

## *Do The Write Thing?*

**Your wordprocessor lets you write at virtually the speed of untempered thought. Great if your time is money. But what does such a capability do to the interactions between creativity and language, reflection and expression?**



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**Iris Murdoch:**  
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**Frederick Forsyth:**  
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*nlock the drawer marked "Literature." If verbal reflection here is bypassed often enough in favor of resolving rhetorical problems onscreen, will it fall by the wayside? Might our power to spew out superficially presentable "product," turn out future generations of verbal action-painters: intemperate literary onanists bereft of the art of rhetoric? Look at the disaster calculators have wrought on mental arithmetic.*

*Given the sheer difference between wordprocessing and previous literary tools, it comes as no surprise that many literati are hostile. They complain that the screen detaches them from their work. They bellyache about losing their way in their texts. "Could Tolstoy have written War and Peace with a wordprocessor? (incredulous guffaw) — Get lost!"*

*On the other hand, the enthusiasts are legion. They dismiss such hostility as either effete technophobia or just old-fashioned snobbery.*

*Daniel Chandler looks at the views of both literary Luddites and wp-devotees in this report on how writers regard the tools of their art — and how text behaves differently onscreen from on the page.*



The list of wordprocessor-friendly writers is long and illustrious. It includes Isaac Asimov, Clare Francis, Arthur C. Clarke, Irving Wallace, Tom Sharpe, Harold Pinter, Alvin Toffler, Michael Crichton, and Stephen King.

But equally as interesting are those who have voiced their opposition to the wordprocessor, principally the more "literary" writers, and especially novelists. Their concern often arises from humanistic misgivings about the dangers of modern technology, though they are inclined to overlook the fact that even the pen is a machine with one moving part. Many are also creatures of habit who fear that changing their ways might interfere with their ability to write.

Kingsley Amis is one outspoken opponent of the wordprocessor: "My experience turned out to be entirely negative — and straight away too. So far, I've found my mind, my typewriter, and the Oxford Dictionary entirely adequate for my needs. The only thing that will improve my writing is more talent."

For many writers, thinking itself has a tactile dimension best expressed through immediate contact with pen and paper. Copywriter turned bestselling novelist Fay Weldon declares: "I don't type, and I choose to believe that there is some kind of mystic connection between the brain and the act of writing in longhand."

Iris Murdoch insists: "I don't go near a wordprocessor, or even a typewriter. I can't imagine how thinking can take place on these awkward machines. There is no substitute for ink. For real thinking — as in philosophy or writing a poem or novel — one must use a notebook or paper that can be turned over and a pen that scratches out."

Even those who use wordprocessing frequently stress that it has not displaced the special character of traditional tools. Terence Feely, TV and theater playwright, notes: "There are times when I still pick up a pencil and paper. I think it's a question of what has started to make your creative juices flow up to this point in your life. E. M. Forster always said it was the scratching of pencil on paper."

Tom Sharpe, the comic novelist who now makes extensive use of the wordprocessor, nevertheless maintains: "Writers who are frightened of it are right to be so." He adds: "For me, the computer is a useful extra. The process of actually turning out the words remains the same — I use a manual typewriter, longhand, and a good pen ... I choose to continue the desktop and trashcan techniques for initial writing."



Some writers, in rejecting wordprocessors, make a sharp distinction between writing and editing. Spy novelist Freder-

ick Forsyth says categorically: "I've never had a wordprocessor, nor have I any intention of having one. I've seen one in operation. It appears to me an excellent aid to editing rather than to writing." And Fay Weldon adds that wordprocessors "seem editors' toys rather than writers', and increasing the power of the editor is the last thing the writer wants."

The distinction between writing and editing is an important one. It is related to major differences in the composing styles of writers. Stephen Spender defined two approaches to writing poetry based on the characteristics of Beethoven and Mozart.

The "Beethovians" compose to discover what they want to say, planning minimally and revising extensively. "Mozartians," on the other hand, make detailed plans in advance, execute them faithfully, and revise them as little as possible. These are the poles of a useful continuum for describing writers' composing styles, although it is worth remembering that writing strategies are dependent on such variables as task, mood, and the time available.

Writers such as Henry Miller and Gore Vidal are Beethovians. The danger of this strategy is that it can lead to overwriting and a consequent loss of freshness and spontaneity. Mozartians include John Steinbeck, who neither rewrote nor reread his writing, and Henry James, who dictated his. This strategy can lead to self-indulgence — culminating in the rambling purple prose of Barbara Cartland, another dictator (of prose).

Wordprocessors inevitably suit some writers and some tasks better than others. A recent study at the University of Minnesota found that those who planned before writing tended to be most satisfied with the use of the wordprocessor. This was probably since they solved large-scale problems in advance, and because wordprocessing supported local editing of their draft.

On the other hand, discoverers, needing to constantly reread their evolving text, were less happy, because they were unable to see the *whole shape* of their text and evaluate the changes they had made.

A few writers claim that wordprocessing has dramatically changed their composing practice. Chris Madigan, an academic, states: "When I was a pen-and-paper writer, I outlined extensively before drafting long papers. So my revision involved correcting and inserting but no major rethinking or reorganizing. Now I'm computerized, I write more often, write longer pieces, write to think more, and outline less. Now, my revisions include major clarifying for myself and often major reorganizing for my readers. But my handwriting's deteriorating."



Is writing with a wordprocessor a more *conscious* act than writing with a pen? Tom Sharpe observes: "The less you're conscious of your writing, the better. The more you're concentrating on the matter rather than the way of doing it, the better you're likely to write."

"One of the reasons I turned from the pen to the typewriter wasn't just the question of getting lots of copies. I found I was also too concerned with my handwriting ... I found that it was getting in my way: I was thinking more about how my handwriting looked than about my writing ... With the typewriter you're halfway to a printed page."

However, he adds: "Now, I spend more time thinking about my wordprocessor than the words I'm writing."

Clearly, for those who are concerned about the neatness of their writing, the wordprocessor is a useful tool. However, as Sharpe's experience suggests, there can be side-effects: using the wordprocessor seems to lead to an increasing awareness of the visual appearance of the text, which may or may not interfere with the writer's priorities. One student writer commented that the wordprocessor made text "look so good that you don't pay as much attention to the ideas."

On the other hand, a 1985 study, by Bridwell, Sirc, and Brooke suggests that seeing writing in a polished form is actually beneficial to writers — it lets them pay more attention to the structure and coherence of their writing. It comments: "As inexperienced writers' first efforts approach the visual quality of

written texts, they may be better able to judge them against "print" standards."

## DECISIONS AND REVISIONS



Much research has focused on the effects of the wordprocessor on writers' revision strategies. With or without the wordprocessor, many experienced writers find that they need to rework their text several times before it takes its final shape. Inexperienced writers do relatively little revision of their writing. They tend to approach revision as a superficial tidying-up, ignoring deeper structural issues. The physical task acts as a disincentive: revision of handwritten text involves a considerable amount of tedious recopying.

In the past, some professional writers have minimized recopying by cutting and pasting or by paying typists to produce a succession of drafts. Clearly, the wordprocessor reduces the physical burden of recopying and thus makes revision easier. However, several studies suggest that the wordprocessor does not necessarily lead to more meaningful revision, at least not with student writers.

American researcher Colette Daiute suggests that manual recopying "could be useful because it slows the writer down during the text evaluation process and leads the writer to focus on each word. One prize-winning writer explained that he prefers to retype his drafts rather than use the wordprocessor because when retyping he has to confront and evaluate each word."

Another student using a wordprocessor for the first time commented: "I make more big changes on the computer, moving stuff around or trying out different things, because I know I won't have to redo the whole thing."

However, this experimental approach is unusual. Word- and sentence-level revisions might be easy with the wordprocessor, but the movement of large chunks of text—especially beyond the boundaries of the current screenframe—is cumbersome. In 1983, Richard Collier reported: "The wordprocessor encourages concentration on the *smaller domains of a text* by making lower-level changes easy and structural changes more difficult."

Tom Sharpe suggests that such low-level revision has its uses: "I find that it helps me through the blank spots. When I'm having trouble with a section, I can scroll back through my previous words and tinker with them. That helps me get the tone back and carry on."

Both experienced and student writers using the wordprocessor still make extensive use of pen and paper. Many writers comment that they do not "trust" their ability to proofread from the screen, preferring to review a hardcopy version.

Some writers report that using computer-based spelling and grammar checkers can result in lower standards—because there is a temptation to abdicate responsibility for proofreading to the system, which still cannot identify common mistakes such as the mistyping of one word for another. Several studies have shown that proofreading onscreen is slower and less accurate than proofreading on paper—clear justification for writers who prefer to proofread from hardcopy.

As one young writer commented: "I get printouts and can see how it looks when I try something. That's the only way I can tell what's working in my paper, unless I get someone else to read it for me." Many writers make extensive use of arrows, circles, and other marks in their texts which are easier to make on paper than with the wordprocessor.

Studies attempting to establish whether or not wordprocessing leads to an increase in revision have produced conflicting results. Slightly more studies show wordprocessing produces more revision than no change.

## SCREEN VERSUS PAGE



As you edit, the cursor dances through the text. American educator Stephen Marcus has spoken of words being "written in light" onscreen rather than "carved in stone." Text on a page is static; text on a screen is dynamic. With wordprocessing, not only content but also sequence, spacing, margins, and often fonts, may be changed during the evolution of a text.

Many writers refer to their wordprocessed text as seemingly more "transient" or "fluid." One commented: "I don't think of separate drafts on the computer. It just seems like a continuous flow of changes." When people experience the ability to move with the cursor through the text, they report a new sense of fluidity in writing. Another writer observed: "I feel as if I'm swimming through my words!"

This ephemerality may encourage revision: the writer is not committed to what s/he initially writes. On the other hand, one user commented that the text "gels too soon—it needs to be fluid for longer."

Tom Sharpe has observed that when he writes on a wordprocessor, he feels: "The words don't seem to matter. They're on a screen—it's not even on a piece of paper. It's not an object, you see, it's simply an image. The result: verbal diarrhea. For me, that's bad writing... A piece of paper, on the other hand, is substantial. You can hold it, touch it, and when you've written a lot of words on paper you feel by God you've done something."

Writing with a pen happens at the tips of your fingers, but screen-based text is at a physical distance and seems to encourage a sense of esthetic distance too. Perhaps since it feels less like a part of themselves, many writers feel freer to be critical of it.

Some writers report feeling too much distance from their onscreen text. "I just don't feel that I know my own text as well when it's onscreen." Iris Murdoch called the computer screen "a glass square which separates one from one's thoughts."

An American student, familiar with wordprocessing, still preferred to do drafts by hand: "I like that closeness to my work. When I write, I get emotional. I like expressing myself. And with a pencil and paper, I can do that. I like the motion, pushing that lead across the page, you know. I like flipping pages and the action of writing. It makes me feel closer to what I'm saying. I feel that I can express myself better. With a pencil and paper I'm touching the words. And the words look like *you* wrote them, not like the machine wrote them."

## LOST IN SPACE



Some people report that wordprocessing seems to give them a heightened sense of an audience for their writing. Sometimes, anthropomorphism comes into play. Penelope Hobhouse, a writer of gardening books, notes: "I see the machine not as a toy but more as a companionable friend. To me the wordprocessor has a distinct personality of its own."

For Tom Sharpe, the humanized wordprocessor is not always benign: "I think that bloody cursor blinking at me on the screen is awful, I mean, it's blink, blink, blink—well, screw this bastard, it's telling me to get on!"

Reading is an important part of writing. Writers need to reread their evolving text to evaluate and revise it, to develop coherence, and to proofread. However, inexperienced writers find it difficult to stand back from their writing. And there are practical difficulties for all writers: close rereading of one's own writing is not easy because one knows what it *ought* to say.

The sense of distance that the wordprocessor encourages creates an advantage here. It is easier to stand back from one's own text when it's printed rather than handwritten.

As Alvin Toffler has suggested, writers using wordprocessors are "closer to seeing the words as a reader while still working as a writer." Using a wordprocessor, they may become more conscious of their audience.

It is difficult to see a passage in context when only 25 lines or so are immediately visible—a case of "out of sight, out of mind." And it isn't clear that split screens or multiple windows on the text, limited as they are by the size and resolution of the screen, offer a complete solution.

A common complaint is: "Why can't I see *all* of my work at the same time?" In his book, "Writing with a Wordprocessor," William Zinsser says: "I was particularly worried about the absence of paper. I knew that I would only be able to see as many lines as the screen would hold—twenty lines.

"How could I review what I had already written? How could I get a sense of continuity and flow? With paper, it was always possible to flick through the

preceding pages to see where I was coming from – and where I ought to be going. Without paper, I would have no such periodic fix.”



Writers often “get lost” in screen-based texts, which provide fewer cues for spatial recall. The solution usually employed involves spreading the printed text out all over the floor. A frequent complaint is: “With the computer, I have no sense of the whole text.” This is a particular problem, obviously, with long texts.

In a 1986 study, Hayes and Haas found that readers of screen-based text were less accurate in recalling the spatial location of items – that is, describing where in a text a particular item occurred – than when they read from paper.

With a printed book, a particular piece of text is always in the same place on the same page. We use this feature as a cue in locating information within the text. Indeed, we refer to pages by number. In reading a printed novel, we may not remember the name of a particular character, but we are often able to remember that the character first appeared in the bottom half of a lefthand page about a quarter of the way through the book.

Screens are not numbered, and their margins are fluid. They are not structural units within a text – they are windows on a “virtual text” which has *no* spatial existence unless it is transferred to paper. Spatial location varies onscreen, especially where scrolling is used for review.

Writers are aware of spatial markers in their writing on paper, such as the top and bottom of pages, and thereby find it easy to mentally flag important parts of their text. With a format that is constantly changing onscreen, this familiar strategy is no longer available to help writers gain a spatial sense of the structure and flow of their text.

In reading one’s text on paper, one may at a glance gauge its length and form an impression of its format and structure. When using the wordprocessor, writers have to rely on seeing the whole text only in their minds. Zinsser is unusual in finding this manageable: “I found that I could hold in my head the gist of what I had written and didn’t need to keep looking at it. Was this need, in fact, still another writer’s hang-up that I could shed?”

With various wordprocessors, it is either impossible or difficult to compare two sections of the same text onscreen. Writing – on one side of paper – does allow you to glance from one sheet to another more easily. Spreading out one’s sheets seems to help some writers get a sense of the shape of their text, and of the text as a physical object.

Some writers report difficulty in moving quickly to a specific place in their screen-based text. One reported that he missed the “quick access with the pen and paper process.” Movement through a wordprocessed text is considered more difficult than movement through a printed text. Scrolling, in particular, is an alien technique.

QUANTITY, SPEED, AND QUALITY



Many writers find that typing at a computer is faster than using traditional tools. This may encourage a faster flow of ideas.

Tom Sharpe works out ideas on the machine, “never going back to correct what I’m writing. I explore all sorts of thoughts this way. I’ll examine my ideas, writing them down very fast, then plateau out after a few hours and stop. It’s a sort of verbal dysentery.”

Some feel that the wordprocessor may encourage them to write too quickly, without sufficient reflection. One English student commented: “It interfered with my creative processes because of the quickness of editing, etc. It didn’t allow me enough time to mull things over.” It may encourage some writers to produce finished text too quickly.

Many writers report confidently that they feel an improvement in their writing with a wordprocessor. Terence Feely comments: “Wordprocessing has improved my output tremendously. I’d also say it has improved the quality.” Penelope Hobhouse declares: “I am certain that using a wordprocessor has

improved my style.” However, text produced with a wordprocessor may look better than it is; the polish may all be on the surface.

Some writers fear that the wordprocessor may produce a sloppy attitude, arguing that when using a typewriter or a pen, one must carefully consider one’s words before committing them to paper. Others, in contrast, believe that the ease of editing with the wordprocessor encourages overwriting – writing which is so “considered” that spontaneity is lost.

Some say that wordprocessing – at least initially – leads them to edit obsessively as they write – which one writer described as “taking two steps forward and one step back.” Tom Sharpe admits: “I have some worries about wordprocessing. I can’t stop! I’m frightened I’m overwriting ... It seems too easy, somehow.”

Terence Feely disagrees: “If anything, when writing with a mechanical device rather than with a pen, one tends to be less precious. I find the dialogue more spare with wordprocessing than in longhand.” Others feel a loss of “immediacy” and “intimacy” in their wordprocessed texts.

Tom Sharpe is aware of the other danger: “Since the words are onscreen and can be easily edited, I put a damned sight more words onto it with a damned sight less care.” An American academic writer comments: “The computer has a tendency to make you want to salvage too much,” perhaps because even the most trivial writing looks polished onscreen.

Disappointingly for those who see quality as the key issue, studies of the effects of wordprocessing on the quality of writing have been inconclusive. Most studies in fact suggest that there is no improvement in the quality of writing with a wordprocessor, except perhaps in the case of beginner writers. It would indeed be intriguing to discover whether independent judges could reliably distinguish between published texts originated on wordprocessors and those written by more traditional means.



Wordprocessors were originally designed for transcribing someone else’s prose rather than composing one’s own, so it is hardly surprising that they have design weaknesses from the creative writer’s point of view. Suspense novelist Len Deighton comments: “Everything about the program on my Olivetti tells me that whoever created it has never sat down and written a long piece of text.” Writer and critic Hunter Davies observed that the wordprocessor “seemed to have millions of facilities, none of which I wanted.”

Crashing disks and the potential loss of text are obviously major concerns. Terence Feely: “Disks failing still worry me ... In the old days you always had something when your typewriter broke down. The words weren’t locked up in some confounded electronic brain.”

A more subtle loss is that reported by Dorothy Dunnett, a popular thriller writer, who looks forward to “an easy system whereby one could obliterate a passage that was going badly, but somehow keep it on record, to be reviewed at the touch of a button. At present, all too often, I confidently alter something I’ve written, and then have second thoughts later – but I can’t retrieve it: it has gone for ever, unlike a change to a printed page.”

It is still not clear how far the limitations of wordprocessors are weaknesses of current software design or aspects of the inherent nature of the technology. But we can only gain in insight, both into writing and the nature of the computer, by following with interest the continuing saga of the love-hate relationship between writers and the wordprocessor. ■

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