

PDF Applications on the iPad: A Review

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Context

Although eBook services were initially developed for downloading and reading electronic books, the potential for document sharing and collaboration has driven the evolution of a suite of PDF applications for eReaders. Many office workers have come to depend on Adobe Acrobat Pro to make document collaboration a digital-only process, relying on features such as highlights, cross-outs, notes, underlining, and comment-sharing between parties on a single document. In the absence of an Adobe Acrobat application for eReaders, Apple and others have developed PDF applications to fill the void.

For this review we tested several of the PDF applications available for the Apple iPad. With over 50 PDF apps available, we've limited this review to the top sellers. The parameters evaluated include markup capabilities, comment transferability, access capabilities of a document, cost, and error handling. In addition, given the mix of born-digital and print-origination that one finds among PDF documents, the optical character recognition feature for each app (that is, the process of converting text in a PDF into a separate text layer instead of just an image layer of text) requires special attention. Following are two examples that demonstrate this problem.

In figure 1, we see how an article with both horizontal and vertical text appears and functions in Adobe Acrobat Pro. The text software can recognize the different text situations and permit highlighting of the body, keeping the main text separate from the side text. Upon selection, the viewer can choose from a variety of options about how they want to edit or annotate the document.

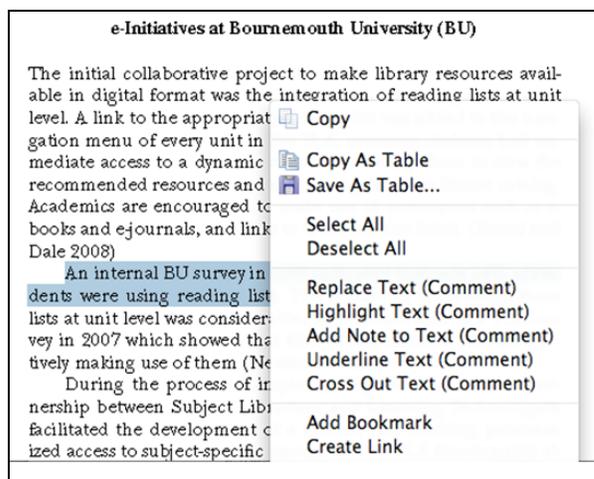


Figure 1

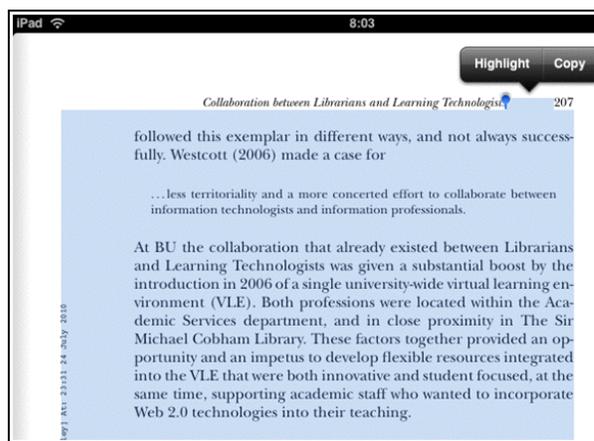


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows a screenshot of an article in one of the tested apps, PDF HD, where the document seems to lack proper optical character recognition for the horizontal and vertical text. Although I wanted a single line from the paragraph, the program can only provide the full block as a highlight option because both text components (the horizontal and vertical text) are considered part of a single layer. When reviewing an emailed copy of the same file, Adobe Acrobat Pro was able to identify a clear and intelligible text layer. Therefore, the text layer aspect of some PDF viewers can greatly alter one's

document review experience. Furthermore, failure to read the document will also affect document searchability. As of now, none of the programs can convert an image-only PDF into a dual-layered image-and-text PDF on the iPad itself, but different apps handle the challenge of poorly formatted text or multi-directional text better than others.

PDF Apps for iPad

PDF HD

For \$2.99, PDF HD is a great, simple PDF viewer with intuitive page turning (left and right for back and forth). PDF HD allows for highlighting of specific text and maintains a status bar at the bottom so you can be aware of your position in the overall document. Highlights are tracked as bookmarks so a full listing can be found in the Bookmarks tab within each document. However, the main issue with PDF HD is that your comments are only saved in the app itself and will not be shared. When I tested the software's capabilities against a poor OCR conversion, the program crashed without saving any previous comments or markups. Also, the method for accessing documents in PDF HD requires a USB connection to a laptop or other computer and the desired documents must be placed in the app within the iTunes store. Therefore, if you want to work with documents from your 3G or WiFi connection or want to share your markups with someone else, PDF HD is not a good choice.

ReaddleDocs

For just \$2 more than PDF HD, ReaddleDocs operates like a completely different program than its simple counterpart. First of all, ReaddleDocs is more of an overall file management tool, as it can accept PDFs, Microsoft Office documents, and even multimedia files like MP3s and JPEGs; for the purpose of this review, I will focus on the PDF functionality. A built-in browser allows direct downloading of articles from the

Internet, a connection to your email enables access to attachments, and server setup provides access to specific servers for file acquisition, in addition to the standard USB connection to a computer. There is also an option for VGA (Video Graphics Array) output to allow users to present files with an external monitor or projector from the iPad. However, the markup capabilities appear to be limited to PDF files. Like the other apps tested, ReaddleDocs can highlight and bookmark text, but it also allows you to copy text or even write notes into the margins; all additions you make to the file will save to the document and be available to other recipients when sharing the document. In addition to these features, Readdle, the larger company producing ReaddleDocs, offers an online file backup service; the service starts at 512MB for free and up to 10GB for \$10/month or \$90/year. Although ReaddleDocs is a vast improvement over PDF HD, the program still fails to properly recognize the text layer by not identifying the different directions as separate entities and having an underlying text that does not match the highlighted image. For a simple Swiss Army knife for digital files, ReaddleDocs works pretty well.

iAnnotate PDF

This \$9.99 app is the most analogous program to Adobe Acrobat Pro but is only for PDF files. Like Readdle, you can import files via email, via the built-in app browser, and via computer syncing; you can also utilize a VGA output for presenting documents in iAnnotate through an external monitor or projector connection. In this program, you can highlight, strikeout, underline, and sketch comments by finger. While the process for completing each task is a little bit more cumbersome, with multiple steps and options, the results are accurate and you can stay in a single mode through the entire document. Furthermore, iAnnotate identifies the main body of horizontal text correctly and does not confuse its highlighting or markup options with the additional vertical text on the side. The greater level of accuracy in this app is key to ensure the success of

other features, such as the ability to send out the document with comments or even sending out just the comments to others. If the text layer is inaccurate, the comments are useless. Other features include tabbed viewing, so you could have multiple files open at the same time.

GoodReader

Priced at \$0.99, GoodReader has generated a lot of buzz. However, my first attempt to test the app resulted in defeat, after locking myself into a document and being unable to retrieve any sort of toolbox even after restarting the app and the iPad itself. After reading the troubleshooting section online, I regained my footing and found some nice features, such as the option to have single- or double-page reading ability, page cropping, text reflow, color and font control, and Jump to Page items. Overall, GoodReader is most similar to Readdle, as it allows server connections and provides VGA output. However, you CANNOT annotate the PDF other than bookmarking; no highlighting or commenting is allowed.

Conclusion

Of the four apps reviewed, iAnnotate is my PDF viewer and collaborative tool of choice. However, for those less demanding of markup capabilities, ReaddleDocs is open to a larger variety of file formats and can markup and share your documents pretty well. Furthermore, ReaddleDocs handles errors much better than PDF HD, for only \$2 more. For those who want a simple PDF viewer similar to Adobe Reader, GoodReader is the most economical but least collaborative tool available.