

Outliners

NoteBook 2.0Publisher: Circus Ponies www.circusponies.com

Pros: Auto-indexing pages, uncluttered interface.

Cons: No user-definable columns

Min specs: Mac OS X 10.3.

Price: \$49

Star rating: ★★★★★

Notebook 3.5Publisher: Hog Bay Software
www.hogbaysoftware.com

Pros: Quick, unobtrusive, aliasing of outline items.

Cons: No multimedia support

Min specs: Mac OS X 10.3.

Price: \$27

Star rating: ★★★★★

OmniOutliner Professional 3.1Publisher: Omni Group <https://store.omnigroup.com>

Pros: User-definable multi-column cells; column aggregation.

Cons: Multimedia supported only externally, profusion of palettes

Min specs: Mac OS X 10.2.

Price: \$69

Star rating: ★★★★★

NoteTaker 1.9.4Publisher: AquaMinds www.aquaminds.com

Pros: Powerful Java-applet plug-ins; scriptable.

Cons: Idiosyncratic interface.

Min specs: Mac OS X 10.2, plug-ins require OS X 10.3 and Java 1.4.2.

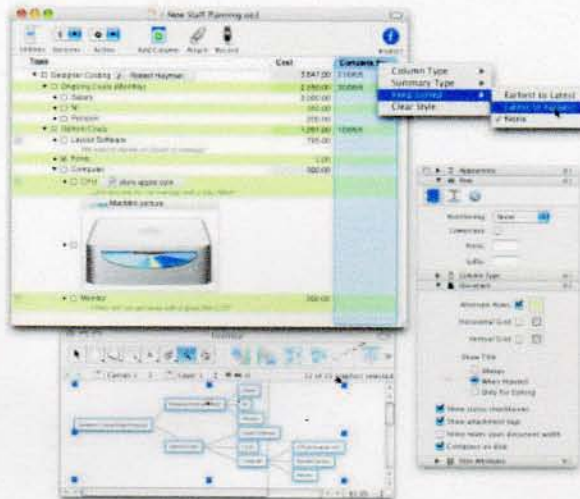
Price: \$69

Star rating: ★★★★★

One class of Mac application currently going through a renaissance is the outliner: a tool for ordering your thoughts hierarchically. In the mid-1990s we saw most word-processing and presentation applications include some form of outlining feature, which at the time made sense, seen as a way for writers to plan documents, or for managers to order an argument. But with the enormous availability of raw data via the Web, emails, and databases, the outliner has a new role: as information organizer. We look at four current top-dog contenders.

Get a professional opinion

For those who've toyed with outline view in Word, an OmniOutliner Professional document will seem familiar: a hierarchy of headings, subheadings, and points that you can show or hide different level of the hierarchy, using standard 'reveal' triangles. But here, your outlines are really 'rows' of information, and items can be more than just text. You can drag-&-drop pictures, contacts from your address book, Web links, or even documents. You can add smart checkboxes (that reflect the state of



any sub-items), pop-up lists, and summarized columns to each point (so that totals get added-up, or the earliest date is shown), you can auto-number items, and sort your outline (within the hierarchy) by any of the columns.

Searching for items is straightforward, and like other Omni products, you can exert fine control over formatting. The program also plays well with others; you can export documents as OPML (open standard for outliner products), you can save your outlines as HTML (static or dynamic), or RTF.

Go the whole hog

At the other extreme, there's Hog Bay Notebook (HBN). Described as a thought container, it focuses on the storing, organizing and retrieval of textual notes: we're talking outliner as data collator. Interface-wise, you might be mistaken for thinking you're in Apple Mail.

This is no accident. Indeed the developer trumpets the use of the classic three-paneled layout as being the quickest and most succinct way to represent and organize information. Folder, files, and outlines replace the traditional headings, subheadings, and points, and further extending the Mail metaphor into something more like the Finder, HBN lets you 'alias' outline items, so that the same item can appear under different headings. There's even a trash icon, so deletions be selectively undone.

The blistering fast search box at the top looks just like the one in AppleMail, but allows Google-like Boolean searches so that you can find matches for say "X but not Y": the results are ranked by relevance, and clicking on an item, shows you the contents à la Apple Mail. You can even set a floating window option, so it's always available for making notes on the fly.

Take good notes

Mac users don't just want to organize plain text: being able to organize pictures and video is just as important. OmniOutliner handles all of these admirably, but AquaMinds' NoteTaker takes things just that little bit further. NoteTaker documents resemble a notebook — with customizable look and feel — that can include not just pictures and video, voice annotations (which, unlike in OmniOutliner, play in the page), but also has the ability to embed an actual Web browser, and via its new plug-in architecture, Java applets: for example you can query an SQL database, and display the results as outline items.

Versatile

OmniOutliner files can even be opened in OmniGroup's OmniGraffle, and have it displayed in chart form. And of course, it's AppleScriptable. OmniOutliner's a powerful tool, but it still treats an outline as just a clever text document.

It also makes collecting information from other sources easier by letting you add a clipping service to a particular page in a notebook. In Safari, say, select some text, and from the contextual menu select the NoteTaker submenu, and choose the clipping page you want to add it to. NoteTaker is produced by part of the team that created the original Notebook application on the NeXT box, and this is one idea that made it over from there.

In use, NoteTaker is like a Swiss Army knife. It can probably do everything you could possibly want an outliner to do, but despite its scriptability, user definable keyboard shortcuts, and plug-in architecture, the interface is often counter-intuitive and un-Maclike.

Ponies not pony

NoteTaker isn't the only outliner app from the NeXT stable. Circus Ponies NoteBook, now updated to version 2.0, is also written by someone who worked on that project. There are a number of common features: a real spiral-bound notebook look-&-feel, clipping services, documents organized by sections and pages, and the ability store (and replay) pictures, sound, video, documents, and text on the page. It too has an index tab on every notebook that automatically keeps track of text, capitalized words, URLs, keywords, attachments, creation and due dates, and so forth. And again, you can customize the look — different paper, ring-bound or hole-punched, colours and names of tabs, and so on.

It doesn't provide all the tools that NoteTaker does, but instead of concentrating on extracting stones from horses' hooves, it pays attention to those details that matter to Mac users. Just two examples: images on the page are stored in a Media Frame, which lets you scale and rotate them and add photo-borders, drop shadows, and even photo corners; every item in NoteBook can be assigned to a single category, while NoteBook items can have multiple keywords and multiple 'stickers' — icons that you can customize and give meaning to — and both are of course indexed automatically, and are searchable.

Macworld's buying advice

Organizational chartists, OmniOutliner (plus OmniGraffle) is for you, and pure text junkies, Hog Bay Notebook's right up your street. But to organize all your Mac thoughts — text, image, sound, Web links — you should plump for Circus Ponies NoteBook: an app so Mac-like that the name should get the 'i' prefix.
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