

Upgrade to Free: The Best Free & Low-Cost Online Tools & Apps

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Texas State Technical College (August 2011)

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With all the advances in Internet technology, it's virtually impossible to take advantage of everything that's available online, particularly free tools and applications.

That's why a book like *Upgrade to FREE* is so useful. Beth Ziesenis, who has been compiling and evaluating such tools since 2007, has put together a very handy volume that includes mostly free tools and applications (plus a few low-cost ones) that will be of great value to novice and experienced computer users alike.

The author begins by providing helpful answers to some basic questions, such as how the tools were selected and why most of them are free. In particular, Zeisenis addresses the inevitability that any traditional book covering this topic would likely be outdated before it is even published. She points out that she did a thorough evaluation of the tools she included in the book, including history, funding, plans, and more. In addition, the book is supplemented by a website (www.AskBethZ.com) that the author continually updates.

Upgrade to FREE is divided into twenty-two subject-specific chapters that run the gamut: included are Personal Organization Tools, Small Business Tools, Fax and Phone Tools, and Social Media Tools.

Each chapter consists of a brief introduction followed by descriptions of several tools. Ziesenis has mastered the art of presenting information in consistent and easily digestible chunks. She created a universal template that shows the tool name and website in the upper left, price information in the upper right, a subhead that describes the tool, and the description of the tool itself. This makes it easy to thumb through the book and pick out tools of interest for further examination.

Additional nice touches include: a list of smartphone applications related to the tool, along with a scannable QR code that readers with smartphones can use to quickly access each tool's website. For some tools, the author includes a sub-section called Also Check Out, which provides abbreviated information about other tools that are similar to the one featured. Every so often, Ziesenis will insert some additional helpful information, such as a Cheap Tip or an entry called Just 'Cuz You Can, which suggests a tool for something specific that the reader may be trying to do.

A compendium of tools suggests that the writing could be dry, but that's far from the case here. Beth Ziesenis has an engaging writing style that both conveys information and entertains the reader, so the book is anything but boring. Every computer user should find something useful in *Upgrade to FREE*.

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (August 9, 2011)

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