

TECHNOLOGY AND THE TUTOR: COMPUTERS AS TOOLS TO ASSIST STUDENT WRITERS

Angela M. Gulick
University Of Alaska Anchorage
Anchorage, Alaska

Computers continue to impact almost every aspect of our lives, from letting us order our own airline tickets on-line to discussing with other computer users what we think of the latest episode of *Friends*. Therefore, it is no surprise that computers can and do play a powerful role in learning centers across the country. In fact, with the aid of the Internet, these connections can now reach from continent to continent. However, when you are not a continent away but sitting next to the tutee, can computers actually be of any use? Yes! But just like any other tool, they can be used effectively or ineffectively. Never forget this important point: a computer is merely a tool that can allow you to do a job more effectively and thoroughly. However, if that tool is used for the wrong job, like trying to use a hammer to screw in a nail, do not be surprised if you end up with a mess on your hands.

Two models seem to exist on how to use computers as instructional tools. The first model is the “bells and whistles” model. This involves learning every intricate feature or “bell and whistle” the computer has and then trying to design lessons or instruction to take advantage of such features. For example, you know that the computer can download sounds or graphic images from the Internet. So in an effort to make education exciting and innovative, you “cram” that information into a lesson for the tutee. The problem with this approach is that it can put technology before the tutor-tutee relationship. Instead of tailoring the instruction to the tutee, you tailor the tutee to the new-and-improved means of instruction. This can be especially dangerous when working with someone who is unfamiliar with

computers or intimidated by them, a likely scenario with some of our adult learners who are returning to school.

The second model is the “here’s what I want the tutee to comprehend” model. In this one, you as a tutor count on your knowledge of subject matter, your knowledge about the tutee, and the goals for a particular session to guide your use of computers. So instead of beginning with the computer, you begin with the concept, “here’s what I want my tutee to comprehend; can the computer help?” In this model, you will sometimes discover that no matter how exciting or glamorous a computer program or feature, it might not be helpful at all. Sometimes, your expertise, clear communication, and creativity can make a point or teach a concept better than all of the “bells and whistles” in the world. Furthermore, sometimes a careful study of the tutee will tell you that this person is not ready for a jump into the world of computers. This second approach is nearly always the best approach because you are focusing on the tutee’s needs, your expertise, and you are using that computer as it was meant to be used: as a tool to help you perform a job more effectively and thoroughly. This basic premise is crucial for you to follow. To do otherwise is to run the risk of confusing the tutee rather than instruct or enlighten.

The following are some suggestions of ways to use computers in reading/writing centers. Some of these suggestions will translate across disciplines and some are discipline specific. However, the goal is to develop a learning object first. Then see if there is some way a computer can help. Do not be afraid to be creative, and do not be afraid to experiment. It is in trying something new and refining it that tutors become more expert.

The learning center does not need to have a state-of-the-art computer laboratory in order for computers to be used as a tool of instruction. The suggestions below, in fact, can

all be used with a single working computer even if it is not networked to any other computers. Even with just a single, non-networked computer with word processing software, the computer can be used in a variety of ways:

1. **Use the Computer as a Model.** When tutees come in with hard copies of papers, occasionally type a paragraph of the work onto the computer to show how easily ideas can be rearranged, added, or deleted. Simply by putting the tutee's writing on the screen, you are able to show how word processing can benefit the tutee's writing process and make it more efficient. This is very helpful when working with tutees who have little experience or negative connotations of computers.
2. **Encourage Tutees to Bring Their Work on Disk.** When a tutee comes into the center with work already on a disk, this saves both time and paper. The tutor and tutee can perform all stages of writing directly on the computer, from generating ideas, to drafting, to revising, to final editing/proofreading.
3. **Engage in Invisible Writing.** Monroe (1993) advocates something he calls "invisible writing," an approach first detailed by Stephen Marcus. In "invisible writing," you turn down the contrast of the computer so that you have a black screen. You then begin freewriting for a set amount of time. When you (or the tutee) have finished writing, turn up the contrast to see what you have completed. According to Monroe, "The computer's editing flexibility really works against productive freewriting. Invisible writing sidesteps this trap" (4).
4. **Use Grammar/Spelling Programs as Teaching Tools.** A student can turn a paper in with a glaring spelling or mechanics error that resulted, ironically, from a computer's grammar/spell check software. Students will often have changed

what was correct but will report: “the computer told me to make that change.”

There is nothing inherently wrong with these types of software programs; however, they can and do give writers a false sense of security that all errors will be magically ferreted out and corrected. However, if you encourage tutees to run these programs in your presence, you can provide the necessary follow-up instruction and clarification that are needed for understanding. Instead of a tutee blindly dividing a sentence up into parts because some computer screen says the original sentence is too long, you can help the tutee perform the act correctly and explain why the sentence is now more effective. More importantly, sometimes you can be the one who says to a tutee, “Well, the grammar program is wrong in this case, and you are right”.

5. Use the “Find” Program to Find Trouble Spots in a Tutee’s Writing. Many computer word processing programs have a “find” feature that will track down whatever is typed into the “find” command. The value of this feature is that the tutee can type anything in it, from commas to semicolons, to articles of speech, to a particular word that he/she might habitually misuse. For example, if a tutee is concerned about switching points of view unintentionally, the tutee can ask the computer to find “you” to see if there are any examples of second-person point of view in the document. The program will not correct the mistake, but it will bring potential trouble spots to the surface and allow for careful examination. Keep in mind that sometimes there is no mistake or problem at all.

6. Use the Bold/Italics/Underlining Features to Highlight Certain Key Parts of Texts. For example, Monroe (1993) suggests, “Put the first four words of every sentence

in boldface type. This calls to attention sentence openings” (48). This strategy can be used on any feature. For example, tutees might go through a paragraph and highlight the main verbs of all of their sentences. Very quickly, tutees will see patterns develop, such as a reliance on “be” verbs instead of action verbs.

7. Use Software that Allows You to Create a Dual Screen. Some software will allow you to split the computer screen in half. On one half of the screen is a writer’s original draft; on the other side is the draft the writer is currently revising. This is an effective way to encourage substantial revision in a document because the tutee can see before his/her eyes the document take shape, change, and become stronger. Again, with the tutor there to help guide the process and point out significant points, this software can be used to highlight a learning objective such as the importance of revision to the writing process.
8. Use the Computer to Investigate Sentence Structure. By inserting a “hard return” after each sentence so that there is a line of space between that sentence and the next, a tutee can see the average length of sentences and the structure of each sentence. This can be helpful for tutees who either write very short, choppy sentences or long, rambling sentences. Seeing a visual pattern on the screen can drive a point home more than just telling tutee about the pattern. Further, some software comes with special features that will analyze the tutee’s writing style in terms of average sentence length and complexity of vocabulary. With you as an interpreter of such information, you can help the tutee become even more aware of his/her writing style.

This is just a short list of ways that the computer can be used to help tutees with their writing. The important component in making these strategies work, however, is the tutor. The goal of a tutor is to provide instruction, guide a tutee through a learning objective, offer feedback, and model effective learning strategies. In some situations, use of a computer in a tutoring session can be very effective. However, remember this cardinal rule: a computer should only be used when it can allow you to do the job better. Avoid the pitfall of using a computer because it is new and unusual. In the words of Rick Monroe (1993), we need to be aware of the “gimmick appeal” of computers and focus on their benefits as “important tools for thinking, problem-solving, remediation, and communication. Until we do . . .the computer is no better than an electronic crayon in the hands of a child” (xiv).

References

Monroe, R. (1993). *Writing and thinking with computers: A practical and progressive approach*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.