

Getting the most out of FreeMind

MIND TRICKS

Learn how to master the advanced features of the FreeMind mind-mapping application to get the most out of this useful tool. **BY DMITRI POPOV**

Although you might think that FreeMind [1] is just a mind-mapping application designed to help creative professionals organize their thoughts and ideas, in reality, it sports so many nifty features that it could prove to be an indispensable productivity tool no matter what you do for a living.

Because FreeMind is a rather straightforward application, you can learn how to use its basic features in a couple of hours. But if you want to get the most out of this excellent application, you might want to master its more advanced features.

Basics

The Ubuntu 9.04 package manager only contains FreeMind version 0.7. To install it, use the *Applications | Add/Remove...* dialog.

On the FreeMind homepage you will find the most recent program version, currently 0.8.1, which brings a number of new features. Just click on Debian

Linux and download the file *freemind_0.8.1-2_all.deb*. A double-click on it starts the installer for external packages. The plugin packages provide additional features but are not necessary.

The package installer automatically takes care of the additional necessary files. The FreeMind developers recommend Sun Java instead of the free GCJ. To get it, install the *sun-java6-jre* package with the Synaptic package manager or run the *sudo apt-get install sun-java6-jre* command in the terminal. Once the package is installed, use the *sudo update-alternatives --config java* command to set Sun JRE as the default environment on your system.

If you don't mind living on the bleeding edge, you might want to opt for the latest test release of FreeMind that comes with a few nifty features not found in the stable version of the application. No official distribution packages are ready yet, so you have to download the zip archive containing the latest de-

velopment version of FreeMind (currently, it's 0.9.0) and unpack it.

In the terminal, switch to the *freemind* directory and run the *sh freemind.sh* command to launch the application.

Using Shortcuts

Because it is a graphical application, FreeMind lets you work with mind maps by the point-and-click method. It also supports keyboard shortcuts, which allow you to perform virtually any operation without touching the mouse.

The main advantage of keyboard shortcuts is speed: Hitting a key combination is much faster than finding and moving the mouse. It might take you some time to learn FreeMind's shortcuts, but once you've mastered them, you can create and navigate mind maps with consummate ease and speed.

These keyboard skills can come in particularly handy when you are brainstorming a problem or taking notes during a lecture and you don't have time to

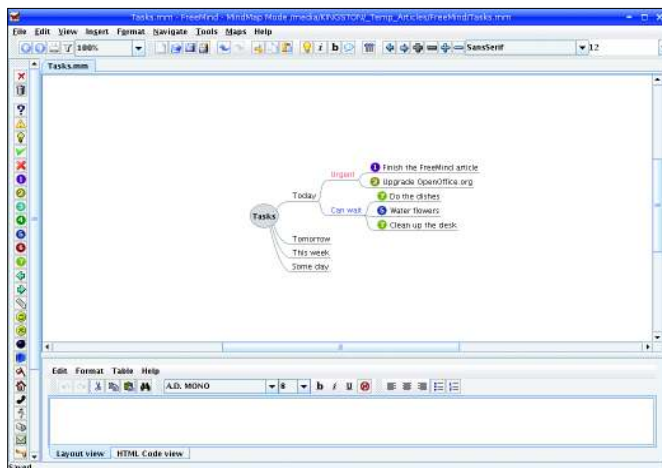


Figure 1: Simple task mind map.

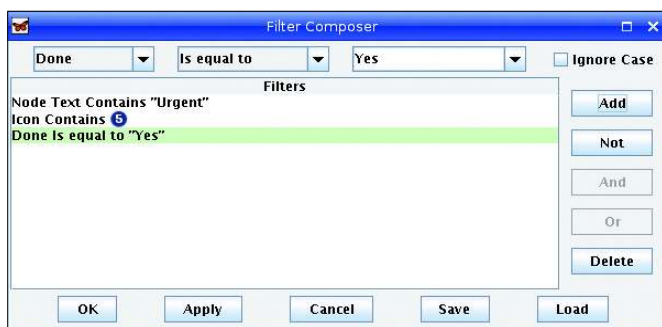


Figure 2: Defining filters.

fumble with the mouse or the trackpad on your laptop. The full list of FreeMind keyboard shortcuts is rather long, but you can start by learning the most essential ones:

- Enter: Add sibling node
- Insert: Add child node
- F2: Edit selected node
- Alt + Enter: Edit selected node with the rich text editor
- Space: Fold/unfold the selected node
- Ctrl + Up arrow: Move node up
- Ctrl + Down arrow: Move node down
- Ctrl + Shift + K: Add link with the file chooser
- Ctrl + K: Add link by entering it manually

Usage Scenarios

FreeMind is not only good for mapping your ideas, with a bit of creativity, you can use FreeMind for pretty much anything. For example, FreeMind has all the features you need to create a task manager. To start, create a mind map that represents the overall structure of a task manager.

The exact structure depends on how you usually manage your tasks, but it could look like the example in Figure 1.

Because FreeMind supports drag-and-drop, you can move your tasks between categories with the mouse. For example, if you don't have time to do the dishes today, you can move the task to tomorrow by dragging it onto the *Tomorrow* node. Also, you can use the available icons to assign priorities to the tasks quickly; right-click on the task and choose the desired priority icon from the icons list.

The Filter feature can help you manage complex task lists (see Figure 2). Say you want to display only the tasks with Priority 1. Just press the *Edit* button (it looks like a pencil) in the Filter toolbar, and use the available dropdown lists to define the following rule: *Icon - Contains - 1*. Press the *Add* button to add the rule to the list, then press *Apply* to enable it.

In a similar manner, you can create a filter that shows only tasks in the Urgent category by creating the *Node - Contains - Urgent* rule; just remember to tick the *Show Descendants* checkbox to display the tasks in the Urgent category.

Attributes is another powerful feature you can use to keep tabs on your tasks. With it, you can add the *Done* attribute with values of *Yes* and *No*, which you can use to mark finished and unfinished tasks (Figure 3). Just choose *Tools | Attribute Manager*, and press the *Edit* button in the *All Attributes* row. Next, type the name of the attribute (i.e., *Done*) and press the *Add* button. Then press the *Edit* button next to the *Done* attribute and add the *Yes* and *No* values to it. To assign the defined attribute, select the desired task and press Alt + F9 (or right-click on the task and choose *Edit Attributes*). Add the *Done* attribute and set its value.

Thanks to the inclusion of a rich text editor that lets you add notes to the nodes, FreeMind makes a powerful and flexible note-taking tool. For example, if you are attending a conference, you can create a mind map containing separate nodes for each conference track, and you can specify different attributes that allow you to identify each track quickly (e.g., "Development," "Marketing," "Birds of a Feather," etc.). Then, to add richly formatted notes to each node, you can use the text editor at the bottom of the main window.

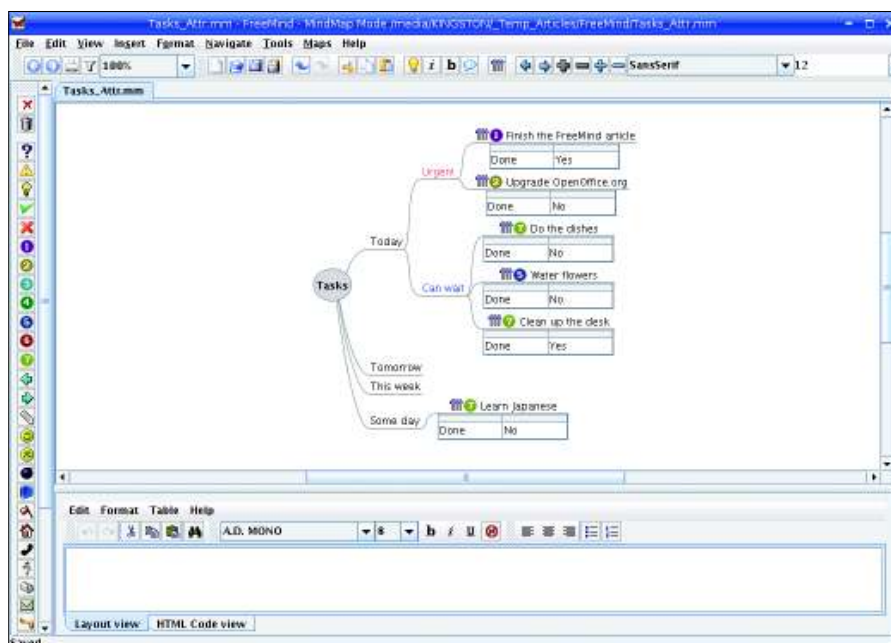


Figure 3: Using attributes to keep tabs on tasks.

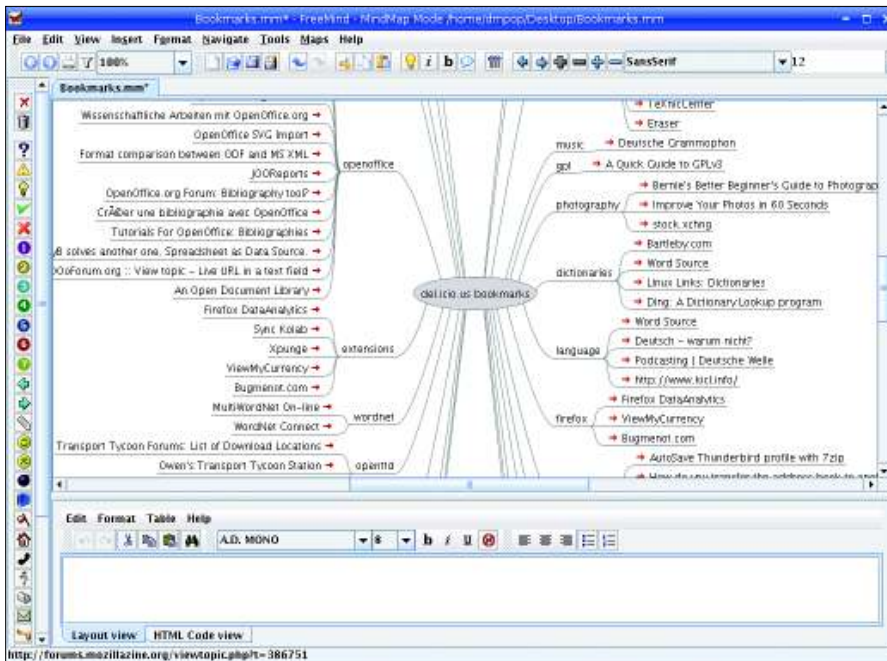


Figure 4: Displaying your Delicious bookmarks as a mind map.

FreeMind can also encrypt individual nodes and entire mind maps, making it suitable for storing private information. With this feature, you can turn a mind map into a password and account manager. Say you want to use a mind map to store your account information for different websites. Just choose *Tools | Insert Encrypted Node* and specify a password.

Once the encrypted node is added, you can add child nodes to it for each website account. Then, you can use the text editor to add notes containing login and other important information. Next time you open the mind map, you must enter the specified password to access the encrypted node and its children. The ability to encrypt individual nodes can come in handy when you want to create a mind map containing both public and private information.

If you prefer to keep all confidential data in a separate file, you can create an encrypted map with *File | Create Encrypted Map*.

With third-party tools, you can put FreeMind to some

less conventional uses, too. If the way Delicious displays bookmarks doesn't tickle your fancy, you can add a whole new dimension to your bookmark collection by turning it into a mind map with a clever utility called *Delicious-Mind* [2]. Just download the *deliciousmind.zip* archive and unpack it into your home directory.

Next, you have to export bookmarks from your Delicious account. To do this, point your browser to <http://del.icio.us/api/posts/recent?count=10000>, enter your username and password when prompted, then save the page as *bookmarks.xml* in the *deliciousmind* directory (in Firefox, choose *File | Save Page As*). In the terminal, switch to the *deliciousmind* directory and run the *sh deli-*

iciousmind.sh bookmarks.xml bookmarks.mm command. This converts the XML file into a mind map, which you can open in FreeMind (Figure 4).

Getting Physical

To provide a more efficient way of applying formatting to nodes in a mind map, FreeMind sports so-called physical styles, which you can use to specify styles and their properties, such as node color, type, font, borders, and so on. To do this, choose *Format | Physical Style | Manage Patterns*. This opens the Patterns dialog window (Figure 5), where you can tweak the existing styles. To apply a physical style to a node, right-click on it and select the desired style from the *Physical Style* list.

Exporting Mind Maps

FreeMind can export mind maps in a wide range of formats, including PDF, ODT, PNG, SVG, and interactive HTML pages, as well as Java and Flash applets, and it can even export your mind maps as TWiki pages and TaskJuggler tasks. But that's not all.

The *mm2odp* [3] and *mm2s5* [4] utilities, for example, let you turn FreeMind mind maps into OpenOffice.org Impress and S5 presentations, whereas the *mm2notes* [5] tool can transform a mind map into hierarchical notes. All three utilities are written in Python, and they are easy to install and use. ■

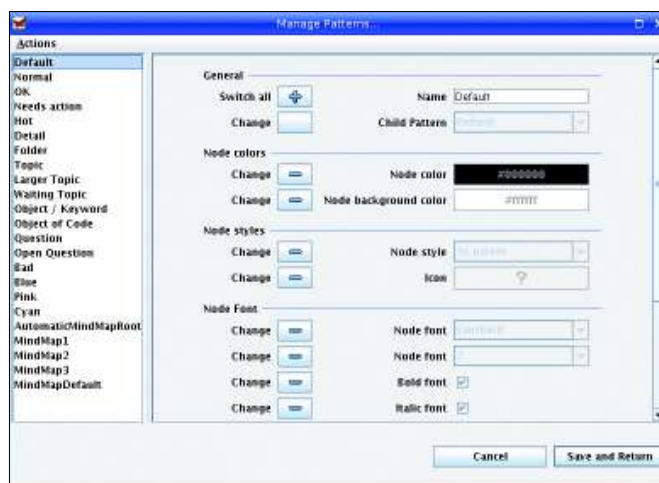


Figure 5: Working with physical styles.

INFO

- [1] FreeMind: freemind.sourceforge.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page
- [2] DeliciousMind: www.blainekendall.com/deliciousmind
- [3] *mm2odp*: code.google.com/p/mm2odp
- [4] *mm2s5*: code.google.com/p/mm2s5
- [5] *mm2notes*: code.google.com/p/mm2notes

THE AUTHOR

Dmitri Popov holds a degree in Russian language and computer linguistics. He has been working as a technical translator and freelance contributor for several years. He has published over 500 articles in Danish, British, US, and Russian magazines and websites.

