

CHAPTER 19

Basics of Computers

A Powerful Shareware Rival to Mighty Microsoft Word

Idea Keeper is a word processor, outliner, and information manager—in one \$15 package

by Charles Haddad

Idea Keeper is shareware for the Macintosh at its best. This little, inexpensive program is nearly as powerful as Microsoft Word. It can even do some things that mighty Word can't, such as automatically stripping out the weird formatting of e-mail text. Not a bad trick for a program that costs only \$15.

For starters, Idea Keeper looks different. You're not greeted with a word processor's traditional blank page at startup. Instead, what you see is a rectangular box divided in half. On the left side are what Idea Keeper calls topics, or headings, that represent a grouping of information. Click on a topic, and what it holds is displayed in the right panel. For example, I grouped notes about how the program worked and other reviews and comments from the developer under a topic about Idea Keeper. Each of these bits of information was saved as a separate item, called an idea.

As you might imagine, ideas are the basic building block of Idea Keeper. It will remind you at first of a word processor. Create a new "idea" file and up pops a blank sheet of digital paper. Here you can write and format text and save information taken from other sources. You can also create endless links between other ideas, files on your hard drive, or Web sites. The links are easier to create and use than in Word. And Idea Keeper will launch other applications from its links. Often, Word can't.

You also can create a stand-alone catalog of bookmarks, called anchors, which mark any passage in any idea across innumerable topics. That's a powerful way to access information you use often in many different projects.

IDEA CHAIN. So is Idea Keeper a word processor? Well, not exactly. The program is a hybrid: part word processor, part outliner, and part information

manager. With Idea Keeper, you can build complex outlines, create documents, and keep and organize notes of all kinds.

What's really different about Idea Keeper is this: It helps you think about text and information in a new way. With word processors, written information is organized page after page, in a linear fashion. Not so with Idea Keeper. It links information in layers. You drill down through notes attached to ideas attached to yet more ideas. It's a way of organizing information that's a little off-putting at first, but it works well once you get used to it.

Another great feature is Idea Keeper's outliner. It's as powerful and works the same way as the one in Word. Click on a button in the bottom of an idea window, and your text is shifted to outline formatting. You can rearrange text by dragging it up and down. Switch back to the regular text view when you're ready to format a final document. Idea Keeper's outline even has a feature missing in Word. You can highlight separate items scattered through out an outline and then gather them together in one place or under one new heading.

Most of Idea Keeper's features are accessible through little clickable buttons embedded in the program's various windows. You can add links, format text, jump among ideas—all by clicking a window button. A lot of Idea Keeper's appeal lies in its ability to automate the gathering of information as you research a project. You can grab pictures, text, and Web addresses from many different applications and store each of them as separate items.

HONOR SYSTEM. The program saves what you've grabbed in a separate window called clippings. You can turn your clippings into a new idea or add it to an idea file you've already created. This feature doesn't work well with every application. I couldn't get it to work regularly, for example, with Netscape Navigator, although I could easily copy and paste information from the Net to an idea window.

While Idea Keeper offers most word-processing functions, it does lack such high-powered features as the ability to create headers and footers, spell-check text, and auto-capitalize sentences. You can add these through another program, such as Casady & Greene's Spell Catcher, but more on that in another column.

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