



Obtain Good Software Free

by
Ron Brubaker

There are three steps to obtaining good software that is free. First you must find the application that you need. Second, you will need to download the application. Third, you must install the application and in many cases register it. Let's examine these three steps in more detail.

Before you go shopping for something it is best to have an idea of what you need. In order to make this illustration more realistic I will choose a software utility program and then follow the remaining steps using this as an example. What I need is a text editor that falls somewhere between Notepad, which comes with Windows, and a full blown word processor. Word processors take too long to start up and have way too many features, but Notepad is too limited (ok, I know about WordPad but I don't really like it either). Let's see what we can find.

The place I started looking was <http://www.freewarehome.com>¹. This site only handles free software. Often these programs were written for the author's own use but seemed too good to keep to themselves so they are shared as freeware. While these programs come with little or no support it is not uncommon to find some real gems in these collections. On the left side of the Freeware Home page are groups of software types listed by titles such as business, desktop, education, games, etc. I couldn't find a category that sounded like it would contain what I wanted so I clicked on the search button which brought up the dialog shown on the right. Note that I entered "text editor" because the quote marks will confine the search to instances where the two words occur together in that order. This brought up a list of over a dozen choices. The initial descriptions all end with ... →more. Clicking on more brings up more complete descriptions of the item and of a number of similar items. I found the first item description below using the more after the 2nd item in the initial list and the second description below using the more after the 4th item in the initial list. Here are the detailed descriptions of the items I chose to examine further. Note the ratings in the lower left-hand corner. I would recommend that you look for at least 4 out of 5 stars and the more votes the better.

The search dialog box contains the following elements: a row of buttons for 'new', 'search', 'submit', 'contact', and 'forums'; a text input field with 'text editor' entered; a 'Search' button; a 'Search in:' dropdown menu set to 'Whole site'; a 'Sort by:' dropdown menu set to 'Score'; and a 'Match:' dropdown menu set to 'All'.

The first entry Win32Pad does not list Vista so I looked for a more recent release. I picked one that was a 2007 release but it did not run under Windows XP. Crimson Editor just says Windows so I will have to test it with Vista.

The screenshot shows two software listings. The first is 'Win32Pad 1.1.4' with a description: 'Notepad replacement, very small in size, doesn't require any extra runtime dlls, very fast and powerful. Has a ton of features like MRUs, Find/Replace, Intellimouse support, shows current location, # of lines, file offset, file size, Goto Line #, Shows Insert/Overwrite editing mode, Can change Font Color/Size/Character set/etc.' It has 71 votes and a 5-star rating. The second is 'Crimson Editor 3.7' with a description: 'Crimson Editor is a professional source editor for Windows that is not only fast in loading time, but also small in size (so small that it can be copied to one floppy disk). While it can serve as a good replacement for Notepad, it also offers many powerful features for programming languages such as HTML, C/C++, Perl and Java. Syntax Highlighting for HTML, C/C++, Perl, Java, Matlab and LaTeX. Also, it can be extended for other programming languages based on custom syntax files.' It has 92 votes and a 5-star rating.

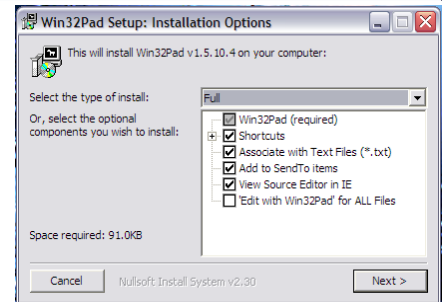
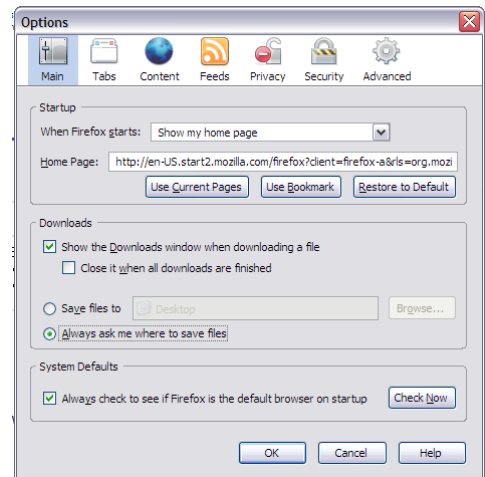
You will note that the first is a very small file (37K). Not only should this download quickly but the application should be quite small which means they should load quickly and run quite fast.

The next step is to download them. Start by clicking on the download button near the right end of the top bar of the program listing. Often this will take you to the site that the author of the program maintains and will give more information on the application. In the case of Win32Pad I found another download button on the page which brings up yet another page. This page offers a choice of versions and a choice of whether you want a "setup" file or a "zip" file. While the latter is smaller its use involves some extra steps so I will opt for the setup file in this case. Crimson Editor similarly goes to the application's home page where you can download the application by clicking on the first paw print (cute bullet). In spite of the larger size of the downloaded file the author claims a fast loading time and small size for the application.

¹ The accompanying article in this month's newsletter includes a number of other sources.

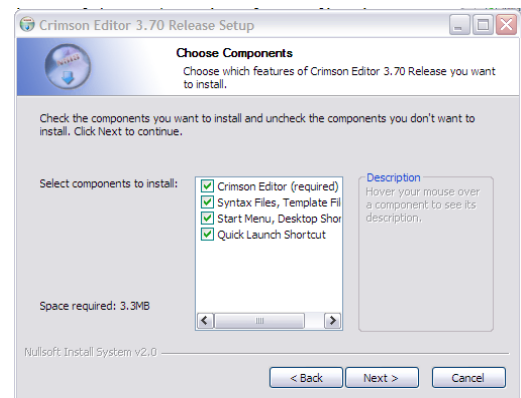
Note: I use FireFox as my Internet browser. It will default to placing all files that you download on your desktop unless you change its default setting. I have set mine to “Always ask me where to save files” but I have also used “Save files to” and pointed it to a download directory I had created just for that purpose. I prefer that the program asks me where I want the file to go because I want to avoid is having files downloaded and not knowing where they went. Believe me, I've been there and done that! For these files I created a folder named Text Editors within my Download folder.

Now for the fun part, installing and (groan) testing the applications. Begin by going to the directory where you saved the file using Windows Explorer. I found two files listed there. Let's start with Win32pad. Double click the icon to bring up its dialog. I'm not sure what it means by shortcuts, I know what they are, but how many of them it will create and where it will place them remains as yet unknown. I'm not ready to associate all my .txt files with this program so I will uncheck that item. I will allow it to add the program's name to the list of destinations where I can send a file. I don't know what the last two options mean so I will go with the authors default suggestion. I pressed the Next button to learn that it wants to place itself in [C:\Program Files\Win32Pad](#), which seems quite reasonable so having checked that 91K will fit into 105GB I clicked Install.



I found icons on the desktop and in the quick launch area (but we know how to get rid of or move these don't we?). The program has an option to minimize itself and hide in the tray. It passes my 5 minute test which is: “If I can get the program up and running and I am able to get it to do something useful in 5 minutes or less I'll keep it for further evaluation.” On a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is Notepad and 10 is a word processor this one is probably 2 or less. It is very small, very fast, and rather minimal. It does add a few things to the standard set by Notepad.

The Crimson Editor was installed by clicking on the appropriate icon in my Download\Text Editors folder. You are asked to agree to a license agreement and then to choose the components you wish to have installed. I decided to forgo the Quick Launch Shortcut but the rest seemed harmless. After a final dialog asking permission to install the application in [C:\Program Files\Crimson Editor](#) the program installed itself.



Again, I ran the 5 minute rule test and found to my surprise that this one is much more than NotePad. It still does one font for the whole document but it can do macros where you can create abbreviations for long strings of characters and then insert the string any time you insert the macro and press a key. I recall using this sort of thing a lot when programming and while writing performance evaluations. It is much easier to type sac than to type Dr. Smedly A. Chronansmithford every time you want to refer to the guy. Macros can be quite useful. Here are the two programs side by side. When I compared the menus and found that there is much more hidden under each menu item in the Crimson Editor.

I'd rate Crimson Editor as about 6 on the scale of 1 to 10 I used above. This is still a text editor and not a word processor. You can only use one font for the whole document so all of those formatting abilities are missing. It does a lot of other things that are useful as well.

