







NoodleTools

Student research platform with MLA, APA and Chicago/Turabian bibliographies, notecards, outlining.

Review Date: 26 October 2017

Overall Score (Weighted Total)	
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Content — 40% (Quality, uniqueness, reliability, and appropriateness for community college audience)	
Interface — 25% (Usability, customization, mobile supported, lack of problems, print/download/email content, citation formatting)	
Cost — 15% (Value and terms of use)	
Accessibility — 15% (Compliance with standards)	
Support — 5% (For administrators and users)	

NoodleTools is a citation builder that also offers an electronic interface for research notecards.

Method

To review NoodleTools, we created book, article, and website citations in MLA and APA. We also used the direct export feature from Worldcat and Gale products to test the accuracy and ease of this feature. We also tested NoodleTools using the browser on an iPad and also NoodleTools Companion app for the iPad. We worked with an assistive technology specialist to test whether NoodleTools can be used with a screen reader like Jaws.

Review

Introduction

NoodleTools supports students' ethical and organized use of information in their research papers by helping them to format their citations and providing an electronic version of research

notecards and outlining. It currently offers direct export of citations from WorldCat and Gale. It supports MLA 8th edition, APA 6th edition, and Chicago 16th edition.

NoodleTools does not have auto-cite options or offer automated evaluations of sources, as EasyBib users are used to having. NoodleTools' website explains that this is because of their interest in encouraging deeper student engagement in the research, planning, and attribution process.

Free content from NoodleTools includes MLA 8th edition citation templates, NoodleTools Express for creating single citations in MLA, APA, or Chicago, and MLA Lite for creating and saving an MLA works cited page (without the added features like notecards, outlining, and sharing).

Interface

Creating Citations and Bibliographies:

NoodleTools offers users three different levels when they are setting up a new project. These levels correspond roughly to the educational level of the users. The main difference among the three levels is the number of source types that are displayed when users are creating a new citation. The recommended level for upper high school and university is Advanced.

NoodleTools is relatively easy for students to use with some brief initial training about how to create a new project and add the first source. There are several clicks to get through this process and new users may get confused when the first screen they encounter after creating a project is not the one where they will add their first source. But, overall the interface quickly becomes intuitive with a little practice.

The major hurdle to creating accurate citations in NoodleTools is selecting the correct type of source when starting a new citation. This is the hardest part of using any citation software, but NoodleTools has a list that seems particularly difficult to understand. The first question students answer is Where is [the source]? And they select from Database; Website; Print or in-hand; Viewed/heard live; File, app, e-book; Other. Because students are likely thinking about what type of source they have rather than where they got it, this step in the process can be confusing at first.

Then students are asked What is it? And, if they are using the Advanced level, they select from a long list of sources that are color coded to indicate which are Electronic/Online, Periodicals, Non-periodicals (defined below), Audio/Visual/Images, Unpublished, or Legal and government sources (the Starter and Junior levels offer users an abbreviated list of source types). New users are likely to require instruction in how to use the color coding. The terminology NoodleTools uses to describe each type of source also presents a problem for users. When indicating what the source is, students using articles are only presented with the options: Journal, Magazine, Newsletter, Newspaper, and Reprinted Article. Since Reprinted Article is the only one that includes the word Article, users we observed sometimes considered selecting that option even when they were simply citing a magazine or journal article.

Create new citation X

Where is it?

What is it?

Original Content in Database	Cartoon or Comic Strip	Review
Conference Proceedings	Chart, Table, Infographic (Born Digital)	Unpublished Paper or Data
Journal	Film or Video Recording	Court Case
Magazine	Lecture, Speech or Reading	Government Publication
Newsletter	Map or Chart (Born Digital)	State Bill or Resolution
Newspaper	Map or Chart, Published or in an Archive	State Committee Hearing/Testimony
Reprinted Article	Musical Score or Libretto	State Report or Document
Anthology/Collection	Photo or Illustration	State Statute
Bible	Photo or Image (Born Digital)	U.S. Bill or Resolution
Book	Radio Program	U.S. Committee Hearing/Testimony
Conference Proceedings	Sound Recording (CD, Record, etc.)	U.S. Congressional Debate
Pamphlet or Brochure	Television Program	U.S. Executive Order/Proclamation
Reference Source	Video Clip (Online)	U.S. Patent
Religious Work	Work of Visual Art	U.S. Report or Document
Report (Technical/Research)	Conference Proceedings	U.S. Rule or Regulation
Reprinted Article	Dissertation or Thesis	U.S. Statute
Advertisement or Commercial	Historical Work in an Archive	
Audio Clip (Online)	Letter or Memo	

Electronic/Online
 Nonperiodicals
 Unpublished

Periodicals
 Audio, Video, Images
 Legal and Government Sources

In order to help students through the process of selecting their source types, NoodleTools provides a set of visual and text-based descriptions of many of the source types that they list. It can be viewed here: <http://www.flat.noodletools.com/guide/showme/advanced.html>

Once the user creates a citation, they can get help with formatting their in-text citation. Under “options” there is a nice explanation of how to do in-text citations with helpful examples.

Integration with Gale and WorldCat (but not EBSCO, etc.):

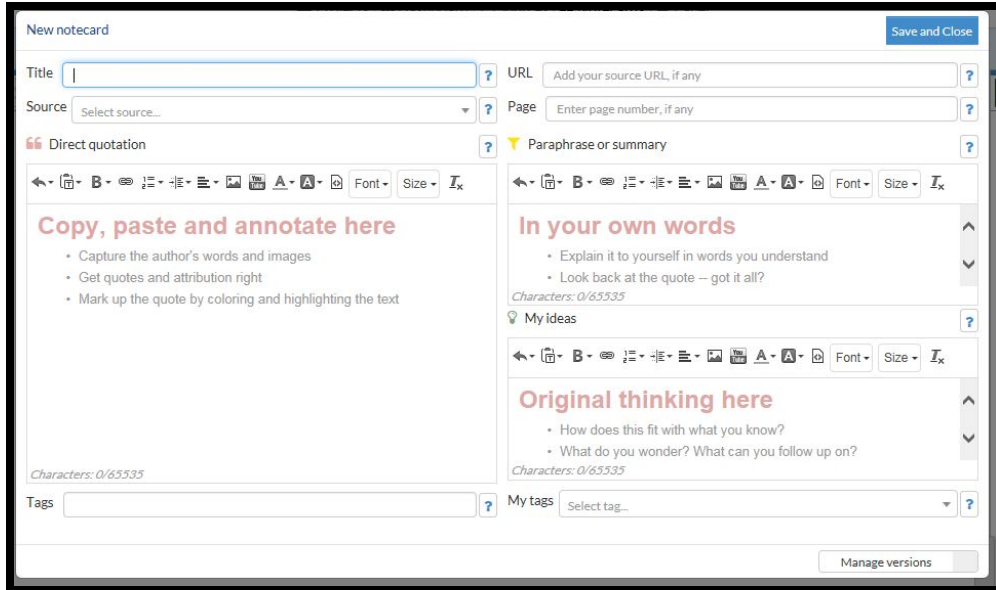
NoodleTools does not offer a way to import citations from EBSCO or any other vendors' tools except for Gale products and WorldCat. A representative from NoodleTools explained that they have plans to integrate with EBSCO but they do not have an estimated date when this will be completed.

Though NoodleTools supports importing citations from Gale products and from WorldCat, these require two different procedures. Importing from Gale is very easy because NoodleTools is one of the listed options under “Export to” when users select Citation Tools. As long as students have their project open and they are viewing their sources, NoodleTools seamlessly adds the selected citation from Gale databases. Before adding the new citation to the student’s project, NoodleTools encourages them to review the automatically formatted citation and find errors to fix. It does not, however, provide the same quality of suggestions and help tips that students see when building their citations in the templates.

WorldCat does not offer the option to export from the record to NoodleTools. Instead, the integration between WorldCat and NoodleTools initiates in NoodleTools. When students indicate that they are citing a book or other “nonperiodical”, they are presented with the option to fill in the template manually or to search for the item in WorldCat using the ISBN, title, or author. Nonperiodical includes reference works, conference proceedings, and anthologies, but does not include films or government documents. If the user decides to search for the item using the ISBN, title, or author, they will be presented with one or more results from WorldCat and are directed to select the correct one. Although the ebook we cited in this test produced an incomplete citation (it was missing the URL), NoodleTools did not provide any suggestions or other alerts when we created the citation or when we selected the option to edit it. NoodleTools also automatically inserted the publisher’s city and state into the citation even though their own help pop-ups said that you shouldn’t include them. The student will have to know to take them out.

Creating Notecards and Outlines:

The Notecards and Outlines feature is not the focus of this review because it is not the primary function of NoodleTools for libraries. However it is a unique part of this product and could have a lot of value for the right program. Overall, the electronic notecards and outline are well designed to replicate the research documentation process that was done in the past on stacks of 3x5 cards. Students will not choose to use this feature on their own, but professors who want to dedicate the time to teaching, evaluating, and grading their students’ research documentation will find that it is likely to be much easier with NoodleTools than with traditional 3x5 cards.



Mobile-friendly

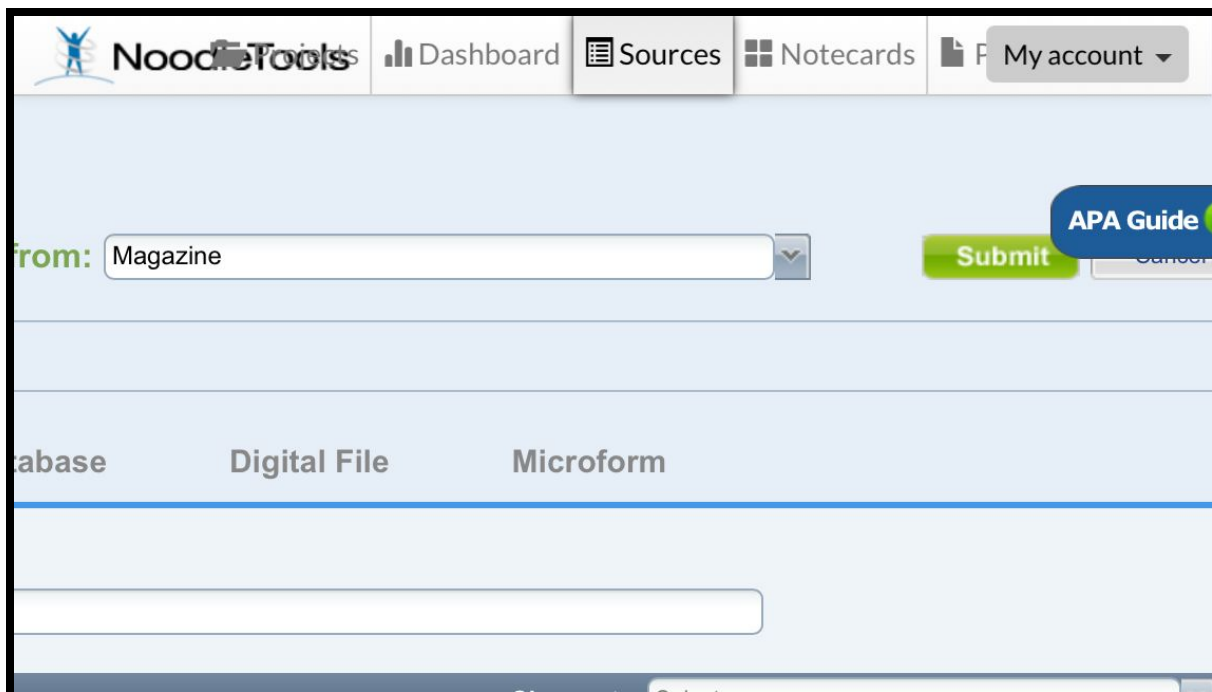
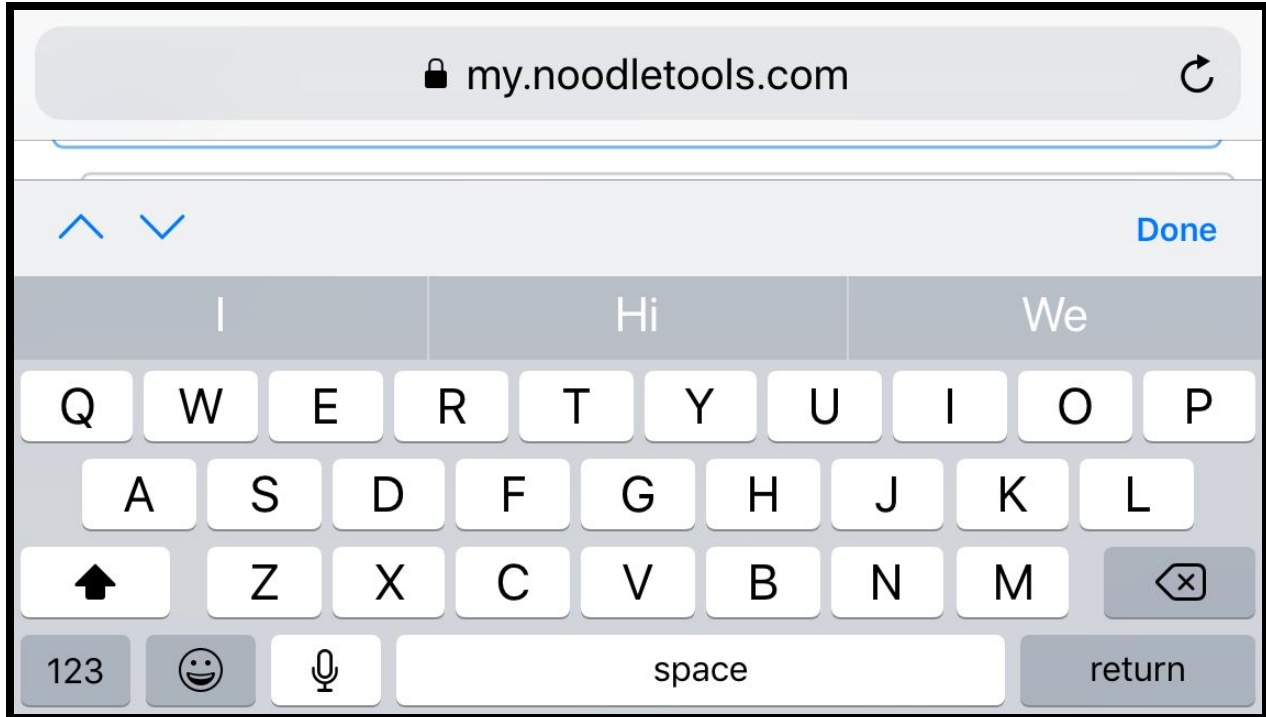
On an iPad

NoodleTools worked in the Safari browser on an iPad in the same way it worked on a PC except that the export to Google Docs would not work, which may be a serious obstacle for those students who depend on iPads. It was possible, however, to email the list of sources, which came as an attachment in rich text format.

On an iPhone

NoodleTools did not work well on an iPhone. The tool is not mobile responsive. You could view your citations and notecards, but they did not fit onto the screen even in the landscape orientation. Some labels and menus overlapped with buttons. When typing in notecards, one is unable to see what one is typing. Scrolling did not work consistently when one pop-up overlaid another page. It was possible to email the source list, but NoodleTools was otherwise unusable on the iPhone.

Below are a couple of screenshots from an iPhone using noodletools.



NoodleTools Companion App

There is an app called NoodleTools Companion available in both the Apple and Google Play stores. The app is not intended to be used for all the functions in NoodleTools. It is only

intended to help students get the citation for a book by either searching for the book inside the NoodleTools Companion app (it is not clear what database is being searched) or by scanning an ISBN barcode. The app allows searches by title, author, or ISBN. The citations produced after a book search are generally correct, but the MLA citations always included the city of publication which is no longer required by MLA. A number of the citations produced by scanning the ISBN had small errors and in one case the search brought up the wrong book. Again, it is unclear what database is being searched when the ISBN is scanned. This app has low ratings in both the Apple and Google Play stores.

Initialization and Administration

NoodleTools does not require much in terms of initialization or administration because it is ready to use when the subscription begins. The college name appears at the top of the NoodleTools screen.

Accessibility

NoodleTools is not accessible using screen reader software because of missing labels and incompatibility with typical hotkeys that are used for navigation. Students using screen readers will not even be able to create a new project. According to the aXe analysis, there are multiple form elements that do not have labels. This is part of what makes it impossible to use NoodleTools with a screen reader. There are also radio buttons that are not part of a group and they cannot be navigated. The pop-up form users need to complete in order to start a new project and the one they use to create a new citation both have some buggy interaction with the parent screen behind them, so navigation with a keyboard does not function as expected. A representative from NoodleTools explained that it is a work in progress to identify what needs to be done and then to address the issues.

Unfortunately, to date the reviewers have not learned of any citation builders that are accessible to students who use screen readers. A student we contacted explained that he works without a citation builder by relying on the citations provided in the databases and by using the citation creator in Google Scholar when he needs citations that the databases do not provide. He often gets help from a family member to double check the citations that he gets from these automatically generated sources.

Support

NoodleTools offers a searchable and browsable set of instructional materials that covers all of the steps from creating a project to exporting an annotated bibliography to Google Docs with notecards and an outline. These comprehensive materials are easy to follow and provide text as well as visual instructions.

Cost and Value

The following statements were shared with the reviewers by California community college librarians who have used citation builder software, including NoodleTools, with students.

- “I think that these citation builders do offer students assistance with understanding what to include in a citation, as well as an added resource when a professor or librarian are not available.”

- “Yes, there is value to provide a citation builder, if a good value, because more and more databases are getting better at their citation creations, which are already part of the subscription to them.”

- “I believe some of my hesitation is an "old school" mentality. If technology were not available, we would still have to be able to cite sources in order to work in the world of academia.

“However, after just trying NoodleTools, I see value in it. It is handy to document my sources and write notes in one place. When I created notecards, I appreciated being prompted to share a quote, restate it in my own words, and apply some original thinking. Also, as citation is increasingly complex given many types of sources, perhaps it is okay to have help from a tool like this one. I would rather students spend their time on thinking about their writing and argument skills, rather than be slowed down by confusing citation standards.

“To get full value from a tool like NoodleTools requires training -- for faculty/librarians, staff, tutors, and students. If campuses subscribe, I hope they will invest in providing the training.

“While I originally had hesitation, a quick test makes me appreciate the tool.”

- “First, we have faculty that require their students to use a citation builder. The student citations improve when they use a citation builder, and they seem to have a better understanding of the citing process, and we agree.”

- “Yes, there is value to provide a citation builder, if a good value, because more and more databases are getting better at their citation creations, which are already part of the subscription to them.”

The Competition

Over the past several years, many community colleges looking for subscription citation services have selected between NoodleTools and EasyBib. Since EasyBib was sold to Chegg, institutional subscriptions are no longer available. Because the free version of EasyBib is choked with advertising and only supports MLA citation style, a subscription is necessary for full functionality and subscriptions are only available to individuals. These changes to EasyBib's business model mean that it is no longer comparable to NoodleTools.

Since NoodleTools has several areas for improvement, it may be worth investigating citation tools that have been less commonly used in California community colleges. Subscription services like EndNote and Refworks are much more expensive than most community college libraries can afford but they may merit their own CCL-EAR Quick Look reviews. Free web-based citation tools that may also meet students' needs include EndNote Basic, KnightCite, and Son of Citation Machine. Zotero is also a free citation tool and is open source, but has so far proven too cumbersome for most community college librarians to help students to use. That is because it is loaded onto students' own computers (which is a different model than any other popular citation builders) and most community colleges do not expect all students to have personal devices. Recent changes to Zotero may address this issue, so it is worth looking into how its added web-based interface may make it a better option. Finally, Microsoft Word provides support for citation formatting within its word processing application.

Recommended Improvements

Complete the planned functionality to directly export citations from EBSCO products.

The product name could seem childish to some users and might put off faculty and students who are not interested in using tools they associate with k-12 education.

The appearance of the tool is outdated compared with some other free and subscription citation apps.

Accessibility needs to be a priority and the incompatibility with screen readers should be addressed.

Conclusion

NoodleTools is an affordable option for many libraries and will benefit students and faculty who need a tool to help with citations formatting. Subscribing to a tool like NoodleTools rather than relying on students' ability to find free citation builders has the added benefit of creating a campus standard. This makes it possible for librarians and other faculty to create instructional materials to help students with the parts of citation that remain difficult even with the help of software tools. Though not ideal, NoodleTools does cost much less than more robust tools

like RefWorks and should be considered for that reason. Libraries wishing to avoid procuring products inaccessible to the vision-impaired should steer clear of it.

Other Reviews

<http://www.internetatschools.com/Articles/Column/The-New-Media-Center/THE-NEW-MEDIA-CENTER-Noodling-Around-in-the-New-NoodleTools-89345.aspx>