

FreeBSD for the Writing Scholar

BY COREY J. STEPHAN

Perhaps it is natural that the sort of mind that thrives on piecing together minutia within one (not computer-related) academic discipline tends to be different from the sort of mind that thrives on learning to use cutting-edge technology. If all that an information technology team provides (or allows) at a workstation is either bloatware from Redmond or spyware from Cupertino, then one might (fairly) assume that nothing better exists. Each week, the typical academic must balance preparing lessons, lecturing, grading, attending meetings, and holding office hours—all while struggling to reserve blocks of time (inevitably too small) for personal research and writing. The stereotype of the absent-minded scholar often holds true (I write while looking in the mirror) not only because of a personal propensity for aloofness but also because workdays are disorderly by institutional design. Normally, the Frankenstein Monster-esque computer setup that I notice while chatting in a windowless, book-filled office is only one piece in a particular scholar's chaotic work life. With so much pressure to produce materials for publication, who has time to build a better computer workflow?

I think that all the traits that a scholar needs in a desktop operating system fit within three broad categories: documentation, stability, and security.

Scholars like documentation atop documentation (atop documentation). If scholars cannot verify something for ourselves, then we are unlikely to trust it. Poorly documented operating systems cannot withstand the skepticism that is standard in the academy. Organization and documentation go hand-in-hand. An operating system whose developers prioritize consistency is probably going to be intelligible for the person who takes the time to learn a bit about how it works. Good man pages, a clean handbook, and a wiki that a dedicated userbase actively maintains—this trifecta is the minimum of order that a scholar's OS must have.

Scholars do not need the same kind of stability for our workstations as, say, freebsd.org needs for its servers, but we do need stability. Twice, my Ryzen-based desktop computer with 16GB of RAM has crashed because I was using 13GB in one program to manipulate a manuscript facsimile. On another occasion, I almost entered cardiac arrest because an update for LibreOffice's Fresh branch rendered all of my work-in-progress dissertation chapters un-editable until I paused and realized that I simply needed to downgrade to LibreOffice Still. To say the least, neither moment was pleasant. Scholars work with many long, complicated documents and databases, and our success depends on as few of those failing during crunch time as possible. If tools in scholars' toolboxes are not broken, we will not wish for anyone to try to fix them.

Security, like stability, means something else for the scholar's workstation than it does for the kinds of environments that a system administrator or software developer has in mind. For the scholar, security means privacy. The best scholars share their work with others for feedback and expect others to do the same with them. However, academics are also the sort of people to be quite selective about those who are or are not able to see what they are doing. Many academics work with confidential materials. Any operating system that reports what its end users are doing to someone somewhere else or that can be hacked or monitored easily is not suitable for scholarly work.

FreeBSD is not the only major open-source operating system with superb documentation, stability, and security (we must never overlook our siblings in the other *BSDs or cousins working on Debian and other great GNU/Linux distributions), but it is undoubtedly one of the best. Information technology professionals often are the only people writing about FreeBSD. They might not realize that many of the things that make FreeBSD fantastic for servers and embedded systems also make it outstanding as a desktop operating system for the writing scholar.

The documentation and organization of FreeBSD are splendid. As a scholar particularly ever in search of historical documentation, trying to find order amidst a diversity of ancient voices, I find the internal coherency of FreeBSD to be downright refreshing. Even kernel building in FreeBSD mainly involves the use of human-readable, plain text configuration files. Things make sense because the people creating them aim for them to make sense.

Few people are going to question FreeBSD's stability. When the FreeBSD Wiki lists certain hardware as being well supported, FreeBSD most likely will not be the cause of a system crash for anyone doing (even esoteric) desktop work on that hardware. My system crashes were in a different operating system. I doubt the same would have happened if I had been using a properly configured FreeBSD-STABLE system and the long-term service branches of my main third-party software applications.

Finally, FreeBSD is fully open and markedly secure. With FreeBSD, scholars can trust that our intellectual property is not monitored by a suit at some hypothetical FreeBSD headquarters in Silicon Valley. FreeBSD is sensibly secure by default and sensible enough to secure.

I proudly recommend FreeBSD for fellow writing scholars. Install FreeBSD. Install the X Window System. Install a dynamic tiling window manager with plain text configuration like FreeBSD consistently uses, such as spectrwm or i3wm, or else a simple traditional desktop environment (XFCE is trustworthy). Install LibreOffice Still and a decent citation management tool that integrates with LibreOffice and handles materials from your discipline (Zotero runs flawlessly in Wine, and FreeBSD has its own native options). Install discipline-specific command-line interface tools. The pkg system makes a good deal of third-party desktop software simple to install. Enjoy researching and writing with a logical, stable, and overall solid operating system. Your publishing schedule no longer will be subject to setbacks from your software.

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