

The Journalist's Digital Toolkit

Tools of the Trade · By Simon Townsend · 4 min read

Simon carried a notebook, a pen, a phone, a tape recorder, and a Filofax. That was the kit for forty years of working journalism. Today's working journalist carries a laptop and a phone, and on those two devices lives a stack of software that will do more than the Filofax ever did. This page is an opinionated guide to what goes on the stack.

The advice here is 2026, practical, and biased toward tools that work well in the Australian market, respect source privacy, and survive on freelance budgets.

Writing

A distraction-free text editor for drafting. iA Writer or Typora if you like Markdown. Scrivener if you are writing a long piece with many sections. Google Docs if you need to share drafts with an editor in real time. Microsoft Word if you are working with a big publisher that insists on track changes in .docx format.

A clipboard manager. Paste on Mac, Ditto on Windows. When you are pulling quotes and facts from multiple sources, a clipboard history saves hours.

A grammar tool, but used lightly. Grammarly or Hemingway. Use them as a second reader. Ignore about half of what they flag. Never paste your unpublished work into a tool that retains it for training.

Research

Trove, the National Library's digital archive. Free. Essential for anything Australian. See the Trove guide on this site.

ABS data. The Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes huge datasets for free on abs.gov.au. Learn to use the DataExplorer tool.

Data.gov.au. The central catalogue for Australian government open data. Everything from school data to traffic counts.

Hansard. Federal and state. Full parliamentary records, searchable, free.

AustLII, for Australian case law and legislation. austlii.edu.au. Free. Essential for any legal research.

The NFSA, for archival audiovisual material. See the NFSA guide on this site.

A good RSS reader. Feedly, Inoreader, NetNewsWire. Track primary sources without depending on social media for surfacing them.

A reference manager. Zotero is free, respects privacy, and handles thousands of citations cleanly. Essential for long features and books.

Interviews and transcription

Recorders. Your phone's default voice memo app is fine for most interviews. For critical sessions use a dedicated recorder like a Zoom H1n or Sony ICD. Always record to two devices if the interview matters.

Transcription. Otter.ai is the working standard. Descript is excellent. Trint is solid. All three upload your audio to US servers. If that matters for your source, do the transcription locally: Whisper running on your own machine is free and private, open source, and as good as any of the paid services on accents it has seen enough of.

Video interviews. Zoom and Google Meet with recording enabled. Riverside.fm for higher-quality remote recording with local tracks.

Fact checking

FactCheck.org, RMIT ABC Fact Check, AAP FactCheck for Australian-specific claims.

Reverse image search: TinEye and Google Images. Useful for spotting whether a photo is genuinely what a source claims.

Wayback Machine (archive.org). Check what a website said before it was edited. Essential for corporate comms tracking and political claims.

Archive.today (archive.ph). A second web archive service. Useful when the Wayback Machine has not captured the page you need.

Source security

Signal for encrypted messaging. End-to-end, open source, recommended.

SecureDrop for anonymous source contact. Several Australian newsrooms run SecureDrop instances. As a freelancer you will rarely use your own, but understand what it is for.

Proton Mail for encrypted email, especially useful for international work.

Password manager. 1Password, Bitwarden, or Keychain. Use unique passwords everywhere and enable two-factor auth.

A VPN for travel and for accessing publications on hostile networks.

Data and spreadsheets

Google Sheets or Microsoft Excel for basic data work. Handles 95% of what a journalist needs.

OpenRefine for cleaning messy data. Free, open source.

Datawrapper or Flourish for simple charts and maps, embed-ready for online use.

For heavier work, Python with pandas. Python is free, runs on any computer, and is the entry tool for data journalism. The learning curve is short for anyone prepared to spend a week on it.

Publishing and filing

FTP client if any editor still wants files delivered that way (some do). Cyberduck on Mac, FileZilla on Windows.

WeTransfer for large file delivery.

Dropbox or Google Drive for long-term client sharing.

PDF toolkit: Preview on Mac, SumatraPDF on Windows, a paid app like PDF Expert for heavy annotation.

AI tools, handled carefully

Large language models are everywhere. Use them for:

Summarising long documents you already have. Always verify.

Rephrasing or tightening your own draft. Always the final edit is yours.

Transcription. Whisper and similar.

Do not use them for:

Generating facts you cannot independently verify.

Writing copy that will be published under your name without substantial editing.

Processing sensitive source material on any service that retains prompts for training.

Every publisher in Australia now has an AI policy. Ask what your commissioner's is, and follow it.

Hardware

A laptop with a real keyboard and a battery that lasts a long day. A phone you are happy to carry into a difficult interview. A cloud backup service (Backblaze is reliable and cheap). A physical notebook for the moments when batteries run out and for sources who ask you to put the phone away.

Simon's advice: carry a pen. Always carry a pen. A reporter without a pen is a reporter who has to borrow one. That is a bad start to any conversation.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.