July 1989

# The Word Processor: A Flexible Tool

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## Recommended Citation

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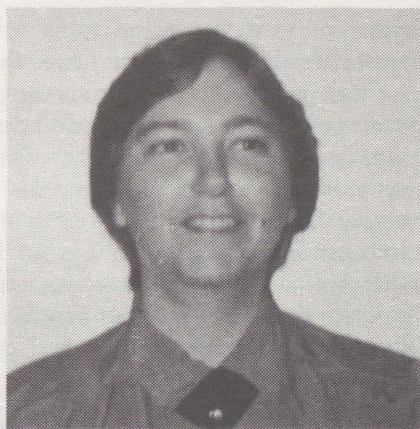
**by Deborah Young**

The word processor is a valuable tool in language arts instruction primarily because it facilitates the writing of original stories and reports. In a classroom in which much writing occurs, the major demands on the word processor will be related to drafting, revising, and editing materials; the word processor will serve its main function as a writing tool.

In addition, teachers can use word processors to design activities, based on learners' needs and the local curriculum, that will reinforce the connections between reading and writing. The purpose of this article is to offer suggestions for structured word processing activities that will guide learners to (1) summarize materials they have read and plan original writings, (2) construct and punctuate coherent texts, and (3) enhance their vocabularies.

## Prompted Writing

Readers can use word processors to write summaries, discuss elements, or prepare critical evaluations of texts and their structures. Some readers need models to illustrate the types of information to collect for each type of writing assignment.

Prompted writing is an effective way to assist readers in examining text and collecting their thoughts. Teachers can prepare sets of questions (prompts) which aid readers in gathering information. Carefully prepared prompts provide guidance in organizing materials for specific purposes. Effective prompts to elicit writing will be open-ended

rather than ask for yes or no answers. A series of prompts to help the reader/writer summarize a story might look like this:

| |
|---|
| Where does the story take place? |

| |
|---|
| When does the story take place? |

| |
|---|
| Who is the main character? |

| |
|---|
| What problem does the main character have? |

| |
|---|
| How is the problem finally solved? |

These prompts about story grammar are generic questions, i.e., they help learners summarize any story regardless of the text or the age of the reader/writer.

Now you might say that these questions about story grammar could be written on a worksheet. However, there are advantages to using these prompts with a word processor. A major advantage is that the writer can write as much information as desired -- the space between the prompts expands to accommodate the amount of text written. On worksheets, however, if there isn't enough space the writer will have to scribble in the

margin, turn the page over, or write on separate sheets of paper. Once the ideas are written with the word processor, the writer can remove the prompts -- can't do that with a worksheet! -- leaving a draft which contains only the writer's text. Now the writer can easily reread, reword, and rearrange the text for content, flow, and coherency. Unlike with the worksheet, the writer does not have to rewrite the entire text but simply manipulate the thoughts and ideas.

Several word processors have prompt features, e.g., **Bank Street Writer III**, **FrEdWriter**, and **Magic Slate**. The cheapest is **FrEdWriter** -- it's free. **FrEdWriter** sets the prompts off in a box which the writer can not alter. The writer types below the prompt box. The space between the prompt boxes expands to allow the writer to say as much as desired. The mechanics of creating and removing prompts with **FrEdWriter** are explained by Irwin (1988).

Can you create prompts with other word processors? Of course. You can type a list of questions, setting them apart with asterisks. The writer can respond using the "insert mode" in which the cursor will push the subsequent prompts down the screen as text is added. To delete the prompts, writers can be taught how to delete blocks of text. Another way to use a word processor without built-in prompt features is to write the prompts on a worksheet and ask the students to respond to the questions on the computer rather than on paper.

Now that you know what prompted writing does, you can create many variations to fit the needs of your students and to incorporate in many areas of your curriculum. Let's look at three examples.

**1. Elaborate on aspects of story grammar**. As children and adults study literature, teachers will want readers to go beyond the elements of story grammar and focus on certain aspects. For instance, the setting or the characters in a particular story might be worthy of special study. Thus, prompts that deal with these specific aspects can be written, such as the following prompts to elaborate on setting: What is the setting of this story? How does the author establish the authenticity and description of the environment? How is the setting important to the story? How does the author use the setting to create problems for the characters? What elements of the setting are most necessary for plot development? How are these elements used to develop the plot? These questions encourage readers to think about the setting and extend their thoughts beyond the information within the text.

**2. Examine genre**. Prompts can be written to examine genre, too. For example, many classroom teachers have students bring in newspaper articles for discussion. Students could use prompts to alert them to the basic elements of a news item: Who is the article about? What happened? When did the event take place? Where did the event take place? Why did it happen? How did it happen? Students could respond to these questions as they prepare for a mock news broadcast. Similarly, prompts could be written for various narrative genre such as mystery stories or historical fiction and for expository text types such as sequential or compare/-contrast structures.

**3. Prepare reports**. Prompts can also be written for content area or expository texts. Suppose your class is working on a unit about diseases and students are to collect information from a variety of sources and write a report for a class book on ailments. Some suitable prompts might be: What is the common name of the disease and what causes it? How and when might a person get the disease? What are the symptoms of the disease? How is the disease treated or cured? When was this disease first identified? How widespread is the disease today? How can the disease be prevented? What other information should a person know about this disease? These prompts need not be limited to the purpose of having learners summarize information and write reports. They might form the basis for students to compare and contrast several diseases or for studying for a test. Even better than having teachers prepare the questions, students can be involved in creating appropriate prompts for numerous topics.

Prompted writing provides aids for readers to collect their thoughts and write about other authors' texts. Writers can use the same prompts as guides for constructing their own texts. Responding to prompts and creating prompts will give students experience in understanding text structures. The long-range goal, of course, is that learners will internalize these organizational concepts and patterns so that readers will summarize and writers will compose without relying upon external prompts.

## Constructing and Punctuating Coherent Texts

With word processors, writers can revise and edit their thoughts without leaving any tell-tale signs on their printed documents. Being able to move, delete, and insert text gives writers opportunities to explore different ways of expressing their ideas by experimenting with word choices, phrasing, and punctuation. The punctuation marks help clarify meaning. Creating and punctuating sentences so they are coherent for the reader is a difficult task for many writers.

There are several computer pro-grams (and lots of workbook pages) available that attempt to help learners identify and punctuate sentences. Most software programs, like the workbook pages, present learners with written texts in which the capital letters and punctuation marks have been removed. learners must decipher the texts and illustrate the authors' meanings through the placement of punctuation marks. These contrived lessons do not permit any deviation from the authors' works, even when there is more than one way to mark the texts. Adding capital letters and punctuation marks to these prepared texts become exercises in second-guessing other writers' decisions. Although novice writers, regardless of age, may become quite competent at completing these exercises, writers often experience difficulty applying insights gained from these exercises to their own writing.

Consequently, to gain experience with sentence construction and punctuation, writers need to write sentences --not a series of isolated sentences, but sentences that are a part of a coherent piece. In order to have meaningful experiences constructing and punctuating sentences, writers need to write real texts for real purposes knowing that real audiences will be reading them. Probably the best way for writers to get started producing coherent sentences which convey messages to readers is to jot down all their thoughts about a topic or story. From these brainstorming ideas, a draft is created. Then, as the learners reread and rewrite their documents, have editing conferences with teachers and peers, and share their writings with others, they will enhance their abilities to refine sentence structures and meaning within passages and use punctuation marks to present the message clearly. Many learners are much more willing to make these refinements now that the word processor makes it possible to do so without tedious recopying.

Occasionally teachers may want to involve novice writers in more directed and structured lessons in constructing and punctuating specific types of sentence structures. Here, again, the word processor can be a valuable tool. For instance, the lesson in Figure 1 could be used to practice writing and punctuating conversations. This example is based on Marcia Brown's book, **Stone Soup** (1947). In Brown's version, three hungry soldiers on their way home from war convince the townspeople of a small village that one stone can create a delicious, hearty vegetable soup. The book ends with the soldiers leaving town aand taking the magical stone with them. The conversation in Figure 1 takes the writer beyond Brown's text to postulate what might have happened to the soldiers later that night after two of the soldiers fall asleep.

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## Figure 1
## Example of a word processing activity focusing on constructing and punctuating speech (Irwin & Young, 1989).

After the three soldiers in the **Stone Soup** story had eaten and rested, they marched on. At nightfall they built a fire. Two soldiers fell asleep, leaving the third soldier awake to guard the camp.

Suddenly out of the darkness came a hunter. The hunter and the soldier sat and talked for awhile. Then the hunter spotted the stones.

You are the soldier. Tell what you would say in the following conversation that would fit in with what the hunter says.

**Hunter:** *I like those stones. Where can I get some like them?*

**Me:**

**Hunter:** *What do you use them for?*

**Me:**

**Hunter:** *That's interesting. What else can they be used for?*

**Me:**

**Hunter:** *Are you sure? How do you do that with stones?*

**Me:**

**Hunter:** *But won't people be suspicious?*

The writer becomes the soldier that stays awake to guard the camp. The conversation takes place around the campfire between the soldier and a hunter, who stops by for some warmth and conversation. During the conversation, the hunter focuses on the nearby stones. The soldier-writer must construct responses that make sense within the framework of the hunter's questions and comments. Notice that the activity is designed so the writer is not limited by the constraints of the story but is encouraged to be imaginative and move beyond the original plot.

Composing sentences using a drama (play) format lets writers focus first on comprehension and the content of the conversation rather than on how to punctuate speech. After the writer is satisfied with the content of the dialogue, the responses can be edited for the proper punctuation in this drama format, which of course does not involve using quotation marks. But think of how easy it would be to use this dialogue as the basis for a lesson on quotation marks. The writer can be encouraged to change this format and present the conversation as it would appear in more typical first or third person narrative prose so that a statement such as:

**ME:** *We got the stones from the baker's garden on the other side of town. You should have seen the baker's face when we started digging through his garden and tossing possible stones on to the walkway.*

becomes:

*I said, "We got the stones from the baker's garden on the other side of town. You should have seen the baker's face when we started digging through his garden and tossing possible stones on to the walkway."*

Teacher modelling and guided practice will be needed to make these conversions. The original drama format serves as an invaluable aid for learners to determine the placement of beginning and ending quotation marks. Of course, learners will quickly realize that the narrative version becomes boring if

each part of the conversation begins with the phrases "I said" and "The hunter said." Thus the opportunity arises to guide the students to think of synonyms for "said" as well as to place the phrases denoting the speaker in different locations in the sentences. Results such as the following could be forthcoming:

*"We got the stones from the baker's garden on the other side of town. You should have seen the baker's face," I laughed as I remembered the baker's round chubby cheeks glowing in the afternoon sunshine, "when we started digging through his garden and tossing possible stones on to the walkway."*

or:

*"We got the stones from the baker's garden on the other side of town. You should have seen the baker's face when we started digging through his garden and tossing possible stones on to the walkway," he chuckled as he added more wood to the fire.*

Clearly the punctuation aspects of this lesson are developed in a meaningful context. The lesson also has implications for helping learners become aware of style and variety in their writing and perhaps it will make them more observant of such features in the narrative texts they are reading. Furthermore, the word processor has taken away the drudgery of such a lesson because punctuation can be readily added and parts of sentences can be moved easily and tried in various places in the sentence.

Similar one-sided conversations could be developed for other stories. They could be completed before reading as a way of involving readers in predicting or activating background knowledge, or after reading as a way of extending the ideas without simply reiterating the plot. Rather than have the teacher create one-sided conversations, learners could create them for other students. This may not be as easy as it sounds, but it will involve the writers in thinking about characters and what they might say as well as in considering how conversational responses are linked together.

A variation of this activity for older writers is to have them listen to conversations around them in their daily lives and record one side of a conversation. The writers can exchange conversations and practice writing convincing dialogue. In addition to collecting material for the activity, the writers are forced to listen to real conversation and think about how people talk.

All these activities could be done with paper and pencils, however using word processors makes the physical process of manipulating texts much easier and more readable. Through teacher encouragement and the use of word processors, writers may continue to explore and experiment with language and to construct and punctuate clear and coherent sentences.

## M--n-ngf-l L-ss-ns for Building Vocabulary

With word processors, teachers can readily design vocabulary lessons directly related to classroom materials. Two types of activities that can assist with vocabulary development are cloze procedures and rewording. Texts for these lessons can be commercially published materials, STUDENTS' writings, or teachers' compositions. Lessons can be developed to introduce new vocabulary or to practice and extend meanings of known words.

**Cloze procedure**. Cloze activities provide a framework for teachers and learners to discuss graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic cues and background knowledge about content. Insights about vocabulary are best achieved in group settings where learners discuss how they determine which letters or words are most appropriate for the blanks and share the thought processes involved in reaching those decisions.

Cloze passages can be typed and presented on the computer screen for guided group activities. Blanks can be placed anywhere within the text and, in most cases, should be of a standard length rather than a dash for each missing letter. When a given number of letters is indicated by the number of dashes, learners resort to guessing what the teacher had in mind rather than thinking through alternative choices. It is far more important to select a word that makes sense than to guess a specific predetermined word. Blanks can be placeholders for words removed from the original text or new words to elaborate the material. Depending on the needs of the learners, the blanks may represent particular types of words such as verbs or adjectives, overused words such as "said" or "and," or a random selection of words.

The following except form **The Polar Express** (Allsburg, 1985) will be used to illustrate the use of the cloze procedure to help students generate synonyms for missing verbs:

> As soon as we were back inside the Polar Express, the other children asked to see the bell. I --- into my pocket, but the only thing I --- was a hole. I had --- the silver bell from Santa Claus's sleigh. "Let's --- outside and --- for it," one of the children ---. But the train --- a sudden lurch and ---moving. We --- on our way home.

The deletions in this passage provide an opportunity to discuss the differences and similarities in the meanings and functions of words within text. Verbs have been chosen for this lesson in order to help learners experiment with shades of meaning, consider the visual images evoked by different words, and become sensitive to the importance of considering alternative words in writing. Since these objectives will not be realized simply by having the learners fill in the blanks on the word processor as an independent activity, the teacher might first model the thinking that occurs when approaching this task. In keeping with the objectives, the teacher's think-aloud comments should relate to possible word choices, the imagery they evoke, and their effect on the meaning of the passage. As the teacher continues to guide the discussion about choices for subsequent blanks, the learners can be drawn into the dialogue. Since the passage is on a word processor, two or three contrasting versions can easily be created, each having words that create different images.

A more specific cloze-like activity is a variation used to help learners concentrate on vowels. The first paragraph of a story, such as the one below from Blackman's (1988) "A good little feature," can be prepared for use before reading the text:

H- w-s - sh-bby -ld m-n.   H- l--k-d
l-k- - c--ntry w-rk-r.   Y-- c--ld s-- th-t
h-h-d n-v-r b--n -n - p-l-c- st-t--n b-f-r-.
    "d- y-- w-nt t- m-k- b-nd?" th- d-sk
s-rg--nt s--d.
    "- d-nn-," h- s--d.   -t w-s pl--n h-
d-dn't -nd-rst-nd wh-t - b-nd w-s.

The "search and replace" features of a word processor make it very easy to change all of the vowels to dashes. A group discussion, again initiated with modelling by the teacher, will be valuable as learners are guided to consider the graphophonemic and syntactic cues to filling in the letters. A discussion of the varied meanings of the word "bond," a key concept in the story, will arise naturally from the discussion. When the passage is completed, the learners can be guided to consider how this author introduces characters and setting. They can also use this excerpt to make initial predictions about the content of the story.

**Rewording**. Another use of word processing for vocabulary development is the rewording of texts. Rewording is the process of substituting words and phrases of a passage to convey a more precise meaning or a different tone or style. Rewording might also be done to alter material for specific audiences or purposes. One vocabulary building activity that will alert learners to authors' styles is to reword a passage as if a particular author had written it. For instance, what words would Shakespeare or Mark Twain have used?

Rewording is most effective as a vocabulary building activity when learners revise their own texts. During the revision process, writers will place themselves in the role of audience for their texts. They must decide if the best words have been chosen and if the material conveys the message that is desired. The following passage is a draft of a writer's ideas about a topic (including the typos and mechnical errors that are to be expected in a rough draft):

*There are many things that I wanted and was not able to get or was disapointed about them when i was still living at home I wanted to go with some peaple to New orleens. They asked me to take care of the food to pay my way. It woulda been alot less but my folks said no and I can,t tell now if it was cause of the money or cause they worried about me away from hom. I was unhappy that i couldn't go but I got over it.*

In rewording the passage during the revision process, the writer can list synonyms and alternative phrases. The writer, along with a peer or instructor, can discuss the shades of meaning represented by these alternative words and phrases and decide upon the most effective choices. The passage as shown below illustrates the changes made in an early draft. Capitalized words show where alterations have been made. The writer has made substitutions of words and phrases like "remember" for "tell" and "organize and supervise" for "take care of." During the process, the writer has also elaborated upon the original text. Through more explicit word choices and elaboration, the writer has helped the reader construct meaning more closely aligned with the intended message.

*I CAN THINK OF things that I HAVE wanted and was not able to get. When I was still BEING SUPPORTED BY MY PARENTS I wanted to go with A GROUP OF peaple to New orleens FOR A WEEK. TO REDUCE MY TRAVEL COSTS, ONE MEMBER OF THE GROUP asked me TO ORGANIZE AND SUPERVISE the food FOR THE MEALS WE WOULD BE EATING DURING THE BUS RIDE to AND FROM NEW ORLEENS. THE COST OF THE TRIP would HAVE been MIMINAL, but my folks WOULD NOT GIVE ME PERMISSION TO GO ON THE TRIP. I can,t REMEMBER now if it was*

19

Through adding to the database, youngsters engage in such processes as: reading and following directions, locating, organizing and categorizing information, using books as references, finding data on title pages, comparing and contrasting stories, and summarizing. The students learn to identify story types, compare writing styles of authors, determine character types, and make judgments about the appeal of books to different readers.

To reach these objectives and to extend the experience beyond simply entering information, other activities can be integrated within the classroom program. The database can be searched to create lists of books by a favorite author or of particular story types and character types. Using these lists, children can consider such questions as: What types of stories does your favorite author write? Are make-believe stories usually about animals? Which animals are found most in the stories we have read? Have we read more stories about girls or about boys? Note that the last two questions might lead to a variation of the original database to include fields for types of animals and gender of the main character.

Other types of extensions are possible as well. Children can search for a book they haven't read, read the story line summary, and then write or tell their versions to friends. They might then read the book and see how their versions compare to the author's. Another search might be conducted for books that didn't get very good picture evaluations and the children could explain ways in which the illustrations might be made more appealing to them. Books with positive story evaluations can be listed and the children can evaluate the characteristics of these stories that make them likable.

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BEcause of the money or WORRY about me BEING SO FAR away from hom. I was ANGRY that i couldn't go but I got over it.

**Wh-t n-xt?** The cloze procedure and rewording process are suggestions for developing vocabulary in --- ways with a word processor. What other meaningful vocabulary building lessons can you ---?

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