

1-1-1986

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Recommended Citation

Kemp, Fred (1986) "Review: Microcomputers and Word Processing Programs," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1112>

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Review

Brian Gallagher. *Microcomputers and Word Processing Programs: An Evaluation and Critique* (CUNY Research Monograph Series Report No. 9 March 1985)

Fred Kemp

You know what they say about word processing. Once you've used it you'll never go back to a typewriter. Such wisdom sounds ominous to some, like warnings of an addiction. But this young technology is rapidly dominating those professions which rely on the written word, ironically restoring the written word by electronic means, as Brian Gallagher says, to the position of respect it once held before being dethroned by audio and video electronics and threatened with McLuhan's "global village." We may still have the global village, but instead of sitting around massive video screens plugging in to World Television, the villagers will each be at his or her own microcomputer hacking out messages to each other and plugging into electronic billboards. However attractive that particular picture may or may not be, the fact is, I am writing this review right now by means of a word processing program on a microcomputer, and if there's one thing I know for sure, once you've moved words around the screen of a micro, the typewriter suddenly becomes a paleolithic instrument and the application of liquid paper and the retyping of multiple drafts become intolerable.

That having been said, I must also mention that the period of adjustment with word processing can be a very trying business, often giving the operator the feeling that he or she has traded in the frustration of the typewriter for a different kind of frustration, one involving mysterious electronic

happenings about as far from the comprehension of a decent wordsmith as you can get. One of the popular phrases around my computer lab is, "It just ate my paper!" followed by a close second, "It doesn't like me." This anthropomorphism is cute, but troubling, because I believe that for many people, especially in English departments, the computer does assume an independent, malevolent intelligence. They won't admit it, of course, and they probably don't believe that they believe it. But the haunting memory of Kubrick's HAL 9000 remains to some degree in all of us.

The business world, with only an occasional expletive directed at either the machine or the sales rep, more or less accepted word processing years ago as something that made sense every way you look at it. Academia, however, and especially that aloof breed which maintains the battlements in the English department, have tended to regard the "man versus machine" issue in Faustian terms.

Part of the problem, maybe all of the problem, lies in ignorance about the issue. Enter Brian Gallagher of the English Department of LaGuardia Community College. He has undertaken, in *Microcomputers and Word Processing Programs: An Evaluation and Critique*, to tread where few English instructors have dared tread, and that is to explain for us and our kind three things: what word processing on the microcomputer is, what we can expect from some of the major commercial word processing programs, and what the future may hold for English Departments once these little metal boxes have truly entered our offices, our classrooms, and even the cramped, quiet places to which we escape in order to publish or perish. Some, mostly those who have never soiled their fingers on an electronic keyboard, perceive such a future as anathema to the cultured concerns of belles lettres and the weekly attempt to capture the sublime in five hundred words. But even here Mr. Gallagher shows us possibilities for using the ubiquitous machines in ways that mechanize neither our writing nor our methods, but actually free us from the mechanical aspects of both.

He begins, appropriately enough, with a little Freudian sex. Computer books outsell computers by ten to one, he tell us, for there is "obviously something titillating, vaguely 'pornographic' in reading about the acrobatic machinations and lightning-quick 'interfaces' of the microcomputer," something "one can easily fantasize performing in the privacy of one's electronic home." I must confess that among the many and varied emotions aroused in me by computers, I have yet to experience lust. But I suppose this comment is Mr. Gallagher's way of establishing his English Department "bona fides" and assuring the wary that he can analyze symbol and motivation with the best. However, I think the proper explanation for the proliferation of computer books is that most of them don't do what they are supposed to, which is to tell non-technically oriented people how to work computers.

The would-be operator is forced to extrapolate information from a variety of sources to perform the simplest tasks. Gallagher is aware of this problem, for he justifies the present monograph as an attempt to concentrate on one aspect of the computer revolution, word processing for the microcomputer, and thereby produce a computer book that is actually useful. Though he hasn't really stuck to this plan, he has done a good job of providing precisely the explanations English instructors need about word processing.

He warns us that most of the information in the first chapter will seem "rudimentary" to some, and he is right, but he has been wise to include the material. Part of the problem with the above mentioned computer books is that, in their attempt to be breezy and commercial, they exhibit the technician's fault of assuming that certain basic points are self-evident. I have found with computers that nothing is self-evident, from the hidden switch that turns the thing on to the error messages that flash on the screen, always describing a totally irrelevant condition. Chapter 1 explains in necessary but occasionally excruciating detail every possible advantage that word processing has over the typewriter, from "word wrap" and "boilerplating" to instant revision. For those who have never touched a microcomputer, it is a valuable description, and a convincing argument that word processing is something that should be experienced at least once in life.

Here he cautiously asserts the credo of those who run computer labs in English departments, that "it is not entirely accurate, as the naysayers would have it, that word processing in no way makes one a better writer." I might have said it with a bit more gusto, but Gallagher obviously wants to maintain an air of equanimity so as not to encourage the "naysayers" to toss the book down without reading further. The truth is that the most odious task which faces our student writers, no matter how we would have it otherwise, is to produce a "clean copy" to hand in to the instructor. Anything which can reduce that task—and such is the special ability of word processing—will greatly encourage what writing teachers want most: experimentation with the text.

Chapter 2, "Word Processing in Writing Courses," surveys a number of approaches to the use of word processing in instruction, all of them variations on a single theme: revision is much, much easier on a microcomputer. Gallagher's descriptions of how this theme can be worked into programs for basic writing, for the learning disabled, for collaborative learning, may be useful to those who have been ordered by the department chairman to establish immediate computer instruction ("the computers arrive tomorrow"), or for those writing a grant proposal. But for anyone who has taught writing of any variety, once the capabilities of the word processing programs become apparent the applications make themselves known quickly. Often

novices display more ingenuity in this respect than those of us who work with computers regularly, and I hope that anyone reading the monograph wouldn't imagine the instructional possibilities limited to those listed in Chapter 2.

He proceeds to a description of how faculty may find word processing useful. As might be imagined, "documents for publication will be easier to produce and will be produced more quickly," to which we cheer, but "they may take even longer to be read by publishers, since the advent of word processing is likely to increase the overall number of submissions." This is a chilling thought. He adds that "Academics will probably find themselves distributing more documents to students..." To those who may ask if this is progress, he makes no answer, but does give a series of suggestions for the scholar searching for a good word processing program.

Ninety pages making up almost the exact center of the document (pages 49-139 of a total of 191) include what will be for fairly experienced users the most valuable information of the monograph: a description of the technical capabilities and liabilities of word processing software, program by program. Though Mr. Gallagher examines only twenty programs out of over two hundred on the market, those he has chosen are the most successful commercially and probably represent the most effective programs for the money. They include familiar names as Wordstar, Microsoft Word, Easywriter II, and Perfect Writer. All are IBM compatible, which is wise since MS-DOS is the closest thing the industry has to a standard operating system. But, as he points out, many of the programs also operate on Apple and other computers.

His format is practical. He has categorized the programs by cost: inexpensive (\$50-\$125), moderately priced (\$175-\$350), and expensive (\$up to \$500). His manner of comparison is especially lucid for a book requiring this kind of detail, stressing "big" concerns such as the amount of memory required, the clarity of commands, the number of keystrokes required to perform regularly used functions, whether the program is screen or print-oriented, whether it is menu or keystroke-driven, whether it can produce headers or footers, and (for the academic writer) whether it can handle superscripting and subscripting, special typefaces, and formatting changes within the document. Nor are relatively lesser but sometimes important functions ignored, such as widow lines, cursor description and placement, and the specific operation of various "modes." I was especially pleased to find, as one might expect, that Mr. Gallagher pays close attention to the relative merits of the operating manuals. Anyone who has ever ventured to operate microcomputer equipment or programs knows how incomprehensible most of the documentation is. One of the first things students who have mastered a particular function remark upon is what little similarity

they find between the "book's" description of a process and the way they end up doing it. A very important consideration for anyone selecting word processing programs, especially for student use, is the clarity and sensibility of the manual.

As for the prose of this section, one occasionally encounters something like "SuperWriter is a program with a plentitude of features," but for the most part Mr. Gallagher manages a fearsome amount of information at a good pace and with a minimum of confusion. As a reference tool for people concerned with word processing on microcomputers and its related nomenclature, I would consider these ninety pages absolutely necessary.

But, as I said above, Mr. Gallagher hasn't stuck to his plan, which is to concentrate "almost exclusively on one aspect of microcomputer use: word processing programs." At two different places in the text he includes a discussion about a general problem with computers in education that some take very seriously. That is the problem of access. If it is true that computers can help writing, it is also true that computers are expensive and will always be more available to richer schools. This "non-egalitarian tendency" of computers for instructional use, as Gallagher puts it, is hardly valid as an argument against the machines themselves, but rather supports the need for better planning by educators. He quotes NCTE's resolve to "urge equity of access to computers among students of varying socio-economic levels" but doesn't suggest how such a thing could be done. He does produce an odd attack on advertisers for displaying computer users in their ads as "unfailingly middle (or upper) class and often, if the setting is in an office, they are shown as ingenious and powerful types." Supposedly, this represents a form of discrimination. Discriminatory, too, is the practice of computer manufacturers' "selling their products at a very large markup." I find it hard to fault the advertisers of a particular product for trying to appeal to the egotism of the very people who would be capable of and interested in buying their product, nor can I blame the manufacturers for selling their product at a price the market will bear. But Gallagher sees word processing, I think, as something that will have so serious an effect upon society that it should be somehow made part of the public domain. His rather provocative ideas about the future of word processing appear in the last chapter.

In the final twenty-five pages, Mr. Gallagher departs from what has been a thoroughly useful discussion of the mechanics of word processing and of specific word processing programs to launch himself into the nether regions of "social, educational, epistemological, and ontological issues" regarding his subject. We are suddenly considering "sharp breaks in the evolutionary cycle," "the creation of entirely new systems of thought," and "polymodality." We are startled to find that "computers demand to be had and used" (a phrase that reminds us of Mr. Gallagher's theory of computer appeal). We

are shaken by aspects of word processing we have never before considered: "Does the program respect the human rights of the user?" "Is the software being used relatively free of intellectual coercion...?" I must admit that I have never examined my software for ideological correctness.

Of the complex "issues" expanded upon in this last section, included are "Word Processing and Pseudo-Consciousness," "Word Processing and the Ontology of Writing," and the following, "Word Processing and the Idea of a 'Text.'" I believe it to be the most interesting, and a good sample of what's in store for the reader as the book winds down.

We find that word processing makes writing "an irreducibly electronic act," and that this "delimits the 'written' text as a thing wholly and completely 'electronic' in its essence." Between the computer's keystroke and the printer's tpestroke, the text "is a complex electrical entity." The meaning of this, in case you are missing it, is that "in a very real sense, only the machines...deal with original texts, the users only and always seeing a reflection of the original." This makes the printed form of the text "only a secondary, not a primary, form of its existence," and therefore "the word processor enforces a certain insubstantiality on the text." Translation: you have to know what you are doing or you can lose five pages in a single keystroke.

It also means that the nature of what we are producing is somehow less real, or as Gallagher puts it, "problematic ontologically." This is not, as one might suppose, a bad thing, because "recent critical and interpretative trends" suggest that the static text we produce on the printed page is a distortion of, he quotes Geoffrey Hartman, the "indeterminable web of texts or interpretations" that actually exist in our understanding. In other words, the word processing program produces a primary electronic text never at any stage "fixed," which mirrors the "radical indeterminacy" of the text as it exists in the mind. With its instant ability to shift, alter, or delete text, the word processor ontologically complements both the natural action of the mind and writing as process.

Perhaps, but I sense the roots of a Grand Theory here which serve to burden the conclusion of an otherwise very useful and competently managed handbook.

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