

(Approx. 1360 words)

So You Want to Write a Book

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Perhaps you want to document your family's history or preserve a collection of recipes, or you may have idea you think you could sell to others. Not long ago, you would have few choices between a loose-leaf notebook and trying to interest a publisher. Today the large gap between these is filled by e-books, which you can distribute yourself to a few friends or to a wider audience through an on-line publisher. This article will cover only the easy part, converting your word-processor file to an e-book, and will ignore the much more difficult areas of writing and marketing. See the references at the end of this article for some ideas on these.

E-books have many advantages over print books, in addition to being much less expensive to reproduce and distribute.

- Since e-books are searchable, indexes are much less important than for print books, although both profit from a good table of contents.
- Material can be copied from an e-book (unless it's copy protected) and pasted into another document. The process is much more complex for a print book, as it requires a copier (and optical character recognition if the material must be edited).
- A hardware e-book reader, such as a Kindle, is about the same size and weight as a print book. You can store many e-books on a reader with about the same size and weight as a single print book.
- E-books allow the insertion of multiple, labeled bookmarks that mark particular points on a page. Print bookmarks mark just the page unless you write in the book.

The two most popular e-book file formats are pdf and epub, but azw3 (for Amazon's Kindle readers) is also common.

A pdf file is an image of a set of printed pages. You set every detail of the layout: the number of characters per line, their fonts, the number of lines per page, and the size and position of images. The only program you must deal with is your word processor as most can export to pdf files directly. Your prospective readers probably have an application to read pdf files; they don't have to acquire anything new. However, since you don't know what device the reader will use to display the book, in particular its screen size and resolution, the text may not be legible without excessive scrolling, especially for readers with aging eyes. You also can't be sure the table of contents will be easily accessible. The first screen-shot shows how a pdf reader displays a page of an e-book. (This pdf reader does make the table of contents easily available.)

439 of 615 < > Q 126.275

Index

- WiFi Security – August 2010 40:
- Should You Try Linux? – October 2010 40:
- Privacy on the Internet – December 2010 40:
- Tor, Anonymity Online – February 2011 40:
- Cloud Computing – April 2011 40:
- Microsoft Software Updates – June 2011 41:
- Buying a New Windows PC – August 2011 41:
- ▼ The Windows 7 Era 41:
- Building a PC – October 2011 41:
- Virtual Machines on Home Computers – November 2011 42:
- Windows 7 Partitioning – December 2011 42:
- Securing Windows 7 – January 2012 42:
- Disaster Recovery and Error Correction in Windows 7 – F... 43:
- Adding Disk Space to Windows 7 – March 2012 43:
- PartedMagic – April 2012 43:
- Setting WNF Default Applications – May 2012 44:
- File Recovery Strategies – June 2012 44:
- File Recovery Using Windows Graphical Tools – July 2012 45:
- File Recovery Using Command-line Tools – August 2012 45:
- Extending the Life of Your XP PC – September 2012 46:
- Exploring PC Hardware with Windows 7 – October 2012 47:
- Tuning Windows 7 – November 2012 47:
- Digital Photography – December 2012 48:
- Windows 7 Live – January 2013 48:
- Windows 7 Libraries – February 2013 48:
- External Storage – March 2013 49:
- Windows 7 Disk Management – April 2013 49:
- Interpreting SMART Data – May 2013 49:
- Disaster Recovery: A Case Study – June 2013 50:
- Home Networks – July 2013 51:
- Network Debugging – August 2013 52:
- Expanding Home Networks – September 2013 52:
- Goodbye XP – October 2013 53:
- Tiny Computers – November 2013 53:
- Live CD-ROMs – December 2013 54:
- Buying a New Computer – January 2014 55:
- Image Processing Software 1 – February 2014 55:
- Image Processing Software 2 – March 2014 55:
- Image Processing 3 – April 2014 56:

PartedMagic – April 2012

Although modern operating systems are robust, sometimes they need maintenance, either to repair problems or because we want to make changes. And many times the things we want to do are not possible within the operating system, because the tools aren't available or because the operations can't take place while the system is live. One solution is to use a live-CD, which is an operating system that boots directly from a CD-ROM or a USB memory stick and doesn't use the hard disk at all. This has the advantage that you can perform any operation you like on the dormant hard disk. The situation is similar to doing an autopsy. Doing the same thing in an operating system that is running from the hard disk is like trying to operate on a patient who is awake. My current favorite maintenance tool is PartedMagic, <http://www.partedmagic.com>, which is small enough (187 Mbytes) to fit comfortably on a CD-ROM or a USB memory stick. See the Web page for instructions on how to create either.

PartedMagic requires a computer with at least an Intel PIII compatible processor and 175MB of RAM, although it will run much faster if there are 400 MB or more. You will have problems if your computer has peripherals that need proprietary drivers, for example, some wireless keyboards and mice. As it boots, you will be asked a couple of questions, but I've found that accepting the defaults works, then you will see the screen below.

Because the page format is fixed, the reader can enlarge the print only by enlarging the window or closing the sidebar that shows the table of contents. Once the page fills the screen, further enlargement will require horizontal scrolling to read each line. Also, not all pdf readers can display the table of contents in a sidebar.

By contrast e-book files are not images of a printed pages but collections of text and images with instructions on how they should appear. They are closely related to the HTML files that your browser displays when you access a Website. The user sets the font size he or she finds comfortable, and the reader program or device adjusts the number of characters per line and the number of lines to fit the screen. The table of contents typically appears in a sidebar that the user opens only when needed. This makes it easy to skip through a book, assuming of course that the entries in the table of contents are meaningful. In my experience, e-book files are about two-thirds the size of equivalent PDF images and half that of the word-processor source files. However, because font sizes, line lengths, and the number of lines per screen is set by the reader, the author loses some control over the appearance of the document. Readers need either e-book software for their computers or hardware readers, such as Kindles. The author needs software to convert a word-processor file to an e-book one, and typically this is not from the same company that supplied your word processor, with the result that there can be errors in the conversion process. The next screen-shot shows an e-book reader displaying an e-book library.



The menu bar icons are the operations you can perform on the e-books, the right sidebar shows the selected book's cover and some information about it, and the left sidebar shows statistics on the library. The next two screen-shots show a page of an e-book as displayed by the reader, first with the table of contents sidebar open and then with it closed.

1152.0 / 1423 Go to... Search

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- The DOS Era
- The Windows 95 Era
- The Windows XP Era
- The Windows 7 Era**
 - Building a PC - October 2011
 - Virtual Machines on Home Computers - November 2011
 - Windows 7 Partitioning - December 2011
 - Securing Windows 7 - January 2012
 - Disaster Recovery and Error Correction in Windows 7 - Feb...
 - Adding Disk Space to Windows 7 - March 2012
 - PartedMagic - April 2012**
 - Setting WIN7 Default Applications - May 2012
 - File Recovery Strategies - June 2012
 - File Recovery Using Windows Graphical Tools - July 2012
 - File Recovery Using Command-line Tools - August 2012
 - Extending the Life of Your XP PC - September 2012
 - Exploring PC Hardware with Windows 7 - October 2012
 - Tuning Windows 7 - November 2012
 - Digital Photography - December 2012
 - Windows 7 Live - January 2013
 - Windows 7 Libraries - February 2013
 - External Storage - March 2013
 - Windows 7 Disk Management - April 2013
 - Interpreting SMART Data - May 2013
 - Disaster Recovery: A Case Study - June 2013
 - Home Networks - July 2013
 - Network Debugging - August 2013
 - Expanding Home Networks - September 2013
 - Goodbye XP - October 2013
 - Tiny Computers - November 2013

Search Table of Contents

PartedMagic - April 2012

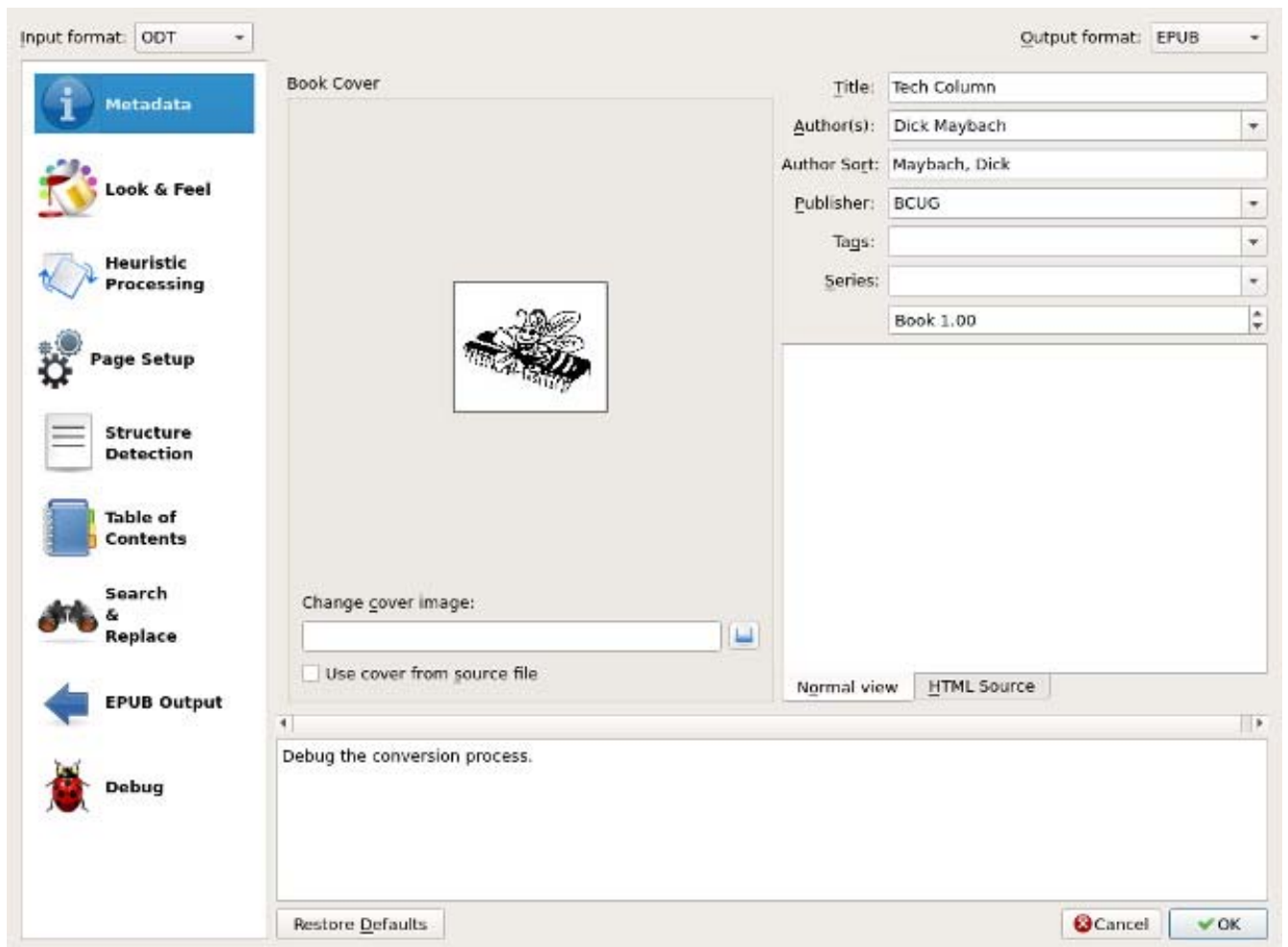
Although modern operating systems are robust, sometimes they need maintenance, either to repair problems or because we want to make changes. And many times the things we want to do are not possible within the operating system, because the tools aren't available or because the operations can't take place while the system is live. One solution is to use a live-CD, which is an operating system that boots directly from a CD-ROM or a USB memory stick and doesn't use the hard disk at all. This has the advantage that you can perform any operation you like on the dormant hard disk. The situation is similar to doing an autopsy. Doing the same thing in an operating system that is running from the hard disk is like trying to operate on a patient who is awake. My current favorite maintenance tool is PartedMagic, <http://www.partedmagic.com>, which is small enough (187 Mbytes) to fit comfortably on a CD-ROM or a USB memory stick. See the Web page for instructions on how to create either.

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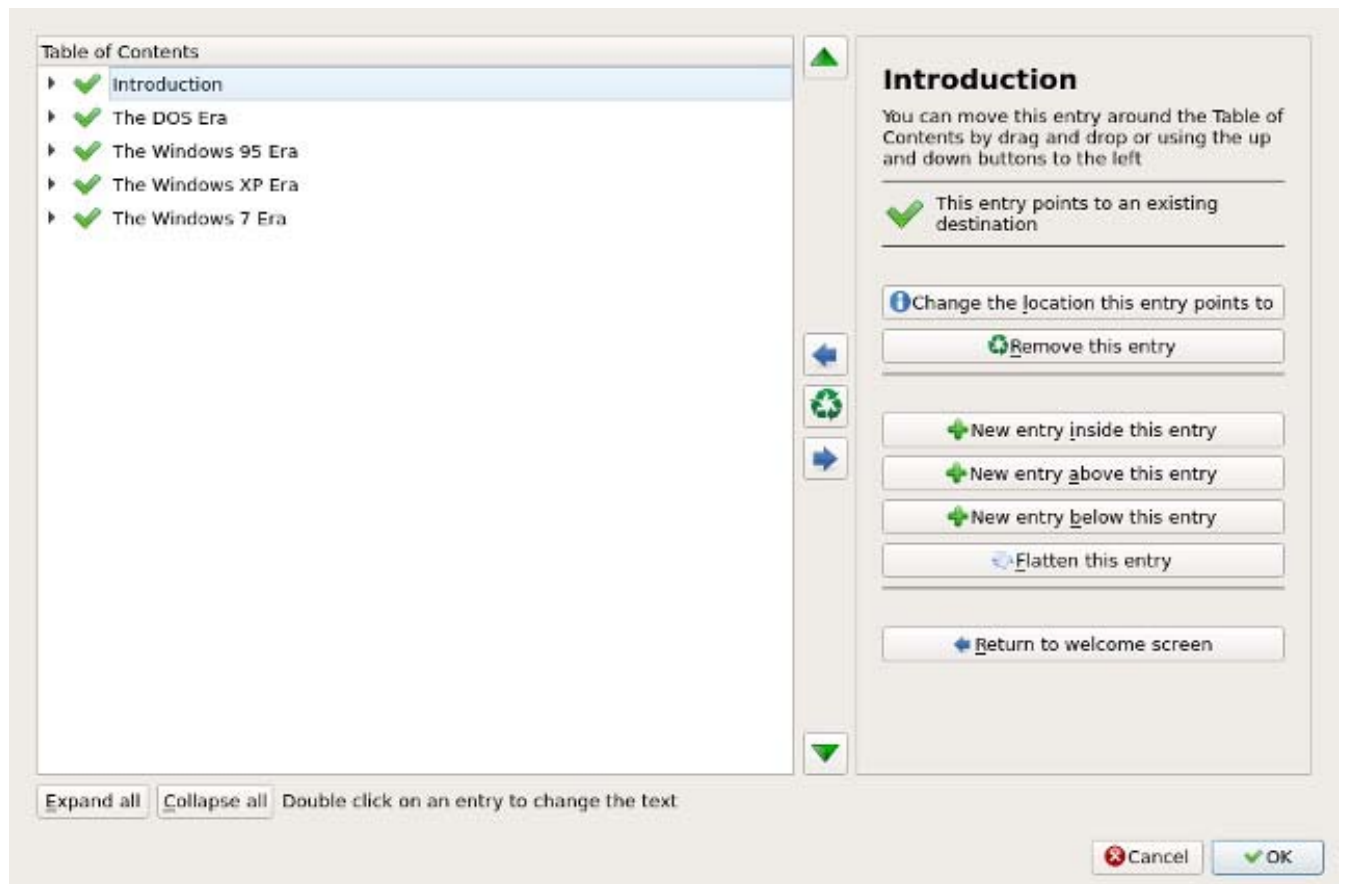


There are many programs available to create e-books; I use Calibre (<http://calibre-ebook.com/>) because it's free and is available for Linux, OS X, and Windows. Regardless of what e-book software you prefer, the process will be similar. You first create the source material using the word processor of your choice. Here is where you'll correct the typos and establish consistent formatting. It is important to use styles for your formatting. For example, your word processor has defined several levels of headings, and you should use these as Calibre will generate a table of contents from them. A table of contents is irrelevant in a novel, but can be very important for other types of books.

The next screen-shot shows the first step of conversion.



The left sidebar shows the operations you can perform. In my case, I needed only to select a cover and set-up the table of contents, as shown in the next screen-shot.



Only the major headings are shown here; each could be expanded to show the sub-levels.

The conversion process is iterative, especially so the first time you do it. You will surely find conversion artifacts that require correction using the word-processor. Expect to repeat this many, many times. If you use Calibre, your first conversion will be to an epub file. Do not generate a table of contents using your word processor, but let Calibre do it from your section headings. Calibre first converts the word-processor file to HTML, and you may get better results if you let your word processor make this preliminary conversion. You can fine tune the appearance of your e-book by editing the HTML. I didn't find this to be necessary, although I did have to make some adjustments in the table of contents. Calibre allows this fine-tuning only on epub files, which is why you create this form first. Carefully proof the result. I've found that most errors result from problems in the word-processor file. In particular, I've fixed many problems by deleting and re-entering headings. I've also found that the size (in pixels) of images is important. While a word processor will accept an image of almost any size and allow you to change its size on the page, the new size is often not preserved in the e-book file. Once you are satisfied with the epub file, you can convert it to another e-book format, but the conversion may introduce artifacts.

You will probably get the best results by using your word processor to create a pdf file, rather than going through an e-book program. I use LibreOffice, which creates a pdf file

with a table of contents that appears in a sidebar in many pdf readers. However not all pdf readers have this feature. To be safe, you should have your word processor generate a table of contents, which will appear at the start of the document. This makes it less convenient than a sidebar, but far better than nothing.

To accommodate your readers, you should provide your e-book in both pdf and epub formats, which will let almost everybody read them. You could also include azw3, since Kindle readers are quite common. (If possible avoid the older Kindle format, Mobi, as it has many idiosyncrasies and often doesn't display properly.)

References

- Ali Luke - Publishing E-Books for Dummies, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2012
- <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-Your-First-eBook>