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SmartDraw Legal Edition

By Brett Burney

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then why do so many legal professionals use mind-numbing gobs of text on Microsoft PowerPoint slides? I suspect one reason is that drawing lessons are not offered as part of paralegal certificate programs or law school curriculum. Also, very few creative software programs are intuitive and accessible to legal professionals. Lawyers and legal assistants don't have the luxury of extra time to sit down and learn how to color elaborate images or design slick demonstrative exhibits. The SmartDraw Legal Edition, however, is perfect for easily creating spectacular and persuasive pictures. All you need is a good idea and the ability to click a mouse.

The original SmartDraw application has been around since 1994. In addition to its basic offering, SmartDraw has editions targeted at the business, medical and legal fields. The SmartDraw Legal Edition, introduced in 2005, contains everything from the basic version but adds a wealth of specialized templates helpful for legal environments, such as timelines, estate planning diagrams, calendars, accident reconstructions and crime scene layouts.

The SmartHelp on the right side of the screen is fantastic. When I first started working with SmartDraw, the SmartHelp panel walked me through each relevant task for the template I selected, lessening my learning curve. The first step is to select a template from the hundreds that SmartDraw offers. I was elated to find so many useful and professional-grade templates that give the impression that you have spent hours and hundreds of dollars creating a brilliant diagram.

Learning the application is a breeze. Each template can be customized by simply clicking the mouse. SmartDraw's interface is easy to get around, and the whole look and feel is similar to Microsoft Office 2007. You don't have the "File, Edit, View" toolbar at the top, but once you select a template, you are provided with a SmartPanel containing tasks relevant to your template, such as "Add Shapes" for family trees and "Set Start" for timelines. All of the functions are there that you normally would have with a conventional menu; they are just arranged at the top so you can easily find them. For example, you can change the entire design of a template by clicking the design tab at the top and selecting your preferred color scheme.

Working on a template is simple — just point and click. Almost anything on the template can be clicked and moved, such as text boxes and colored shapes. If you want to move a text box, just click and drag. Select an item and change its color with the buttons above. You certainly can start from scratch and create your own masterpiece; however, I found it much easier to open an existing template and customize it. Lines and arrows are a snap to add — a drop-down menu toward the top allows you to select the type of line you need, such as straight, curved or freehand. I am a huge fan of the curved line. I know it sounds simple to create, but so many graphic applications lack an easy tool for creating a perfectly curved line. SmartDraw also provides some great free-form drawing tools if you are better than I am at sketching with a mouse.

SmartDraw offers more than 20,000 symbols and shapes that can be added to any template or creation. I found the symbols in the crime scene templates to be the most interesting — I was able to add a spot of blood to the floor and place a ski mask on the table. SmartDraw gives you the power to dynamically re-create a crucial event from your case. You then can print out full-color images for the court or convert the images for insertion into Microsoft PowerPoint. SmartDraw also did a great job at converting my finalized images into other formats. You can use the buttons at the top left of the application to immediately convert the image to PDF; Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel; Corel WordPerfect; or just a simple JPEG image.

Unless you have a gifted person in your office who can create stunning graphics in his or her spare time, I would recommend SmartDraw for all your drawing needs and to create exemplary diagrams and graphics. While the case planning calendars and timelines are definitely helpful for litigation matters, SmartDraw has some extremely useful engineering templates for patent prosecutions, as well as family trees for probate issues. In today's highly competitive legal environment, legal assistants can turn their good ideas into great results, impressing clients and their lawyers.



SmartDraw Legal Edition

SmartDraw.com • (800) 817-4239 • www.smartdraw.com • \$297 •
Mac; DOS; Windows 2000/XP/Vista

Pros: SmartDraw Legal Edition has an intuitive click-and-drag interface and a look similar to Microsoft Office 2007. An incredible selection of hundreds of templates allows you to create professional crime scene diagrams, accident reconstruction diagrams, legal flowcharts and timelines. The ability to export the final product to Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Corel WordPerfect, PDF and JPEG is as easy as clicking a button.

Cons: Full installation of SmartDraw Legal — all examples and templates — will consume almost 3GB of space on your hard drive.

Verdict: I recommend SmartDraw Legal to easily create professional-looking diagrams and graphics that can be used in a variety of applications such as Microsoft Word or PowerPoint.

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