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Playing Well With Others: Collaborative Tools for Successful Group Projects

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Playing Well With Others: Collaborative Tools for Successful Group Projects

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**Playing Well With Others:
Collaborative Tools for Successful Group Projects**

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Google Docs	2
1. Creating a new Document:	3
2. Uploading a File You Already Have:	5
3. Sharing Files	6
4. Exporting a <i>Google Docs</i> File.....	8
Spreadsheets.....	8
Zoho	10
Microsoft Office Live	11

Playing Well With Others: Collaborative Tools for Successful Group Projects

Introduction

Without doubt more and more of the lawyer's routine activities have migrated to electronic platforms. At first this involved primarily the means and resources for legal research – first, Westlaw and Lexis, but then new resources that include not only the primary legal materials, but also secondary tools and analysis, either in the form of databases or blogs. With time the transition came to include many ordinary means of communication, from texting to tweeting.

Perhaps it was then inevitable that as part of this new environment the collaborative activities of a legal practice would also become possible via the new medium.

Collaboration involves any activity that involves more than one person, typically needing to share access to the same files and data. File-sharing has of course been possible since the advent of email and file attachments: one person updated the file, and then forwarded it to a project member, who then made his or her own changes before bouncing the file back, or perhaps even forwarding it on to a third member.

The drawbacks of this process would be readily apparent to anyone who has tried to work under that process: Multiple copies of the file make it easy to confuse which is the latest version containing the most current revisions, with the risk that changes will be made to multiple versions, making it difficult to reconcile the many updates.

Collaborative research tools eliminate these and other problems primarily by allowing the user to store files in external servers (i.e., on the “internet), which can then be accessed remotely by the user and others that he or she designates. Better yet, typically the file can be accessed and manipulated simultaneously by many users, allowing changes to be made and seen in real time.

This presentation illustrates the advantages that can be enjoyed by using collaborative research tools, by looking closely at one of the most popular platforms available, *Google Docs*.

Google Docs

Google Docs is not the only collaborative research platform – several others will be mentioned later – but does have the advantage of being supported by a known provider (Google), and of being completely free.

To begin it is necessary to first obtain a Google account. If you do not have one already, you can get by going to google.com, and choosing to “sign in”:



Sign in to personalize your Google experience.

Google has more to offer when you sign in to your Google Account. You can customize pages, view recommendations, and get more relevant search results.

Sign in on the right or [create one for free](#) using just an email address and password you choose.

-  [Gmail](#)
Get a fresh start with email that has less spam
-  [Web History](#)
Access and manage your web activity from any computer
-  [iGoogle](#)
Add news, games and more to the Google homepage
-  [Google Checkout](#)
A faster, safer and more convenient way to shop online

Sign in with your
Google Account

Email:

Password:

Stay signed in

[Can't access your account?](#)

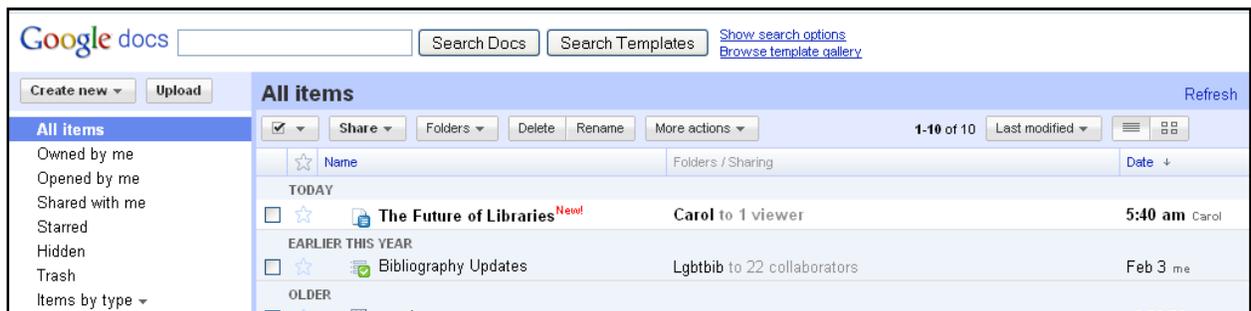
Don't have a Google Account?
[Create an account now](#)

Once you have a Google account, you can log in and go to Documents:



The screenshot shows the Google homepage with the user logged in as 'dono421846@gmail.com'. The navigation menu is open, and the 'Documents' link is circled in red. Other links in the menu include Books, Finance, Translate, Scholar, Blogs, YouTube, Calendar, Photos, Reader, Sites, and Groups. The search bar and 'I'm Feeling Lucky' button are also visible.

Which will take you to a window looking something like this:



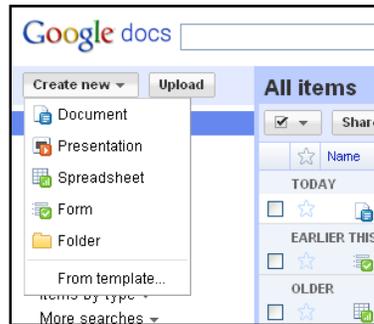
The screenshot shows the Google Docs interface. The 'All items' view is active, displaying a list of documents. The top navigation bar includes 'Create new', 'Upload', and search options. The document list shows 'The Future of Libraries' (New!) and 'Bibliography Updates'.

Name	Folders / Sharing	Date
The Future of Libraries ^{New!}	Carol to 1 viewer	5:40 am Carol
Bibliography Updates	Lgibtbib to 22 collaborators	Feb 3 me

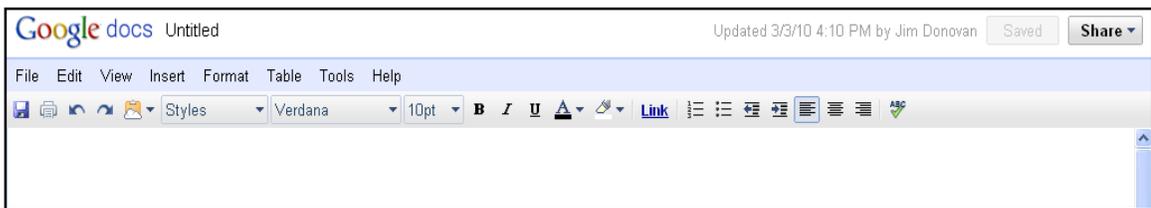
1. Creating a new Document:

Choose “NEW” on the menu bar and select which type of document you wish to create. Our primary focus at the moment will be on word processing files, but notice that you have several other options including:

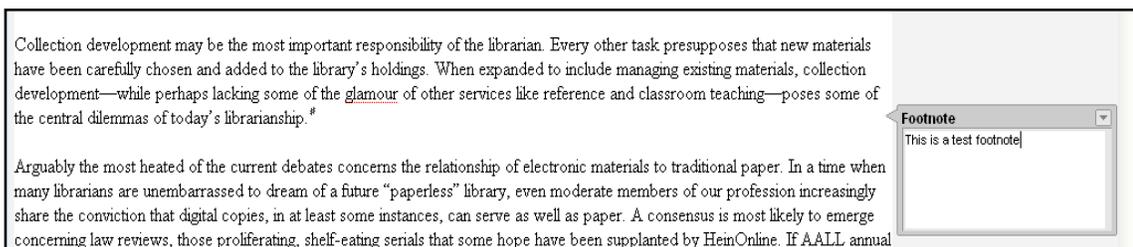
- Spreadsheets
- Presentation Slides
- Forms



Choosing “Document” will open a window that will allow you to begin creating your file:

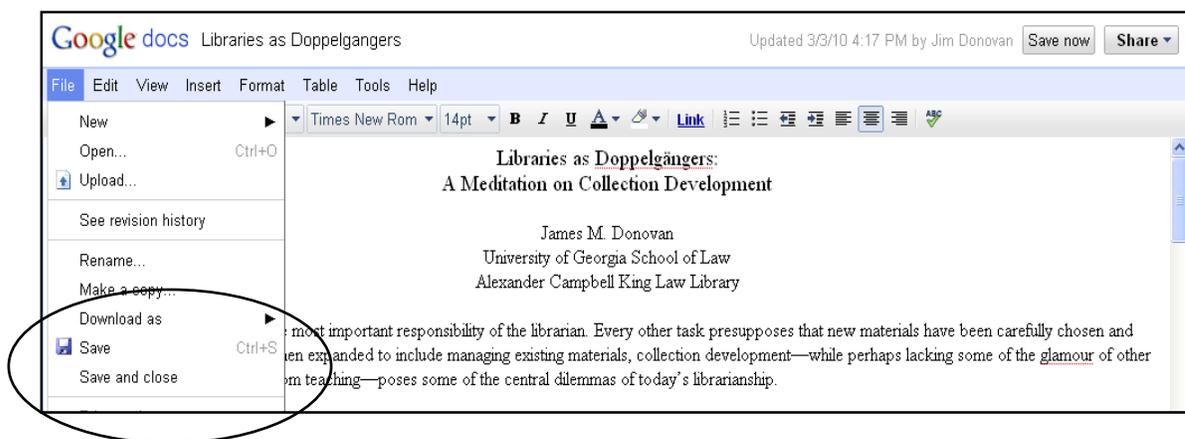


Notice that *Google Docs* provides a word processing software that is not like MS WORD. It has only a few fonts and special formatting features. If your primary interest is in a direct, uncomplicated text, this software should serve well. It does, however, support footnotes:



Note that when inserted the superscript numbering does not appear except as a hatch mark; the full format will appear when the document is downloaded into a non-*Google Docs* format.

Google Docs will AUTOSAVE your work every few minutes, preventing the loss of valuable time and energy. When you are done, however, click “SAVE AND CLOSE” to exit the document:

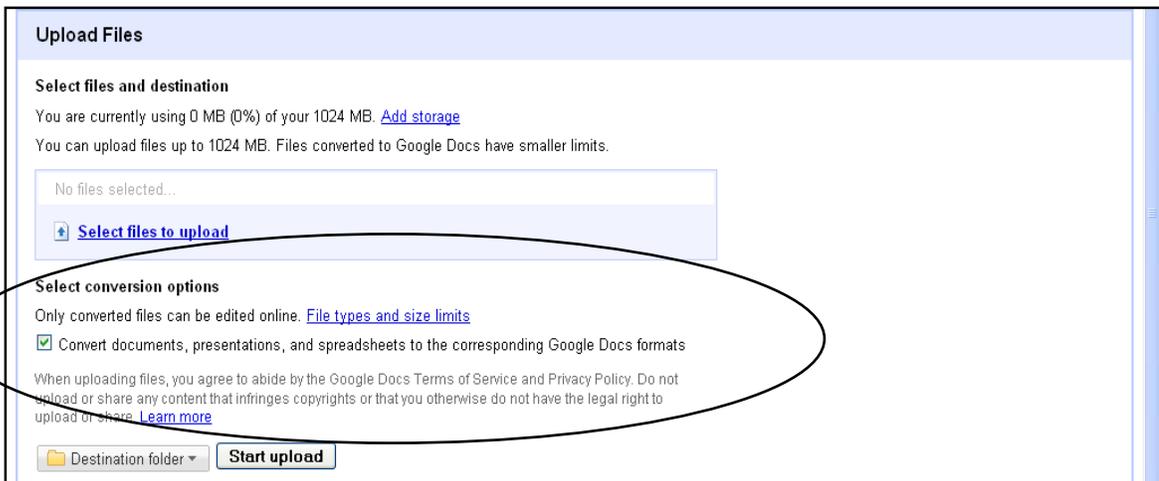


2. Uploading a File You Already Have:

Sometimes you will create the file on your desktop, and then wish to move it to *Google Docs*. You can do this by choosing to **UPLOAD** an existing file:



From here you have two options:



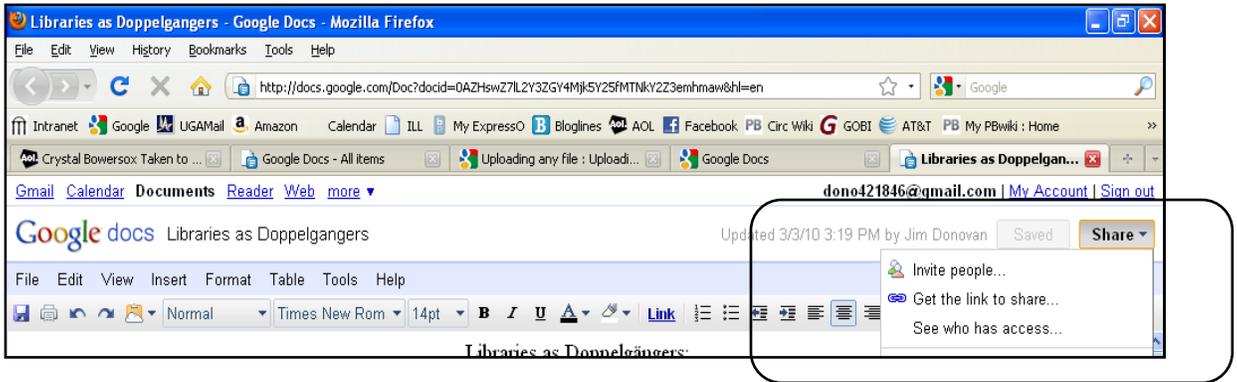
You may upload the file exactly as it sits on your computer, regardless of the software in which it was created. You may want to do this to have access to the file as you travel, or to work on at home after downloading from *Google Docs*. If this is your preference, uncheck the file conversion box.

If you leave this box checked (the default), the file will be converted from its original format into *Google Docs*. Only some kinds of files can be converted, however:

- You can only upload and convert these file types:
 - For spreadsheets: .xls, .xlsx, .ods, .csv, .tsv, .txt, .tsb
 - For documents: .doc, .docx, .html, plain text (.txt), .rtf
 - For presentations: .ppt, .pps
- There are some file-size limits.
- **Some of your original formatting may not be preserved.**

3. Sharing Files

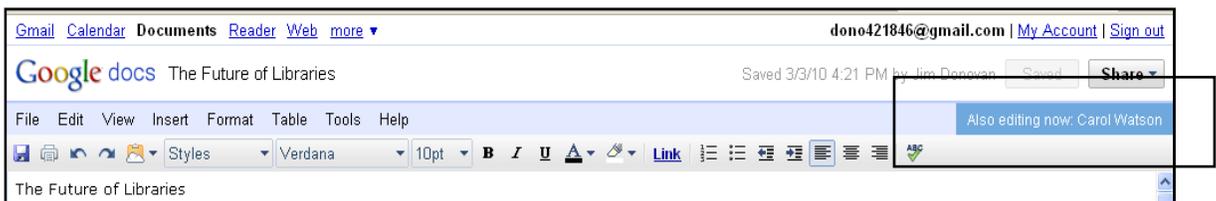
Whether uploaded from your desktop, or created only, you now have a file in *Google Docs* that you wish to share with others.



You can:

- Invite individuals to share the document, deciding whether to allow them to edit the document or only read it. Under the first method at any time you can see who has access to your file, and can email all users simultaneously to share information. You also can control whether others can invite additional viewers. Persons invited by this method must have a Google login; or
- Share a direct link to the document that will anyone direct access to the file, again to either view or edit. Those accessing via the link do not need a Google login.

Users can work on the same manuscript at the same time! Whenever someone else is working on the paper, *Google Docs* will let you know:

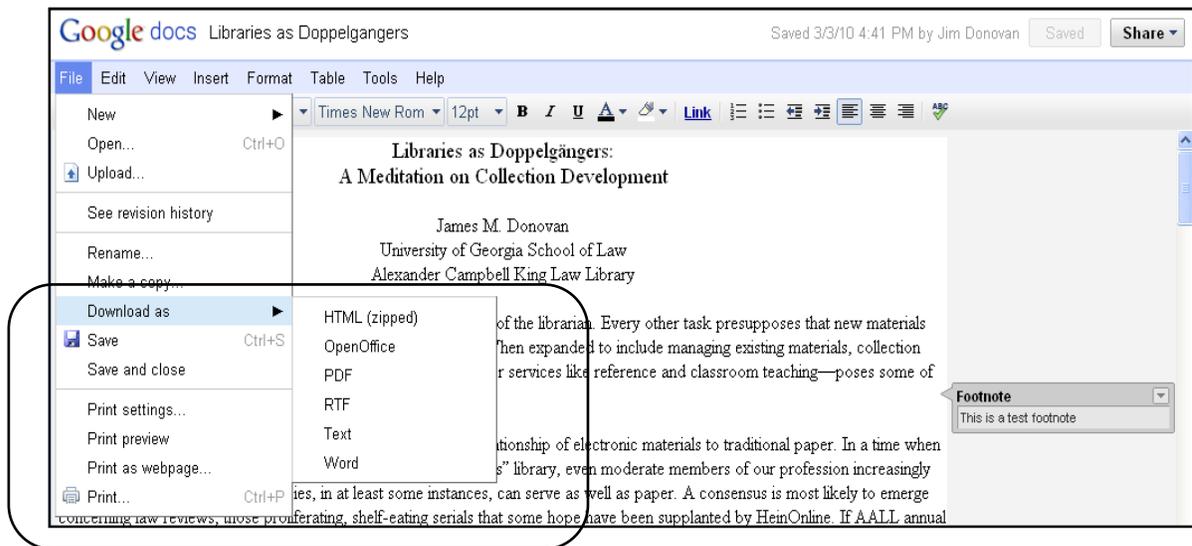


Finally, all changes are tracked by *Google Docs*, and attributed to the appropriate user, so that praise (or blame) can be suitably assigned:

Revision	Last Edited	Changes
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 110	2 minutes ago by Me	klklklklklklklkl Libraries are only buildings...what about the future of librarians? Libraries: Revisions 108-110
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 108	2 minutes ago by Carol Watson	<i>no text added</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 107	2 minutes ago by Carol Watson	jkjklklkl Libraries are only buildings...what about the future of librarians? Libraries are e) Revisions 105-107
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 105	3 minutes ago by Me	<i>no text added</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 104	7 hours ago by Carol Watson	Library as City Center- Rejuvenation - http://www.miller-mccune.com/culture-society/nr Revisions 102-104
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 102	9 days ago by Carol Watson	Emerging Technologies Librarian - John Marshall School of Law in Chicago - an enthus Revisions 98-102
<input type="checkbox"/> Revision 98	2 weeks ago by Carol Watson	We're drowning in information...information overload yet our funds are shrinking. New (Revisions 96-98)

4. Exporting a Google Docs File

At some point you will certainly want to download and print out the *Google Docs* files. The program offers a variety of formats, but most users will choose the MS WORD option; *Google Docs* does not support a WordPerfect version:



Spreadsheets

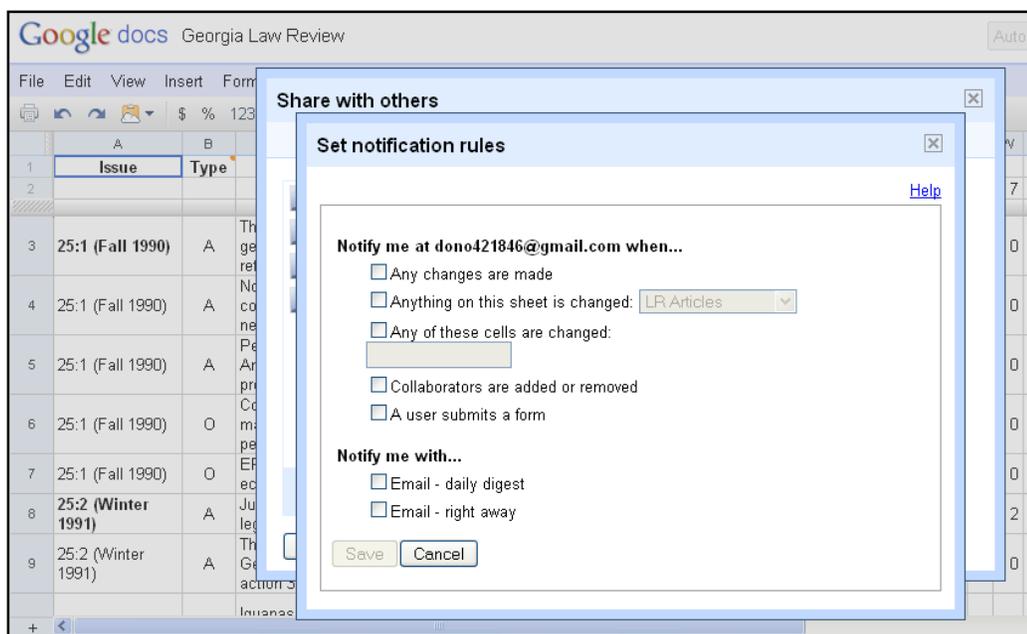
Much of what has been said for word process also applies to the spreadsheet functions available in *Google Docs*.

While most users will never bump up against them, the user should be aware that limitations do exist on the size and number of spreadsheets that *Google Docs* will support:

- Each spreadsheet you upload and convert can be up to 256 columns, or up to 200,000 cells, or up to 100 sheets -- whichever limit is reached first. There's no limit on number of rows.
- Each spreadsheet can have up to 20,000 cells with formulas. Of this total, the following limits apply:
 - Up to 1,000 GoogleFinance formulas
 - Up to 1,000 GoogleLookup formulas
 - Up to 50 Import formulas
- You have a limit of 1000 spreadsheets. The spreadsheets that are shared with you do not count against 1000 limit.
- The limit on spreadsheets open at one time is 11.
- You can import and convert spreadsheets up to approximately 1MB in xls, xlsx, csv, ods, txt, tsv, or tsb format.

NB: Although in *Google Docs* spreadsheets can be quite large, experience has shown that after a certain size program responsiveness can become an issue.

Like documents, spreadsheets can be shared with other users. One feature of this capability that is unique to spread sheets is that you can ask to be notified whenever another user has made changes:

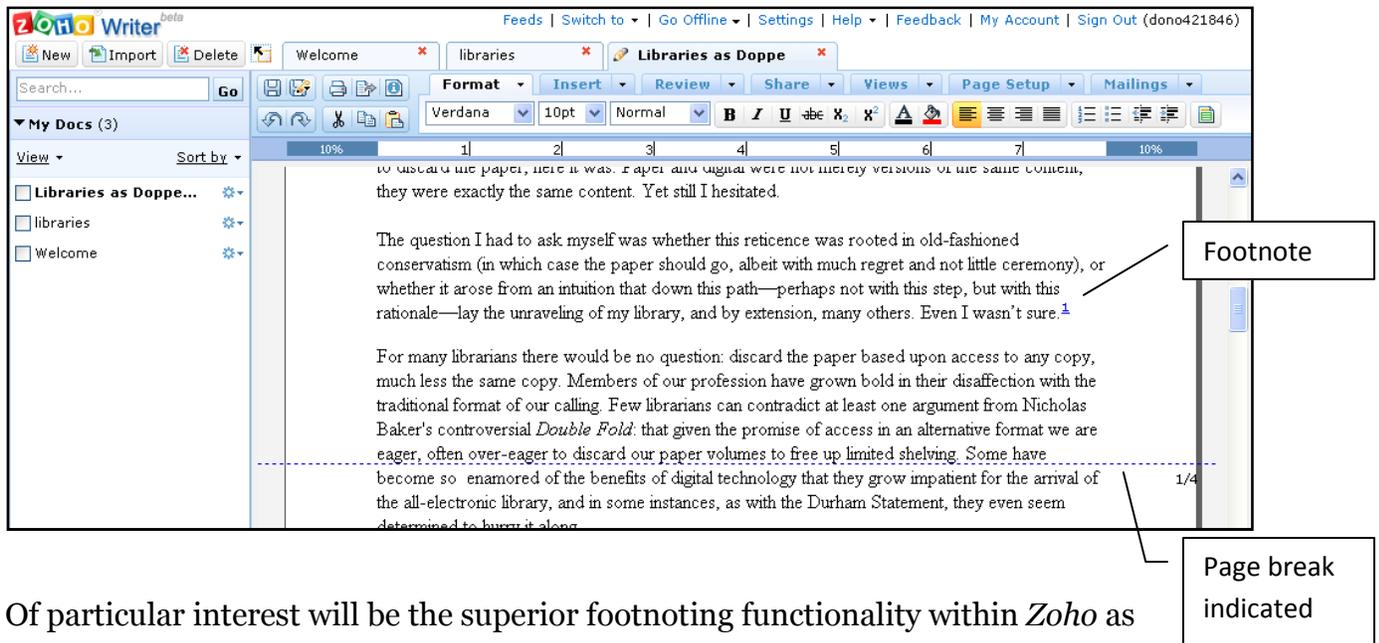


Google Doc spreadsheets can be downloaded into several formats, including Excel and PDF.

Zoho

Of course *Google Docs* is not the only collaborative research tool available to the busy attorney. *Zoho* (zoho.com) is another, and it offers several features that may make it worth exploring before the user chooses a preferred service.

Two features of *Zoho* may be especially attractive. In *Google Docs* you write a document in what is basically HTML format, and, in order to see how it appears on the page, you must export it and further manipulate it. *Zoho* allows you to edit the paper in its page mode, allowing you to see it much more as it will appear on the printed page. You can, for example see where the page breaks will occur:



Of particular interest will be the superior footnoting functionality within *Zoho* as compared to *Google Docs*. Footnotes are numbered and appear in the text, but the writer does not show the text of the note.

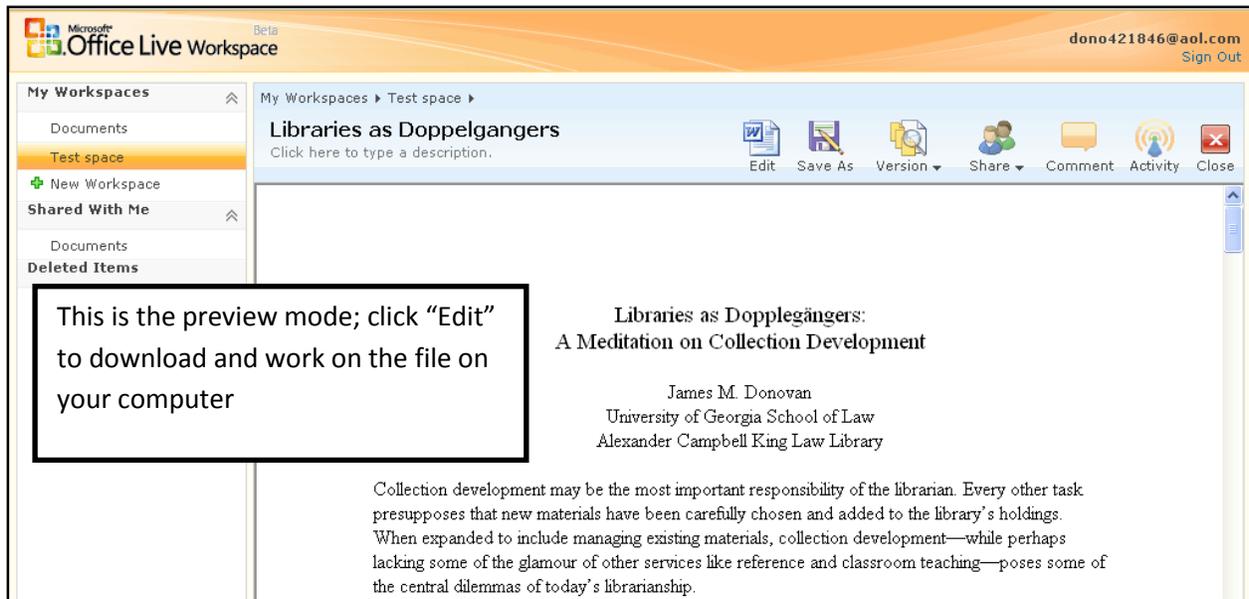
One drawback of the *Zoho* is that, unlike *Google Docs*, it does not provide an Autosave to automatically preserve your work every few minutes, running the risk that, if you do not frequently save yourself, you may lose some text should the computer malfunction. Another limitation is that, whereas *Google Docs* can be shared with anyone, *Zoho* documents can be shared only with other *Zoho* members.

Both *Google Docs* and *Zoho*, support offline editing of documents. Edits made offline are then synched with the document the next time you connect to the service.

Microsoft Office Live

Many potential users will view the need to convert files to the special processing formats used by both *Zoho* and *Google Docs*. These people may be more interested in

the newly available Microsoft's *Office Live* (<http://workspace.officelive.com/en-us/Home2>). This service allows you to upload a file in the original MS format, and when you decide to edit, will use the MS product on the computer. The revisions are then saved to the file back on *Office Live*.



Initial set up for this service can be a bit daunting. In order to use this program it is first necessary to download an application file. Next, when first trying to edit a document, you will also have to respond to a query box to create a linking sign-in.

Office Live lets you store up to 5GB of files, allowing any single file to be as large as 25 MB, and share with up to 100 people. Unlike the other utilities, however, only one user can edit a file at any given time.