

Co:Writer

Cost:

£99 (£49 for Scottish schools, from SCET)

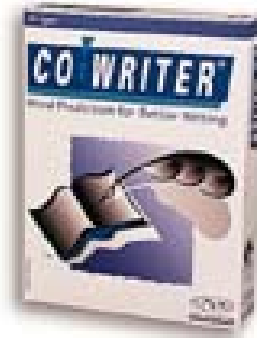
Version reviewed:

2.1 for Macintosh

Publisher: Don Johnson Special Needs, 18 Clarendon Court,
Calver Road, Winwick Quay, Warrington WA2 8QP.
Tel. 01925 241642. (www.donjohnston.com)

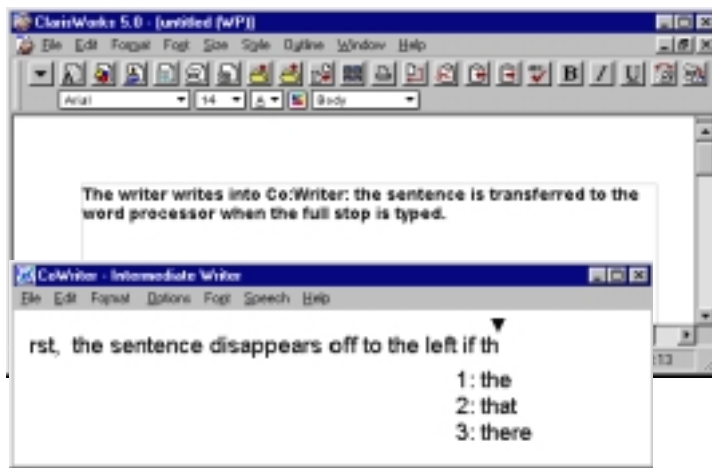
Available from:

Don Johnston, SCET, TAG



Features

Co:Writer is a popular word prediction program originally developed for Macintosh, and which is now also available for Windows computers. It is one of the most effective predictors available and with expert use its features can save more key-strokes than most other predictors. While writing simple prose it often suggests the correct word within one letter (see the results in chapter 15 for details). It predicts with a grammatical model of correct word usage from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, amongst other sources. This means that when you type a word and press the space bar, *Co:Writer* offers a grammatically correct list of words and inappropriate words only appear if there is space at the bottom of the list.



One of the most noticeable aspects of *Co:Writer* is the fact that you type into a separate window – not directly into the word processor or other application. The *Co:Writer* window at the bottom of the screen fills the full width of your screen (although it can be made smaller if necessary), and the sentence builds up and then scrolls across it. When a full stop, question mark, or other sentence terminator is typed, the completed sentence is transferred into the word processor. This technique has more disadvantages than advantages. First, the sentence appears only on one line, so that the first few words disappear off to the left if the sentence gets too long.

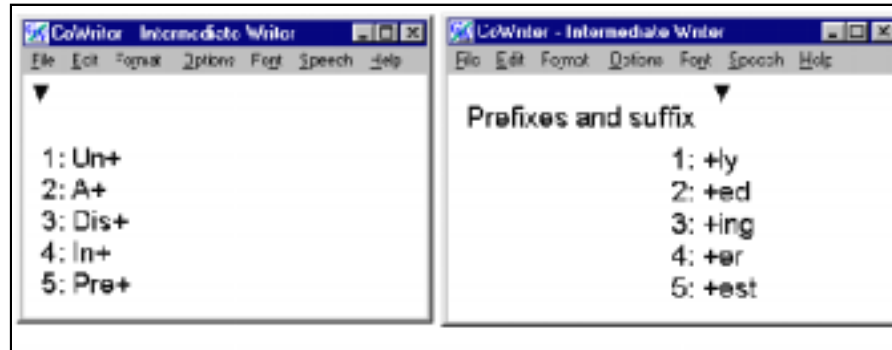
The separate window wastes a lot of screen space and you can lose track of your writing because you cannot easily see it. It can also be confusing when you first load the program because you have to make sure the *Co:Writer* window is active before it will start predicting, and starting the Windows version can be confusing unless you load *Co:Writer* first.

A positive aspect of the separate window is that it lets you focus and concentrate on the sentence in question as you write. The window itself is clear and uncluttered. The Mac version can display a reasonable although limited set of fonts and sizes, while the Windows version can display any font or size. The background and text colours cannot be adjusted and are fixed at white and black respectively.

Co:Writer has many sophisticated features such as easy manipulation of prefix, suffix and word endings; abbreviation expansion; single or double column word lists; alphabetic or frequency-ordered lists; automatic scanning of words for switch users; and advanced dictionary editing.

Novices may find some of the features confusing at first – for example, pressing '*' calls up a list of prefixes, '+' a list of suffixes to be added to the word, and '=' a list of abbreviation expansions, rather than typing the actual punctuation marks. Once learned though, these tools can make the word predictor very effective. Words are selected from the list using the number keys; pressing ESC lets you type numbers and punctuation into the text as normal.

The speech output on the Macintosh version has high quality Macintalk voices while the Centigram TruVoice speech on the PC version is also good. An attractive feature is that the words in the list can be spoken by pointing at them (there is no need to click), by moving up and down with the arrow keys, or by *Co:Writer* automatically scanning through them (selections are made with a switch or with the spacebar). The speech can be changed between a number of voices, but all of them have American accents.



Co:Writer is supplied with four main dictionaries of 0, 2,000, 10,000 and 40,000 words. At any time there are three dictionaries in use: the 'Main', 'Personal' and 'Collected Words' lexicons. When you type a word that *Co:Writer* does not recognise, the word is added to the 'Collected Words' dictionary. At the end of the writing session the user or teacher looks through the Collected Words and moves words that will be needed again to the 'Personal Dictionary' of correctly spelt words, or deletes unwanted words. It is necessary to adjust the grammatical word type and frequency of use as these are not set automatically.

The three main dictionaries are well organised with only the basic form (root) of each word stored. Derivatives with different tenses, numbers and forms are created as necessary by the grammar system. Thus, for the 'ten thousand word' main dictionary, there are actually over 11,300 root words with more than 25,000 different forms. This gives *Co:Writer* the advantage that it will probably know most of your words, except proper nouns, but the disadvantage that it does not have a small Main dictionary for people with limited literacy. If this is needed, you use a Main dictionary with no words, and add the words you want to a Personal dictionary. However, you cannot import a text file into a dictionary and automatically add new words to it – you have to type them in manually. Fortunately, Alan Stewart, Development Officer in the Scottish Highland and Islands, has created *Co:Writer* lexicons with the 100, 200, 500, 750 and 1,000 words most frequently used by children and these are available on disc from CALL. He also recommends a neat trick for creating new dictionaries without having to type each word in: a text file can be transferred from the computer to an AlphaSmart using the AlphaSmart *Get* utility, and then the AlphaSmart used to insert the text into *Co:Writer* as though the words were being typed manually.

Co:Writer is designed for use by many children in the classroom: all the settings and dictionaries for a particular writer can be saved as a 'Writer File'.

The program works well with Don Johnston's *Ke:nx* and *Discover* range for alternative access through switch, mouse, expanded, mini and overlay keyboard, and Morse Code (see CALL's Special Access Technology (Nisbet & Poon, 1998) for details of alternative access to computers).

The manual is short but clear and the program has an excellent on-screen 'Help' facility which gives tips on using the program in practical situations.

A demonstration version is available from Don Johnston.

Who might use it?

Co:Writer is designed for people who type slowly, either due to difficulties with spelling, language or motor operation. It is the best word predictor for the Macintosh, and one of the best for Windows systems. Features like prefix and suffix manipulation, plus the special access options make it particularly good for writers who have physical typing problems. The main disadvantage of the program is that it is more expensive than most of the other predictors for PC (except for Scottish schools and educational establishments who can buy it from SCET for £31 per licence, £2 for discs, and £16 for the manual).

Pros

Excellent word prediction; generally well thought out design; Macintosh and Windows versions; lots of features.

Cons

User interface can be confusing; perhaps too many 'magic' keystrokes for novices; expensive for non-Scots.

Conclusions

A powerful and flexible word prediction program. Scottish schools, and users with physical writing difficulties should definitely evaluate it.

EZ Keys

Cost:

£500 (£1,000 with speech output).

Version reviewed:

2.0a for Windows 95

Publisher:

Words+, 40015 Sierra Highway, Building 145, Palmdale, CA
93550, USA

Available from:

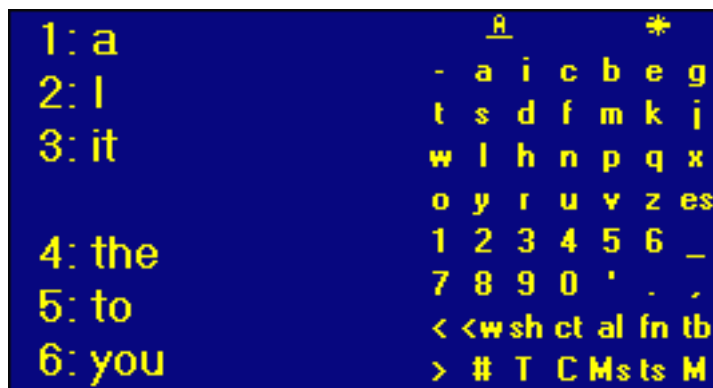
Cambridge Adaptive Communication.

EZ Keys

Features

EZ Keys has been available for many years for MS-DOS on PC's and the latest version of the program works with Windows 95. *EZ Keys* is primarily an access and communication program for people with physical typing difficulties, and communication impairment. It gives access via: on-screen keyboard with switch and scanning, or pointing device; mini, expanded and overlay keyboard; and Morse code. (Refer to *Special Access Technology* (Nisbet & Poon, 1998) for a full description of the *EZ Keys* access methods). *EZ Keys* has a particularly effective range of scanning switch settings and methods, and the keyboard response adjustments are also comprehensive.

EZ Keys has *speaks as you type* letters, words, and sentences. It can also read the words in the prediction list. *EZ Keys* has other speech output tools for people with communication impairment. The *SideTalk* facility lets the user stop



EZ Keys prediction list and on-screen keyboard

typing, generate a message to be spoken using the speech synthesiser, and then carry on writing, quickly and easily. The *Reader* tool is for reading out longer stories or presentations that have been previously prepared. The program supports a very wide range of speech synthesisers, including software-based systems like *ProVoice* and *TextAssist*, and also external units plugged into a COM port, such as *MultiVoice*.

To speed up text production, *EZ Keys* has a word predictor, *Instant Phrases* (a word and phrase bank facility) and abbreviation expansion. As a predictor, *EZ Keys* performs well but is by no means at the top of the

class. It was the first program to have full *Next Word Prediction* which gave it a considerable advantage when it was first developed, but now the competition is catching up. It learns new words but, like *PredictAbility*, does not highlight them in the lexicon so removing mis-spellings or unwanted words is difficult. The standard lexicon, of nearly 2200 words, is designed for interpersonal communication rather than writing and contains many words relating to people, objects, and food. There are no other lexicons supplied with the program.

The options for prediction are a bit sparse; you can disable new word learning and choose the number of words predicted in the list (up to 10). The smart punctuation is very flexible; the location and number of spaces, capitalisation and so on can all be individually adjusted for each punctuation mark.

The window layout and appearance is designed for people who use switch or pointing device for accessing the computer. A blue window with yellow text holds the main options, and positions itself in the corner of the screen. The predicted words are offered in the left side of the window, with an on-screen keyboard on the right. The user cannot move the window with the mouse, and there is only limited control over colour, font and size.

The publishers of *EZ Keys* have a 'software for life' policy, so that users can get the latest version of the software to suit new hardware for the cost of the disc. A demonstration version of the program is available from CAC.

Who might use it?

EZ Keys is a computer access system and communication aid. It is designed for users who need independent alternative access to the computer with switch, pointing device or special keyboard, and who also require speech output for communication. The program has a consistent and efficient design which appeals to many older pupils, students and adults. It gives a switch user, for example, fast and efficient control over the computer, quick speech output for communication, as well as the option of operating environmental control aids. It costs far more than any other word predictor, and is not suitable for use by dyslexic or slightly disabled people, or for

The screenshot shows the EZ Keys Instant Phrases and SideTalk speech output tool. It features a 'SideTalk (tm)' window with a list of phrases (F1-F10) and a 'File: general' field. Below this is a 'SideTalk (tm)' window with a red border containing the text: 'The sidetalk window is used to create new messages. Instant Phrases stores complete words and phrases for quick communication.' To the right are buttons for 'Clear', 'Phrases', 'Reader', and 'Exit'.

EZ Keys Instant Phrases and SideTalk speech output tool

mainstream classroom use.

Pros

Special access options and communication facilities; after-sales support.

Cons

Very expensive; not cutting edge word prediction.

Conclusion

An effective program for special access and communication, but not suitable for more general use within the classroom.

KeySpell

Cost:

£60

Version reviewed:

Beta 1.02 for Windows 95

Publisher:
Words Worldwide Ltd., Ash House Belle Villas, Newcastle upon Tyne NE20 9BE. Tel. 01661 860999 <http://www.keyspell.com>
Available from:

Inclusive Technology, iANSYST, REM


 The logo for KeySpell features the word 'Key' in a large, black, serif font, and 'Spell' in a smaller, red, cursive script font.

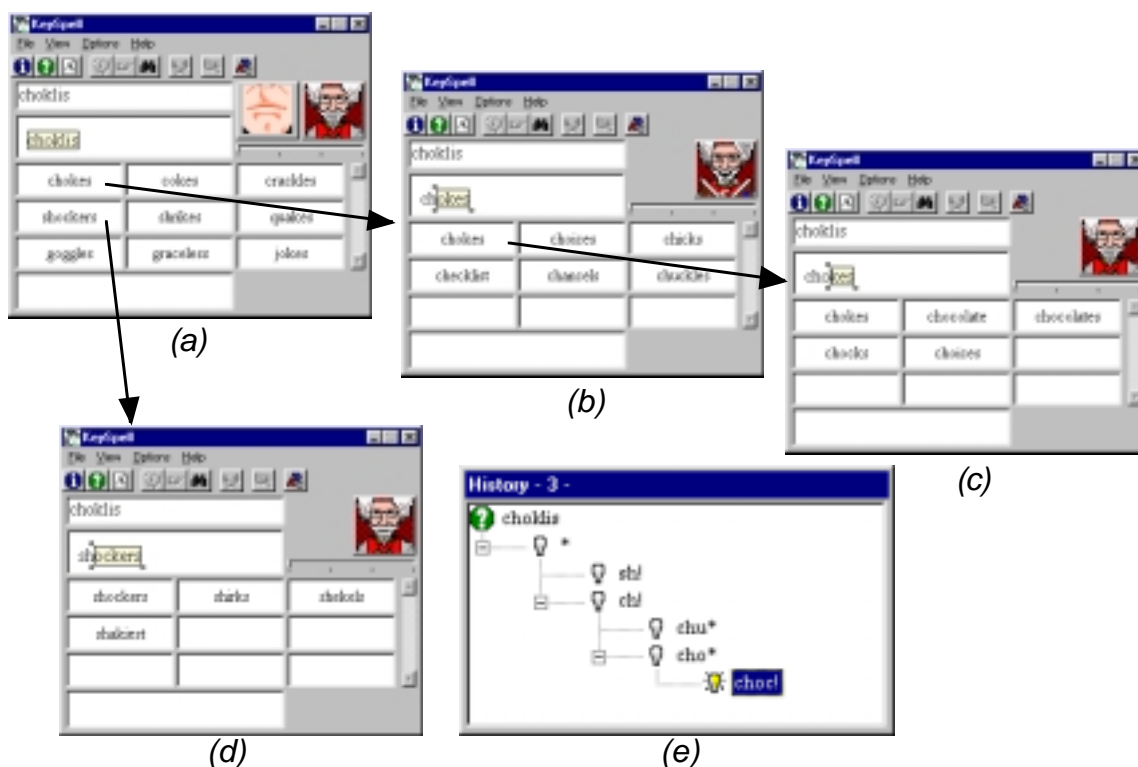
Features

KeySpell is different from most of the other spellcheckers, in that the user interacts with the checker and can control the way in which the program searches for the correct spelling. This will suit some users, who have sufficiently sophisticated language skills to control the program, but will cause difficulties for others.

KeySpell is a utility program, which can normally be used alongside a word processor or other program. It is primarily a spelling aid, but also has *speak selected text* facilities. We tested the beta version 1.02 which had some limitations: the current version (*KeySpell 99*) is designed to “start where the standard *Word 97* spellchecker stops” – if the correct word is not offered by the *Word* spellchecker, the writer can click on the *KeySpell* button to call up the *KeySpell* checker.

When *KeySpell* checks a word, it offers up to nine possibilities. The user clicks on the most similar one, and will then be offered more words. The first window below (a) shows *KeySpell*'s offering for 'choklis' (i.e. 'chocolates'). If the user thinks that 'chokes' looks likely, double-clicking on it brings up the second window (b) and double-clicking on 'chokes' again finally brings up the correct spelling in window (c). If the user is confident that the word begins with 'cho' the search can be done much faster: the user just moves the highlight on 'choklis' to only cover 'klis', and *KeySpell* automatically displays the set of words in window (c) that begin with 'cho'. However, suppose the user is not sure about the start of the word and thinks that 'shockers' in the first set looks more like 'chocolates', than 'chokes' does. Clicking on 'shockers' will lead the user down the wrong path, finding words beginning with 'sh' (d), and so 'chocolates' will never be offered. At any point, the writer can use the 'History' window (e) to retrace the search path, or start a new search. It is also possible to click on a word to hear it, and call up the 'Context' window to see and hear the word in a sample sentence.

In practice, some users will no doubt choose the correct path and find their word quickly; others may follow



several different paths until they find the word; while others will not choose the correct starting path and will not be able to find the word. In the tests reported in Chapter 14 we tried to use a method which was a reasonable compromise between a user unable to control the search, and one who searches thoroughly. If the word was not shown, we clicked either on the correct root, a similar looking word, or a word related to the one required (e.g. *scholar* got *school*). If the word was not found down one path, we usually tried another. If it was not found down the second path, we usually gave up – with the result that *KeySpell*'s scores are lower than they would have been had we kept searching for longer. The scoring algorithm also penalised *KeySpell* every time a new search path was chosen.

KeySpell was the only checker that offered the correct spelling for some of the more difficult words – *frens* (friends), *simn* (swimming) and *choklis* (chocolate), which supports the publishers claim that it can handle more bizarre mis-spellings. However, it also missed some which were picked up by *TextReader* and the Franklins, such as *yoost* (used) and *all sow* (also). Nevertheless, if you are able to use the strategies in *KeySpell* to search for the word you want, it may well be a very effective tool.

KeySpell also has a homophone checker, although in the version tested the contextual examples were incomplete. All homophones are shown in one window, with contextual examples of the current word in another. Each of these can be spoken, and the quality of the speech is very good.

In use, *KeySpell* could be very slow to offer words: sometimes it would take over 30 seconds to offer the complete list of suggested words (running on a 200 MHz Pentium). The user interface is complicated but colours and text can be adjusted, which is good. No manual was supplied with the beta review program, but the on-line help was useful. There is a demo available from the *KeySpell* web site.

The publishers say that the current version has many improvements over the early version we tested: it is faster and simpler to use; the number of words offered can be constrained; and the spelling dictionary is much larger.

Who might use it?

KeySpell is best suited to an established writer (in secondary school, further education or employment, for example) with significant spelling difficulties, who finds that standard spellcheckers are not helpful. The flexible search techniques means that the correct spelling for even quite bizarre errors can be found, provided the user is able to operate the program's search tools.

Pros:

Can usually offer the correct spelling, sooner or later; excellent speech quality; relatively cheap.

Cons:

Complicated user interface; slow to find and suggest words..

Conclusion

Writers who find that standard spellcheckers cannot cope with more unusual mis-spellings should consider *KeySpell*.

Penfriend

Cost:

£50 for single user (£60 including speech output)

Version reviewed:

1.08 (Acorn), 0.97r for Windows

Publisher:

Design Concept, 30 South Oswald Road, Edinburgh EH9 2HG.
Tel. 0131 668 2000. (<http://www.jasper.co.uk/penfriend/>)

Available from:

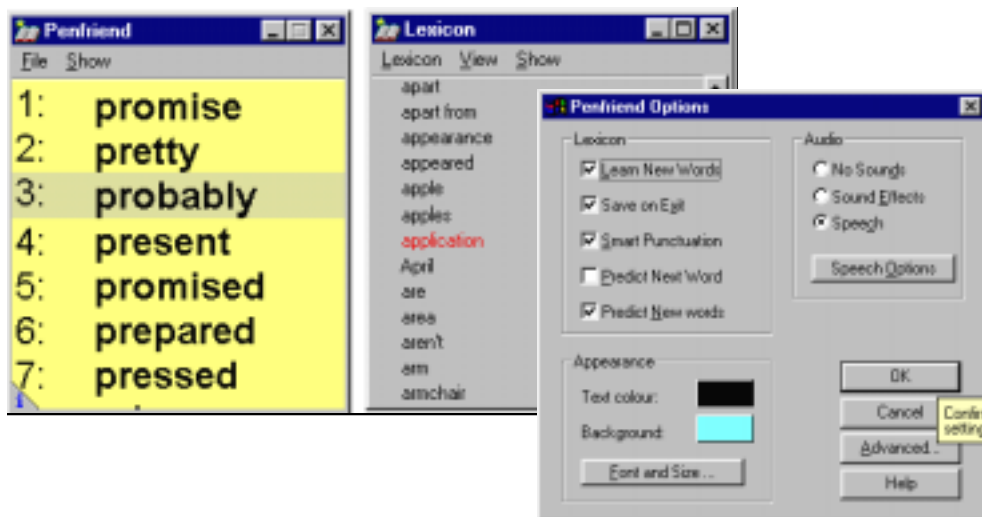
AVP, Crick, Inclusive, REM, etc.



Features

Penfriend is primarily a predictive typer, but also provides speech output and an on-screen keyboard. It has been available on Acorn computers for many years, and now works on Windows 3.1 and Windows 95/98. This review deals with the Windows version.

The basic quality of the prediction is the best of those tested. It saved more keystrokes than any other program in our tests, and predicted more words within one letter in all cases but one. It does not offer a lot of complex features and functions and screen design is clear and uncluttered.



Penfriend predictions, lexicon and options

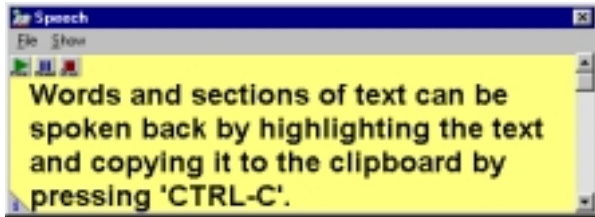
The *Penfriend* menu can be added and removed by clicking on the triangular button in the bottom left corner of the window. Without the menu, more space is available for predictions and restless children are less likely to fiddle with the options. The font, size and colours of the words are fully controllable, with the numbers appearing in a lighter (less bold) font than the actual words if possible. One omission is that *Penfriend* does not have an 'affix' or word ending facility – either the complete word has to be selected from the list (if it is offered), or the unwanted word ending must be deleted and replaced with the correct ending. The program is quick to offer, speak and insert new words into the text compared to some of the other predictors.

The 'Show' menu lets you edit the lexicon and abbreviations, and set preferences about the operation of the program: the number of predicted words; text and background colour; font and size; whether to predict 'next words' and use new words added to the lexicon; and the keys used for selection – either number or function keys. It has control over 'repeated predictions' so that likely words are offered again in the list so the writer has a second chance to select them; a good feature common to only *Co:Writer*.

Penfriend can be set to learn any words not in its lexicon, and mark them as being new. New words can also be learned direct from a text file. The user (or teacher) can then review the words later, and either delete the word or add it to the lexicon. Common mis-spellings that would otherwise have to be repeatedly removed from the lexicon can be put a special 'black-list' of words that are recognised but will not be predicted. The user can adjust word frequencies, grammatical type and the list of words that are likely to come after each word.

A version of *Penfriend* with speech is available for slightly higher cost. It uses Jonathan Duddington's synthesiser

which is not as smooth to listen to as the *ViaVoice Outloud* speech in *Write:OutLoud 3*, for example, but is clear and the accent is more 'British' than most. *Penfriend* can speak each letter, word or sentence as it is typed. Selected words and sentences can be spoken back by highlighting the text and copying it to the clipboard by pressing 'CTRL-C' or by clicking on the 'copy' button available on the toolbar of most word processors. The selected text is shown in a separate window and there are controls to play, pause and stop the speech.



Penfriend speak selected text



Penfriend on-screen keyboard

The *Penfriend* on-screen keyboard gives a simple QWERTY display for writers who have keyboarding difficulties but can use a pointing device. It is not as sophisticated as dedicated on-screen programs like *Clicker* or *Point*, but can be effective for writers with a visual impairment, or who have difficulty transferring their gaze between the physical keyboard and the screen. The latest version of *Penfriend* works well with *Clicker 3.5*, so that predicted words can appear in the *Clicker* grid. This is particularly useful for writers who use pointing devices or switches to operate the computer.

Prediction and other preferences are stored with each lexicon file, so use by several writers is easy: the user just clicks on their own lexicon to load *Penfriend* and the correct dictionary and settings.

The manual is brief and there is on-line help, with tips which explain preference options.

A demonstration version on disc is available from Design Concept, or can be downloaded from their web site.

Penfriend for Acorn is simpler than the Windows version and the prediction is not as good. It does not use grammar or other advanced prediction methods, and speech output is not included (but can be used through other programs). In tests the prediction quality was poorer and the user interface is not as well-finished.

Who might use it?

Penfriend is suitable for writers of all ages who need good word prediction to reduce keystrokes or give help with spelling. It combines a range of features including an on-screen keyboard and simple speech output into one of the cheapest packages, and so would suit a school with pupils with a range of difficulties. It is more effective and has more facilities than the cheaper *Predictability* and yet it performed better than more expensive products. People who need to use speech output for reading a lot of material from the screen or who need spellchecking might look at *textHELP!*, but users who need good prediction should go for *Penfriend*. *Co:Writer* has more facilities for controlling the prediction (affixes, etc.) but costs more than *Penfriend* (unless you are a Scottish school).

Pros

Excellent word prediction; good combination of features; easy to use; works with *Clicker 3.5*; good value.

Cons

The Acorn version is not as advanced as the Windows one; no affixes.

Conclusion

Penfriend was the most effective predictor we tested. The speech and on-screen keyboard make it good value for money.

PredictAbility

Cost:

£29 (5 user copy)

Version reviewed:

1.5 for Windows 95/98

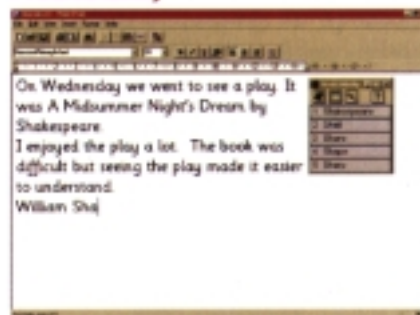
Publisher:

Inclusive Technology, Saddleworth Business Centre, Delph, Oldham OL3 5DF. Tel. 01457 819790. (www.inclusive.co.uk)

Available from:

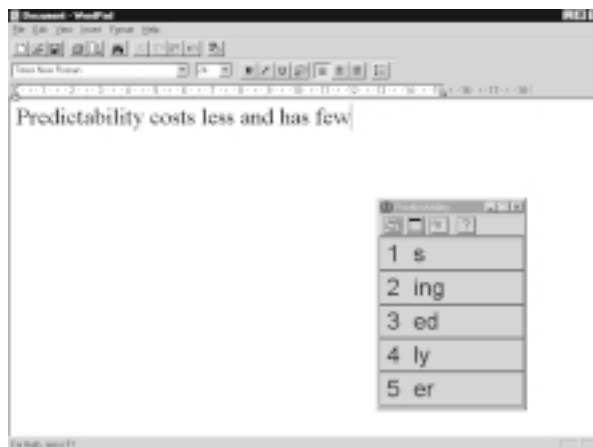
Inclusive Technology, REM

PredictAbility



Features

PredictAbility costs less and has fewer features than any of the other predictor programs considered here. However, the fundamental prediction quality is good, and the lack of features makes it very simple to use. The program was developed the Department of Applied Computing at the University of Dundee, who pioneered the research and development of word prediction in schools. As a result of the research, the team developed *PAL*, on which *PredictAbility* is based.



The main prediction window has a small tool-bar at the top from which the other features and settings can be accessed. The text and background colours can be adjusted, but there are always black lines between the predictions, and the font for the words is fixed. The size of the font can be adjusted simply by dragging the bottom edge of the window, which re-sizes the text to suit the window size.

PredictAbility learns new words as you type them, but they are not clearly marked in the lexicon, so deleting unwanted words is difficult. It is also not possible to disable the learning of new words, so the lexicon will almost inevitably fill up with mis-spelled words. A good feature, though, is that you can delete words when you see them in the prediction window instead of having to trudge through the main lexicon. While this may save you the chore of weeding the lexicon by letting you delete words only when they are definitely unwanted, it requires the writer to be able to spot mis-spelled words, which may often not be possible.

The program has a next-word prediction facility which is not strictly grammatical, but it does the job well once the lexicon has been used for some time. It stores the most likely next word based on the previous two, which generally means that the word you want will appear on the list fairly quickly. However, the default lexicons do not contain any of this sequence information; it is learnt only after you have typed quite a lot of text.

PredictAbility has some good features for a classroom environment where several writers will use it. When you load the program it asks you to select your name or lexicon from a menu, or create a new user. For new users, the lexicon size can be started at between 100 and 5000 words, or even zero. These smaller dictionaries are very useful for creating topic-specific lexicons for early or struggling writers. You can also upgrade a lexicon to any of the larger sizes without losing the words you have taught it, which makes it easy to expand the vocabulary in line with the writer's literacy development.

Speech output can be used with *PredictAbility* but it requires a genuine *SoundBlaster* sound card and the *TextAssist* speech synthesiser software. To configure the system you have to edit a parameter in a system configuration file and re-run *PredictAbility*: a level of technical fiddling which is unsatisfactory. Words in the prediction list can be spoken by clicking with the right hand mouse button and then selecting 'Speak word' from the pop-up menu that appears.

The manual and on-line help are both very brief and tend to address issues from the technical side rather than the viewpoint of the user.

Who might use it?

PredictAbility is an inexpensive word predictor which is suitable for early writers or those with limited literacy who would benefit from lexicons of only a few hundred words, although some of the other predictors with speech and more flexible options would still probably be better. The program lacks some of the essential features of a word predictor to be useful for a wide range of writers. For example, it is not possible to stop unrecognised words being added to the dictionary so that writers who make spelling mistakes will find their errors being offered back to them as predictions.

Pros

Cheap and uncomplicated; good word prediction once the lexicons have been adapted; small lexicons suited to early writers.

Cons

Few options for adjusting the prediction method; always learns new words; limited adjustments.

Conclusion

A basic program for trying out prediction but lacking in essential features.

Prophet

Cost:

£70

Version reviewed:

1.5 for Windows 95

Publisher:

Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm

Available from:

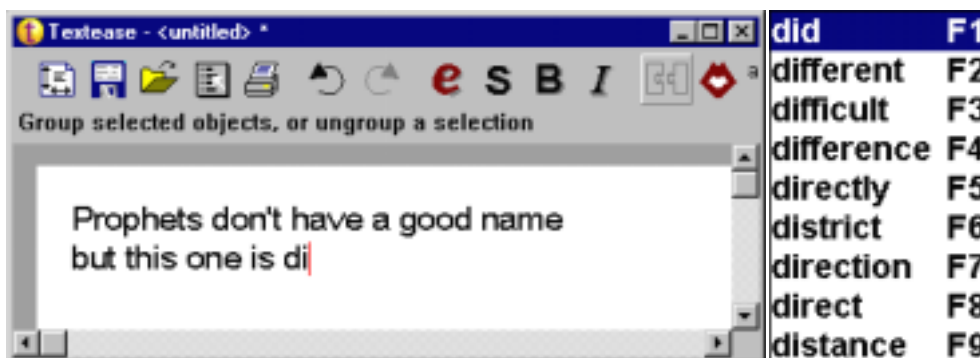
ACE Centre

Prophet

for Windows

Features

Prophet is a word predictor developed by the Department of Speech Communication at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, and the ACE Centre in England, so it has all the right credentials. Version 1.3 runs on Windows 3.1, and the latest version 1.5 is for Windows 95. The quality of word prediction in *Prophet* is very good. In tests it came out best on some types of document (particularly the late Primary School material), and a close third overall.



Prophet has 'fixed' prediction, which means the word order in the list stays the same regardless of how often a word is selected – i.e. commonly used words are not moved up the list. This makes it easy to memorise the sequence that will appear but means it responds more slowly to new words – however often you use a new word it will not appear on the first list offered. *Prophet* stores next-word pairs, so when you finish one word the next one predicted is likely to be correct even before you type any letters. *Prophet* has the facility to add suffixes to words, so the valuable space on the list of predictions can contain more word roots initially.

enough	F1	→	end	F1
end...	F2		ends	F2
english	F3		end's	F3
England	F4		ends'	F4
entire	F5		ends	F5
enables	F6		ended	F6
energy	F7		ending	F7
entered	F8			
entirely	F9			

Prophet word endings facility

The window display and keyboard interception are the weakest points in *Prophet*. The prediction window has no title bar nor any margin space around the text and changes size depending on the number of words to be predicted, even vanishing completely if it has nothing to say. This can be confusing and disconcerting initially.

The colours are fixed (to the Windows default colours) which means that the window may be difficult to see against your word processor unless you change the colours on the word processor.

Words are selected either with the function keys or by highlighting the required word with the cursor keys, and pressing 'Home' to select but you cannot use the mouse to select a word. Instead, clicking on the window lets you to move the window around. Like *Co:Writer* and other programs which use the number and other keys to operate the predictor, it may be confusing for new users at first because the keyboard cannot be used to operate the word processor in the usual way. However, you can stop *Prophet* intercepting these keys by pressing F10.

Prophet does not have speech built in as standard, but can use the *ProVoice* speech in the *Monologue* program, which is available separately for around £50. *Monologue* provides a basic highlight and speak facility, and can read out the words in the *Prophet* prediction list (by highlighting with the cursor keys), but does not give speak-as-you-type. The speech in *Monologue* is good quality, but has an American accent.

Prophet comes with two dictionaries of 7,000 and 14,000 words that are good for general writing, but not so useful for early writers who need a very small vocabulary. It is easy to edit new words and to transfer them to the main dictionary, but difficult to edit the words in the main dictionaries. Words can be added automatically from a text file. *Prophet* lexicons and settings can be saved for different users.

A demo version is available on disc from the ACE Centre, and can be downloaded from the ACE web site.

Who might use it?

Prophet was originally designed for physically disabled keyboard users, especially those prefer using the cursor keys to the mouse. It's word prediction is good, making it also suitable for writers with spelling difficulties. It links well with *SAW* for writers who control the computer via an on-screen keyboard accessed with switch and pointing devices. Users who have difficulty identifying the correct word in the list, or who need speech feedback with their writing, will need to buy *Monologue* at extra cost, but the speech does not work as well as the facilities in *Co:Writer*, *Penfriend* or *textHELP!*.

Pros

Good word prediction; links well with *SAW* for switch access.

Cons

Can interfere with some keyboard keys; main dictionaries are difficult to edit; speech costs extra.

Conclusion

A good predictor, but lacking in some of the extras and features available with some of the other programs.

textHELP!

Cost:

£95 (single), £195 (primary site), £435 (secondary site)

Version reviewed:

textHELP! 98 version 3.0.363

Publisher:

textHELP! Systems Ltd. Enkalon Business Centre,
25 Randalstown Centre, Antrim, BT41 4LJ, N. Ireland.
Tel. 01849 428105. (www.texthelp.com)

Available from:

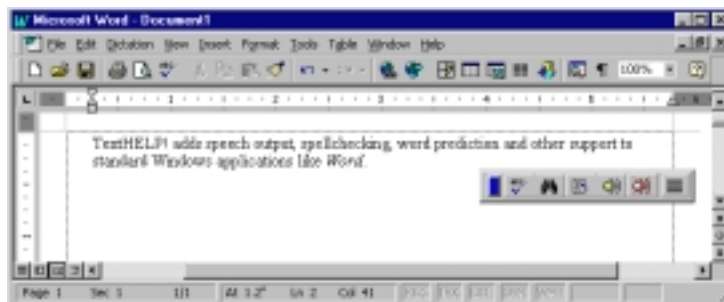
IANYST, Inclusive Technology, Semerc, REM, SCET, AVP



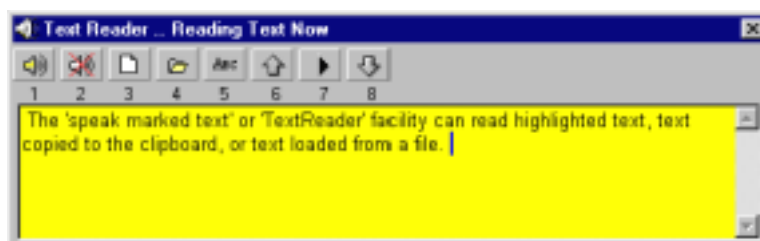
Features

TextHELP! is a utility program which provides several tools to support reading and writing, for Windows 3.1, Windows 95/98 and Windows NT 4. We reviewed and tested *textHELP! 98*, which has since been succeeded by *textHELP! Read and Write*. A new version, *textHELP! Read and Write 4*, which is claimed to have many improvements will be released in September 1999. A Macintosh version, *textHELP! Type and Talk* was released in early 1999.

TextHELP! runs alongside a word processor, database or email program in the same way as most predictors do, and adds: speech output; spell checking and thesaurus; word prediction; help with homophones; and abbreviation expansion.



Speech output is particularly comprehensive, based on high quality Microsoft/Lernaut & Hauspie 'SAPI' voices. The speech has an American accent, but flows well and is easy to understand. The synthesiser has a pronunciation exceptions dictionary. In addition to the usual *speak as you type* and *speak selected text* functions, *textHELP! 98* also has a *screen reader*. This can be very useful because it can read almost anything on the screen, such as menu items, icons, messages in dialogue boxes, as well as words in the *MS Word* spellchecker list, or the *ViaVoice* correction list. It will only read from programs which support Microsoft's 'Active Accessibility', and our test version sometimes read too much 'hidden' information from web pages for example (a problem that applies to most screen-readers). The new version is claimed not to suffer from this. The *speak as you type* system can read



each letter, word or sentence as you type. The *speak selected text* or '*TextReader*' facility can read highlighted text, text copied to the clipboard, or text loaded from a file. The window can be made to appear when you start reading a block, or to stay on permanently. The text that is being read can appear in the *TextReader* window, or in a speech bubble from an 'Agent'. The Agent is an animated irritant – you can choose to be annoyed by 'Merlin', 'Genie' or 'Robbie' – that sits on screen and spouts speech bubbles. Fortunately, you can switch them off. The *TextReader* window is more useful for supporting reading, highlighting each word as it is spoken. There is control over the text font and size and it can be controlled using definable keys or by clicking on the toolbar.

The *textHELP! 98* spellchecker can either check the text as you write and automatically offer suggestions for mis-spelled words, or it can check a selected section of text. When the *check as you type* system detects an error the system can beep and/or offer the suggestion box, or speak a message (the default is 'hey, that's not right' but

this can be changed) to draw the writer's attention. The dialogue box is clear and uncluttered and can show between nine and twenty suggestions (set by resizing the window). The background and text colours can be defined and it can also speak the words in the suggestion list. On our test machine the only way to close the window was to close the whole *textHELP!* program, and it sometimes stopped checking errors for no apparent reason.

The *check selected text* system is good in that it shows the word in context. The unrecognised words are highlighted in red, and the writer can click on each word to get suggestions. Homophones are highlighted in



blue and the writer can click to get a spoken explanation of the word. The highlight colours can be defined by the user. In both checkers, the words are offered alphabetically which means the user is more likely to have to scroll through the list to find the correct word. The new version 4 will give the most probable words towards the top.

A good feature is the operation of the spellchecker which can be adjusted to suit particular patterns of spelling mistakes: for example, to search for joined words, or missing or extra letters. The checker can also be set to search for particular phonetic transpositions (e.g. using 'f' instead of 'ph'). Different main spellchecker dictionaries can be used and new words are added to a custom dictionary which can be edited. However, as standard the spellchecker gave only an average performance in our tests. The publishers say that this is because it is designed to be adapted to each user's particular spelling difficulties and claim that it can 'out perform any other spell checker' if the settings and Phonetic Map are correctly adjusted. There is an automatic spell correction feature which works well to correct common mis-spellings (eg. replace *anb* with *and*).

The *TextHELP!* word predictor facility did not perform well in the tests reported in Chapter 15. The window and the colours, font and number of predicted words can be adjusted easily; it can learn new words and lexicons can be saved and loaded for different subjects and writers. The forthcoming version 4 is claimed to have much better word prediction. *TextHELP!* also has abbreviation expansion facilities for typing common pieces of text quickly.

The program is supplied with a manual and online help system, and a demonstration version of the program can be downloaded from the *textHELP!* web site or obtained on CD.

Who might use it?

TextHELP! has many helpful facilities for people with writing difficulties. The speech tools are good; the spellchecker has some nice facilities; but the spellchecker and prediction tools, as they are supplied, did not perform very well in our tests. However, if the user was able to adapt the program's dictionaries and settings, better results would be achievable. Writers who need top-notch word prediction should look at a specialised predictor such as *Penfriend* or *Co:Writer* and early writers may find that a talking word processor like *TextEase* or *Write:Outloud* is easier to use. *TextHELP!* is therefore best suited to older primary and secondary school pupils, students and adults who need a flexible, general purpose tool to support writing and text entry into different applications (e.g. word processor, email, web browser). The main advantage of the program is that it provides several facilities to support writing in one package, at reasonable cost.

Pros

Good speech; lots of tools in one package; cheaper than more specialist screen reader programs.

Cons

Average spellchecker (until adapted to the user); poor word prediction 'out of the box'; the version tested was occasionally unreliable and slow.

Conclusion

Popular and flexible tool for older writers which can support writing and reading with different computer applications.