

WRITING WITH TECHNOLOGY

by Lindsay Clandfield

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I remember as a child listening to my father write various articles that he was writing for his work at the university. The click clack of the typewriter, the bottle of Tipp Ex and the endless supply of little index cards (all organised into attractive little plastic boxes), the letraset, these were all a part of the process. The working space needed for this covered my father's desk, and would often spread onto the floor into piles all around. My brother and I were forbidden to touch any of the piles of papers that dotted the office floor (where we sometimes liked to play) so as not to disorganise things.

Now, almost thirty years later, I am working on a book of my own. It's a coursebook for English language learners. I still manage to have piles of paper all around me, but gone are the days of patiently weaving a piece of paper onto the typewriter, setting up the margins and having the TippEx constantly at hand. Most of my work, no I'd say almost all of my work is in my laptop computer. The space required can in fact now be reduced to my knees under extreme circumstances.

Writing a coursebook is a long process, and involves several people. Aside from myself, the writer, there are at least two editors, somebody responsible for illustrations, another person responsible for picture research (the photos), and the designers. Not to mention the actors and sound technicians who have to record the audio material. I haven't finished the book yet, and there will be probably more people involved before the whole thing arrives finally on the bookshelves.

The purpose of this brief article is to describe some of the technology tools that I use in the initial creation of material.

The nuts and bolts of writing

The most obvious tool of course is the word processor. I am not that adventurous with my word processor, although I have found that with practice I can now do most things without needing to use a mouse. The shortcuts on a wordprocessor will be different according to what language you are using (for example, to make the text **bold** I type Control+B on my English word programme, but on a Spanish programme it's Control+N) but it's very useful to know them as it speeds things up immensely.

Finding shortcuts

If you are using Microsoft Word, you can find keyboard shortcuts in the following way:

1. Click on Help menu and select Microsoft Word Help. Or press F1.
2. Search using the word 'keyboard shortcuts'.
3. Click on 'Quick Reference to some common shortcut keys'.

Some of the common English shortcuts I use with text are:

Shift+arrows – to select text a letter at a time

Control+Shift+arrows – to select text a word at a time

Control+X – to cut text

Control+V – to paste text

Control+Z – to undo something I've done

Control+B for **bold** text

Control+I for *italics*

Control+U for underline

Saving work is incredibly important when writing. I have had two or three sickening moments when I thought I had lost something. Even backups on CDROM make me nervous now, but I have found a wonderful Internet site to store things. It's called Yahoo Briefcase and if you are already a Yahoo mail user then you have it free. Basically it's a storage space - you can upload documents there and leave them. Then you can go and download them from the site into any computer, anywhere. I think I have draft versions of two books in my virtual briefcase, and always use it now as a backup.

Using Yahoo Briefcase

1. Go to briefcase.yahoo.com in your Internet browser (you don't need to type www at the beginning)
2. If you have Yahoo mail, then click on the 'sign in' button. You will sign in just like you sign in to your mail. If you don't have Yahoo mail, you will have to get a Yahoo ID to use the briefcase. Click on the Sign Me Up link for new users. It's free and Yahoo are very good about spam.
3. Once you have a briefcase (i.e. you have a Yahoo ID and have signed in) click on Add Files. You will have to create a folder (e.g. Exam Classes). Then you can add files in the same way you would attach a document to an email.
4. You have the option of sharing folders with other people. On the welcome page, click on Share Files and follow the instructions to make the files visible.

Topics and material

One of the most difficult things in writing material is to find an interesting text or angle on a topic. This is where the Internet becomes an extremely useful, even indispensable tool. It would be hard here to say which links are the best for finding ideas, it's really a question of what you're looking for. One site which is probably among the most popular, a good starting point, is the BBC website, www.bbc.co.uk, simply because you can find something on almost anything in there.

I also regularly consult the free online encyclopaedia Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com) for information about topics. It's really an extraordinary site. It has over a million entries (Britannica has 75000 entries). Anyone can contribute to Wikipedia, and anyone can edit it. It's self-policing – meaning that offensive or inaccurate material tends to be removed very quickly. The only problem is that it is not authoritative and probably never will be. But the quantity of information is huge. As a teacher, I have used the short texts from Wikipedia with students.

Another favourite website I use to get ideas or look for interesting data is NationMaster (www.nationmaster.com). It's a compilation of data from such sources as the CIA World Factbook, United Nations, World Health Organization, World Bank, World Resources Institute, UNESCO, UNICEF and OECD. Unlike Wikipedia, this site is authoritative. Using a simple form, you can generate maps and graphs on all kinds of statistics, from number of English speakers to amount of beer consumed per capita to average age that people get married or have children.

Using Nationmaster

1. Go to the site www.nationmaster.com
2. If you just want to browse around, look at the Top Graphs on the left hand side of the page.
3. If you want to make your own graph or chart, look at the 'Make your own chart' box at the top of the main webpage.
4. Select the areas you want details for from the drop-down menu (you can select all European countries, African countries, Asian countries etc. or all the countries in the world)
5. Choose how many countries you want to compare from the "Compare" menu (top 5, top 10, top 100...you can also select bottom 10, bottom 5...)
6. Select the category from the category menu (agriculture, lifestyle, crime, food)

7. Finally, select the specific statistic from the statistic menu and click on the grey button Generate Stat.

For example, I followed the above procedure to find out the average number of 13-year-old students in a classroom around the world. Here's the top five.

Definition: The average number of 13-year-old students per class.

1. Japan 35.5 students
2. Hong Kong 31.9 students
3. Colombia 30.5 students
4. Greece 24.8 students
5. Thailand 23.8 students

Weighted Average 31.12 students

Source: "Efficiency and Equity in Schools around the World" by Eric A. Hanushek and Javier A. Luque, April 2002.

Language work

Most dictionaries now come with a CDROM. This is an excellent addition to any writer's or teacher's computer. I have the Macmillan English Dictionary on CDROM. With this dictionary you can get not only definitions, but illustrations, pronunciation (British and American) and study sheets. I use it mostly to help me write definitions or find alternative ways of explaining words. The site www.answers.com is another dictionary resource I use online sometimes. On Answers.com you type in a word and the website will come up with definitions from other dictionaries.

I am currently writing material for lower level learners. Another author tipped me to a great site for measuring text difficulty, called Vocabulary Profiler (<http://132.208.224.131/vp/>).

Vocabulary Profiler is a site created by Tom Cobb from the University of Quebec. What it does is "break texts down into frequency categories, as determined by the frequency of words in the language at large". I paste a text into the profiler, and it does the following:

- 1) tells me how many words the text has
- 2) tells me how many different words the text has

3) divides the words into first and second thousand most frequent words in English, academic words, and the remainder 'offlist.'

If for example, over 80% of my text is in the top 1000 words, then there's a good chance it's not too difficult for the level I am writing for. If my text has only 50% of the top 1000 words in it, then it might be too difficult.

Using Vocabulary profiler

1. Go to the vocabulary profiler website <http://132.208.224.131/vp/> .
2. Click on the link VP English (on the left hand side)
3. Type or paste the text you want the Vocabulary profiler to look at into the yellow box.
4. If you have a very large text, you can upload it to Vocabulary Profiler. This is Input Method B, at instructions are at the bottom of the same page.
5. Click on the grey Submit button at the bottom of the page.

Corpus data is also useful. I find that my most common use of corpus data is to check a hunch I have about language. After a period of time unavailable, the Collins Cobuild site is finally back up and working. If you enter a word or combination of words into the search engine, the site will grind through the 56 million word corpus and give you examples of that language (in concordance lines, see example below). The Collins site also allows you to search for collocation, which is extremely useful too. The Collins Corpus sampler and Collocation finder is free at <http://www.collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>.

Here are example concordance lines for writing:

storage. Ideal for card games or letter **writing**, it is sure to
A full list of winners will be obtainable by **writing** to Hush
the past, my friends could have won creative **writing** awards for
in his much vaunted work. Painting and **writing** is Alexander's
Carroll is one of the most arresting authors **writing** today, and
Guyana. [p] American man, hobbies reading, **writing** and movies.
and opted for relative sanity as one half of a **writing** team with
I would also recommend people to read bad **writing**, or
as they listened attentively had Marvell **writing** an ode in his
and retrieval system, without permission in **writing** from the
painted in different colours. For a few weeks **writing** with a pencil
of what I have learned.' Joni's purpose in **writing** the book was
made to a social worker which recorded in **writing** and placed in

that means a whopping mistake in your **writing** is invisible fiction completing the domination of genre **writing**. With the top s accident and emergency trainees association, **writing** in the British AN obsessed fan faces up to 35 years jail for **writing** obscene

And here are the five most common collocations the site gave me for the word "writing".

Collocate	Corpus Freq	Joint Freq	Significance
reading	4974	265	16.018238
about	106379	356	14.059650
in	765730	1118	13.905865
and	1129483	1490	13.646050
book	11372	155	11.670908

Conclusion

A friend of mine and I once had a conversation about whether or not we could still write without the use of our computers and the internet. We thought we probably could, but nowhere near as fast or easily. That has been the benefit of technology on the writing process, but also its curse. Editors and publishers now expect material much quicker. Deadlines are getting shorter and shorter, and the whole time process of producing something like a coursebook has probably been halved (or more) in the last ten years. And in this article I haven't even touched on material produced on the Internet. Maybe in thirty years time my son will be writing an article like this and saying "to think that my father made something that was printed on paper – how old fashioned"!

Lindsay Clandfield is a teacher, trainer and materials writer based in Spain. He is currently writing a coursebook for Macmillan called Straightforward Elementary. He is a main author on the website Onestopenglish and does teacher training for Oxford TEFL Barcelona.