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ReadCube Desktop

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Repository Citation

Hughes, M. (2014). Readcube desktop. *The Charleston Advisor*, 16(1), 34-38. <https://doi.org/10.5260/chara.16.1.34>

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ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

ReadCube Desktop

doi:10.5260/chara.16.1.34

Date of Revision: June 9, 2014

Composite Score:

★★★ 3/4

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Abstract

ReadCube Desktop is a free-to-download file and reference manager that competes with Papers, Mendeley, and Zotero, among others. Many of its predecessors' features are replicated in a sleek and lightweight interface from which researchers can manage PDFs, search Google Scholar and PubMed, and annotate documents. But ReadCube is distinguished by its ability to enhance eligible papers with clickable in-line references, a figure browser, and other ways to engage with formerly static PDFs. In attempting to simplify research management, however, ReadCube overcompensates, removing a feature for each it adds. The lack of collaboration features, in particular, makes ReadCube a program ill-suited to the needs of many scholars. In sum, ReadCube is a solid product with much to recommend it, but it falls short of its billing as the "ultimate researcher toolkit." Note that this review acknowledges, but does not evaluate, ReadCube Access, Labtiva's pay-as-you-go program for renting or purchasing individual articles.

Room for One More?

Note: Reviewed on a MacBook running OSX 10.7.5 in conjunction with Adobe Air 13.0 (required). ReadCube's SmartCite tested using Microsoft Word for Mac 14.2.4.

When the history of reference managers is written, in the world's least interesting dissertation, it will begin with obscurely named documents, warrens of subfolders, and minefields of icons on cluttered PC desktops. In short, it will begin with a problem.

Many have tried to improve the process by which researchers discover, read, interpret, and organize their papers. In fact the field is crowded with solutions. Wikipedia lists 29 reference managers in various states of development, for various operating systems. These include well-known products, like EndNote and Zotero, and relative newcomers like Mendeley and Papers. Each has a community of adherents, and each has been absorbed into the work-life of countless researchers.

By this standard, ReadCube is a Johnny-come-lately, especially next to graybeards like EndNote. First introduced by Labtiva in 2011, the company and its signature product are now owned by Macmillan, of which Nature Publishing Group is a subsidiary, making ReadCube the fourth reference manager offered by a commercial publisher.

ReadCube is both familiar and new. It performs many functions common to other reference managers, but offers novel improvements too. The question is whether the total package is enticement enough to abandon your current setup.

GET ORGANIZED

ReadCube Desktop is a file and reference manager that aims to collapse the research process into a single interface. It scans a host computer for PDFs, extracts metadata from them, and then checks those metadata against citations in Google Scholar, PubMed, and CrossRef. When the program locates a match it adds that information to the user's library, relieving the manual entry of bibliographic information. This isn't a new feature—Zotero's done it for years—but it's a minor miracle when compared against the alternative.

When a resolved article is selected from the library, ReadCube displays its vitals: abstract, journal name, authors, any notes you've taken, and a citation count drawn from Google Scholar (Figure 1). If you prefer to read the article on its publisher's website, there's a button for that, too. These features depend on an article's metadata, however. Articles that can be searched against records in Scholar and PubMed will yield more information than a book chapter you scanned yourself. For PDFs without metadata, only the file name will be imported. ReadCube will then prompt you to add enough information to help it make a match.

Unfortunately, the program assumes that every unmatched PDF is a journal article, and to quote Ira Gershwin, it ain't necessarily so. A book section is not an article, and a white paper may not have a matching citation in Google Scholar. For Zotero and Mendeley users, this is a minor headache: just manually enter any information the program can't autocomplete. In ReadCube, however, there is no way to manually alter an article's imported bibliographic record. Should a title import incorrectly, or with corrupted characters, the reader is stuck with it, at least in ReadCube's present incarnation. Even worse, the program permits users to manually create references, including a wide variety of document types, but obscures the process by which a reference is linked to a PDF, effectively undermining the feature.

Papers are automatically sorted by the date they were added, but readers can organize their libraries as they wish: sort by first author, title, publication year, and so forth. You can also assign papers to custom lists, the equivalent of folders in Mendeley and Zotero, or mark articles with stars to indicate importance, à la Gmail. These stars are as close as it gets to custom tagging, which is not supported in ReadCube. Folksonomy fans, especially those used to tagging articles in Zotero, will miss that feature here. Moreover, the usefulness of stars decreases as they're assigned. If the point of a starred article is to stand out against several dozen papers, a reader should use them sparingly.

ReadCube is strict about the files it will organize. Unlike Zotero, which promises to "store anything," ReadCube welcomes only PDFs. This is disappointing, especially given the growing diversity of research products. People working with images, video, datasets, or oth-

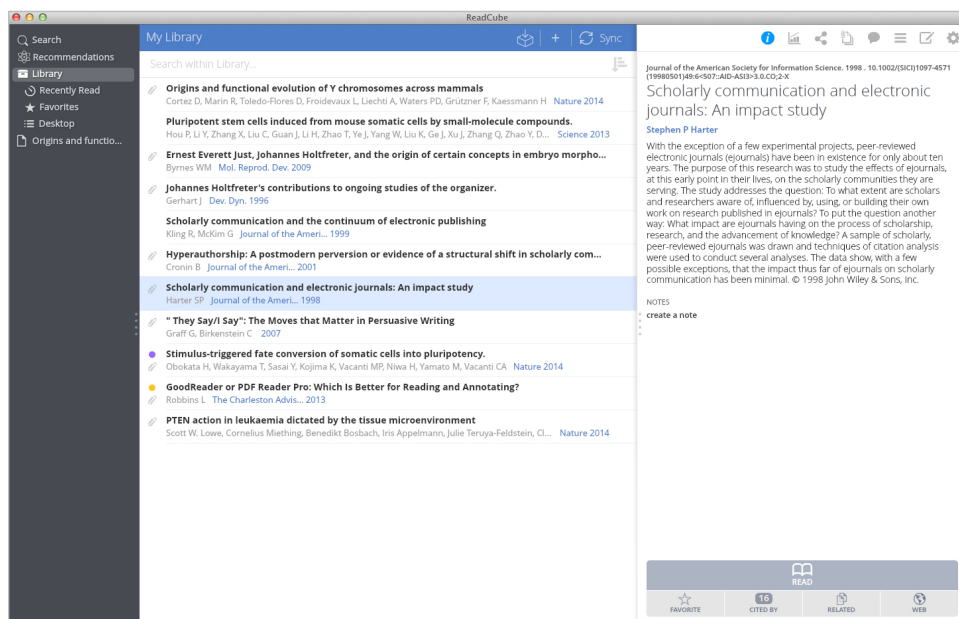


FIGURE 1 Details of Selected Article on ReadCube

A search bar allows the user to crawl his or her library, including the full text of all OCR-enabled PDFs, making it relatively easy to summon a specific article, or any papers on a given topic. Users cannot search by field, however, a negligible concern for small collections but one that grows in proportion to the number of papers added. Limiting a search by title only, as Google Scholar allows users to do, would help cut the number of false positives retrieved.

Speaking of Scholar, ReadCube makes much of a search feature that incorporates both Google Scholar and PubMed right into its interface (Figure 3). In theory, a user can search the databases from within ReadCube, discover research she'd like to read, and then add those papers to her library with just a few clicks. In practice, however, it's difficult to envision anyone using ReadCube's integrated browser over a stand-alone instance of Scholar or PubMed. None of the powerful advanced search and limiting functions of the databases, PubMed especially, is present in ReadCube (Figure 4). Each search engine has been simplified almost to uselessness. It's a clever idea, but Labtiva would do better to load the real deal inside the interface.

er files can record, organize, and annotate them in Mendeley and Zotero (which, like ReadCube, are free to download). Overlooking other file types is an oversight that Labtiva should address, and quickly.

READING, SEARCHING, CITING

Double-clicking an article in the library launches ReadCube's integrated PDF reader. In addition to the usual snapshot, resize, and search tools, ReadCube enables users to annotate and highlight text in one of four colors (Figure 2). A sidebar presents additional information, such as a paper's Altmetrics, if available, or any notes you've taken. You can also create a citation in more than 500 styles using a simple drop-down menu.

Finally, ReadCube works with Microsoft Word to insert citations as you write, and to create bibliographies. Mendeley's plugin works with more word processors (LibreOffice, BibTeX), but it requires a separate download and installation. ReadCube's is built in, and works so long as the program is running. To insert a citation in Word, double-click Control to summon a floating citation menu. Search for the article you'd like to cite and it's inserted as a numbered reference. When you're ready to generate a bibliography, summon the menu again, select Insert Bibliography, and then the citation style of your choice. Select the wrong style? No worries: any changes are automatically reflected in the document without disrupting your work. But remember the adage: garbage in, garbage out. If ReadCube failed to accurately resolve an article, it will output that way in your document. In other words, check your work.

Finally, ReadCube works with Microsoft Word to insert citations as you write, and to create bibliographies. Mendeley's plugin works with more word processors (LibreOffice, BibTeX), but it requires a separate download and installation. ReadCube's is built in, and works so long as the program is running. To insert a citation in Word, double-click Control to summon a floating citation menu. Search for the article you'd like to cite and it's inserted as a numbered reference. When you're ready to generate a bibliography, summon the menu again, select Insert Bibliography, and then the citation style of your choice. Select the wrong style? No worries: any changes are automatically reflected in the document without disrupting your work. But remember the adage: garbage in, garbage out. If ReadCube failed to accurately resolve an article, it will output that way in your document. In other words, check your work.

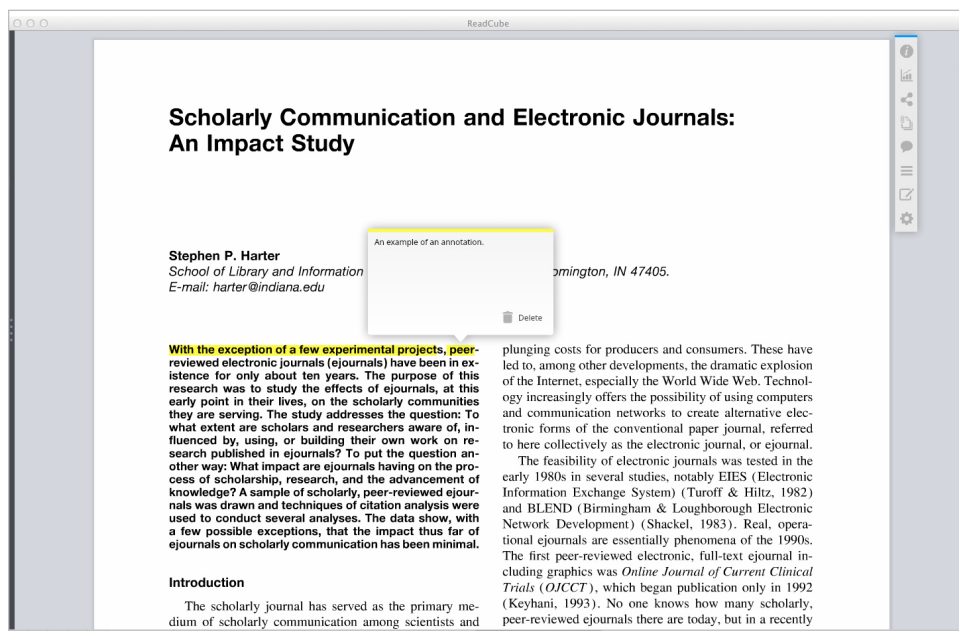


FIGURE 2 Annotation and Highlighting PDFs in ReadCube

FIGURE 3 Google Scholar in the ReadCube Interface

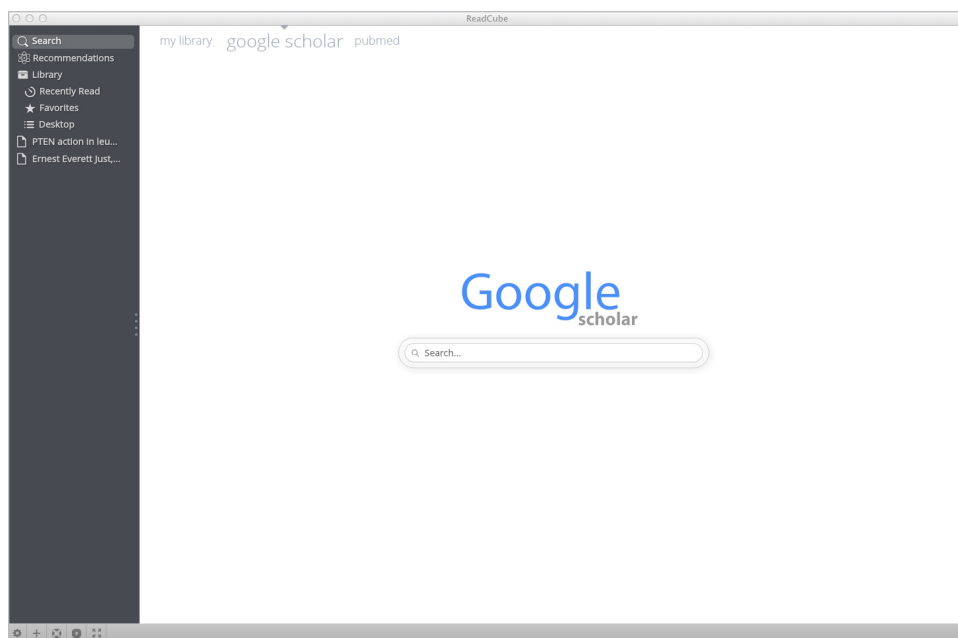
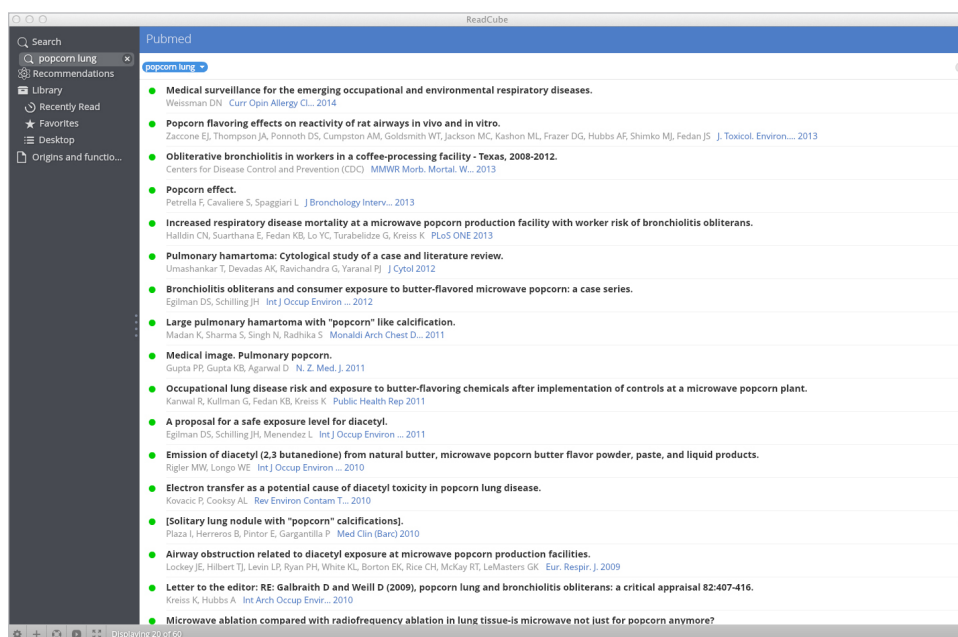


FIGURE 4 PubMed Results in ReadCube



STANDING OUT FROM THE HERD

Apart from the distinctions outlined above, ReadCube is essentially a sleeker version of existing reference managers, which begs the question: why switch? One answer comes in the form of ReadCube’s Enhanced PDF feature, which adds HTML functionality to static PDFs. By capturing data from the HTML version of an article, an enhanced PDF boasts clickable inline references, making it easy to see a cited reference without scrolling to the bibliography (Figure 5). Double-clicking these references launches a search for the paper itself. Because ReadCube works with most institutional proxies, the program can retrieve papers from the journals to which your library subscribes. When it works, this feature is as seamless as you’d hope, depositing new PDFs into ReadCube and populating them with citation information. On occasion, however,

I’d try to access a paper only to find ReadCube’s internal browser spinning haplessly without resolution, so don’t delete your library bookmarks just yet.

Labtiva claims that over 10 million PDFs are “enhanceable,” but it’s not clear how they arrived at that figure. The best way to demonstrate the feature is to download an article from *Nature*, which shares a corporate parent with ReadCube. In fact, when downloading PDFs from the journal, readers are now asked whether they want a plain-vanilla version or if they’d rather view an interactive PDF in ReadCube. Opting for the latter launches an in-browser (i.e., in Chrome or Firefox) version of the research organizer including its article-level annotation and highlighting features (Figure 6). Of course a ReadCube client is required in order to save notes or claim the PDF, effectively making these “ReadCube Articles” advertisements for the software.

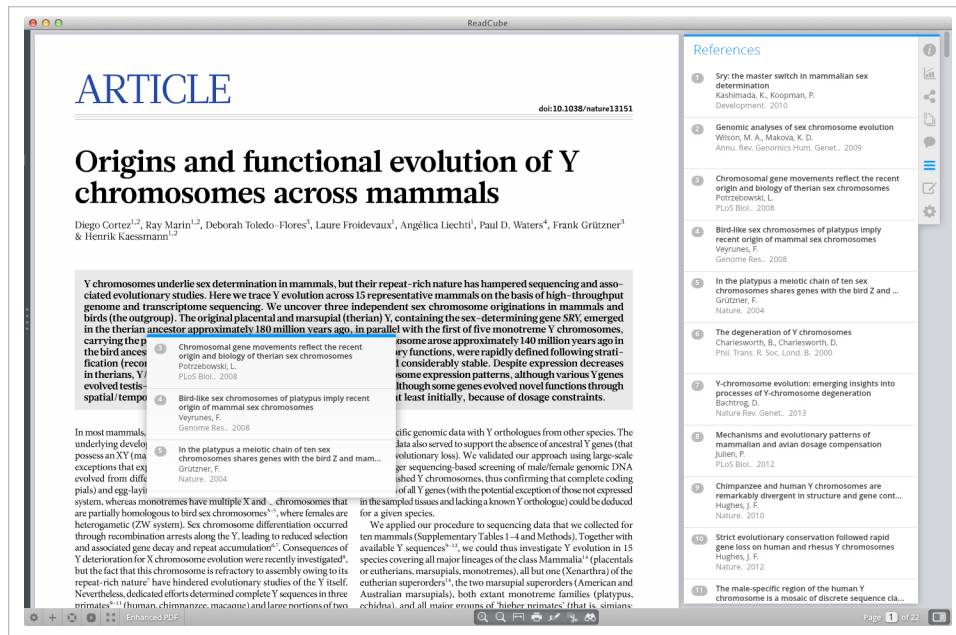


FIGURE 5 ReadCube's Enhanced PDF with HTML Functionality

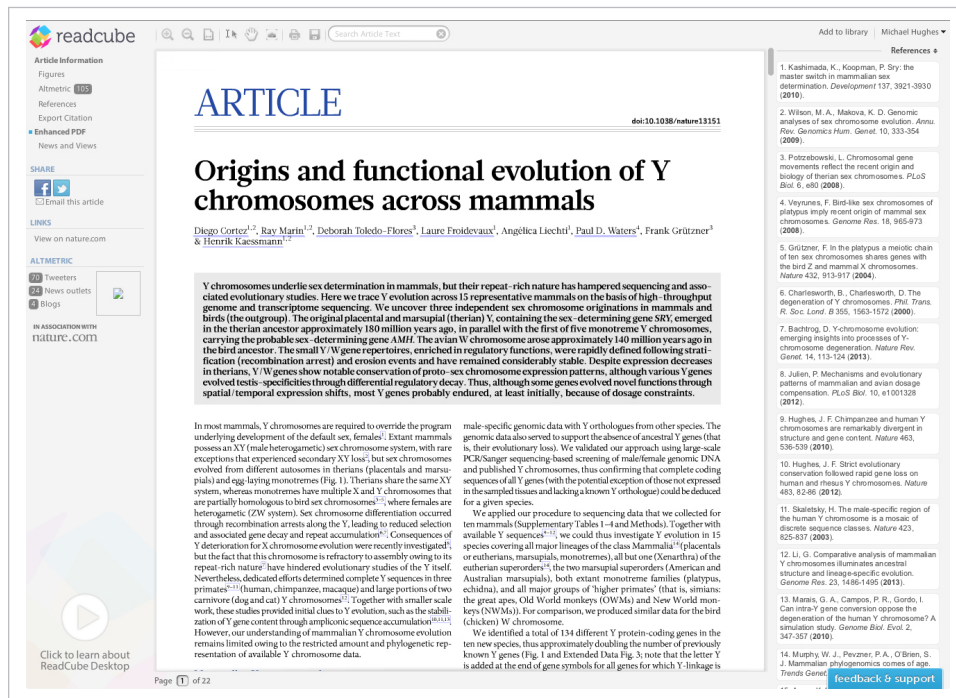


FIGURE 6 In-Browser Version of Research Organizer

ReadCube also touts a Recommendations feature meant to ease the process of discovering must-read literature. Call it better living through algorithms. The idea is that the more you use ReadCube—the more articles you import and resolve—the better it understands your research inclinations. The company is understandably tight-lipped about how it determines these recommendations, but it's safe to assume that they're informed by keyword location, density, and frequency of use, not unlike the relevancy ranking in EBSCO databases.

I'm reluctant to comment on the efficacy of ReadCube's recommendations. While evaluating the program, I imported a number of articles, some of which I hadn't read or were outside my areas of expertise. If I were to thus trigger a recommendation, I couldn't describe its helpfulness with any certainty. The same would hold true of bulk

loading articles on, say, information literacy in an attempt to force a recommendation. Suffice it to say that your mileage might vary.

That said, I'm skeptical of the value of machine-driven discovery. It's well and good to allow your reference manager to complete citations for you; ReadCube is perfectly suited to such drudgery. Discovering

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ReadCube Review Scores Composite: ★★ ★ 3/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★ ★ 1/2

Enhanced PDFs are impressive when they work, and other features, such as SmartCite, are a welcome upgrade from leading alternatives. The lack of now-standard features, however, such as support for multiple file types, makes ReadCube a product both of and outside its time.

User Interface: ★★ ★ 1/2

An elegant three-paned interface, in hues of gray and blue, is easy on the eyes, and ReadCube's search function quickly retrieves papers. The integrated PDF reader jettisons unnecessary clutter, retaining only the features necessary to reading and interpreting a paper. Unfortunately, the interface is streamlined to a fault. Readers cannot tweak bibliographic information, for example, or link PDFs to custom references.

Pricing: ★★ ★ ★ 1/2

ReadCube is free to download, but the basic version is tied to the machine on which it's installed. For \$5 per month, or \$45 per year, users can upgrade to ReadCube Pro, which stores their libraries, including notes, annotations, and highlights, in the cloud and syncs across devices. Pro users can also designate "watch folders" for ReadCube to monitor. PDFs added to these folders are automatically imported to the reader's library. ReadCube Pro's annual rate is \$10 less than Mendeley's, and less than the cost of purchasing the Papers app (licenses are €59 each). Of course ReadCube Pro is \$45 more than using the free-to-download Zotero in conjunction with the free-to-download Dropbox.

Contract Provisions: N/A

Full terms and provisions are laid out at <www.readcube.com/terms>. A privacy policy is available at <www.readcube.com/privacy>. As with all software, users should avail themselves of ReadCube's terms before using the program. That said, I didn't find anything surprising or alarming about them.

In terms of data collection, ReadCube gathers usage information and data on "what articles users are reviewing and commenting on through our Service." This data is used in the aggregate in order to "make the Site or Service appealing to as many users as possible," and cannot be traced back to an individual.

The company also provides for the disclosure to advertisers of "any of the information we have collected from you in non-personally identifiable form...in order for that Advertiser to select the appropriate audience for those advertisements and/or offers." I did not encounter any ads while using the product, but it's early days yet.

relevant literature, however, is a process of careful complexity. Leaving it to ReadCube seems careless. Incorporating recommendations as another step in a workflow is one thing, but I wonder at ReadCube's role in "[ensuring] you never miss an important paper again."

Finally, a few words on ReadCube's collaboration functions, and only a few because they don't exist. Unlike Mendeley and Papers, which offer virtual workspaces in which groups can collectively share and markup papers, ReadCube lacks such an option. This makes it hard to recommend to anyone who's come to rely on this feature, or for future users who require a central repository from which to enjoy shared access (e.g., a group of lab students). Today, ReadCube is tailor-made for the individual researcher, one unlikely to require any but the most informal kinds of collaboration.

If it Ain't Broke ...

Who is ReadCube for? Lactiva hopes they've made a product for everyone, but ReadCube falls short of that goal. The fact is, your favor-

ite reference manager is the one you already use, the one that helps you get more done. ReadCube is a fine product, and one with many fans already. But puzzling drawbacks—its lack of collaboration features, its refusal of Zotero-like customization, and its PDF-only policy—suggest that ReadCube is unlikely to make converts from readers accustomed to other solutions.

Authentication

ReadCube works with most institutional proxies. If your library uses EZProxy, the client will auto-detect and add your university (this can be changed in the preferences). Users can also manually add institutions.

About the Author

Michael Hughes is an Instruction Librarian at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. He works with the departments of Communication, History, Philosophy, and Film Studies. ■