

WRITING IN A DIGITAL AGE

Using today's technologies to improve students' writing skills and engage their interest in writing.

by Sandy Hayes

A student should be able to speak and write well for a variety of purposes and audiences. This state writing standard from Alaska is representative of the broad scope of many states' standards. But the urgency to improve student skills has become more pointed. In *The Neglected 'R'*, the National Commission on Writing called for a doubling of the amount of time students write, yet researcher George Hillocks has found that high-stakes writing tests have narrowed the writing curriculum. In today's world, writing skills involve much more than penmanship and paragraphs—and counter to those who see pervasive technology as part of the “writing problem,” many teachers are using technology tools to strengthen students' writing skills and engage their interest in writing.

Strengthen writing through improved revision.

Peer response is an important part of the writing process, but its use in face-to-face situations has practical limitations: it takes class time, students review only a few pieces of their classmates' writing, peer responses can be superficial, it's difficult for teachers to monitor and intervene with suggestions for improving responses. New types of online environments can make peer response a more effective aid for student revisions.

BLOGS, WIKIS, ONLINE BULLETIN BOARDS, AND MOODLES. Don't be intimidated. Choosing between these modes is like choosing between

a pen, pencil, or fine-line marker—similar purpose, different look. Each mode allows a writer to publish drafts online and a reader to publish reactions and critiques. The ongoing interaction blurs the boundaries between revision and publication; since all text is endlessly revisable, it also changes the notion of a “final” draft.

At Vestavia Hills High School in Alabama, Cindy Adams' students—in a class for at-risk readers and writers; students who normally don't

movies suffer from spur-of-the-moment story lines and special-effects overload. Teachers can help students increase the substance of their projects by focusing on storyboarding, effective writing, and self-critiquing skills. Utilizing students' technical skills gives them pride in their work. Showing their productions on the school web site or local cable channel adds the knowledge that the works will be seen by an outside audience. And the narrative genre of digital

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see a purpose in classwork—are actively engaged in using the chatroom feature of their in-house moodle to respond to everyone's drafts of a thesis statement for a research paper. While these students' responses may be written in IM-ese, their thesis statements aren't. As writers post revisions, they get feedback on the effectiveness of the changes, and their classmates see strategies they could apply to their own writing problems. For them, writing is no longer a static assignment, performed for a teacher and then discarded, but has become a dynamic exchange in which students use writing to learn, refine their understanding, and influence a larger audience.

Strengthen writing by making it matter.

Many students have already made sophisticated digital-media products at home. Many of these

storytelling, as well as presentation and script-writing skills, fits naturally with most traditional language-arts instruction.

DIGITAL MOVIES. In Minneapolis, sixth- through eighth-graders at Southside Family School, working with video artist Mike Hazard, created *Four Sisters for Peace*, a 30-minute documentary about four sisters who are peace activists and nuns. Though the students were from a typical classroom, Hazard notes, “their understanding of film as a language and how to compose a film was incredible. It helped them bring to bear the writing skills they needed to do justice to the story.” This project underscores the professional-level work students can do; it is only the childhood timbre of their voice-overs that first gives viewers a hint of their youth.

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For more on learning in a digital world,
see *Threshold* (fall 2005) at
www.ciconline.org/threshold

DIGITAL STORYTELLING. Generally two- to five-minute personal essays or memoirs narrated by the writer, the writing in these narratives can be incredibly powerful. They may be composed in a movie editor such as iMovie, or in presentation software such as PowerPoint using still photos or artwork for visuals. In Hawai'i, the Department of Education has, for the last three years, sponsored a digital-storytelling contest in which students demonstrate creative writing and content knowledge. In this year's contest, students will add a segment on the standards their movies address and a self-reflection on their process and what they learned.

PODCASTS. With a computer, free software, and a \$40 digital recorder or an iPod, students can produce audio recordings or their own radio programs that can be broadcast via the Internet. Last spring, the third- and fourth-graders in Bob Sprankle's class at Wells Elementary School in Maine produced their first series of podcasts, and Sprankle is enthusiastic about the rapid spread of podcasts into classrooms worldwide. "Educators are making this purposeful; it's not just bells and whistles," says Sprankle. "We'd already done a lot of reflective writing. Then we moved to a blog. That drastically changed their writing. In groups of four students, they were able to create a successful podcast that some might not have been able to do independently. Both the quantity and quality of their writing has increased. It's almost seamless with some of the writing skills we're working on."

Strengthen writing through purposeful use of technology.

Six tips for using technology tools to improve writing quality:

- Check your state's technology standards. While you are using electronic tools to improve students' writing skills, you might make a project do double duty by meeting additional standards.
- Put the writing first. Drafts should be completed before recording, digitizing images, or selecting sound effects. Writing can always be revised to respond to the nuances of the images.
- Emphasize using the tools to learn rather

than learning to use the tools. After introducing the tool, get right to the writing task. Let tech-savvy students assist their peers.

- Make critiques matter. Give class time for students to read and respond online to classmates' writing. Post your own comments; they serve as models to improve students' future critiques. Periodically, require students to post final drafts alongside first drafts so that students see where critiques and revision make a difference.
- Be creative in finding audiences for students' writing. Arrange a showing of students' digital storytelling projects at the local movie theater, post them in QuickTime on

your school's server, or contact your local cable access channel to air longer works or a collection of short pieces.

- Remember that students don't have to produce standardized writing to meet writing standards. ■■



Digital Writing Technologies

Digital Movies

How to:

www.atomiclearning.com/imovie3x
iMovie tutorials from Atomic Learning.

Examples:

edcommunity.apple.com/gallery/student

Apple reviews and posts student-submitted short movies, and visitors can post comments.

www.thecie.org

The Center for International Education, from whom *Four Sisters for Peace* is available.

Digital Storytelling

How to:

www.jasonohler.com/storytelling

Jason Ohler has an extensive collection on the background and process of digital storytelling. His PowerPoint presentation and handouts are available for teachers to use.

Examples:

www.kqed.org/topics/education/educators/calstories-contest.jsp

Winning entries by high-school students in the Coming to California digital-story contest.

islandmovie.k12.hi.us/winners.htm

Past winning entries of the Hawai'i digital storytelling contest, with connections to language-arts standards.

Moodles

How to:

moodle.gla.ac.uk/moodle/doc/view.php?id=1&file=teacher.html

Moodles are open only to enrolled participants. This manual offers a brief guide and includes screenshots of sample moodle pages.

Podcasting

How to:

bobsprankle.com/blog

Click on Bit by Bit to listen to Bob Sprankle's series of podcasts on how to podcast.

Examples:

bobsprankle.com/blog

Click on Room 208 for podcasts by Bob Sprankle's third- and fourth-graders.

www.podcast.net/show/4023

Faculty and students at Chicago's Mohansen High School Radio present an episodic comedy podcast evocative of 1930s radio serials. Note: some links may not be appropriate.