TechMatters: Bending the Browser to Your Will: Firefox Extensions

Krista Graham, Central Michigan University

Have you ever wished your browser could be customized to do more than just view web pages? Have you ever wanted it to include additional tools to make your browsing experience easier? If so, then I may have just the solution for you … provided, of course, that you are willing to use Mozilla's Firefox browser!

What are Extensions?

According to the folks at Mozilla, "extensions are small add-ons that add new functionality to … applications. They can add anything from a toolbar button to a completely new feature. They allow the application to be customized to fit the personal needs of each user"[https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/extensions/]. As such, they have the potential to significantly improve the browsing experience for you, your students, and your patrons!

Finding and Installing Extensions

Locating and installing Firefox extensions is incredibly easy. Begin by opening Firefox and choosing **Tools -> Extensions** from the menu, and then follow the **Get more extensions** link. This will take you to the Mozilla Firefox Add-ons web page. Alternately, you can access this page directly at https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/extensions/.

The Add-ons page lists the newest, top-rated, and most popular extensions. In addition, you can also browse by categories such as search tools, news reading, navigation, and even entertainment.

Once you find an extension that you would like to try, installation is straightforward. Each extension has an overview page that includes an "Install Now" link. Follow the link to open a software installation dialog box and then click the **Install** button. Following download, simply close and reopen the browser and your new extension will be successfully installed!

A Few of My Favorite Extensions

Text size toolbar

https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/472/

This nifty little extension adds toolbar buttons to increase, decrease, and return text to normal size with a click of the mouse. With this add-on, you (or your students) can easily make web pages more readable if text size is an issue. Be aware that the new browser buttons will not appear automatically upon installation. After downloading the extension, select **View -> Toolbars -> Customize** and then drag the new buttons onto the toolbar section of your Firefox window.

Clear cache button

https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/1801/

As all of us who surf the web on a regular basis know, the first step to take when browser trouble is encountered is to try clearing the cache. Save yourself the hassle of extra clicks with this extension that allows you to place a button to clear your cache in one easy step right on the toolbar. As with the text size extension above, you will need to use the toolbar **Customize** option to place the button on the Firefox toolbar following installation.

gTranslate

https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/918/

With this slick tool, interpreting text on international web pages is easier and quicker than you can imagine. Although using Google's translation services, this extension was not created by or affiliated with the folks at Google. To translate, simply highlight the text in question and then right click. Choose the menu option to **Translate "with gTranslate"** and view the translated text. A menu option to change translation languages will also appear. Upon installation, the default is to translate from "German to English". To change this default go to **Tools -> Extensions**, highlight gTranslate, select **Options** and choose your new default

language pair.

SessionSaver

https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/436/

If you've ever experienced the frustration of temporarily "losing" the location of a particularly interesting web site as a result of a browser crash, then this is the extension for you. Whether closed intentionally, or because of a force shutdown, SessionSaver restores your browser exactly as you left it the next time you launch Firefox. It will even restore multiple tabs and multiple windows!

ScrapBook

https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/427/

Have you ever wanted to download an entire web page, or even a whole site, including the images to view offline at a later date? If so, then the ScrapBook extension is just the utility for you! This clever little tool, allows you to save an entire web page or site with or without images, CSS styles, and JavaScript. You can also specify the depth to which links on the site will be followed and captured. Once the page has been downloaded, ScrapBook provides organizational tools to help you manage and organize your saved sites.

IE Tab

https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/1419/

Despite the fact that Firefox is a superb standards-compliant browser, there are still some sites that are best viewed in Internet Explorer. And, of course, if you are designing instructional web pages, you will want to make sure that you pages look beautiful and work well in Explorer. Using this extension, you can open an "Internet Explorer" tab within Firefox and switch between the two rendering engines with a click of the mouse. In addition, you can also designate certain sites, such as the Microsoft web site, to always render using the embedded Explorer tab.

Dealing with Unwanted Extensions

Feeling nervous about experimenting with Firefox extensions? There really is very little need for apprehension since extensions are even easier to remove than they are to install. To delete an extension, simply choose **Tools -> Extensions** from the Firefox menu, select the extension you wish to remove, and then press the **Uninstall** button. Close the browser, and when you re-open Firefox the extension will no longer be available!

Finding Other Groovy Extensions

The extensions outlined above represent only a small fraction of the tools available to extend the capabilities of the Firefox browser. Opinions and reviews abound regarding the most useful of these applications. Check out the opinions of technology experts regarding the best extensions at the sites listed below, then experiment and have fun!

Top 15 Firefox Extensions – PC Magazine

http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,1759,1758849,00.asp

The Firefox Hacks You Must Have – Wired News

http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,69781,00.html

Firefox Extensions: Reviews and Downloads – CNET.com

http://www.download.com/Firefox-Extensions/3150-11745_4-0.html