

y Abby Klein-Goldberg and Glenn Goldberg

As teachers, we can understand and support the need to write a journal, article, or report. As writers and poets, we can understand the need to be inspired. Writing is a form of communication; it can be intimate and personal, humorous, factual, or tell a really amazing story. When people write, they show a part of themselves in their words. With a solid word processing program, the layout of the author's work can fully express his/her imagination and then change it for whatever reason. For too long children have been left out of this part of the writing process.

Some word processing programs for kids (we won't mention any names) simply allow the kids to choose a font, type in a couple of words and a graphic, and print. Little thought was given to mistakes or to creativity. Here, we will be comparing two first rate word processing programs for children both with enough merit to be used in our classrooms.

"The Amazing Writing Machine"

Once again, Brøderbund has introduced a program that makes learning fun with "The Amazing Writing Machine." Let me tell you, it really lives up to its name. One terrific feature of this program is that it has a very user friendly manual. Younger children might have a hard time grasping some of the concepts, but with some parental guidance, they'll do just fine.

The Manual

The manual is fun to look at, easy on the eyes, and simple to understand. The directions are clearly written and have pictures that show the user step-by-step instructions of what should be on the monitor. One thing we really like is that the manual gives a visual representation of each icon next to the tool's explanation (a great way to reinforce reading skills). The manual also explains the reason for using a different layout for different writing genres (poems, journals, essays, stories, and letters). Finally, the piece de resistance is the reading and writing resource index in the back of the manual. It includes Newberry Award winning titles for journals, poems fiction and non-fiction so kids can read the works of authors who know how to write well so children, in turn, will learn to write better.

he Program

INSPIRING!!! "The Amazing Writing Machine" made me, a curmudgeon of humorous writing, want to write silly poems and crazy stories. How did this happen? First, I was able to choose which format I wanted to write. Poetry, letter, essay, journal, and story each have its own layout. I was even able to choose whether I wanted to write my own work, or complete one of the program's previously written works. I could illustrate my work by using "stamps" or by coloring in the pictures in the program (a la Brøderbund's "Kid Pix").

"Okay, that's all fine and good, but this is supposed to be a word processing program. Where's the stuff that we buy WP programs for?" Believe it or not, this program has nearly everything that a regular WP program has and some features an adult's WP program doesn't. The spell check feature, a staple for any word processing program, is available, along with a "Bright Ideas" tool to lend facts, jokes, and thesaurus entries into your writing. "The Amazing Writing Machine" even has an address book (complete with entries of famous people, government addresses, etc.) and an "Infosaurus" to aid in grammar, word rhymes,

and quotes. The program also boasts a “Reader Robot” feature that will read aloud highlighted entries, although our system is not able to support this feature.

“The Amazing Writing Machine” gets high marks for introducing writing as a fun activity for children ages 6-12.

Pros

- Great for inspiring younger children and children with special needs
- Approaches various genres of writing
- Just so darn cute

Cons

- May be too simplistic inappropriate for older writers

Publisher Info

Brøderbund
500 Redwood Blvd
Novato, CA 94948
415-382-4700

“The Writing Center”

“The Writing Center” by the Learning Company is a very serious word processing program for children or adults. I may be of a biased opinion on this program, because I’ve used it with my elementary school students. “The Writing Center” is not only a writing tool but a learning tool. So much so that the program comes with a guide to writing reports that’s detailed enough to be used as a mini-text book.

The Manual

Were these people textbook authors?! It seems so given the thickness and the layout of the manual. The manual is not fun to look at, but it is able to be understood with some guidance. The best part of the manual is that it is very matter-of -fact. Everything, from working the program to troubleshooting tips is labeled, described, and illustrated to add clarity to what could be rather difficult concepts to grasp. In the back of the manual are reference guides to all the different picture and template folders in the program as well as a listing of various ways to use the templates to create advertisements, invitations, and cards.

The Program

Terrific and solid are the two words that we would use to describe “The Writing Center.” All the components of any good adult WP program are here plus some great extra features.

There are different layouts for various works to be written such as columns with headlines and pictures (excellent for news articles), letter and report format, or you can custom design your own layout. Different fonts are available to use to add an interesting dimension to your work.

The pictures are wonderful- very vivid and expressive. What we liked most was the variety of pictures available in this program including animals (separated by classifications: mammal, bird, extinct, insects), maps of countries and states, community, people, science and nature, and even some historical references. We were also able to reduce or enlarge the pictures, flip and rotate the illustrations, and add borders at will.

The templates I found slightly difficult to work with. I found that I couldn't always place the pictures where I wanted, and the presentation of the template on the screen was hard to see and confusing. Template confusion was really the only negative part of the program.

Tech Note: This program was written while System 6 was still around. You can tell because the manual explains how to move fonts using Font/DA Mover (which is included on the CD). This is not a problem but it might be time for The Learning Company to update their program to take advantage of System 7.
In A Nutshell...

Brøderbund's "The Amazing Writing Machine" is a terrific, fun, and inspirational tool for younger writers. Because the manual is so easy to read, younger children won't be intimidated by the content or the program. The program is an absolutely wonderful way to introduce children to writing and to enjoy the process. Here a child can experiment freely, and it feels like s/he has friends s/he is writing to hidden in the program. "The Amazing Writing Machine" encourages writing of all genres and gently nudges the child into writing more.

All the points that make "The Amazing Writing Machine" a hoot for kids writing at grade-level make it a necessity for children with special needs. Special needs kids need more encouragement to try, more freedom to experiment, and a larger safety net on which to fall back. This program provides all of that in a setting that is fun and secure (not to mention down-right silly at times) to use.

The Learning Company's "The Writing Center" is a more practical, solid word processing program and is great for older kids who are ready to write a report. It's an excellent introduction to writing as a process including editing and word usage. I would strongly encourage teachers and parents to browse through the guide book with their children to help them understand the writing process. Although "The Writing Center" is not as fun to use as "The Amazing Writing Machine", it is better suited for writing papers and articles. I definitely see merit in using this program in an upper elementary or junior high school classroom with fantastic results.

Editor Note: In the near future, look for the Writing Center to be revised and renamed, "The Student Writing and Research Center." One of the more unique features that will be added to this revision is the complete "Compton's Concise Encyclopedia." Stay tuned.

Pros

- Great guide book for report writing
- Full featured word processor
- Good variety of pictures
- Custom layouts available

Cons

- Template feature confusing to use

Publisher Info

The Learning Company
6493 Kaiser Drive
Freemont, CA 94555
800-852-2255