

Chapter 2

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2 WORD PROCESSORS

“I feel much more confident about writing since I began using a word processor.”

from ‘I.T. Helps’ (NCET, 1995)

A word processor is the basic and most important tool for supporting writing on a computer. It lets the writer:

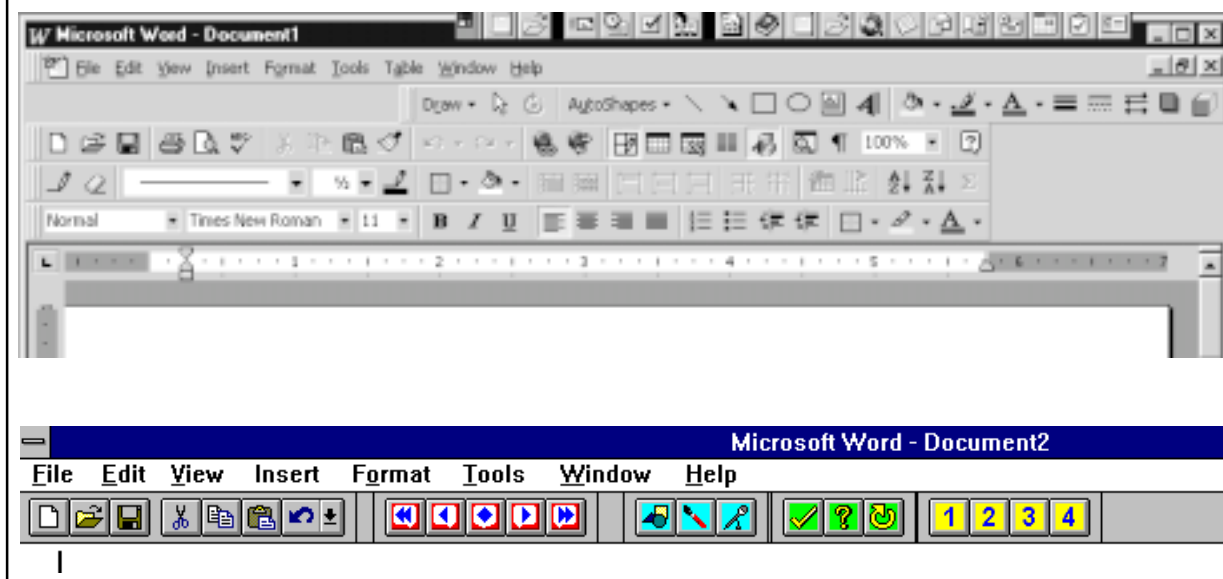
- be freed from the physical effort of handwriting;
- redraft and edit the work easily without large amounts of rewriting;
- produce work in a presentable form.

Pupils with spelling difficulties often have poor and slow handwriting and it can be difficult to decide whether the pupil’s difficulty or reluctance to write is due to physical or cognitive problems, or a mixture of the two. Sometimes, unexpectedly, provision of a word processor can improve all aspects of writing simply by removing the physical effort and concentration needed for handwriting.

2.1 ‘Standard’ word processors

‘Heavyweight’ programs such as *Microsoft Word*, *Lotus Word Pro* and *Corel WordPerfect* are designed for business or experienced users and have lots of features which are of little value to primary school children. However, it is possible to configure the menus and toolbars to present a clean uncluttered screen, with only a few buttons to perform common tasks like changing the font and size, and loading, saving and printing work. *Word 6* and *Word 97* can be made more accessible by adding *Talking Word for Windows* or RM’s *First Word* (Figure 2.1), which present a simplified interface and add good speech options. In general though, these word processors are not as good as programs designed for school use, and are still overly complex for younger writers.

Figure 2.1: Configuring the *Microsoft Word* Toolbar. It is important that the user interface is suitable for the person using a program. A young child would be baffled by the array of buttons presented by the *Microsoft Word* toolbar (top), but would find the *Talking Word for Windows* (bottom) interface easier to use.



The less expensive *AppleWorks* (formerly *ClarisWorks*) – is generally more suitable for school use because it has fewer complicated features, runs better on older or less powerful computers, and can be adapted easily for learners of all ages and abilities.

The features charts in Chapters 12 – 14 and the reviews in Chapter 18 give more information and compare *Word* and *ClarisWorks* in further detail.

Program	Machine	Description	Cost	Supplier
<i>Apple (formerly Claris) Works 5</i>	Mac / Win	Office suite with word processor, drawing program, database, spreadsheet. Easy to use. Built-in <i>speak marked text</i> on Mac.	£58	Various, e.g. REM, TAG, SCET
<i>Corel WordPerfect Office Suite</i>	Win	Business office suite with word processing, spreadsheet, address book, etc.	£169	Various, e.g. DABS Direct
<i>Lotus WordPro</i>	Win	Business word processor. Similar to <i>WordPerfect</i> and <i>Word</i> , but slightly more straightforward and fewer functions.	£36	Various, e.g. Simply Computers
<i>Microsoft Word</i>	Mac / Win	Probably the most common business word processor. Lots of features, complex, but a good spellchecker, plus <i>AutoCorrect</i> .	£229	Various, e.g. Software Warehouse
<i>Microsoft Works</i>	Mac / Win	Office suite with word processor, spreadsheet, database. Easy to use.	£41	Various, e.g. Insight

Note that many of the programs in Table 2.1 are available at a considerable discount through educational and site licences, and through “competitive upgrades”.

2.2 Word processors for children and schools

There are also word processors specifically designed for children, such as *ClarisWorks for Kids*, *Microsoft Creative Writer* and *KidWorks*. These are simpler to use than the ordinary standard word processors and have lots of fun features. Table 2.2 lists some popular children’s word processors.

Program	Machine	Description	Cost	Supplier
<i>AppleWorks for Kids</i>	Mac	Children's version of <i>ClarisWorks</i> with lots of templates and clip art.	£35	Various, e.g. SCET, TAG
<i>MS Creative Writer</i>	Mac / Win	Children's writing and DTP program. Good fun, lots of clip art.	£25	Various, e.g. TAG
<i>KidWorks Deluxe</i>	Mac / Win	Children's writing and painting program with clip art and sound library. Speech output.	£10	Various, e.g. REM
<i>Write Away!</i>	Win	Word processor designed for classroom use with different levels of complexity to suit different users.	£85 for 5 users	Black Cat

Word processors such as *Talking TextEase* that are specifically designed for schools are usually a better solution for primary and early secondary school and also have supportive writing features like word banks and speech built in. These are discussed in the chapter on ‘Talking Word Processors and Speech Output’ later.

2.3 Word processor summary

Word processors are useful for pupils with writing difficulties because:

- ✓ it can be physically easier to write with a keyboard than by hand;
- ✓ drafting, re-drafting and editing is quick and easy;
- ✓ they produce neat, legible results.

Word processors are worth investigating if:

- ✓ the writer has slow, hard to read, or illegible handwriting;
- ✓ the writer gets tired handwriting.

Things to look for in a word processor:

- ✓ ease of use;
- ✓ features suited to the writer and task (e.g. simple operation with good graphics for early writers; sophisticated chapter and sections, footers and headers, tables etc., for older writers; good spellchecker for writers with spelling difficulties);
- ✓ reliability;
- ✓ cost;
- ✓ staff familiarity and availability of support materials;
- ✓ built-in writing support tools – word banks, good spellchecker, speech output.

2.4 Tools to organise writing

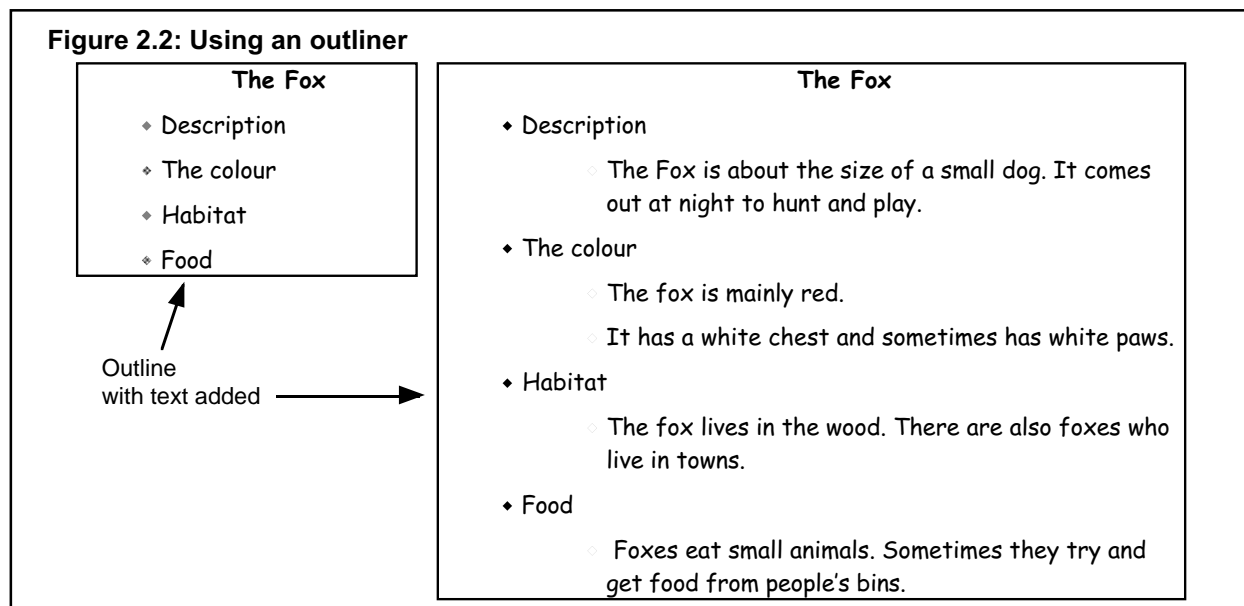
“They [outlining programs] encourage students to give the writing task a title and to break down the work into sub-tasks, under sub-heading and sub-sub-headings.”

(Hawkridge & Vincent, 1992, p. 129)

All word processors can help pupils organise and structure their writing: headings can be typed in and then filled out with text; paragraphs, sentences and clauses moved around; and draft versions saved for later editing. These are skills which must be taught, particularly if the pupil has difficulty planning their work. Some programs have extra features over and above the basic editing tools.

2.5 Outliners

Most business oriented word processors (e.g. *ClarisWorks*, *Microsoft Word*, *Lotus WordPro*, *Corel WordPerfect* etc.) have ‘outliners’ which help the writer plan, structure and organise the work. The writer starts by setting out the major topics to be covered, then adds sub-topics at progressively lower levels. The outliner automatically indents the topics and adds paragraph numbers if required. Once the structure for the piece is in place, the writer starts adding text. At any point the writer can click on a sub-topic and move it up or down the outline, or make it a ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ level of topic. The text inside a topic gets moved with the topic heading, without having to cut and paste. The writer can also choose to see the entire text, or just down to a particular level of sub-heading, to get an overview of the structure.



Sections of the text can be ‘collapsed’ or ‘expanded’ to see the structure or the text, as required. Portions of text can be moved easily without having to cut and paste.

Outliners require a fairly high level of skill and ability to use a word processor and so are perhaps more suited to secondary school pupils, students and adults. They also assume that the writer has a reasonably clear idea of what he or she is trying to achieve *before* writing starts, which is not always the case.

2.6 Assistants, wizards and templates

Business-oriented word processors also have ‘tutorial’ facilities (e.g. *ClarisWorks* ‘assistants’ and *Word* ‘wizards’) which guide you through each stage of designing documents like newsletters, posters cards or other documents. They are useful for creating an overall layout, but do not help with planning or creating the actual text.

Templates or *stationery files* are ready-made frames into which the writer can add their own text. Again, business word processors are supplied with a range of these for designing certificates, address lists etc. More useful templates for school use are available for or supplied with word processors like *TextEase*, *Microsoft Creative Writer* and *ClarisWorks for Kids*. The *Pages Resource Packs* from SEMERC contain templates for use in curriculum topics, such as ‘Christmas’, ‘The Romans’, or ‘Maths’.

2.7 Story Starters and writing frames

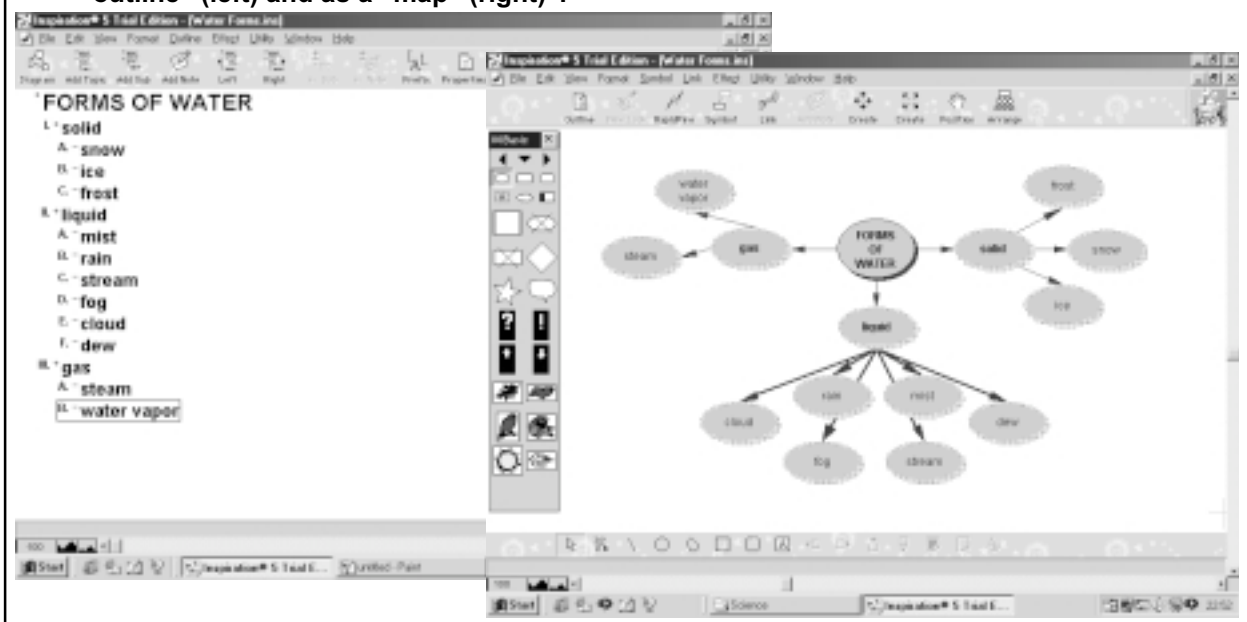
Some writers need help to ‘get started’ with a piece of writing. Programs like *Storybook Weaver* use attractive graphics and sound to prompt writers; *Creative Writer 2* has simple ‘story starters’; while any word processor can be used to create ‘writing frames’ (Wray & Lewis, 1997) with starter sentences to help the writer compose text. *WordBar* is a word bank program designed specifically for secondary school pupils which has sets of sentence starters.

Writer’s Toolkit is a program which supports the process of creating imaginative, personal and functional text. It consists of a set of tools: a word processor, word bank, note-making and note-ordering facility, speech feedback, spellchecker, and prompting to help define the type of writing and the audience. A full review is given in Chapter 18. The program is useful for pupils from about age 9 who need help with planning and structuring their writing.

2.8 Graphical 'ideas processors' / 'mind-mapping'

Some pupils have difficulty thinking and planning their work in 'linear' order and find it easier to think in terms of pictures rather than text. Ideas processors, or 'mind-mapping' programs (Buzan, 1993) are graphical outliners: topics can be added in any position on the screen, then moved around, linked and unlinked until the ideas are arranged in the correct order. Pictures (and sometimes, sound) can be added to the outline. Different levels of sub-topic can be created and displayed, and text added to each idea box. Once all the text has been added and the structure is finalised, the program puts each idea, with text, into order ready for printing out. The writer can flip between the graphical design and the linear text at any time to check and edit. Graphical outlining programs like *Inspiration*, *Thinksheet* and *Expression* are appropriate for writers in late primary and secondary school, and are particularly popular in further and higher education.

Figure 2.3: Planning writing using *Inspiration*. The same information is being presented in "outline" (left) and as a "map" (right)".



2.9 Summary of tools to organise writing

Tools to help organise writing are useful for pupils with writing difficulties because they:

- ✓ allow the writer to more easily plan, create and edit text in any order;
- ✓ can give a structure and scaffolding to writing.

Tools to help organise writing are worth investigating if:

- ✓ the writer has difficulty working through a 'beginning-middle-end' planning and writing sequence;
- ✓ the writer has problems getting started with work.

Things to look for in a organising tool:

- ✓ suitability for the writer and the task;
- ✓ ease of use.