

Choosing an HTML Editor: Software Reviews from the Experts

How do you decide among all the Web software? Two experts review some of the best.

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In the May-June issue, we provided an introduction to HTML, the language of the Web. We stressed the fact that learning to “code” or “mark up” text using HTML for viewing on the Web can be a tedious task. After all, as a nonprofit you’re more interested in your mission than whether to code a page title as <H1> or <H2>.

Fortunately, the good news is that there’s a wide range of software products available to help you prepare HTML files for the Web. The better news is that most of these products hide HTML codes so that you don’t see them as you’re building Web pages.

THREE TYPES OF PAGE-CREATION SOFTWARE

HTML page-creation software can be divided into three categories:

1. Basic Conversion Programs

Basic conversion programs let you create documents using standard word processing software and export the file you create as an HTML page. Most of the newer word processing programs on the market, including Microsoft Word and Word Perfect, are capable of performing this function. You’ll notice a similar

option in spreadsheet programs—such as Microsoft’s Excel—and page layout programs such as Adobe Pagemaker.

There are two advantages to basic conversion programs. First, they’re inexpensive. In fact, they come free with the software you purchase. Second, they’re easy to use. To create an HTML page, you simply type your document and save it as an HTML-ready file.

But, like all things that are cheap and easy, basic conversion programs are limited. It’s pretty tough to create a nice looking Web page using a basic conversion program (Pagemaker, being a design layout program, is an exception). Of course, you can always use the program to create an HTML file and then edit the

HTML file by adding codes and tags as you see fit. But then you would be working with HTML codes, and that’s what you were trying to avoid in the first place!

2. Coding Software

Coding software includes powerful tools specifically designed to create HTML pages with computer-programming-like features. The best example of this type of software is BBEDIT (see Figure 1), a powerful, Macintosh-only HTML page creation tool. BBEDIT was developed for computer programmers to build software. The company that created BBEDIT, Bare Bones Software, adapted it with a series of options to include HTML pages as well. As a result of its ori-

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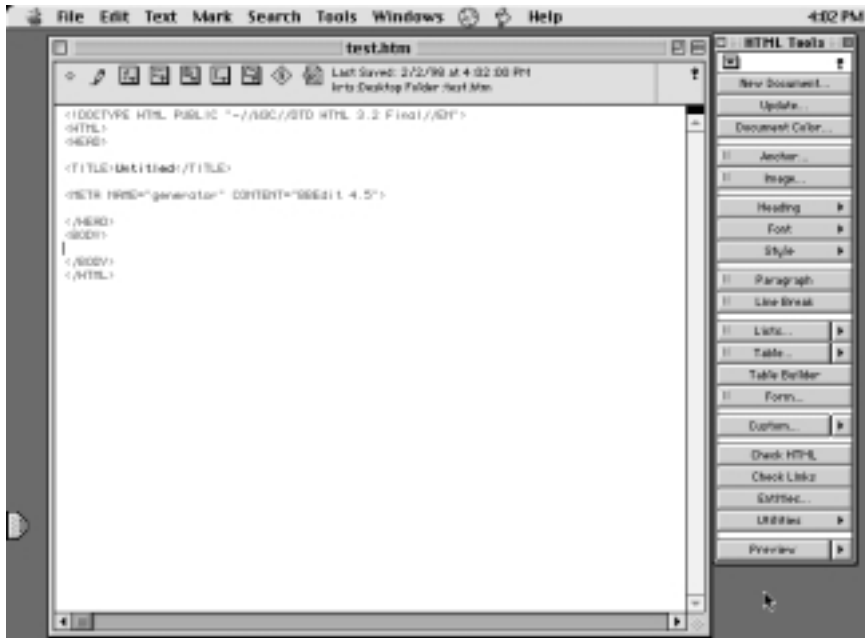


Figure 1

gins, BBEDIT offers very powerful search and replace capabilities (if you're a programmer, you might have to replace complicated strings of commands with other commands) and a host of robust features, including the ability to search and replace words in hundreds of documents at the same time with one command.

The advantage of coding software is its power. It is also very stable, meaning that it's time tested and won't crash your computer. Coding software is also very scalable: As new HTML features become available, you can easily upgrade your software and incorporate the new features into your documents. These tools are used by professional Web developers.

Coding software, however, is not free. You can expect to pay anywhere from \$100 to \$200 for an application.

The main disadvantage of coding software is that there is a steep learning curve. While the program will do all the HTML for you, you still must learn to use the program. And for many, learning a coding application such as BBEDIT is not an uncomplicated affair: It could take several months to learn to use the software effectively.

3. Graphic Layout Programs

Page layout programs try to hide from view all HTML coding. While you can click on an option and look at the true HTML codes underlying your pages, graphic layout programs provide an intuitive, user-friendly method for creating HTML pages. To create HTML pages with a graphic layout program, you open a file, type your text, move the text around the page, insert pictures and icons, and save your document, which is then ready to post on the Internet for viewing. It is really that simple.

The advantage of graphic layout programs is that you never have to learn HTML! The program takes your design and converts it directly to a final page for viewing. We have trained several non-profits to create very attractive HTML pages in a few hours using graphic layout programs. And, because the programs feature a design and layout metaphor, you can have a professional designer create a group of attractive page templates of your Web site's design, and several people in your organization can use those templates to add new pages to your site.

The disadvantages of graphic layout programs are minimal. They are real software applications and cost anywhere from \$60 to \$120. Some hardcore professional Web developers deride these programs by likening them to riding a bicycle with training wheels, but that shouldn't be a problem: The goal is to create Web pages, not become a computer programmer.

We strongly recommend that if you're going to create your own HTML pages you consider purchasing a graphic layout program. Select a program that is cross-platform—that is, it works on both Windows and the Macintosh. Since most designers work on the Macintosh, if you use a Windows machine you'll have little difficulty moving files back and forth.

We also recommend that you purchase software from a company with a reputation for delivering stable products that are updated frequently to incorporate new features. Almost all the software companies that make graphic layout programs offer free trial versions of their products which you can download from the Internet. Spend an afternoon downloading several of the major programs, and decide which program feels most comfortable for you. Once you've found a program, stick with it so you won't have to keep learning new programs.

CHOOSING A GRAPHIC LAYOUT PROGRAM

There's a wide range of graphic layout programs from which to choose. The bottom line is that all the programs offer a rich assortment of features—and the features they don't have will likely be added in an update. If you're looking for a comprehensive overview of the major graphic layout programs, check the major computer magazines, which regularly run features on the subject. Here are a few of our favorites:



Adobe PageMill

One of the first graphical HTML editors on the market, PageMill has remained a standard-setter in the industry. The application was named the best Web authoring tool by Small Business Computing/Home Office Computing magazine, and we know that some of the largest and best looking sites on the Web were created with PageMill. The program features an elegant interface where you can see how your pages will look as you create them. It also has excellent import and export functions, allowing you to bring in text from virtually any word processing program. Because Adobe is one of the largest graphic software makers in the world, PageMill ships with a copy of Photoshop LE, a limited edition version of Adobe's highly successful Photoshop program, which allows you to crop and re-size images and prepare them for use on the Web.

Platforms: Macintosh, Windows 98, Windows NT

Price: \$99

Web site: <http://www.adobe.com>

Claris HomePage

We wish we could strongly recommend Claris HomePage, a favorite of ours since its inception in 1996. We built quite a few nonprofit Web sites with HomePage, which is the easiest graphical HTML editor on the market.

Unfortunately, the future of HomePage is uncertain. As of this writing, the Claris Corporation is undergoing a major restructuring, with some of the company's products being taken over by Apple Computer and the remaining products falling under the domain of Claris. We're not sure where that leaves HomePage.

Whatever happens, we still recommend HomePage because of its simplicity. A very easy-to-understand interface makes creating pages an absolute snap.

Surprisingly, for all its simplicity, HomePage still manages to pack in all the standard features found in other pro-

grams (for example, HomePage was one of the first applications to have a built-in spell checker, a useful tool for proofing HTML pages). Maybe that's why the company's motto is "Simply Powerful Software."

Platforms: Macintosh, Windows 98, Windows NT

Price: \$99

Web site: <http://www.claris.com>

Microsoft Front Page

To know Front Page is to grow with Front Page. When we first started using the program, we were slightly disappointed by the program's interface design: It looks exactly like Microsoft Word, while the other programs have a much more inviting look. Then we started working with Front Page. The program is remarkably stable (unlike the other programs, it never crashes), and can handle all the basic HTML tasks (such as creating bulleted lists, etc.) all the way up to the most complex (designing pages with complicated tables and frames).

More important, Front Page includes WebBot components, which are dynamic objects that you insert into your Web page to perform complicated tasks such as building a search engine into your Web site. Without a WebBot-driven search, building a search engine into your site can be a pretty difficult task.

The more we used Front Page, the more we liked it. In fact, we now recommend it to most nonprofits. If you already use Microsoft's Office or Word programs, an added convenience is the ease with which you can move files back and forth.

The new version of Front Page offers handy features that will help you "grow your site." These features include the ability to create user forms that send information directly to your mailbox, to manage banner ads, to produce a total Web site diagram, and more. We beta-tested the latest Front Page 98 and are convinced that with its new features, this program might be the pick of the lot.

Platforms: Macintosh, Windows 98, Windows NT

Price: \$99

Web site: <http://www.microsoft.com>

In the next article in our series, we'll discuss finding a home for your Web site. If you have a question or comment you'd like to see covered in future columns, send an e-mail to jpffrenza@earthpledge.org or contact JP Frenza c/o *Nonprofit World*, 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719. ■

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These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

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