

I Might Flip for NaNoWriMo 2015

This blog post serves two purposes. The first is what the title is about, which I will explain below. The second is to serve as a way for me to become acquainted with an online collaborative writing tool called Penflip. If you've been reading my blog long enough to know how much I promote the use of Markdown to draft novels, you'll understand why Penflip being built around Markdown is so appealing to me. For the most part, the collaborative side of Penflip is less important to me, so I will leave discussion of that aspect to someone else. As for the NaNoWriMo angle? I'm *mostly* committed to participating in NaNoWriMo this year, and using Penflip for it – and that actually means a lot more than “hey, I have a new tool to use.” Read on to see what I mean!

In the past, I wrote the first draft of my NaNoWriMo novels all by myself, with nobody “looking over my shoulder,” which is true for every other novel and short story I've ever written. Even if I was physically in public while writing, nobody could see what I was writing. Nobody could read the story until after the first draft was done. If my plan to use Penflip comes together, though, this next project will be written in a way that you can follow along with my progress in almost-real-time. This means you'll be seeing all the edits, all the dead-ends I later abandon, and other rough edges. I don't know if anybody will actually bother to look, but just knowing that it is possible will make it an interesting experience for me.

Beyond just reading my new novel as it is created, you can actually *make suggestions while I write it*. This is the collaborative facet of Penflip coming into play. Since I'm not a paying user, I'm only able to make a “public” project, and anybody with the link can make edits. However, if you choose to edit my book, what you'll really be doing is making suggestions via your copy of it. Your edits will not automatically be merged into the book; however, if I *like* your suggestions, I will be able to merge them in to the actual book.

To get an idea of how Penflip could be used for other team writing, here are some comments from Christopher Mahan (@chris_mahan), to whom I give credit for introducing me to Penflip. This was done directly through Penflip. I sent the link to him, he edited his copy of it, and I merged the changes back into the master copy.

So I am being given credit to introduce you to penflip, huh? Yikes...

Essentially, MS Word isn't up to par for working collaboratively, and by that I mean *at the same time*. Also, once it leaves the writer and the editors and goes to the publishing pipeline, all kinds of formatting magic has to occur and all of that seems clunky at best. As a programmer, I like to automate everything and it seems this may work better with the markdown that penflip uses under the hood.

As far as I can tell, the downsides are:

- people with expensive and or intermittent internet access will have a harder time
- One needs to learn new formatting.

The upsides, however, to me, make very good sense:

- Ability to work with multiple people simultaneously
- Simple interface, no fighting with MS Word/Scrivener/or any other tool.
- Moving the Art of Writing and Publishing to the 21st Century.
- Easy path to ebooks, html, and printed books.

Again, as Stuart indicated, this is an experiment.

Let's kick the tires, shall we?

Back to Stuart:

Using Penflip to draft this blog post has been instructive and encouraging:

- I was able to work on my PC as well as my Android phone, using the mobile browser (Chrome). It was a little problematic, and it was helpful to be using the Hacker's Keyboard (an Android keyboard), but it's definitely usable enough to be productive.
- I used the optional git access to add this list item in my usual Linux editor, demonstrating that there's no need to use the Web-based editor if one doesn't like it.
- If I can work out the git support on my Android tablet, I should be able to use my preferred Android editor (DroidEdit Pro) when I'm away from my home office.

Overall, there really is a lot to like about this service. I can see using Penflip more and maybe, eventually, paying to upgrade. Don't be surprised if my future nagging to use Markdown also references the ease of doing so via Penflip. The last step of this test will be to download this blog post draft in HTML and add that content to a new Drupal node on my site.

One of the benefits of using Markdown is the ease of generating multiple document formats from the Markdown source, and Penflip makes that even easier by providing multiple download format options right from the document. For example, I didn't have to do anything fancy to get the PDF version of this blog post (attached below), I just downloaded it. I could have also downloaded it as a .docx file, and other formats. There are ways to customize things, but I didn't do that for this blog post. The attached PDF was downloaded from Penflip using the default settings.

Technical and writing stuff aside, making solid commitments this year has been especially challenging, so there's still a chance that I won't do NaNoWriMo at all this year. There's also a chance that I'll decide that using Penflip isn't what I want to do after all. However, as of this writing, I would say there's at least an 80% chance that I will tackle writing a new novel in November and do that right here!