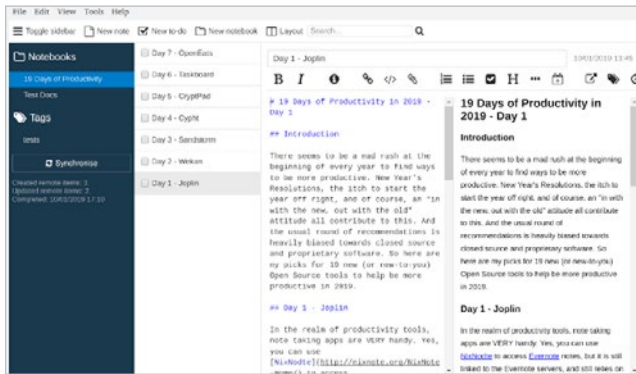
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Introduction

IN OUR BUSY WORLD, people seem to constantly be searching for ways to be more productive. The usual round of recommendations is heavily biased towards closed source and proprietary software. It doesn't have to be that way. Here are my picks for open source tools to help you stay organized so you have time be more productive.

Joplin, a note-taking app

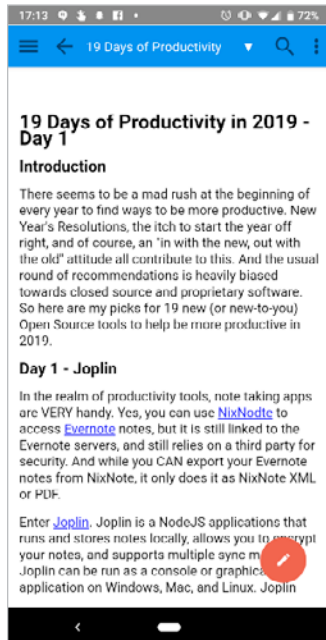
IN THE REALM OF PRODUCTIVITY TOOLS, note-taking apps are VERY handy. Yes, you can use the open source NixNote [1] to access Evernote [2] notes, but it's still linked to the Evernote servers and still relies on a third party for security. And while you CAN export your Evernote notes from NixNote, the only format options are NixNote XML or PDF files.



Joplin's GUI.

Enter Joplin [3]. Joplin is a NodeJS application that runs and stores notes locally, allows you to encrypt your notes and supports multiple sync methods. Joplin can run as a console or graphical application on Windows, Mac, and Linux. Joplin also has mobile apps for Android and iOS, meaning you can take your notes with you without a major hassle. Joplin even allows you to format notes with Markdown, HTML, or plain text.

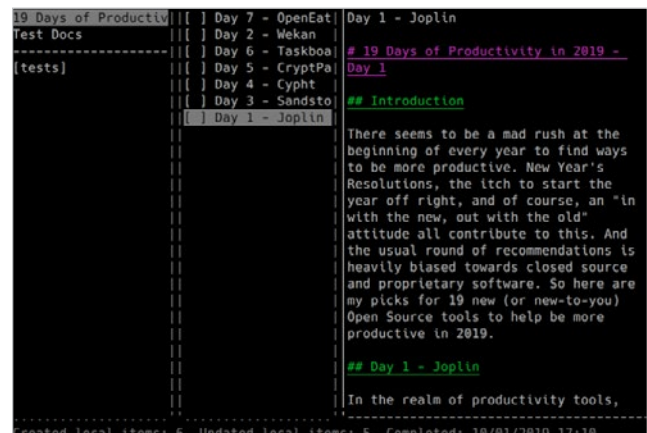
One really nice thing about Joplin is it supports two kinds of notes: plain notes and to-do notes. Plain notes are what you expect—documents containing text. To-do notes, on the other hand, have



Joplin's Android app.

a checkbox in the notes list that allows you to mark them “done.” And since the to-do note is still a note, you can include lists, documentation, and additional to-do items in a to-do note.

When using the GUI, you can toggle editor views between plain text, WYSIWYG, and a split screen showing both the source text and the rendered view. You can also specify an external editor in the GUI, making it easy to update notes with Vim, Emacs, or any other editor capable of handling text documents.



Joplin in the console.

The console interface is absolutely fantastic. While it lacks a WYSIWYG editor, it defaults to the text editor for your login. It also has a powerful command mode that allows you to do almost everything you can do in the GUI version. And it renders Markdown correctly in the viewer.

You can group notes in notebooks and tag notes for easy grouping across your notebooks. And it even has built-in search, so you can find things if you forget where you put them.

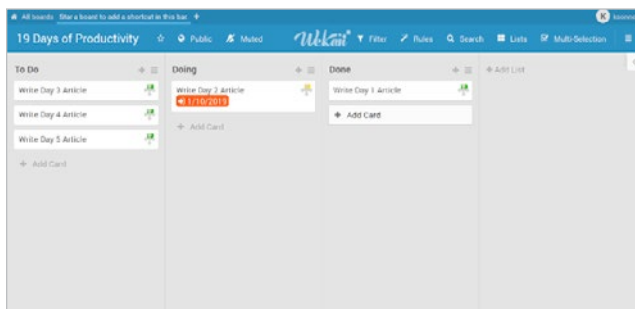
Overall, Joplin is a first-class note-taking app (and a great alternative to Evernote [4]) that will help you be organized and more productive over the next year.

Links

- [1] <http://nixnote.org/NixNote-Home/>
- [2] <https://evernote.com/>
- [3] <https://joplinapp.org/>
- [4] <https://opensource.com/article/17/12/joplin-open-source-evernote-alternative>

Wekan, an open source kanban board

KANBAN BOARDS [1] are a mainstay of today's agile processes. And many of us (myself included) use them to organize not just our work but also our personal lives. I know several artists who use apps like Trello [2] to keep track of their commission lists as well as what's in progress and what's complete.



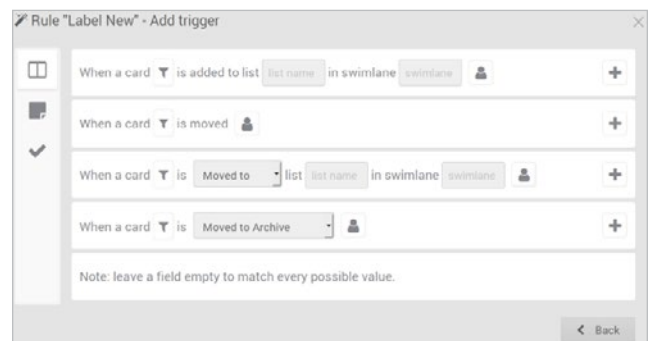
Wekan running locally

But these apps are often linked to a work account or a commercial service. Enter Wekan [3], an open source kanban board you can run locally or on the service of your choice. Wekan offers much of the same functionality as other Kanban apps, such as creating boards, lists, swimlanes, and cards, dragging and dropping between lists, assigning to users, labeling cards, and doing pretty much everything else you'd expect in a modern kanban board.



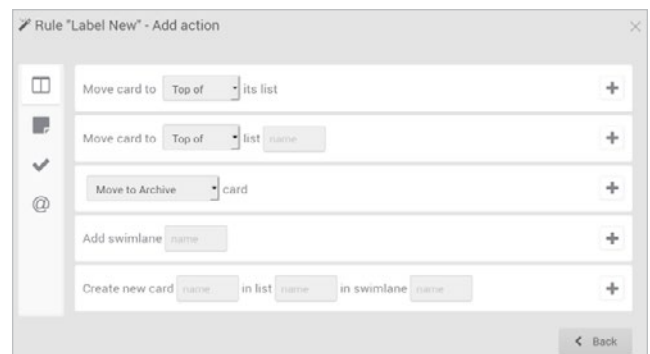
Wekan rules list

The thing that distinguishes Wekan from most other kanban boards is the built-in rules. While most other boards support emailing updates, Wekan allows you to set up triggers when taking actions on cards, checklists, and labels.



Wekan rule triggers

Wekan can then take actions like moving cards, updating labels, adding checklists, and sending emails.



Wekan rule actions

Setting up Wekan locally is a snap—literally. If your desktop supports Snapcraft [4] applications, installing is as easy as:

```
sudo snap install wekan
```

It also supports Docker, which means installing on a server is reasonably straightforward on most servers and desktops.

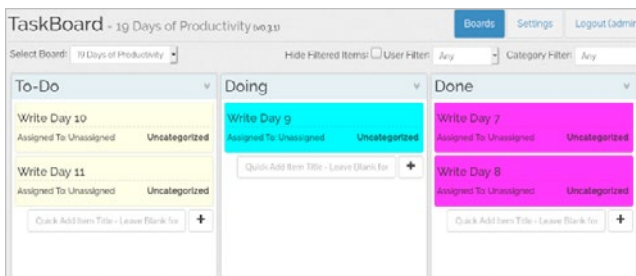
Overall, if you want a nice kanban board that you can run yourself, Wekan has you covered.

Links

- [1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kanban>
- [2] <https://trello.com/>
- [3] <https://wekan.github.io/>
- [4] <https://snapcraft.io/>

TaskBoard, a lightweight kanban board

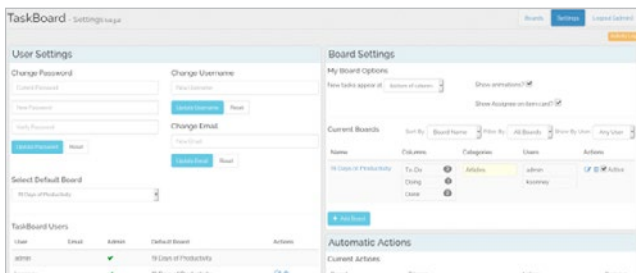
AS I WROTE IN THE SECOND CHAPTER in this guide, kanban boards are pretty popular these days. And not all kanban boards are created equal. TaskBoard [1] is a PHP application that is easy to set up on an existing web server and has a set of functions that make it easy to use and manage.



TaskBoard board

Installation [2] is as simple as unzipping the files on your web server, running a script or two, and making sure the correct directories are accessible. The first time you start it up, you're presented with a login form, and then it's time to start adding users and making boards. Board creation options include adding the columns you want to use and setting the default color of the cards. You can also assign users to boards so everyone sees only the boards they need to see.

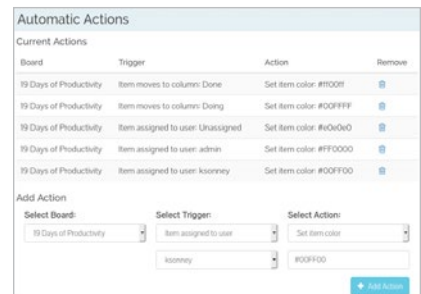
User management is lightweight, and all accounts are local to the server. You can set a default board for everyone on the server, and users can set their own default boards, too. These options can be useful when someone works on one board more than others.



TaskBoard settings

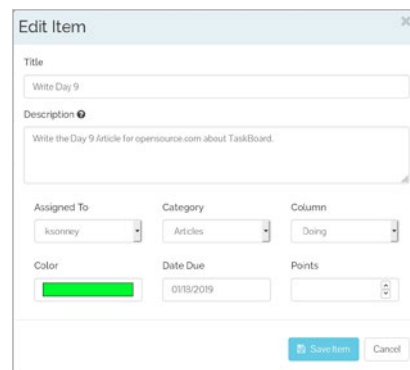
TaskBoard also allows you to create automatic actions, which are actions taken upon changes to user assignment, columns, or card categories. Although TaskBoard is not as powerful as some other kanban apps, you can set up automatic actions

to make cards more visible for board users, clear due dates, and auto-assign new cards to people as needed. For example, in the screenshot below, if a card is assigned to the "admin" user,



TaskBoard Automatic Actions

its color is changed to red, and when a card is assigned to my user, its color is changed to teal. I've also added an action to clear an item's due date if it's added to the "To-Do" column and to auto-assign cards to my user when that happens.



Editing a TaskBoard card

is optional, but if you are using TaskBoard for scrum planning or other agile techniques, it is a really handy feature. You can also filter the view by users and categories. This can be helpful on a team with multiple work streams going on, as it allows a team lead or manager to get status information about progress or a person's workload.

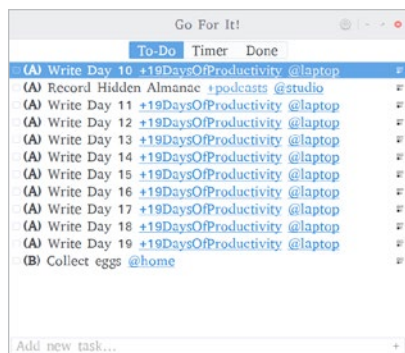
If you need a reasonably lightweight kanban board, check out TaskBoard. It installs quickly, has some nice features, and is very, very easy to use. It's also flexible enough to be used for development teams, personal task tracking, and a whole lot more.

Links

- [1] <https://taskboard.matthewross.me/>
- [2] <https://taskboard.matthewross.me/docs/>

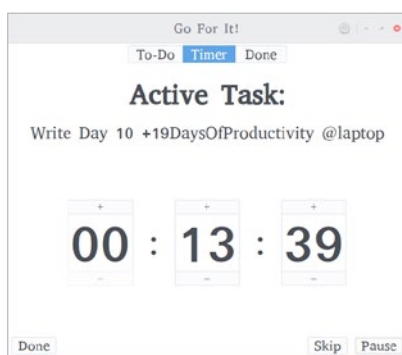
Go For It, a flexible to-do list application

SOMETIMES WHAT A PERSON NEEDS to be productive isn't a fancy kanban board or a set of notes, but a simple, straightforward to-do list. Something that is as basic as "add item to list, check it off when done." And for that, the plain-text `Todo.txt` [1] system is possibly one of the easiest to use, and it's supported on almost every system out there.



allows drag-and-drop ordering of tasks, allowing users to organize to-do items in the order they want to execute them. It also supports priorities, projects, and contexts, as outlined in the `Todo.txt` format guidelines [3]. And, it can filter tasks by context or project simply by clicking on the project or context in the task list.

At first, Go For It may look the same as just about any other `Todo.txt` program, but looks can be deceiving. The real feature that sets Go For It apart is that it includes a built-in Pomodoro Technique [4] timer. Select the task you want to complete, switch to the Timer tab, and click Start. When the task is done, simply click Done, and it will automatically reset the timer and pick the next task on the list. You can pause and restart the timer as well as click Skip to jump to the next task (or break). It provides a



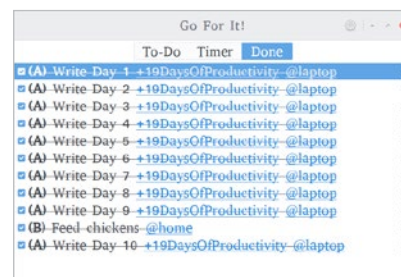
warning when 60 seconds are left for the current task. The default time for tasks is set at 25 minutes, and the default time for breaks is set at five minutes. You can adjust this in the Settings screen, as well as the location of the directory containing your `Todo.txt` and `done.txt` files.



Go For It's third tab, Done, allows you to look at the tasks you've completed and clean them out when you want. Being able to look at what you've accomplished can be very motivating

and a good way to get a feel for where you are in a longer process.

It also has all of `Todo.txt`'s other advantages. Go For It's list is accessible by other programs that use the same format, including `Todo.txt`'s original command-line tool [5] and any add-ons [6] you've installed.



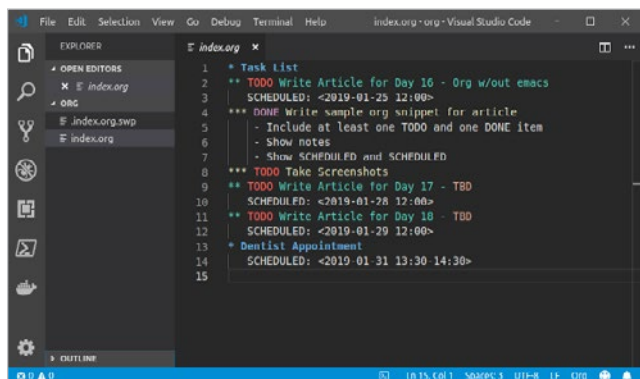
Go For It seeks to be a simple tool to help manage your to-do list and get those items done. If you already use `Todo.txt`, Go For It is a fantastic addition to your toolkit, and if you don't, it's a really good way to start using one of the simplest and most flexible systems available.

Links

- [1] <http://todotxt.org/>
- [2] <http://manuel-kehl.de/projects/go-for-it/>
- [3] <https://github.com/todotxt/todo.txt>
- [4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique
- [5] <https://github.com/todotxt/todo.txt-cli>
- [6] <https://github.com/todotxt/todo.txt-cli/wiki/ToDo.sh-Add-on-Directory>

Org mode without Emacs

ORG MODE [1] (or just Org) is not in the least bit new, but there are still many people who have never used it. They would love to try it out to get a feel for how Org can help them be productive. But the biggest barrier is that Org is associated with Emacs, and many people think one requires the other. Not so! Org can be used with a variety of other tools and editors once you understand the basics.



Org, at its very heart, is a structured text file. It has headers, subheaders, and keywords that allow other tools to parse files into agendas and to-do lists. Org files can be edited with any flat-text editor (e.g., Vim [2], Atom [3], or Visual Studio Code [4]), and many have plugins that help create and manage Org files.

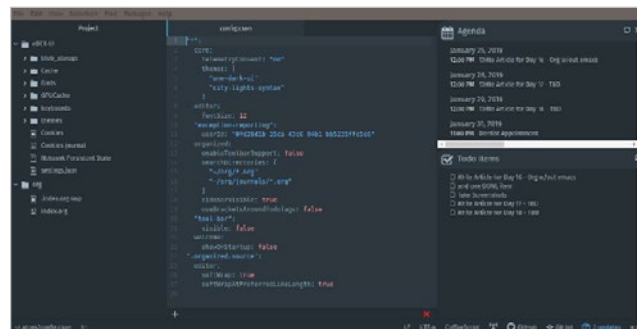
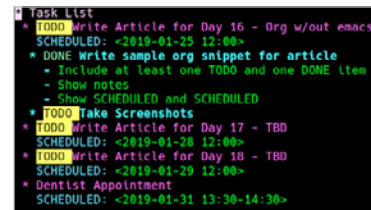
A basic Org file looks something like this:

```
* Task List
** TODO Write Article for Day 16 - Org w/out emacs
   DEADLINE: <2019-01-25 12:00>
*** DONE Write sample org snippet for article
    - Include at least one TODO and one DONE item
    - Show notes
    - Show SCHEDULED and DEADLINE
*** TODO Take Screenshots
** TODO Write Article for Day 17 - TBD
   SCHEDULED: <2019-01-28 12:00>
** TODO Write Article for Day 18 - TBD
   SCHEDULED: <2019-01-29 12:00>
* Dentist Appointment
   SCHEDULED: <2019-01-31 13:30-14:30>
```

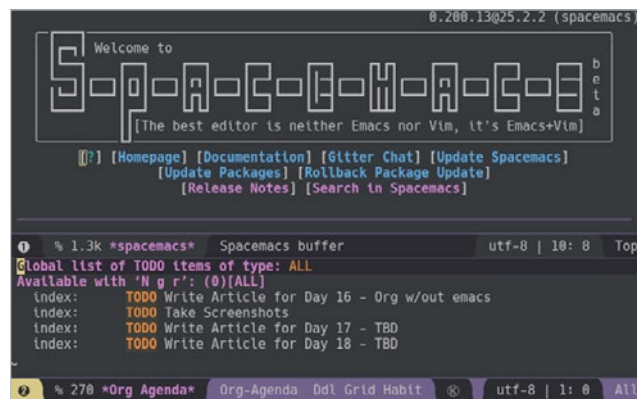
Org uses an outline format that uses * as bullets to indicate an item's level. Any item that begins with the word **TODO** (yes, in all caps) is just that—a to-do item. The work **DONE** indicates it is completed. **SCHEDULED** and **DEADLINE** indicate dates and times relevant to the item. If there's no time in either field, the item is considered an all-day event.

With the right plugins, your favorite text editor becomes a powerhouse of productivity and organization. For example, the vim-orgmode [5] plugin's features include functions to create Org files, syntax highlighting, and key commands to generate agendas and comprehensive to-do lists across files.

The Atom Organized [6] plugin adds a sidebar on the right side of the screen that shows the agenda and to-do items in Org files. It can read from multiple files by default with a path set up in the configuration options. The Todo sidebar allows you to click on a to-do item to mark it done, then automatically updates the source Org file.



There are also a whole host of tools that “speak Org” to help keep you productive. With libraries in Python, Perl, PHP, NodeJS, and more, you can develop your own scripts and tools. And, of course, there is also Emacs [7], which has Org support within the core distribution.



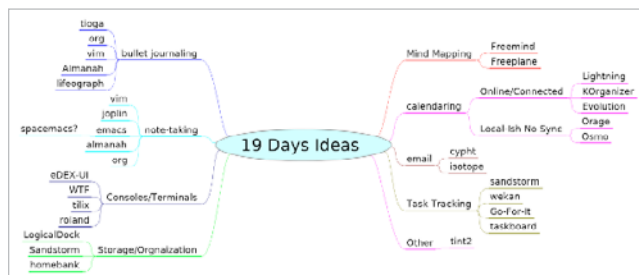
Org mode is one of the best tools for keeping on track with what needs to be done and when. And, contrary to myth, it doesn't need Emacs, just a text editor.

Links

- [1] <https://orgmode.org/>
- [2] <https://www.vim.org/>
- [3] <https://atom.io/>
- [4] <https://code.visualstudio.com/>
- [5] <https://github.com/jceb/vim-orgmode>
- [6] <https://atom.io/packages/organized>
- [7] <https://www.gnu.org/software/emacs/>

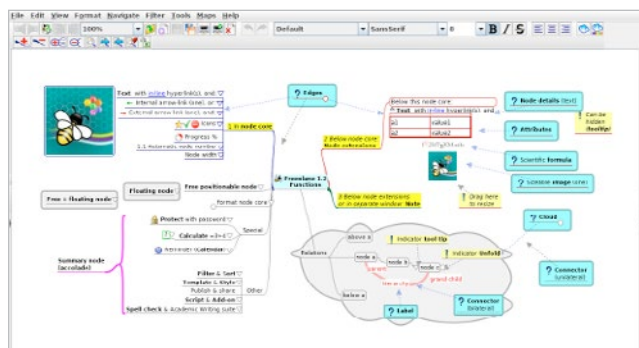
Freeplane, an open source mind mapping application

MIND MAPS [1] are one of the more valuable tools I've used for quickly brainstorming ideas and capturing data. Mind mapping is a versatile process that helps show how things are related and can be used to quickly organize interrelated information. From a planning perspective, mind mapping allows you to quickly perform a brain dump around a single concept, idea, or technology.



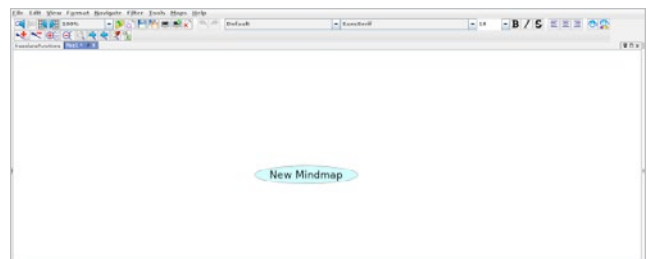
Freeplane [2] is a desktop application that makes it easy to create, view, edit, and share mind maps. It is a redesign of FreeMind [3], which was the go-to mind-mapping application for quite some time.

Installing Freeplane is pretty easy. It is a Java [4] application and distributed as a ZIP file with scripts to start the application on Linux, Windows, and MacOS. At its first startup, its main window includes an example mind map with links to documentation about all the different things you can do with Freeplane.



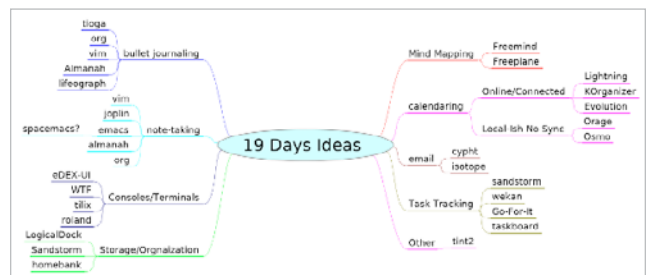
You have a choice of templates when you create a new mind map. The standard template (likely at the bottom of the list) works for most cases. Just start typing the idea or phrase you want to start with, and your text will replace the center text. Pressing the Insert key will add a branch (or node) off the center with a blank field where you can fill in something

associated with the idea. Pressing Insert again will add another node connected to the first one. Pressing Enter on a node will add a node parallel to that one.



As you add nodes, you may come up with another thought or idea related to the main topic. Using either the mouse or the Arrow keys, go back to the center of the map and press Insert. A new node will be created off the main topic.

If you want to go beyond Freeplane's base functionality, right-click on any of the nodes to bring up a Properties menu for that node. The Tool pane (activated under the View->Controls menu) contains customization options galore, including line shape and thickness, border shapes, colors, and much, much more. The Calendar tab allows you to insert dates into the nodes and set reminders for when nodes are due. (Note that reminders work only when Freeplane is running.) Mind maps can be exported to several formats, including common images, XML, Microsoft Project, Markdown, and OPML.



Freeplane gives you all the tools you'll need to create vibrant and useful mind maps, getting your ideas out of your head and into a place where you can take action on them.

Links

- [1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map
- [2] <https://www.freeplane.org/wiki/index.php/Home>
- [3] <https://sourceforge.net/projects/freemind/>
- [4] <https://www.java.com/en/>