# Screenshot Software: A Comparison Review

"**Choose your preferred image-capture tool."**

*by Pete Choppin*

Almost all of us need to use screen-capture software from time to time. It can be very useful, from a simple task like capturing an image of your screen to show someone an error you have on the screen, to creating tutorials with screen-by-screen shots of each step in the process. Certain types of screen shots involve captures of entire windows, images of specific drop-down menus, toolbars, individual buttons, or cropped regions that highlight key elements of an application interface.

Of course, it's possible to do almost all of this by pressing Alt+Print Screen to copy the active window to the clipboard, and then pasting it into your favorite image-editing application. However, for each screen capture this requires you to go through the same set of actions in order to crop, set the color depth, add borders or edge effects, and finally save it. If you take only the occasional screen capture, then this is fine. But it can become extremely tedious and time-consuming if you have a large number of screens to capture.

This is where screen-capture tools are helpful. They are designed to speed up the process by automating the tasks that you would otherwise have to complete using your regular image-editing application.

In this article, I'll take a look at six of the leading screen-capture tools for Windows. There is a short review of each, including my view of each tool's three key strengths and weaknesses.

**Snipping Tool (included within Microsoft Windows Vista and Windows 7)**

The Snipping Tool is a very basic screen-capture utility that is built into the Windows Vista and Windows 7 operating systems.

When you open the Snipping Tool, it initially looks like this:

Although lacking many of the refinements boasted by other third-party products, it does enable you to capture either entire windows or regions of the screen, add simple annotations, and save to four common file formats. If you have only the occasional need to capture screens, this may well be perfectly adequate. However, serious screen capturers will be frustrated by the lack of screen magnifier and keyboard support, both of which are essential for defining rectangular screen regions with precision.

**Strengths**

• Already included within Windows Vista and Windows 7
• Simple interface
• Automatically copies images to clipboard

**Weaknesses**

• Difficult to capture screen regions precisely
• Very limited annotation tools
• Copying drop-down menus is awkward

**FastStone Capture 6.5 (FastStone Soft)**

FastStone Capture 6.5 provides a relatively low-budget option with an impressive range of features. Among other features, you have the option of downloading it as a portable application that can be stored on a USB drive and then used on any PC into which the drive is inserted. This could be useful if you are a freelance author who needs to capture screens from a range of different applications and computers.

Comparing it with full-featured tools such as SnagIt and MadCap Capture, its main disadvantage is that it has no native file format of its own. (MadCap Capture is not reviewed in this article, since it is very similar and comparable to SnagIt.) So, although you are able to add and adjust captions and highlights within a very nice vector-based editing environment, the images are inevitably flattened when you save them to a file. This means that it is not possible to reopen previously saved captures in order to update or adjust their annotations. This could be a serious drawback for many technical authors who need to be able to revise or update their documentation easily.

The FastStone Capture 6.5 package includes two other useful little utilities: a color picker (which enables you to discover the RGB values of any color displayed on your screen) and a screen ruler (which you can use to measure the distance in pixels between any two points on your screen).

**Strengths**

• Ability to select rectangular capture regions with precision
• Good range of vector-based annotation tools and edge effects
• Option for portable installation

**Weaknesses**

• No vector-based storage format available
• Can't easily resize images to specific percentage (except 50 percent and 200 percent)
• No circular or ellipse capture

**FullShot 9.5 (Inbit Inc.)**

As indicated by its relatively high version number, FullShot is a well-established capture tool. It was introduced in 1991, and has been widely used within the documentation industry since then. Version 9.x has a more contemporary-looking user interface than earlier versions, and apparently contains a redesigned screen-capture engine

FullShot is available in three different editions: Standard, Professional and Enterprise. Since the average pricing of the other screen-capture tools reviewed in this article is matched most closely by FullShot's Standard Edition, this is the edition to which I am referring.

FullShot takes a rather different approach to the capture mechanism from the other tools reviewed in this article—when you open it, a set of special capture buttons is added to the active window of all your applications.

Each button represents a different type of capture: S is the entire screen, W is window, O is object, R is region, etc. These buttons persist even when FullShot is minimized as a taskbar button or hidden in the system tray.

You start a capture by clicking on the appropriate button for the required capture type, or by using the appropriate keyboard shortcut. Using the buttons means that it's impossible to capture the cursor unless you set FullShot's countdown delay option. For this reason, it's usually easier to use the keyboard shortcuts—however, since there is a different key combination for each of the different capture types, these can be quite difficult to remember.

FullShot is a popular tool with a good track record; FullShot Standard Edition automates the screen-capture process very successfully. The tool uses a different capture mechanism and workflow from most of its competitors, and it is a matter of personal preference as to whether it is any more or less easy to use than the other tools. The interface is fairly complex, and it is difficult to capture screen regions precisely.

**Strengths**

• Easy capture using buttons on the window title bar, even when FullShot itself is hidden
• Supports concurrent editing of multiple screen captures
• Minimizes file sizes by optimizing the color palette

**Weaknesses**

• Difficult to capture screen regions precisely
• Won't enable you to set the color depth of a captured image to a specific value
• No support for capturing buttons in the Standard Edition

**HyperSnap 6.7 (Hyperionics Technology)**

HyperSnap 6.7 is a mature and popular screen-capture tool. It provides a high level of control over the final image file in terms of color depth, palette and compression. A highlight of the tool is its mechanism for defining the target area of the screen for "region" captures—this seems to be rather more intuitive and offers more precise control than the methods used by some of the other tools reviewed in this article.

HyperSnap 6.7 is a fairly intuitive product—the user interface is well organized, and it has a

useful and comprehensive Help system. It is a well-designed package that enables easy and very precise capture of regions, buttons and other screen elements.

**Strengths**

• Wide range of capture options
• Well-organized and easy-to-use interface
• Support for precise selection of capture region using arrow keys

**Weaknesses**

• Limited support for edge effects such as torn paper
• No built-in vector-based image editor
• Ability to save configuration settings is not as elegant and intuitive as the capture profiles used by other tools

**ScreenHunter 5.1 Free (Wisdom Software)**

If you're looking for a basic screen-capture utility and don't want to pay for one, then you might want to consider one of the many tools that can be downloaded for free. Of these, ScreenHunter Free is one of the most popular.

ScreenHunter 5.1 Free is a stripped-down version of ScreenHunter 5 Pro. The Pro version (for which you will need to pay a license fee) has a feature set similar to that of the other tools reviewed in this article. I have chosen to review the free version because it represents an option for those users who don't want to spend any money.

ScreenHunter 5.1 Free enables you to capture rectangular areas, active windows, or the entire desktop. When you capture rectangular areas by dragging your mouse, it provides a magnified view of the area around the mouse pointer. However, it does not enable you to adjust the selected region before confirming the capture.

You can capture either to the clipboard or to a file, but only .bmp, .gif, and .jpg formats are supported. The files are saved automatically using a set of user-definable file-naming options. Although this has the advantage that no user intervention is required, the downside is that there is no option in the free version to supply a specific name for individual captures. Nor are you able to add annotations or any form of effects before saving.

I like the fact that ScreenHunter can be easily hidden to the system tray by clicking the prominent Stand By button. While in the system tray, ScreenHunter will still respond to the capture hotkey, thus providing a very simple and unobtrusive way of doing basic screen captures.

**Strengths**

• Zero cost
• Simplicity of interface
• Stand By mode that hides the application in the system tray

**Weaknesses**

• No .png output format in the Free version
• Very restricted capture options in the Free version
• No ability to adjust the capture region before confirmation of capture

**SnagIt 9.1 (TechSmith Corporation)**

SnagIt, screen-capture software, which I am most familiar with, is probably the most full-featured of the capture tools reviewed in this article. Though a complex product, it's also easy to use thanks to a well-designed interface and workflow.

The workflow at the heart of the tool supports the author's needs at every stage of the capture process. It enables you to select capture settings (including a wide range of standardization options and effects); capture the image; preview it; and optionally use a range of vector-based editing tools to add callouts, arrows, stamps, etc.

The capture settings over which you have control are logically organized into four groups: *Input* (screen, window, region, etc.); *Output* (file, email, catalog, etc.); *Effects* for standardizing on image resolution, adding edge effects, etc.; and *Options*. The current status of each of these settings is displayed graphically in the SnagIt window, which is a really nice touch—you can quickly check the current settings without needing to use any menu options or dialogs.

SnagIt supports almost all the capture options available in the other tools in this article. Of all the tools, it has the widest selection of options for the shape of the capture region, and its *Effects* options enable the automatic creation of a variety of edge effects, including drop shadow, fade and torn paper. Like MadCap Capture, SnagIt provides profiles that enable you to save and reuse specific combinations of capture settings.

Among its other impressive features are the following:

• Library: This storage system makes the management and retrieval of captured images easier. SnagIT stores a range of useful metadata with each captured image, including the name of the application or Web site that it was captured from; you can also apply your own keywords and flags. It is then possible to filter the list of images in the Library using any of these criteria.

• Text capture: This enables you to capture editable text from screens such as file listings, error messages and status pane information.

• Printer capture: This enables you to capture an image of what is sent to the printer, and is activated by printing to the SnagIt printer from any application that can print.

• Batch Conversion: In a single operation you can convert multiple image files to a specific file format, at the same time applying a range of optional modifications such as a reduction in color depth and new edge effects.

• Links/Hotspots feature: This feature, introduced in version 8, enables you to add interactivity to your captured images easily.

• Auto-Save: new in version 9, SnagIt automatically preserves each captured image in its Library even if you forget to save it.

To specify a capture region, you click and drag the left-hand mouse button to form the region —a magnified view of a small area of the screen surrounding the cursor is displayed for greater precision. As soon as you release the left mouse button, the capture is complete.

SnagIT zoom window.

**Strengths**

• Exceptionally well-designed interface and workflow
• Comprehensive options for capturing, standardizing and adding effects to images
• Bundled tools include powerful vector-based image editor and file-management utility

**Weaknesses**

• The ability to select capture regions with precision using the arrow keys is not documented, and is therefore not easily discoverable
• Rather lame capture sound effect
• Ribbon-based interface of SnagIt Editor may be unfamiliar to some users

All of these packages, depending on your needs, can provide very good screenshots. My preference is SnagIT. It provides the most powerful options and is a very good value for the price.

If you have to do any type of documentation, training, technical writing, or Web editing, screenshot software is invaluable. It can take a time-consuming task and make it quick and simple. In my profession, I find many uses for screenshot software every day. Hopefully this article provides the information for you to choose your preferred screenshot software.