

1-1-1987

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Recommended Citation

Partenheimer, David (1987) "One View of WANDAH: HBJ Writer," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1155>

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One View of WANDAH: HBJ Writer

David Partenheimer

Many claim that television has undermined the writing skills of the modern youth. Another machine, the computer, promises to restore writing skills and perhaps even improve them. Though scientists have utilized computers in their research and teaching for the last forty years, those in the language arts have just discovered the potential of the computer in the last twenty years and on a large scale during the last five. In the future, computer-assisted writing may well become a standard feature of writing programs in both secondary schools and universities. However, whether the computer will become a writing messiah is open to serious debate.

The Utah State Board of Education is one example of an educational system that has attempted to improve writing skills at the high-school level through the use of computers. In 1985, the State Board of Education procured \$310,548 from the Utah Legislature to underwrite a pilot program in computer-assisted writing. The economy-minded Utah Legislature awarded the monies for WANDAH primarily because it hoped that computers could teach more writing to more students with less capital outlay. Since automation has replaced many assembly-line workers, it was thought that perhaps the computer could replace some expensive classroom teachers. Six Utah schools were selected to test a writing program originally called WANDAH, but called HBJ Writer after Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich bought the software. I was employed by the Park City School District to implement WANDAH in the high school. My experience may prove useful for other teachers and schools working with or considering using WANDAH, or similar programs, in their writing centers.

WANDAH the Witch or WANDAH the Wonder?

The WANDAH software offers prewriting aids, a word processing program, and reviewing and revising aids. On the surface, WANDAH offers

a magic potion for introducing both process-oriented writing and computer-assisted writing.

The prewriting aids provide prompts and instructions so that students learn to freewrite, nutshell, and plan. In particular, the freewriting section is useful to students and teachers who have no background in process writing. A message, "do not stop typing" flashes on the screen so that students concentrate on pure production. "Invisible writing" does not display the text so that students won't attempt to edit while generating a rough copy.

However, by the second or third writing assignment, most students become annoyed with or intimidated by the flashing message. "The flashing light makes me panic so I write dumb things just to make it quit," says one student. Other students complain that invisible writing foils the writing process. "I always get into the middle of the sentence and forget what I've said," grumbles a frustrated student. "I repeat a sentence five or six times," says another. In other words, *WANDAH*'s free-writing programs stifle the freewriting process for many students.

The nutshell program forces the student to decide on a title, purpose, and audience for his paper. This program allows the teacher to intervene early in fundamental writing decisions by checking whether the student has specific objectives and a real audience. The "summary" section allows only three lines, a limitation that forces many students to do this assignment elsewhere.

The planning program requires a student to write a thesis and provide several "supporting and opposing statements." This program is particularly useful for persuasive papers or for simply forcing students to think about their topics. However, it is useless for most other discourse modes such as description, narration, and imaginative writing. Furthermore, the pro-and-con construction determines an organizational format that may be either inappropriate or overly simplistic. Neither the teacher nor the students should get the impression that planning is limited to listing pros and cons. Planning involves numerous strategies that students should learn. Accordingly, the *WANDAH* planning program is soon exhausted and discarded.

Since the prewriting programs cannot be reentered, students must complete a prewriting drill at one sitting or start over. Students complain that repeatedly starting over wastes productive writing time. Consequently, students experienced with *WANDAH* avoid these problems by working directly with the word processing program, where they can exit and reenter at will. In short, students ultimately do *WANDAH*'s prewriting aids on the word processing program.

A major part of an effective writing program must include instruction in proofreading and revising papers. WANDAH's reviewing and revising aids are designed to fulfill these writing needs. However, like all language-analysis software on the market, including that for main-frame computers, WANDAH's reviewing and revising aids are sorely inadequate.

An organizational review offers another nutshell program, a transition-and-pronoun search, and a first-sentence or selected-sentence outline. This second nutshell program encourages students to reexamine their purpose, audience, and thesis, all of which may have changed through the process of writing. The outlines are useful in making students create topic sentences and examine the relationship of major ideas in their papers. However, the teacher, not the computer, provides the significance of these exercises.

For the transition-and-pronoun search WANDAH underlines coordinate conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, and personal pronouns. According to the *HBJ User's Manual*, "Seeing these words and their location marked in your paper gives you an overview of how you have linked ideas." In fact, most students do not understand the printout. "It's confusing," they lament. In any case, it's misleading. Good transitions between paragraphs are often sentences rather than single words. Often there is no transition word between sentences because the connection is achieved by logical deduction or the repetition of a key word. The information provided by the WANDAH program inaccurately suggests to students that numerous *ands* and *buts* reflect good transitions. Generally, the extensive use of *and* and *but* means that sentences are carelessly strung together. At best, teachers may use the transition-and-pronoun search as a one-time introduction to transitions and pronoun antecedents.

A stylistic review highlights *be* verbs, so-called abstract words, gender-specific nouns, prepositions, *-tion* and *-sion* words and calculates sentence length. None of these reviews is particularly accurate nor very sophisticated. For example, WANDAH can effectively identify *to be* in its various conjugations and determine, on the basis of some undisclosed standard, whether the percentage is too high, about average, or below average. However, the program cannot tell the student how to replace *to be* verbs. Furthermore, the computer is not "smart" enough to distinguish *to be* forms as auxiliaries in progressive or passive constructions. Unfortunately, students often get the impression that if the omniscient computer does not require more advanced skills than *to be* verb recognition, there are none.

The *-tion* and *-sion* word program baffles most students. "What's wrong with the word *nation*?" they rightfully ask. The teacher spends valuable time sorting out the errors. Instead, the teacher should use the time explaining the difference between abstract and concrete or general and specific words.

The WANDAH abstract-word program cannot determine if a particular word is appropriately concrete and specific within a given context. Students place too much faith in WANDAH. If she doesn't underline a word, they think it is not abstract. In fact, nearly every other noun in high school writing could be made more specific and concrete. Nonetheless, the WANDAH printout states that "the text has one abstract word in 1 sentence" or some similarly inaccurate statistic. Students are quick to cite WANDAH as an authority against the teacher so that they do not have to revise further. The wise teacher does not show her students WANDAH's abstract-word program.

The mechanical review section highlights commonly misused words and potentially missing punctuation marks. If the teacher cautions her students that WANDAH is not very thorough, this program does little harm. However, at this stage of the writing process, students should be using their peers for help. WANDAH is a woman without lips. She underlines. Students explain. WANDAH saves and retrieves. Students praise and blame. Computer-assisted writing should never become writing for the computer.

In this respect, WANDAH's commenting program is pedagogically dangerous. Either a student or teacher responds to a text on the screen. These comments are stored, and the writer can view them either on the screen or have them printed out. Though composition teachers should welcome computer-assisted writing, they should avoid such insidious programs that make writing an impersonal event and create an artificial barrier between a writer and his readers. Instead of commenting on the artifact on the computer screen, the teacher or student should talk directly to the writer about his writing. Talking is quicker, more profound, and more effective than typing comments on a machine. Though WANDAH is a lady without lips, she should not be allowed to silence a classroom of talkative students by making them type their reactions onto a magnetic diskette.

Any program must be user-friendly; otherwise it won't be understood or used. For use in secondary schools, the program must also be graphic, even simplistic. Even seniors in high school do not read instructions accurately. The WANDAH program is not self-explanatory. Students may be able to use the various programs such as prewriting, *to be* verb analysis, and sentence-length calculation, but they do not know what to do with the data. "I just hit the keys; I don't read the instructions," says a student glibly. Apparently, the teacher is expected to provide the preparatory information. If WANDAH or any computer program is to be a teaching aid, it must free teachers from simple instruction so that they can address more complicated writing issues such as content, logic, and rhetorical considerations—issues that the computer may never adequately handle.

At best, WANDAH provides a starting point for teaching students how to write. The teacher must caution her students that WANDAH encompasses only a fraction of the skills involved in effective writing. Any competent writing teacher covers the features of WANDAH's prewriting, reviewing, and revising programs within a few months and then moves on to other writing skills. Furthermore, since process writing instruction is becoming a part of middle school and elementary curricula, the WANDAH program may be "old stuff" for high school students within the next five years.

Since teachers and students soon ignore both WANDAH's prewriting and revising programs, WANDAH must ultimately be evaluated as a word processing program. On this basis too, WANDAH is not entirely satisfactory. Frequently, the "Save" function fails but nevertheless indicates a created file. When a student attempts to retrieve it, the file is gone. "It screwed up my disk! I'll kill the damn machine!" students scream. Another problem is that formatting codes are complicated, confusing, and unsophisticated. Each code must be entered on its own line, thus separating some text unnaturally from the general body of the text. Furthermore, the screen version and printed version are seldom identical.

There are other problems. WANDAH allows for only draft-quality printing. It has no automatic back-up capability. It does not have right-margin justification. The printer commands do not allow for the various font and print capabilities of our IBM Proprinters, which have nearly twenty different print options. WANDAH also has no endnote or footnote features. In comparison with other popular word processing programs on the market, WANDAH is primitive. Students quickly discover its limitations and use other word processing programs. All in all, once with WANDAH is enough!

WANDAH has perhaps little magic of her own, but she has been the catalyst for improving writing skills at my school. Since the state of Utah awarded us \$40,000 to implement a computer-assisted writing program, our English teachers have felt obliged to teach more writing, and writing is clearly one of those skills in which more practice makes a significant difference. The limitations in the WANDAH software have made us in the English Department more aware of the essential writing skills and how they should be taught.

Initially, the computers for the WANDAH program were placed in my classroom. Though we in the English Department were aware of writing centers and across-the-curriculum writing programs, until WANDAH, we never had enough impetus to open a writing center and involve the entire faculty in writing. Now, we have employed a writing center supervisor to implement and operate a writing center and to coordinate across-the-

curriculum writing. We are developing a software library for all writing and language needs. I anticipate that within a year or two, WANDAH will be collecting dust in our software library. Nonetheless, we at Park City High School are indebted to her for the inspiration of computer-assisted writing.

David Partenheimer implemented the WANDAH project at Park City High School from 1985-1986. Currently, he teaches composition, literature, and English education at Northeast Missouri State University.