



PDF Scanning Apps

*By Trey Peacock, Winning Cases Based On Science & Data For Over 25 Years
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As mobile devices have become increasingly refined, specialized, and popularized, they have also taken on much of the functionality of classic office equipment. Need a Dictaphone? There is an app for that. Printing? You can do it from your iPad or iPhone. However, there is one area in which smartphone technology has historically been finicky: scanning.

In terms of image quality, resolution, and consistency, it is hard to beat a physical office-grade digital scanner. But, as we all know (especially in these novel WFH times), situations frequently arise in which you need desperately to scan a document into PDF form despite being miles away from the closest office or FedEx. Accordingly, scores of apps have been developed and released to satisfy this need. Unfortunately, many of them fall short. They're clunky, ineffective, or expensive. In this article, I round up some of the most popular scanning apps on the market, summarize features of each, and give you my pick as to which is the best. However, your mileage may vary and I recommend simply picking the app that you think best suits your scanning needs.

Microsoft Office Lens

First up is Microsoft Office Lens, the proprietary (free) Microsoft app that slides delicately into the existing Microsoft suite, ported as of a few years ago to function across all mobile devices. This app is extremely easy to use, features a clean visual user interface, and satisfies the basic scanning needs of the average user. Yet, it comes up short in several categories. First, the app scans via the phone camera and the camera guide auto-detects (with varying results) the borders of the photo or document you are attempting to scan. The user snaps a photo and then Lens takes the user to a Snapchat-esque editing screen where she can add a black-and-white or greyscale filter, crop or rotate the photo, annotate with a multicolored brush tool, or add text. Then, the user can save the file as a photo or PDF and export it to the app of her choice. Lens comes with an option to scan a photo from the Camera Roll, but every time I tried to use it, the app inexplicably crashed. On the positive side, the Lens app is well integrated into the existing Microsoft Office suite and importing scans or photos from Lens into PowerPoint or Office on an iPad or iPhone is a cinch. However, Lens's incredibly basic editing system and software errors ding its reputation, as does the lack of OCR (Optical Character Recognition) software in its free version. The lack of OCR means the Lens app can't recognize text or create searchable text PDF files. If you're only looking to use the app for things like scanning a passport or a grocery list, the lack of OCR might not be a problem, but for those with hefty, document-based scanning tasks, Lens is not for you.

Evernote Scannable

Like Microsoft Office Lens, Evernote Scannable arrives as a free add-on to an already popular suite of task managing and office software. Like Lens, it functions extremely well as a companion to the Evernote ecosystem, and if you are user of those apps you will find it relatively easy to add your scans into lists, documents, or reminders. The Scannable app boasts a classy, easy to use interface, integrated hardware capability, and moderate editing tools. The app opens on the camera, prompting users with on-screen guides to zoom in on their subject, rotate it, or place it on a more contrasting background. These guides are helpful, but occasionally require a bit of legwork before a clear image scan can be secured on complicated documents or in dim light. Once your photo has been snapped, Scannable auto-blanches the image to a crisp black-and-white imitation of a digital scan. This effect is consistently helpful and goes a long way to getting a better quality image. The app allows an option to turn off this auto-color correction, but beyond that, offers few tools to edit or annotate the scanned images. Although it lacks tools, it is great for quickly capturing quick lists or receipts and adding them into Evernote's software. It also has a useful "business card" tool which recognizes contact info from a business card scan and auto-populates the information into a new phone contact. Despite the fact that this feature demonstrates the app's capability to recognize and read text, the app inexplicably lacks OCR, preventing the user from creating searchable text PDFs. This may be because the app is free and Evernote does not want to include OCR, a frequently paid-tier feature, into a free app. Whatever the reason, you don't get OCR capability with Scannable. Like Lens, this app is best used quickly, sparingly, and in companion with its accompanying ecosystem.

Prizmo 5 > Pro Scanner (My Low-Cost Pick)

This app doesn't come with a set of other office-related applications, but it unquestionably performs its task better than its low-cost competitors. Prizmo 5, the latest release of the Prizmo app, offers a free version as well as a one-time Premium purchase of \$13.99. All scans created with the free version are branded with a prominent Prizmo watermark, so if you choose this app, go ahead and spring for the Premium. Of all the apps tested, Prizmo boasts the best page capture technology, the quickest, crispest scans, and the greatest selection of editing and sharing tools for PDFs. The camera section of the app auto-reads the page borders with pretty reliable accuracy, and auto-snaps a photo for the user. From there, the app brings you to an editing page where you can choose from any of several editing tools to up the contrast of the photo, crop or rotate it, wash it out or darken it, or saturate the colors. Users can also add text or written annotations. If you are scanning something with rounded edges, say a list of nutrition facts on a can, the app even has a "Flatten" tool which smooths the image borders and lines up any text evenly. I found this last feature particularly helpful, as well as totally unique among the apps I tested.

Additionally, Prizmo sets itself apart from its peer apps with its inclusion of OCR technology. With the touch of a button, user can scan the text of a page and create a searchable PDF. And, if you spot any errors (they do occur, though Prizmo's OCR performs quite admirably in most conditions), it's a simple tap to edit the text to match what's on the page. Once editing and OCR has been performed, Prizmo offers users the choice to export their file in PDF, JPEG, PNG, docx, or "Prizmo file" format. The app also has a built-in text reader as part of its accessibility features and is VoiceOver and Siri enabled. Additionally, like Scannable, Prizmo allows users to import contact info from business cards, while also featuring a "Scan from Camera Roll" feature that doesn't cause the app to crash like the Lens app. With this tool, users can import files, images, or even entire photo albums to be quickly scanned and collated. The user can page through the document and correct any auto-cropping errors or contrast problems. It is slightly tedious to arrange misplaced pages, as you must touch and hold within the app to move pages one-by-one, but properly ordering an album before scanning isn't too difficult to do either. Once sufficiently arranged and edited, the user can have the whole thing scanned with OCR and converted to a searchable PDF. While the price tag of this app may seem steep for casual users, anyone who frequently needs quality, searchable PDFs and is on the go, the app is a must. Plus, the one-time fee beats a traditional subscription model.

All in all, Prizmo easily claims the title of my personal pick. It's flawless scanning ability combined with its advanced editing tools and customizable export capability make it by far the best app for those with consistent scanning needs.

Scanbot (My Professional Pick)

While Prizmo fits the bill for anyone searching for a consumer-grade, low-cost scanning option that still functions well and offers useful features, Scanbot is unquestionably a better pick for anyone who uses a mobile scanner as a main tool in their profession or hobby. If you frequently scan and collate multi-page documents, love high-efficiency OCR searchability, and often consult scans on a mobile device, Scanbot is for you.

Scanbot just finished a new user interface renovation, and the clean new look serves the app's functions extremely well. The app auto-scans the viewfinder of the camera to detect borders, and displays on-screen prompts for the user to move closer, farther, left, right, and even tilt, to get proper perspective alignment. The app also offers a number of lighting and zoom options to help the user effectively scan documents. It also has a multi-page option that works flawlessly and allows users to re-order scanned pages with drag and drop.

Once all pages are scanned, the app allows you to rename and designate a location for the file, and presents you with a "create workflow" option. This allows the user to quickly and easily share scanned images or documents through any of the supported apps, which include Mail, Messages, Gmail, Slack, and more. This feature comes in handy when on the go or pressed for time, as a simple two or three taps sends the document where it needs to go.

Additionally, the app features a number of color correction and editing tools to help adjust the white balance, contrast, opacity, and crop so that each image is just right. Perhaps most helpful, though, is the annotation feature. A simple tap from the file viewing screen takes the user to a new window where one can superimpose an annotation onto the scanned image. This allows immense customization of documents. Users can quickly and easily add a scribbled note or an arrow, a note with typed text, a signature, or a black window to redact selected portions of text. These last two features are extremely handy for lawyers, allowing you to quickly scan, sign, and edit a document, all from the palm of your hand.

The only downside of Scanbot is the price. Unlike Prizmo, it utilizes a subscription model rather than a one-time purchase. The app's full-tier features are priced at \$3.99 a month or \$23.99 a year. Again, this price tag might appear steep for someone who won't fully and frequently use the app's myriad features. However, if your work requires you to have access to PDFs and files on a day-to-day basis, Scanbot and the convenience its features provides are worth the money.

The Rest

A simple search for "scan" reveals plenty of other scanner apps in the App Store. Many of these apps, like Lens and Scannable, offer serviceable scans that suffice for the average user. Many of them are also free. Some of them even have a few of the features that Prizmo possesses, such as OCR technology or contrast altering. However, none of them have as *many* features for the same price. To unlock any of the higher tier features, apps like iScanner and ScannerPro require users to pay a subscription fee, oftentimes \$9.99 per month. I recommend you cough up the extra fourteen dollars for Prizmo 5, or stick with the free version. Either way, you'll be in good shape.

About the Author

Trey Peacock, a partner at [Susman Godfrey](#), has been winning cases based on science and data for over 25 years. He has also chaired the firm's IT committee for over two decades. [Learn more about Trey here.](#)