

Android Applications

by Andy Pepperdine

Introduction

This is an arbitrary list of some applications that I have found useful, or others have recommended. Some are more suited to phones, and others to tablets. There is no pretence that these are properly reviewed or even fit for purpose. As they say, your mileage may vary.

In many cases where an application has a free version, it insists on showing you advertisements. Sometimes there is also a paid version that does not have advertisements, and will also provide more features. It is worth investigating in each case whether the trade-off is acceptable for you.

Standard features

I will start with a few features that phones or tablets may have that you may not be aware of.

Encrypted storage

All Android devices have the ability to encrypt the main storage area. However, to do this, you will have to supply a password with which you unlock the device. You cannot encrypt and use some other method of unlocking. The unlock password provides the encryption key.

Note that in general when encryption is applied, then applications cannot be accessed without first putting in your password. There are some special exceptions to this, and will be noted under the relevant headings.

If your device has an extra SSD card, then this can also be encrypted or not, independently of encrypting the main storage area.

File browser

Sometimes there is a default file browser on the home page, and sometimes not, depending on the device. If it is not obviously available, then try Settings → Storage → Explore.

Another recommendation is the OI File Manager, which can also handle any extra SD cards easily.

Phone

A phone is a phone is a phone. This is one of the features that can receive calls without decrypting the phone. To make a call, you have to supply the password. You can also access the phone via the Contacts list.

However, you have to unlock to see any text messages that arrive.

Camera

These days almost every device has a camera in it. To save time it may be possible to set it up so that a quick double click on the Home key will immediately bring up the camera, even if the camera is locked. However, it cannot incorporate the new photos into its Gallery unless you first unlock the phone, and then it will merge them automatically. To access this feature, use Settings → Applications → Camera → Quick Launch, but not all devices have it.

Weather

My phone's weather app is driven by AccuWeather, and has the ability to select up to 10 alternative places to be watched, and alternatively displayed. Useful when travelling on a long haul flight.

I installed a similar AccuWeather app on the tablet, but it was not standard.

Another recommendation is the Met Office weather app, but it is also reported not to refresh automatically.

Clock

The standard Clock app has all the usual features of alarms and timing, on both phone and tablet.

I noticed that when I was abroad, it displayed both the local time and my home time by default. Otherwise, other cities can be included. However, I found that the number of places available in each time zone was quite limited, and so I had to set the time to a more remote place and then remember what it was for. The danger is that the place chosen has different daylight savings requirements and so can be adrift significantly from where one might expect it to be.

Internet Access

This might be a browser that the supplier has adapted for their special phone or network, or it might be the standard Google variant of Chromium. Either way, it is useful to check data, catch up on news, look up where you are on a map, and any of many other uses you might find for it.

Firefox

Mozilla have provided at least three versions of their Firefox browser for use on mobile devices. I would welcome comments on how people have found these different versions and what they might be most useful for.

First, there appears to be a fairly simple port of the standard Firefox browser.

Then there is a beta version of Firefox for Android. I do not know how this differs from the "normal" version.

Finally, Mozilla have issued a version called Firefox Focus which always uses private browsing, so you can remain assured that others will not see your history even if it gets stolen. It can be set up so it will always clear out your cookies etc. whenever the last tab is closed, or the window is closed.

Play Books

You can use your device to download and read any books you have access to. The standard one is Google Play Books. Useful if you are a long trip somewhere.

Radio

Most phones also have a radio app already to go, although only FM. Stations available on the internet can obviously be obtained via your browser, although you may have to do that via your wifi connection to ensure speed and connectivity.

Additional Applications

Onto each of my devices, I've added more applications that I find useful. The ones mentioned here are possibly of use to others.

Signal

This is a replacement for, and can be set to override, the usual phone and text messaging app on the phone. If you are at all concerned about privacy, then this is the recommended app to use. However, not many others use it, so the encryption facilities are not useful until your correspondents are also on it. It is available only for devices that can make phone calls.

WifiFTP

This app enables you to transfer files from your own computer to or from the device using an ftp client, such as the FireFP add-on for Firefox. The transfer is made through a wifi connection, not the phone connection, so you must first establish a wifi connection. You also set a username and password that will be used when connecting via ftp.

AnySoftKeyboard

I use more than one language, and a way of easily switching between them when writing messages is almost a must. This does the job with many extra language keyboards, including logical and mathematical symbols, available to add on. It is available for phones and tablets.

K-9 Mail

I use e-mail access only on the tablet, as the phone is too small for practical use in this case. The advantage of K-9 mail seems to be relative ease of use, and the ability to encrypt messages using the same keys as my other machines, although that requires in the installation of APG as well, which automatically links to K-9 Mail seamlessly.

Calculator

The standard calculator is rather rudimentary, and if you need anything scientific, then it needs extending. I use RealCalc for the job, and installed the professional version, at a small cost, in order to avoid adverts and get a fuller version.

Graphing calculator

If you want a way of displaying graphs in the mathematical sense, then a Graphing calculator will do the job. I've put this only on the tablet, because the screen on a phone is too small to be sensible for this job. It's worth upgrading to the paid version if you are using it seriously.

BBC iplayer and Media

The BBC has introduced a couple of applications you may want in order to view BBC programs. Personally, I've not yet registered my details, and have found no call to use either of these apps.

OpenDocument

There is a reader for Open Documents (eg. .odt files and similar). However, I've not yet found a usable writer. Even Google docs does not seem to have all the features you might want to use.

There is also a LibreOffice app, but that does not allow writing yet. I can only hope there will be one available soon.

Reading PDF files

A recommended PDF reader is MuPdf, which was reported as being able to read everything it was presented with, whereas others were not able to do so.

Dictionaries

There are a number of dictionaries available. I use the Merriam Webster one as it seems to have the best interface and a very reasonable price, like free, but it does have ads, which can be a bit of a nuisance, but largely tolerable. The reviews of the free Oxford Dictionary are full of complaints about aggressive advertising and popups, so I have not done a comparison.

The Chambers dictionary has generally very favourable reviews, but there is no free version, only one at a reasonable cost.

SatNav

It was pointed out that using your mobile phone as a satellite navigation system while driving may be considered illegal, unless it is used in a "hands-free" mode. If not, then you it could be construed that you are using a mobile phone while driving.

With that in mind, one system worth considering is Google maps.

Specialised apps

There are a large number of specialised apps for a particular institution or shop, and as these are so specific to each individual user, I've not listed mine.