This chapter is full of extra tools to help you get more out of your site and WordPress.

16

Tips and Tools for WordPress

In this chapter, you learn what the helpful tools are for running a WordPress site primarily using free or inexpensive programs.

If you haven't figured out by now that I'm a geek, I think you've been reading an entirely different book than the one I've been writing! Part of being a geek is having toys, not just playthings (although I do have those scattered about my desk), but also the programs and tools that help me do my online work all that much better. Since I started developing websites more than 15 years ago, making sure I had a well-stocked toolkit of geekery has been essential to every job, every task, and even every device that I use on a regular basis. I even carry portable toolkits of apps on little USB drives, some of which I can use to even boot a computer, so that I always have the things I need to do my job wherever I am.

This chapter is all about those tools, specifically the ones I use with my WordPress-based blogs. A lot of the tools are free, some you download, and others you use online. There are really geeky tools, but for the most part, these tools are just simple apps that make jobs a lot easier.

I'm going to start off with one of my favorite tools, and one that can save you a lot of frustration: blog editors.

Using Blog Editors to Write Content Offline

Blog editors are simply word processors for blogs. It's just like using Word to write a document, but instead of emailing it or printing it, you post it to your blog. Most blog editors are standalone programs that you download and run just for posting to your blog.

Why, you wonder, should I use a blog editor when the editor within WordPress looks just fine? The biggest reason is flexibility. When you use a blog editor, you don't have to be online to write your post, just to post it. Sure, most of us are online all the time when we use our computers. Most of the time I'm online when I'm writing a post in a blog editor, so that isn't a huge boon, is it? Well, not really, so I need to sweeten the pot a little.

Blog editors are stable and built as writing tools first, not blog engines. See, WordPress bolts on TinyMCE to give it a visual editor. It's not actually part of WordPress per se. Think about writing for a minute. Think about the tools you like to use when you write. Things like saving drafts, or dragging things around in the editor, or dropping a picture in. TinyMCE does these, but not as well as a program running on your computer.

I've been blogging for years and years now, and I've used a blog editor almost the entire time I've been blogging (more than six years now). Over the years, I've used nearly every blog editor out there. I even helped run a company that developed a blog editor. No matter what editor I use, everything starts and is centered around my browser. I start with reading my RSS feeds (right now, more than 900) to catch up on the news of the day (or hour), and as I read, I open interesting articles in my browser. The articles are actually opened in the background, so I don't even have to break the flow of my reading. When I'm done, the fun begins. I go through each article there and decide what's going to be blog fodder. I keep those tabs open and off to the side. When it's time to write, I usually have anywhere between one and ten tabs open with source material. When I start my first post, I open the editor and start writing. When I get to the point where I need a link to the post or a quote from it, I switch to my browser and click a handy Bookmarklet. That sends the link or quote back to the editor and all nicely formatted for me.

If I need an image, I drag it to the editor, position it, and keep writing. I don't have to wait for it to upload right now; that can wait until I post. I set the categories and tags for the post—my editor knows what they all are—double-check my spelling (that's built in), and post. If I need to put the post aside for a bit, I either save it as a draft on the server (which I rarely do) or save a copy locally, just like I would if I were writing any other kind of document. Throughout all this, I don't have to wait for my blog to load; I can't accidentally close the editor tab and lose my work, nor will JavaScript flake out on me while I'm writing. I focus on writing, and when I'm ready, I post; I don't even have to wait for the posting process to completely finish before I switch to the next task. (I do have to wait for the editor to finish before I can start a new post, however.) If the server is sluggish or hiccups (which happens), the editor recovers nicely, letting me know that something went wrong, and I might want to check it out.

SHOW ME   **Media 16.1—Using a Blog Editor to Post**
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my.safaribooksonline.com/9780132182836/media

I know you might not be convinced (hence, the ShowMe video). Although many of my friends aren't convinced, every time I've had a friend or client become

frustrated with posting and I showed them a blog editor (there are great ones for Macs and PCs), they've loved it—and have never looked back. Oh sure, I still occasionally post and edit through WordPress, but the bulk of my writing is done in an editor. I'm so spoiled with using blog editors that when I'm faced with a system that doesn't let me use one, I use the program that I'm using to write this book in, and then post it.

Here are some blog editors to check out:

- PC
    - Windows Live Writer (free)
    - BlogDesk (free)
    - BlogJet (pay)
- Mac
    - ecto (pay)
    - MarsEdit (pay)
    - Blogo (pay)
    - Mac/PC/Linux
- ScribeFire (free, Firefox, Google Chrome, and Safari extension)

The one hesitation I have with recommending blog editors is that because they are niche products, many of them aren't actively developed any longer. For example, ecto and MarsEdit were leaders in the Mac realm, as was the app I worked on called Qumana. But now, development is not so active. As best I can tell, Blogo, BlogJet, ScribeFire, and Windows Live Writer are the only apps in active development right now. I can only hope that as WordPress gains in popularity and sophistication, more blog editors will emerge and the current ones will continue going strong.

Image Editors

A blog without pictures is just missing something. The old cliché "a picture is worth a thousand words" comes to mind, but I've found that people often feel daunted when it comes to using images. They don't know how to create them, edit them, save them, or publish them. This is a real shame because today, image editors, especially free web-based ones, are easy and powerful. I tend to have several different image tools on my computer, partially because I test a lot of them, but also because I like to have apps that do specific things well.

In this section, I'm going to talk about image editors of both the online and offline variety. Not only just editors, but ways to take pictures of your screen (screenshots) and batch resize images all at once, and even ones that can help you make sure your images are as small as they can be (and still look awesome).

This section isn't about creating images or how to make buttons and backgrounds, but it gives you all the tools you need to get there.

Online Image Editors

Online image editors used to be, in a word, lame. This wasn't the fault of the programmers; it was because browser technologies (and how fast we can connect to the Internet now) just weren't there. Now—wow. Two of my favorite online editors are the Aviary (www.aviary.com) suite of tools, which rivals desktop/offline equivalents in their sophistication and feature set, and Picnik (www.picnik.com) which was recently acquired by Google. If you can't do what you need with these tools, well, it probably can't be done.

Did I mention that both these tools are free? Aviary (see Figure 16.3) made all their tools free in February 2010, and Picnik (see Figure 16.1) was purchased by Google in March 2010. There are several other online image-editing suites (including an online version of Photoshop from Adobe), but both Aviary and Picnik have set themselves apart by how they connect with other social media services (like being able to load pictures from Flickr to edit) and how easy they have made their interfaces.

My personal favorite is Picnik, just because most of the time, its basic tools (though very fun) are all I need. I've found Picnik's crop-resize-export tool to be well streamlined for most users (see Figure 16.2). Aviary, however, takes the cake for the largest suite of tools, from image editing (like Photoshop), vector drawing (like Illustrator), color palette creation (which is way cool), effects, screenshots, and even a podcasting studio. All the tools are integrated with each other for simple mixing and matching.

Why would you choose an online editor instead of the "real thing" (that is, a program on your computer)? Simple: How often are you going to need that app? Although hard drives are getting bigger and bigger, there is still a limit to what they can hold. If you use an image editor only once in a while, why have it taking up room on your machine? Then there is the inevitable—not having your machine and needing to do something with an image on the go.

Figure 16.1   *The entry point to online editing fun—Picnik.com.*
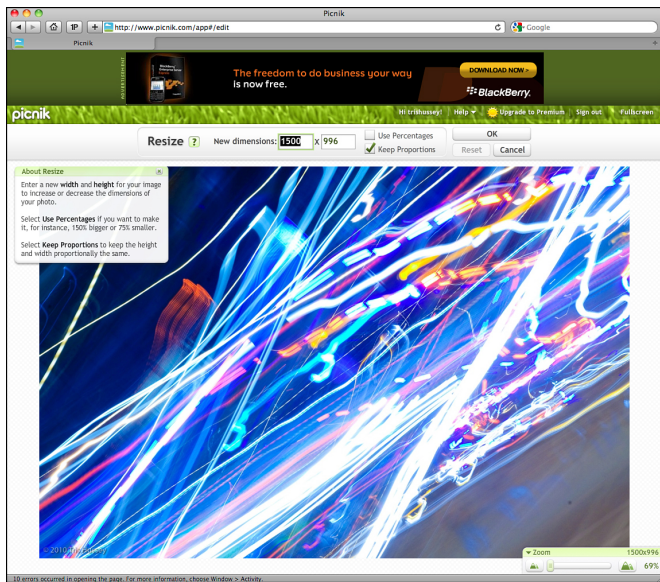
Figure 16.2   *Resizing a picture in Picnik. I don't think it could get much easier than this.*
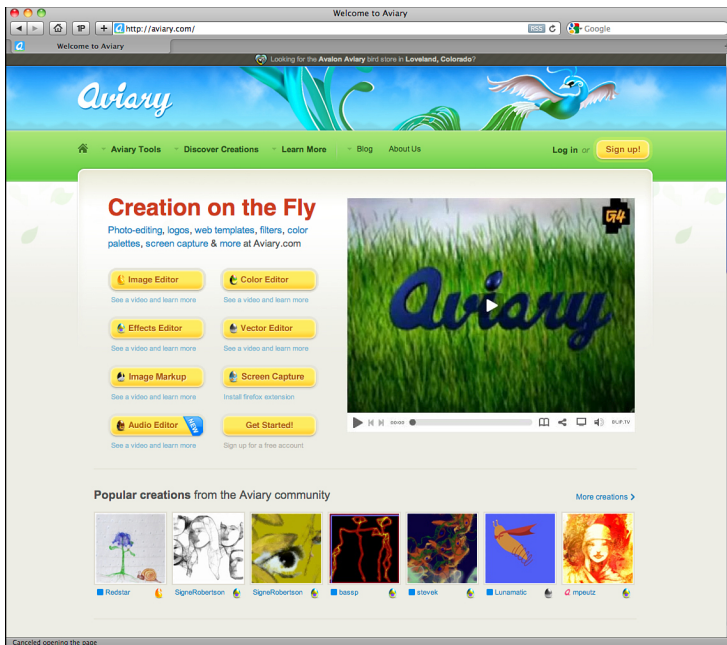
Figure 16.3   *Aviary.com is another Flash-based online image editor. It has lots of options and lots of power, but it's still easy to use.*

On my netbook, I don't have a large hard drive for storage, so I primarily use online versions of the programs I have on my regular laptop. There are obvious limitations, of course. If you have a huge picture from your digital camera to edit, uploading it could take a while. Also, both these tools run Flash in your browser, which isn't a bad thing per se, but Flash can chew up a lot of resources on your machine. So, imagine having it edit a large picture with lots of effects; chances are your machine might be begging for mercy pretty soon.

Even with those cautions, I have Picnik as one of my go-to "okay I need to edit this picture on the go" tools I call upon and teach people how to use. ("Teach" is rather deceptive because Picnik is drop-dead easy.) Aviary is setting new standards for how online editing tools can become entire suites of tools that work together. I know you'll have fun using either of them, but sometimes you need to work "offline" and need an app on your machine. Fear not: There are thousands of options out there. I'll touch on a few of my favs now.

SHOW ME   Media 16.2—Picnik and Aviary Online Image Editors
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Offline Image Editors

Although I do use online image editors for light work, especially if I'm on the go and using my netbook, when I'm using my laptop, I prefer an app on my local machine for "real" work. Although you can spend lots of money on an image editor, I'm not a fan of that. I like to find great apps that are inexpensive or outright free. Sure, if you're a graphic artist, you already have an arsenal of tools. If you're a photographer like me, same thing. But most people don't need a lot of power for 90% of the image tasks they need to do.

For PC users, just go to www.getpaint.net and download Paint.net (see Figure 16.4). It is going to blow you away. Why? Because it's free, amazingly powerful, and very easy to use. I haven't come across a better app for simple medium-level tasks, even if you want to spend money on the app, anywhere.
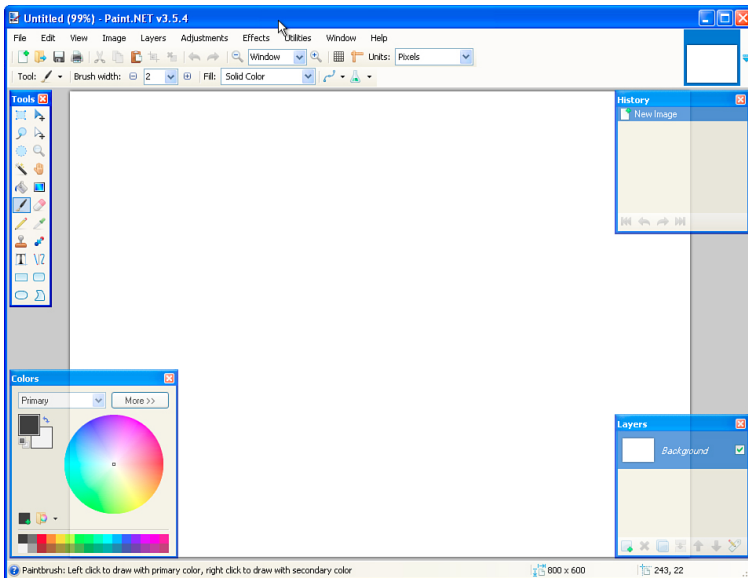
Figure 16.4   *Paint.net—it might look plain and basic, but it is packed with power, very easy to use, and free!*

Us Mac folks have some decent options for good apps; the leading free option is an open source app called Seashore (http://seashore.sourceforge.net/). I use a tool called Acorn (see Figure 16.5) (http://flyingmeat.com/acorn/), which comes in free and paid versions, and has the right balance of complex and easy. (I like easy.)
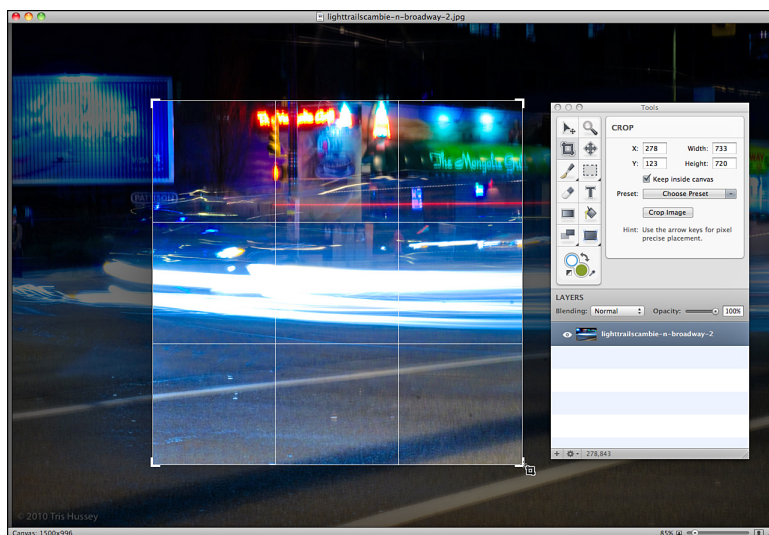
Figure 16.5   *A look at Acorn, with the familiar floating dock of tools.*

Remember, the point here is to find the tool that works for you and does what you need. If you just need to resize and crop images, look for a simple tool. If you want to edit a bit, something a little more complex is in order.

Other Image Utilities

Using images is not only about creating them. There are lots of other things you might want in your image manipulation toolkit. What about when you have a ton of giant-sized images that you'd like to make all, say, 500 pixels wide (but keep the height in proportion with the image). Sure, you could open each of the images one by one and resize them, but what if you have maybe 20 images that need to be resized? Yeah, that's annoying. This is when you need a batch resizing tool to get the job done. I have a few, but my favorite is Shrink-O-Matic (see Figure 16.6), which you can find at http://toki-woki.net/p/Shrink-O-Matic/.

Shrink-O-Matic is an Adobe AIR app, so it works with Macs, PCs, and even the daring souls using Linux. Just drop your images on the big yellow space and ta-da! They are all resized to the size (even format!) you want. Very handy, even for just a couple images.

Figure 16.6 *The apps I use for resizing images. My favorite is Shrink-O-Matic, at the bottom-left corner.*

Okay, resizing images is cool, but what if you want a brand-new color scheme for your blog? I don't know about you, but I don't have a great sense of how to match up three or four colors together to make something that looks appealing and not like a dog's breakfast. For this, you need a color tool. And I have just the tool for you: ColorSchemeDesigner (http://colorschemedesigner.com/). I've been using this tool for years. When I needed a theme that played off a particular color, I just had to give it a starting color and then see what I liked. See Figure 16.7 for an example.

There are several other tools like this. Aviary has a color editor called Toucan (all the apps have bird's names) and Adobe has Kuler (pronounced cool-er) that lets you even upload a photo to pull complementary colors from it. Combine the Kuler website (http://kuler.adobe.com/) with the Adobe AIR app, and you have a powerful set of tools for working with colors (see Figure 16.8).

Of course, there is a lot more you can do with images than adjust size and color, but this section gives you a great start with image utilities and apps. There are new image apps and utilities every month. I have three apps that just batch resize images. (Man, I need to clean house.) Not to mention apps for capturing and editing screenshots (only two). I could spend the rest of the chapter going through all the different image editors out there, but that isn't going to actually help you. Remember, find the app that does what you need and in a way that you get. More than that is just too much.

Figure 16.7   *A great color scheme based on the official WordPress blue.*
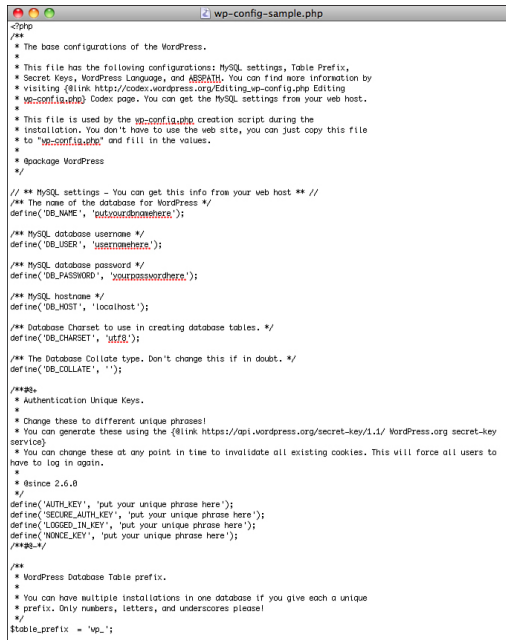
Figure 16.8   *A few of my color palettes that I've created over the years.*

Text Editors: Beyond Notepad and TextEdit

In case you hadn't noticed, there can be a lot of text files that need editing when you run a WordPress site. This isn't unusual or wrong; it's just one of the things that happens. Sometimes you need to edit wp-config.php or a theme file or something else. The fact is that a good, solid, powerful text editor is something that all computer users, even novice ones, should have on hand. Yes, Notepad (PC) and TextEdit (Mac) are fine. They work and they will happily open, edit, and save all the files that WordPress throws at them, but they aren't great at what they do. What you need is a text editor that understands all the code and explanations in PHP, HTML, and CSS files so that you can edit them easily and with confidence. You need a programmer's text editor.

Don't worry—a programmer's editor isn't any different than the ones you're already using; they are just tuned to help you read and better understand the files with which you will be working. Figure 16.9 shows an example of wp-config-sample.php in TextEdit (the default Mac text editor).

Figure 16.9   *Your basic wp-config file opened in TextEdit.*

You certainly can read the document and find what you're looking for, but compare this to TextWrangler (a free programmer's editor for the Mac, shown in Figure 16.10).

Figure 16.10   *The wp-config file in TextWrangler. You have line numbers, and on your screen, the important parts have different colors.*

Better, huh? Not only is it bigger (both programs use their default settings), but in TextWrangler, there is syntax coloring. This means that it understands that in PHP files, some pieces of text are special and that there is a structure to the document. This lets you know that when you edit the line for the database name and you accidentally don't close the name in single quotes (for example, 'mywpdb instead of 'mywpdb'), the lines following won't look right. In my case with TextWrangler, the word "define" is in a blue-green color and the parts between the parentheses should be pink...unless I goof. If I goof, the colors are wrong. Things that should be blue-green are pink, and things that are black or gray text are pink. Fix it, and all is well.

Text editors can do a lot beyond using syntax coloring. They have amazing search and replace functions. Some can connect directly to your server through SFTP/FTP

to edit files. Others have awesome tools for managing entire sites. That's not the point here. The goal is to give you a text editor that you can use to quickly open, edit, and save all the PHP files (and others) that you're going to run into working with WordPress. Remember that all your theme files are written in PHP, and sometimes going through them can be a chore if you're looking for a specific line to change, unless you have an editor that understands what you're looking at.

For a lot of you, your text editor needs are going to be pretty limited and occasional, so again free is best here. For PCs, I recommend PSPad (http://www.pspad.com/) or NotePad++ (http://notepad-plus.sourceforge.net/uk/about.php) as great editors to have on hand (see Figure 16.11). For my Mac brethren, TextWrangler (http://www.barebones.com/products/) from long-time Mac app maker Bare Bones is the free tool of choice. If you want something more and get into the development end of things, you'll probably want to shell out some cash for a better and more powerful editor. For the time being, however, any of those free options will be just fine.
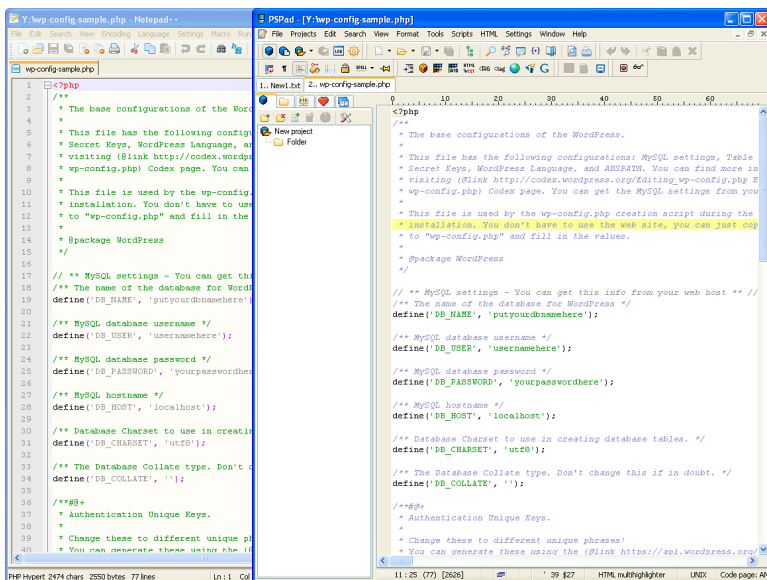
Figure 16.11   *Notepad++ and PSPad, text editors for the PC.*

One word of caution is about updates. Free software is often at the mercy of the developer who wants to continue to spend time developing it. Sometimes great software stops being updated, and you might have to look for another option if your favorite app stops working.

Using a CSS Editor to Change the Look of Your Blog

When you get the hang of working with template files a bit, you might want to start adjusting the style or look of your theme by working with the stylesheet. I talked about CSS in Chapter 7, "All About Themes," and if you recall, CSS files (they all end in .css) are actually just text files like the PHP files that make WordPress work. PSPad, NotePad++, and TextWrangler all understand CSS files just fine, but an editor designed to edit CSS understands them better. In Figure 16.12, you can see this clearly.
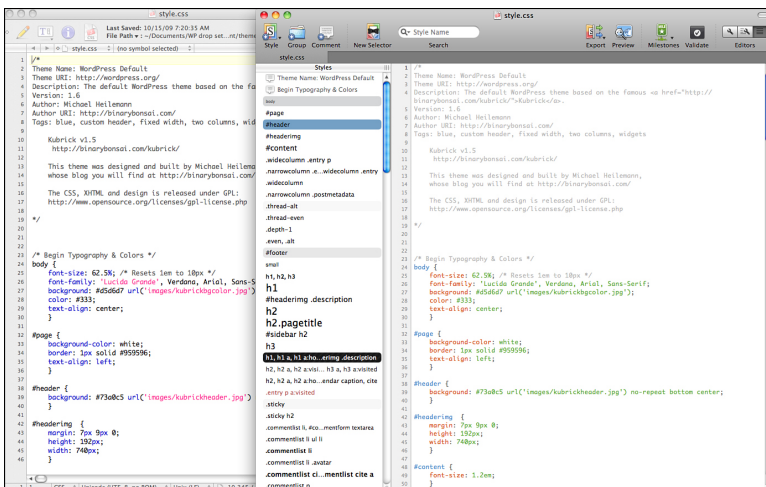
Figure 16.12   *TextWrangler on the left, CSSEdit on the right, showing you how beneficial a CSS editor is when working with stylesheets.*

On the left is TextWrangler and on the right is my CSS editor of choice, CSSEdit. Although both highlight the CSS, CSSEdit also makes an outline of the structure of the stylesheet for easy reference, and the different elements of a given style are all highlighted differently. Expanding my CSSEdit window with all my editing panes showing, now on the right you can see all the elements of the "body" style described in easy-to-view and edit options. Everything from color, size, alignment, and background image are all right there for you to see and edit. If you changed the size from 62.5% to 60%, you can do it on the right panel, and it would be changed in the middle panel without the risk of a typo or a syntax error. CSSEdit, like most CSS editors, also lets me see a live preview of what my changes will look like when I upload them to the server. I can make changes locally and tune what I want the site to look like without changing the live site until I'm ready. This is a

huge boon, because you really don't want people to see your work in progress as they visit the site.

For Macs, the best standalone CSS editor is CSSEdit from MacRabbit Software (http://macrabbit.com/cssedit/). It's a commercial program (about $40) that is well worth the money if you edit themes more than just casually. On PCs, the best editor I know of is TopStyle from Bradbury Software (http://www.topstyle4.com/), which is about $80. Before you buy an editor, do take advantage of the free trials so you can get a feel for the program before you buy it.

Of course, these aren't the only two CSS editors out there. Lots of my friends like Coda for the Mac (http://www.panic.com/coda/), which is a complete code and CSS editor, and on Windows, many people mention that Expression Web (http://www.microsoft.com/expression/products/Web_Overview.aspx) is good. Dreamweaver from Adobe (http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver/) is a high-end designer's tool; when my students work with WordPress themes, they find Dreamweaver to be a little much for what they are doing.

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FTP Clients to Help You Move and Update Files

Throughout this book, I've talked about using your handy-dandy FTP client to get files to and from your server. A good, reliable FTP client is essential to using WordPress. You might not need it all the time, but I guarantee that you will need it some of the time.

Like text editors, there are lots of FTP clients out there. I've tried a lot of them, from free to pay, open-source to commercial, and the one thing that is always my deciding factor for liking or not liking a client is the interface for looking at and managing files. Here's why: When you connect to your server, you are not only working with those remote files but also your local files on your computer. Maybe you upload a new version of WordPress or plugin or download a file to edit. Those two halves, local and remote, are always there. The important thing is that distinction is crystal clear, which is where files are heading (up or down). You don't want to confuse your local with your remote so that backup files wind up getting wiped out by accident or you accidentally edit a file on your server when you didn't mean to.

I've used the open-source and cross platform app FileZilla (http://filezilla-project. org/) for years (see Figure 16.13). It might not be perfect, but it is free, and the interface works.
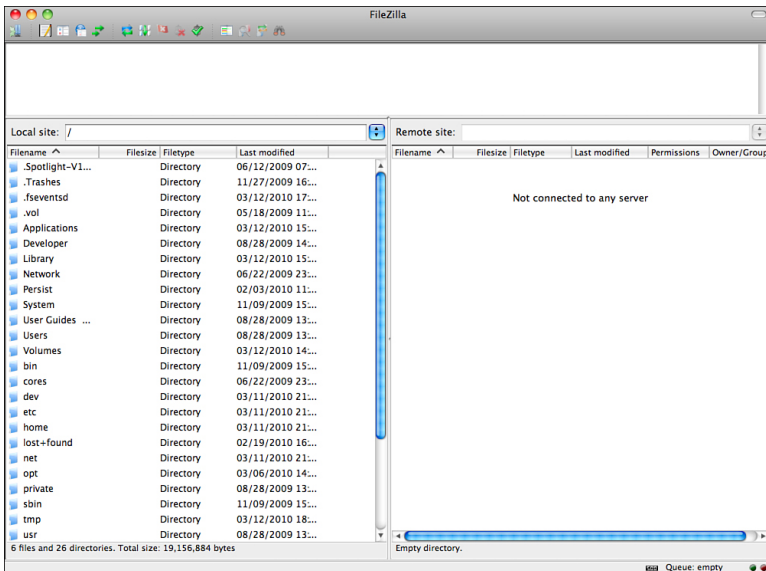
Figure 16.13　*Don't worry—it won't trample your files. FileZilla is just for SFTP/FTP.*

If FileZilla isn't to your liking, there are lots of apps to check out. However, I haven't found free apps that are much better, with the exception of CyberDuck for the Mac (http://cyberduck.ch/), which I have used a lot and quite like. If you use a PC, you might like CuteFTP (http://www.cuteftp.com/), which looks very much like FileZilla in terms of its interface but is a commercially developed app. On the Mac side, I use both Transmit (http://www.panic.com/transmit/) and Flow (http://extendmac.com/ flow/), both of which are commercial apps.

Are commercial apps better at FTP? That's a great question, and one that I'm at a loss to answer fully. I haven't found the transfer rates to be any different (they shouldn't be really), but what I've found is that commercial apps often have features such as quick opening shortcuts and folder syncing that comes in handy for someone like me who manages a lot of sites. I will tell you that I used free apps for years and wasn't let down by their performance, and they all have the features I needed (as basics). FileZilla and CyberDuck are apps that I recommend to my students and use in class to demonstrate FTP. When I work on several things at once,

though, having extra features (like being able to open a file directly in an editor through FTP) has been worth the money.

Other Geeky Tools You Might Like

What I've talked about so far are the core tools that can help you manage your WP site better: a blog editor for posts, image editors for pictures, text and CSS editors for your core files, and an FTP client to get things where they need to be. Of course, those aren't all the tools I have in my toolkit that I use to manage my blogs. Oh, there are so many tools that you can add to your arsenal, when you're ready.

If you start getting into using Subversion, you might want a local SVN client to manage files on your local machine and have your own repositories. I use SVN to manage updates to the themes on my various sites, so I can make changes and push them to the server, but know if I have an "oops" moment, I can roll back quickly. On my Mac, I use svnX; for Windows users, I suggest going to http://subversion.apache.org/ and reviewing how SVN works for you. This is advanced stuff, and I've accidentally deleted or damaged files I was working on because I didn't have my setup 100% right the first time. You've been warned.

If you want to try running a mirror or sandbox version of WordPress on your own local machine, try XAMPP (PC/Mac http://www.apachefriends.org/en/xampp.html) or MAMP (Mac http://www.mamp.info). These packages give you all the server components to run and install WordPress (and hundreds of other applications) on your local machine (see Figure 16.14). Why, pray tell, would you want to do such a thing? I, for one, like to experiment and test new things. Sometimes I don't even want my tests to be on the Internet, so I run them on my machine. I also like to have examples that I can run for students, even if I don't have a connection to the Internet. Telling someone how to edit a theme file isn't nearly as good as showing them how to do it.

Just stepping into running SVN and a server on your machine can serve you well for honing your WordPress skills. As you can guess, a lot of what I've been telling you about and showing you throughout this book is a culmination of years of practice, but as I've been researching and writing this book, I've increased my understanding of WordPress significantly. The simple effort of reading what is possible, what other people are doing and trying, gives you new things to try and do. Even little tricks like compressing and decompressing files right on your server are ones that can save you hours of time waiting for uploads.

Because I can't tell you all the different tools for all the different options, I suggest that you keep an eye on my blog (http://usingwordpressbook.com/) for updates. If this chapter tells you anything, I love to find new and cool things to make my computing life easier and better. If I find it, like it, and use it, I'll almost always blog it.
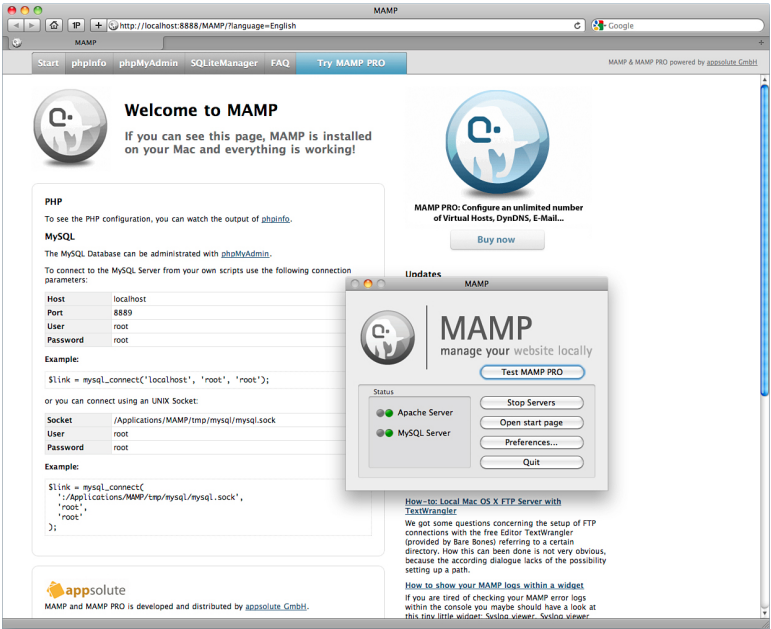
Figure 16.14 *MAMP running on my Mac and the browser-based start page.*