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Better Blogging

Tips and Tools for Web Writers

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<http://uiobservatory.com>

It's all about writing

Behind every great blog is a great writer. Great writing is the core competence of a great blogger, and writing is a blogger's most important mode of operation.

In this class, I will share some tips and software suggestions with you that will help you focus on your writing.

The most effective paths to this goal are locking out distractions while you are writing, and minimizing the time you have to spend on typesetting your documents in HTML, preparing your text and media files for publishing, and uploading your articles to your web server.

The software that is featured here is what I use myself. At the end of each section, you will find links to these applications, but also to other software with similar functionality, so you can pick the one that works best for you.

Please do feel free to [email me at jochen@polytropia.com](mailto:jochen@polytropia.com) if you have any questions about better blogging.

And if you are interested in usability, I invite you to check out my own blog, [The UI Observatory](#).

Staying in writing mode

Writers tend to be very fussy about their working environment: everything has to be in the right place for quick and easy access, and distractions from ringing telephones, blaring radios, etc. are eliminated as much as possible.

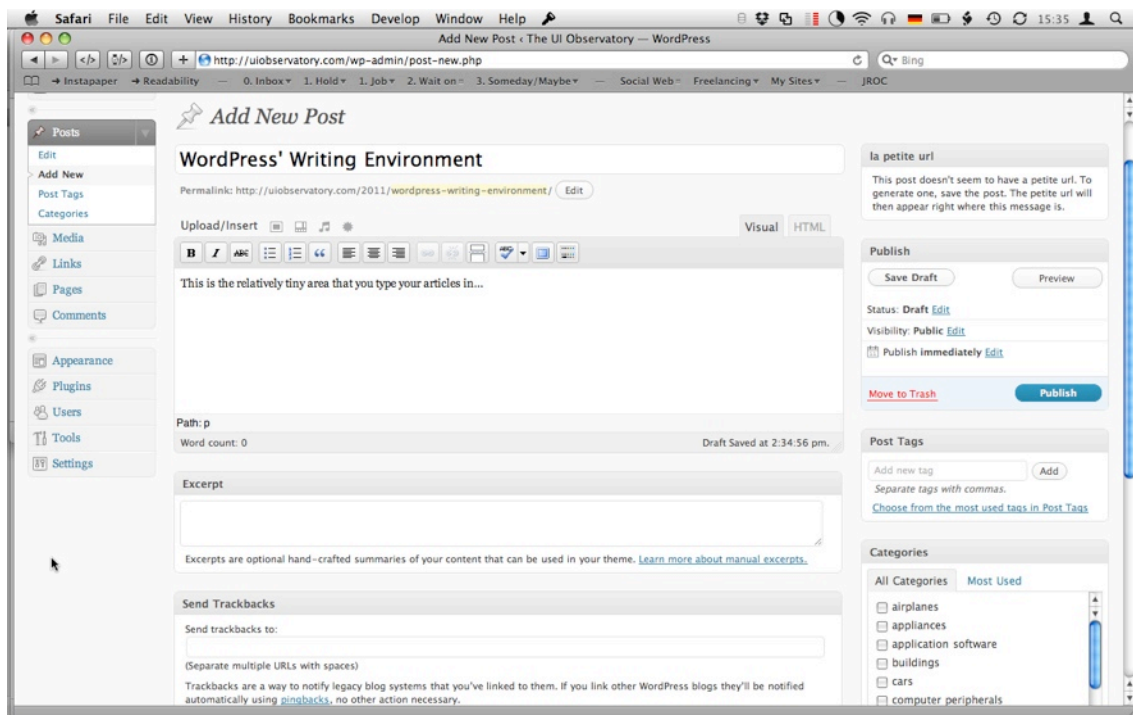
The same holds true for what's on your computer screen: all those icons on your desktop, multiple application windows in the background, the badge with the number of unread emails in the Dock, and so on.

All these things can distract you from focusing on your writing unless you remove them from your view.

Use a Mac-native editor

The editors that are built into state-of-the-art weblog server software are very capable writing environments — technically.

The following screenshot shows the screen for creating a new blogpost in WordPress. Even when you expand the browser window to cover the entire screen, the actual text editing field is tiny and it is surrounded by a plethora of links, checkboxes, and navigation menus that are unrelated to the task of writing a post.

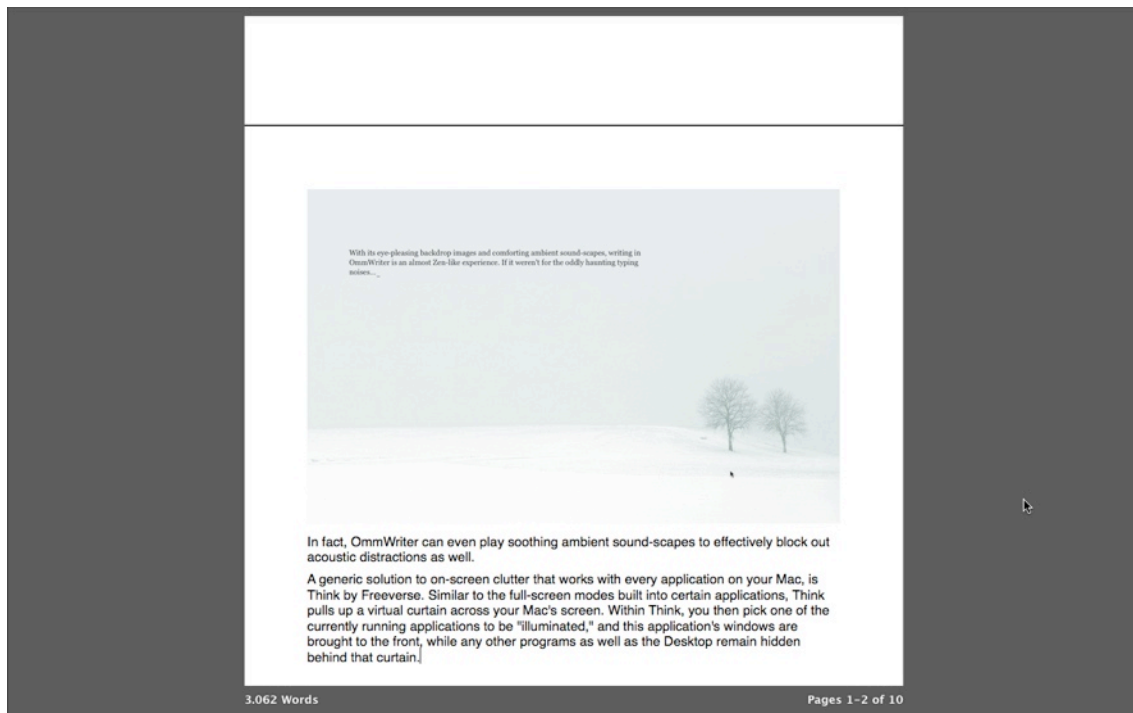


The first step to reduce on-screen clutter is to use a true Mac OS X application to write in, like a word processor (Pages, Scrivener, Word, ...) or a plain-text editor (BBEdit, TextMate, ...).

Remove distractions from your screen

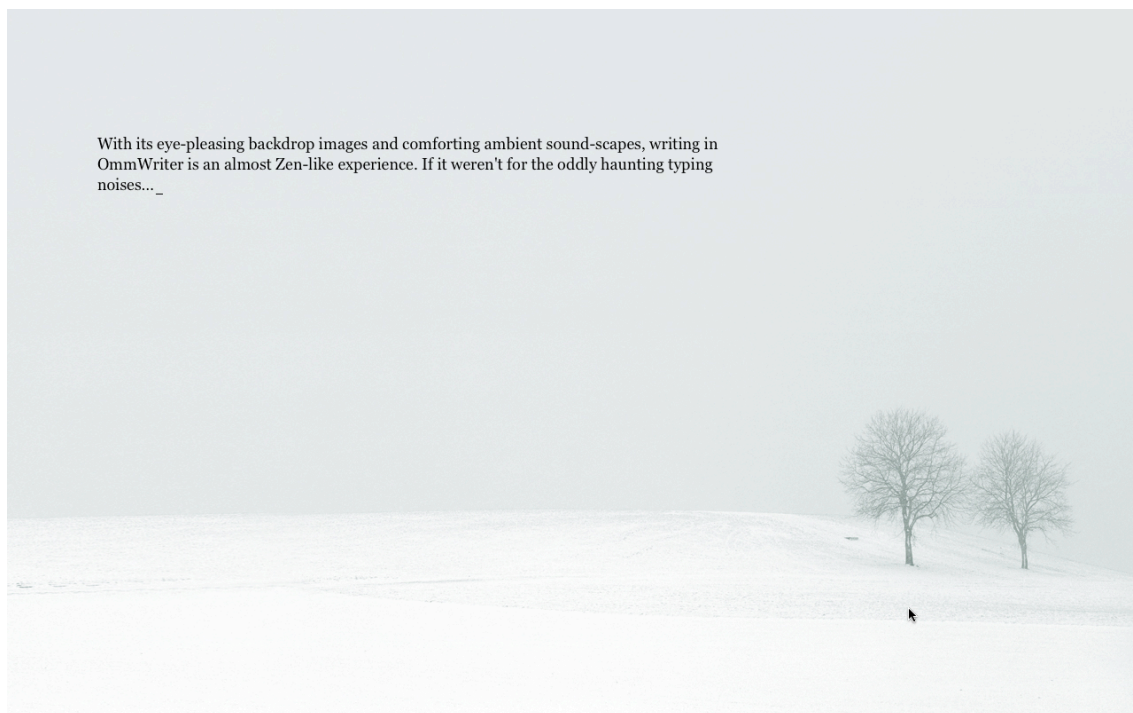
Some full-featured text processors including Pages or Scrivener offer full-screen views.

In this view, the text processor's user interface is reduced to a single text editing window that covers the entire screen. All other windows, palettes, and the menu bar -- as well as any other running applications -- are hidden behind a virtual curtain.

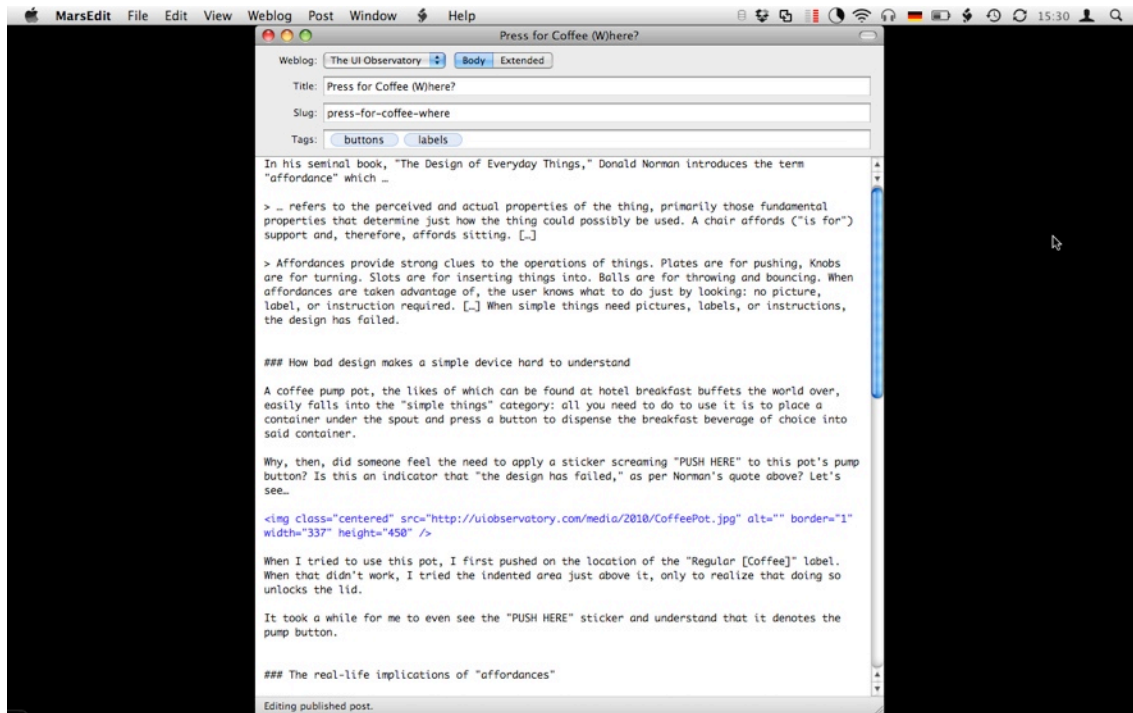


A more radical approach is found in WriteRoom and OmmWriter: these were developed as pure writing environments. Their functionality is limited to very basic text editing in order to create a quiet and distraction-free text authoring environment.

OmmWriter even plays soothing ambient sound-scapes to effectively block out acoustic distractions as well.



While these full-screen modes are application-specific, Think by Freeverse works with every application on your Mac. After launching Think, you pick one of the currently running applications to be “illuminated.” This application's windows are then brought to the front and any other programs as well as the Desktop remain hidden behind a uni-colored back-drop.



Additional applications can be brought to the front as “guests” by selecting them in OS X’s Dock or the application switcher. Keyboard shortcuts let you go back to only the “illuminated” application, or to select another application for “illumination.”

- Apple Pages <http://apple.com/iwork>
- OmmWriter <http://www.ommwriter.com>
- WriteRoom <http://www.hogbaysoftware.com/products/writeroom>
- Scrivener <http://www.literatureandlatte.com/scrivener.php>
- Think <http://freeverse.com/think>

Mark-up your articles with Markdown

An annoying distraction while writing for the web is having to use HTML code to add emphasis to a word, denote headlines, insert a bulleted list, etc. Even if you perfectly remember the syntax for the required HTML tags, typing them is tedious and takes your concentration away from what you want to say in your writing.

Markdown is the near-perfect antidote to this problem. It uses a syntax similar to what you may already be using if you write your emails in plain text.

For example, you add emphasis to a word by surrounding it with `_underscores_`, or ...

```
> denote a quote through a leading greater-than character
```

... and ...

- * use asterisks
- * for bullet
- * items.

Headlines are indicated with hash marks with their number defining the headline level. Other elements like links or embedded images are also much more human-friendly than their HTML counterparts. The output on the screen, however, is identical to what you would achieve by relying on HTML.

For example, this text block using HTML ...

```
<h2>Keep it human</h2>

<p>Writing HTML code in your articles can be <em>very</em> tedious. <a href="http://daringfireball.net/projects/markdown" title="Visit the Markdown homepage">Markdown</a> makes this process much easier and provides a number of benefits:</p>

<ul>
<li>Fewer things to remember</li>
<li>Faster writing</li>
<li>Brain stays in writing mode</li>
</ul>

<blockquote>"I love it!" -- many a writer</blockquote>
```

... looks like this when written using Markdown:

```
## Keep it human

Writing HTML code in your articles can be very tedious. [Markdown](http://daringfireball.net/projects/markdown "Visit the Markdown homepage") makes this process much easier and provides a number of benefits:

* Fewer things to remember
* Faster writing
* Brain stays in writing mode

> "I love it!" -- many a writer
```

The output in the browser is identical for both text blocks. Note that you can also combine Markdown and HTML in the same text.

As you can see, Markdown is not only easier to write; it is also much easier to read. As a result, while editing a Markdown'ed text, your brain stays in content mode.

Support for Markdown can be added to most weblog server software via plug-ins, some of which expand on the original Markdown implementation by adding additional elements like tables or footnotes. Markdown support is also built into many text editors, including syntax coloring and WYSIWYG previews.

Markdown <http://daringfireball.net/projects/markdown>
Markdown Extra <http://michelf.com/projects/php-markdown/extra>
MultiMarkdown <http://fletcherpenney.net/multimarkdown>

Type more efficiently with a text replacement utility

Sometimes, you will not be able to avoid writing your own HTML code, e.g for HTML tags that are not (yet) supported by Markdown, or if you require more elaborate custom tags with CSS attributes like `<blockquote class="warning">`. In these cases, a text replacement utility like TextExpander can save you a lot of time and effort.

As the name “text replacement utility” implies, TextExpander replaces text that you type with other text: you define pairs of abbreviations and replacement text, and whenever you type the abbreviation, it is erased and the replacement text inserted in its position.

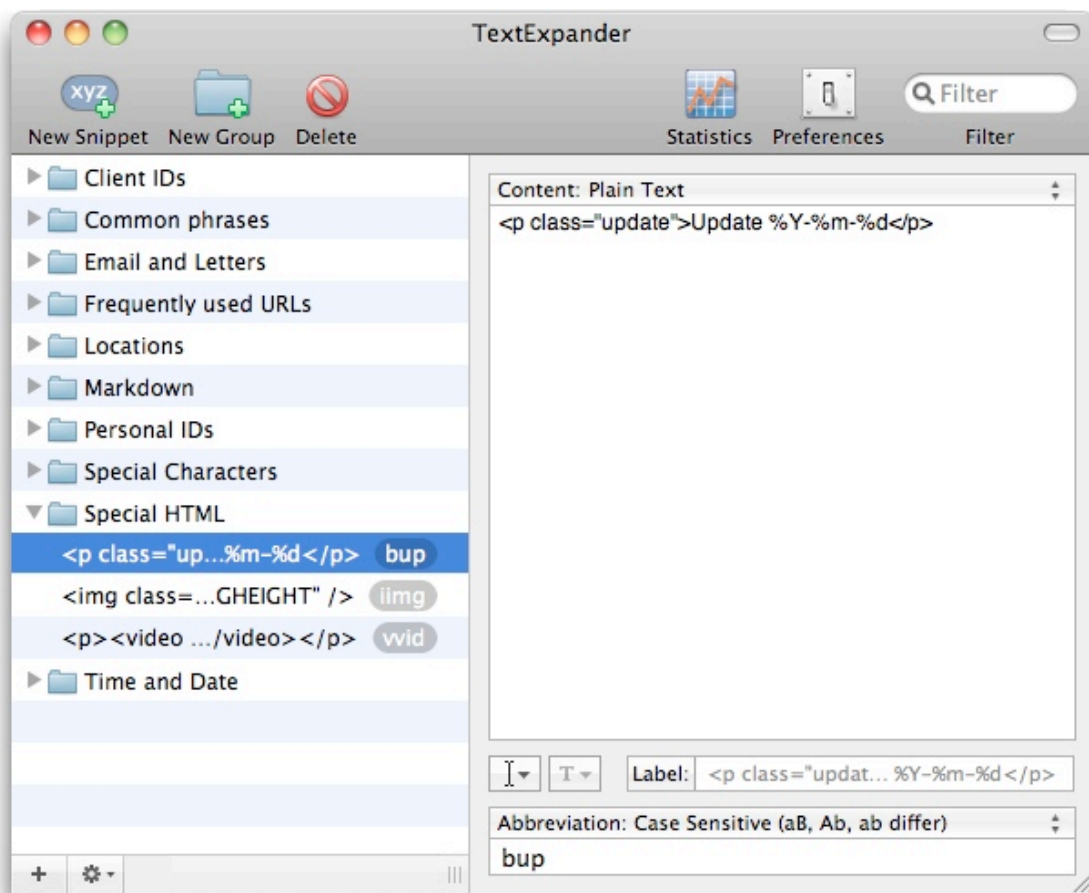
For example, you could define a replacement text of “Kind regards,” for the abbreviation “kr”. Now, every time you type “kr”, “Kind regards,” is put in its place.

Some word processors like Microsoft Word or Pages support similar features, but these only work inside the respective application. Text replacement utilities, however, work system-wide, so that you can use all of your “snippets” in any application on your Mac.

TextExpander offers an extensive HTML library with well-thought out tag sections. As an example, if you wish to insert a definition list in your article, you type “dl” will insert this whole block of HTML code:

```
<dl>
  <dt>%|</dt>
  <dd></dd>
  <dt></dt>
  <dd></dd>
</dl>
```

The %| is a placeholder for the text cursor: after inserting the replacement text, TextExpander will place the cursor at this position, where you most likely will continue typing. Other placeholders are available for inserting clipboard contents, date and time, key presses, etc.



This screenshot shows another example for what is possible with text replacement software: when I edit a blog post that has been published already, I like to add a prominent “Update” label with the date the editing took place. All I need to do to add this label is to type “bup,” as in “**blog update**” to make TextExpander insert the required HTML (including a dedicated CSS class attribute) as well as the current date, formatted just the way I like it.

There are three key benefits to using text replacement utilities, which are:

- they make typing much more efficient
- they remember complex text and code snippets for you
- they help prevent typos

You can also leverage these benefits in your daily writing practice for, say:

- often-used words and phrases
- entire text blocks like author bylines
- your email addresses, phone numbers, etc. (no more typos!)
- special characters that are not directly accessible via the keyboard (⌘, ⌥, ...)

In addition to the obvious advantages outlined above, text replacement utilities have another, slightly more obscure benefit as well: When you type an abbreviation to insert a piece of text,

your hands stay within the context of the keyboard instead of moving to the mouse to access a menu or palette with HTML tags.

And by choosing intuitive abbreviations, it is much easier to remember how to summon up the desired text snippet compared to remembering more obscure keyboard shortcuts that are used for inserting HTML tags by some text editors.

- TextExpander <http://smileonmymac.com/TextExpander>
- Typelt4Me <http://www.ettoresoftware.com/products/typeit4me/>
- Typinator <http://www.ergonis.com/products/typinator/>

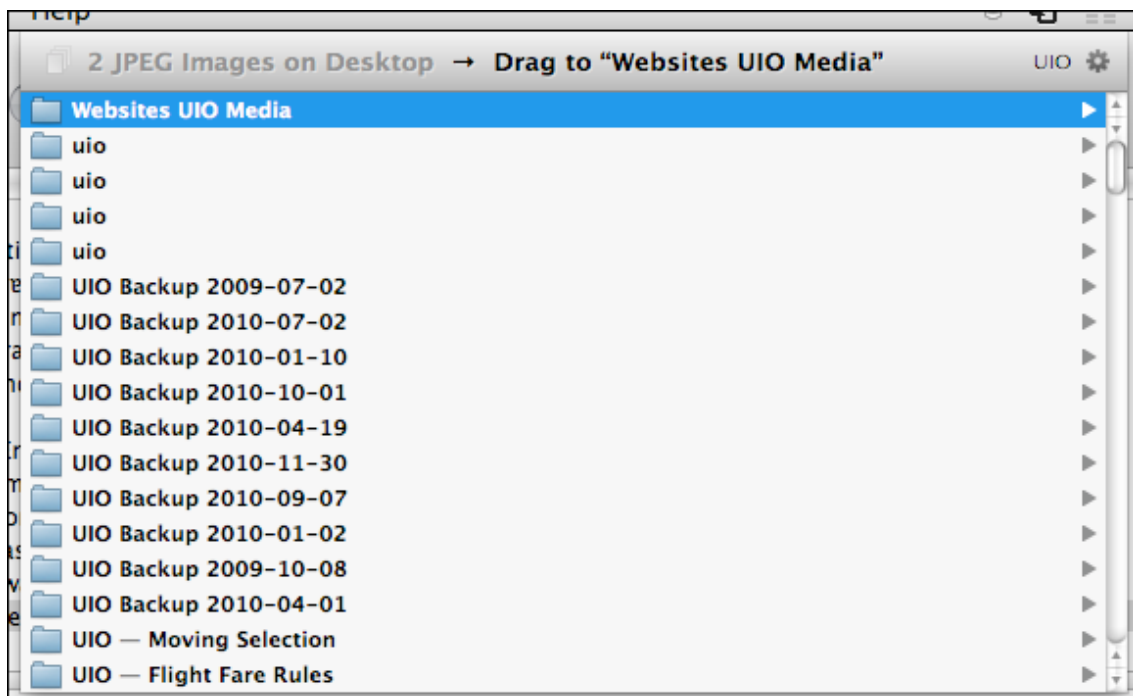
Simplifying file handling

The previous chapter focuses on the act of writing. It's all about making sure that your brain can stay in authoring mode and concentrate on what you want to say, instead of being side-tracked by other things on-screen.

In a similar manner, you can streamline the way you manage your files in order to minimize the distraction you experience whenever you have to look beyond your text editing window.

Access data beyond your text window through an application launcher

When working on a text, chances are that you will need to quickly jump into another application to look up a piece of information, copy something from another file into your text, insert an image, etc. You can optimize such actions by using a search/launcher utility like LaunchBar.



Instead of manually traversing the folder hierarchy on your computer's hard drive in search of a file, you open an unobtrusive text entry box via a keyboard shortcut, type in a search string, and select the appropriate item from the results list.

The key difference in searching for a file with LaunchBar versus Spotlight is that LaunchBar searches are based on a file's name, while Spotlight also searches *inside* of files. If you pay attention to how you name your files, searching by file name only often finds more relevant search results. LaunchBar can serve as a one-stop shop for both file name and file content searches, though, because you can also run Spotlight searches from its text entry window. The results for such searches are being displayed in a Finder search window.

LaunchBar also has "search templates" through which you can launch a search on an Internet site, like Google, Wikipedia, and others: you type your search term into LaunchBar, and the result is shown in a new window in your browser.

With LaunchBar, you can even copy and move files from one folder to another without ever entering the Finder. Like TextExpander, LaunchBar is a piece of software that is useful well beyond your writing environment.

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Alfred | http://www.alfredapp.com/ |
| Butler | http://manytricks.com/butler/ |
| LaunchBar | http://www.obdev.at/products/launchbar |
| Quick Search Bar | http://code.google.com/p/qsb-mac Let a native blog editor handle your publishing workflow |

After removing distracting clutter from your computer's screen and optimizing the way you find and access files on your computer's hard drive, the next step is to streamline the way you upload your finished articles and any related media files to your web server.

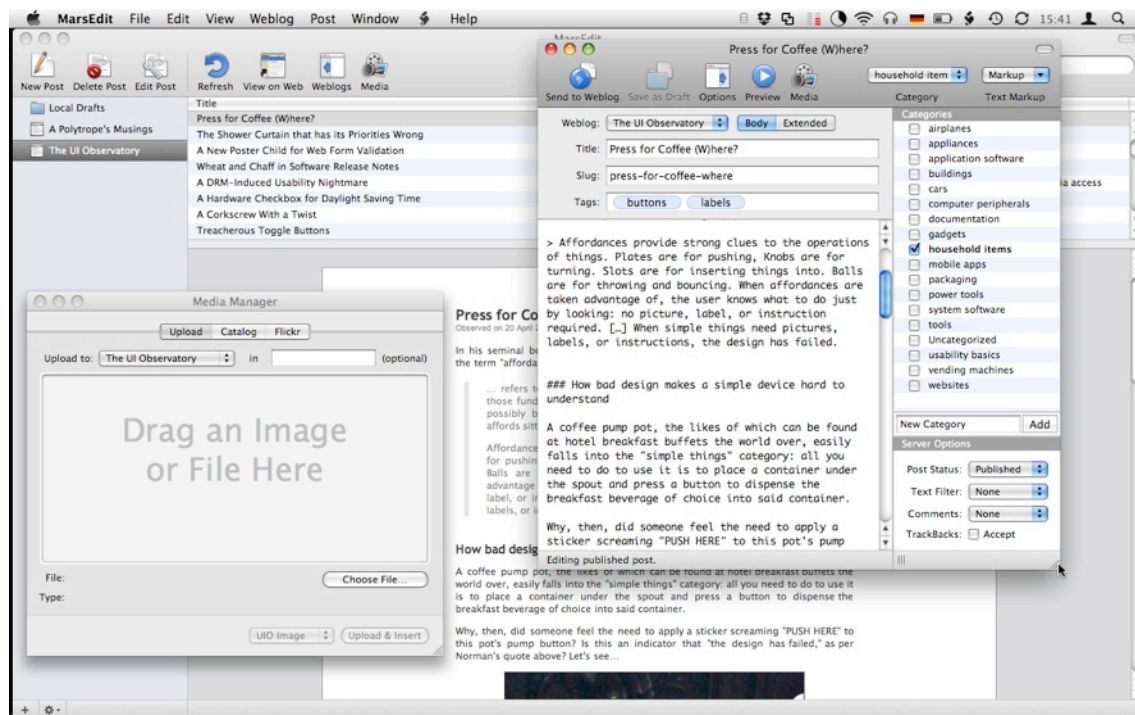
The usual approach would be use a dedicated application to upload your media files, etc., add the respective links to your article text, then log into your weblog server via the browser, create a new blog post, copy-and-paste the article from your local file, set meta-data like categories, etc., and, finally, press the Publish button.

This whole process becomes much easier and more convenient when you use a Mac-native blog editor. These are dedicated applications for writing blog posts, managing related meta-data, and uploading the posts and any related files.

One such application is MarsEdit.

MarsEdit supports numerous weblog platforms and you can configure multiple blogs in the software. So even if you write for several blogs running on different platforms, you only really have to master a single user interface -- namely MarsEdit's -- to publish to all of them.

The main window shows a list of all weblogs plus a folder for local drafts. Another list contains all blog posts for the selected blog, and the selected blog post is displayed as a preview.



The document window for editing a post contains a plain-text editor, but also gives you access to options and meta-data for the respective post. Unlike browser-based editors, you can show and hide these options with a single keystroke. In combination with the Think application, this is as text-editing-focused as it gets.

To upload files via MarsEdit, you drag them from the Finder into MarsEdit's Media Manager window and click upload. After the file has been uploaded successfully, MarsEdit can automatically insert an HTML snippet, which are customizable.

Placeholders for metadata -- like an image's height or width -- are supported as well: embedding an image in a blog post becomes as simple as dragging-and-dropping the image to the location in the blog post's text where you would like it to appear, selecting from a menu the HTML snippet you require, and clicking Upload.

In essence, an application like MarsEdit is a one-stop-shop for bloggers, with its functions ranging from creating, editing and previewing blog posts over uploading images and videos to publishing your posts with the proper meta-data all set. And, of course, you can also apply all the tips mentioned previously when using such a weblog application.

In fact, I'm convinced that the most effective action you can take to optimize your blog publishing workflow is to start using a native, dedicated weblog editor.

- Blogo <http://www.drinkbrainjuice.com/blogo>
- ecto <http://illuminex.com/ecto/>
- MacJournal <http://www.marinersoftware.com/products/macjournal/>
- MarsEdit <http://www.red-sweater.com/marsedit/>

Capture ideas on the go

Some of your best article ideas may pop up inside your brain when you least expect it: under the shower, during a long walk through the forest, while driving in your car, etc. Therefore, you should be prepared to capture those ideas wherever and whenever.

Pen and paper are just fine

Using pen and paper is just fine for starters. Especially in environments in which you cannot, or are not allowed to use electrical devices, a little notebook and a reliable pen are all you need to quickly write down your ideas.

If you own an iOS device like an iPhone or iPod touch, you have a few more interesting options.

Adding article ideas to your electronic to-do list

One option is adding article ideas to a task-list manager like OmniFocus or Things. The advantage is that these applications have desktop companion software with which they can automatically synchronize their data. By using this route, your ideas will automatically become an integral part of your overall to-do list.

Then again, task-managers are great for managing tasks: things that you have committed to doing. They are not so great for incubating ideas, which will require some thought and maturing before you know how to transmogrify them into a blog article.

OmniFocus http://www.omnigroup.com/products/omnifocus_for_iphone/
Things <http://culturedcode.com/things/iphone>

Incubate your ideas in a notes app

A more useful system for such “ideas in incubation” is using a note taking application on the iPhone, one that also synchronizes with a companion application on your Mac. A great combination is Simplenote (iOS) plus Notational Velocity (Mac OS X).

Both applications have been optimized by their respective developers for being exceptionally efficient to use, so as not to get in the way of your thoughts and the process of capturing those thoughts.

What I do quite often is capture a quick idea in either one, and regularly come back to it with new ideas, changes, and additions, until I'm confident that I can base a whole blog post on it. In which case I copy the entire note from Notational Velocity into BBEdit and start writing.

Notational Velocity <http://notational.net>
SimpleNote <http://www.simplenoteapp.com>

Record voice memos on your iOS device

Your iPhone or iPod touch has a built-in app that is perfect for capturing ideas in those moments when, for whatever reason, you cannot type: Voice Memos.



Voice Memos is like a dictaphone: launch the app, hit the record button, and speak whatever's on your mind. You can listen to your voice memos inside the app, and they are also synced with iTunes, appearing in a playlist called Voice Memos on your Mac.

By adding Voice Memos to your iPhone's dock, you can access it directly, and once you get to know the on-screen locations of the few controls in Voice Memos, you will be able to start a recording without even looking at the screen. Truth be told, I sometimes use this app to capture notes while driving.