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Another View of WANDAH: HBJ Writer

Bill Emmett

Writing. At best it's hard work, often it's very difficult, and—to a great number of high school students—it's "boring," "stupid," and "impossible." But wait. Look down in the writing room. It's a bird. It's a plane. It's *Super WANDAH: HBJ Writer*. Faster than a speeding ballpoint, more powerful than a typewriter, able to leap tall essays in a single class period, *Super WANDAH* helps students produce writing that is clear, precise, and fun to read, writing that is an example of truth, justice, and the American way.

Well, perhaps I exaggerate a tad. Maybe WANDAH can't do it all, or even most. But it's possible that we've given her a cape she wasn't supposed to be wearing. Is her real name Clark Kent? Or has Kryptonite robbed WANDAH of all power. Let's go back to the beginning, which occurred not on some distant planet but in some sunny corner of UCLA. WANDAH began life as a rather innocuous writing program to assist incoming freshman with their writing skills. At the same time, the head of Logan High's English Department had completed a course with the Utah Writer's Project. With a missionary's zeal, she sought to bring the entire department into the waters of process writing. Soon we were saved as well.

But that didn't stop our department head. Something was needed to help the work along, something that could assist our efforts in converting uninspired writers from the darkest corners of the eleventh and twelfth grades into born-again thinkers and writers, capable of heavenly composition. "Could not that something be a computer, *Time's Man of the Year*?" reasoned our department head, and quicker than you can say "floppy disk," Logan High had sixteen computers, four printers, and WANDAH. After two years of use in the writing process at Logan High, has WANDAH become the Superman of Composition, the Wicked Witch of the Writers, or something else entirely? In order to answer that question, we must look at how WANDAH fits into the writing process at Logan High.

First, she came at an opportune time. Not only had our English department committed to process writing but we had also acquired an adjacent

elementary building with a large media center room to be used by the English Department. In addition, our school moved to a trimester system, which gave us seventy-minute classes. By mid-fall, we were ready to go. WANDAH could do her thing.

But exactly what was her thing? We didn't know for sure. All we knew was that we had a program with some interesting features (gender-specific nouns, for example). Now what? Our next move was to hire a "writing room assistant" who knew both composition and word processing. Then we all took lessons. Finally we decided how a computer could fit into the writing process at our high school and then began to teach writing with the help of WANDAH. After two years of WANDAH: HBJ *Writer*, have our expectations been met? Well, yeah, pretty much. But then we never did look at WANDAH as a "writing messiah." We have always considered WANDAH to be an aid to both the writer and the instructor, but never to be a replacement for either.

In Antoine de Saint-Exupery's essay "The Tool," the author asks "how anyone [can] conceive that the machine is the end? It is a tool. As much a tool as is the plough." WANDAH the computer, WANDAH the tool. But how good is this tool? How does WANDAH help the teacher and the writer to reach the desired result, a good piece of writing?

First I'll look at prewriting. We found that the prewriting section was not very effective by itself. Our students quickly tired of the exercises for prewriting. However, in our process writing, we have found that prewriting is mandatory for successful writing. The solution? Do prewriting exercises without WANDAH. Most of our writing assignments include two or three days of some prewriting activities. WANDAH's role in prewriting has now become one of support. If a student or teacher feels that an idea or topic is not making any progress, the student may then move into the appropriate section in prewriting and use WANDAH as a catalyst to get moving again. Most students find the prewriting done in class prior to work in the Writing Room is sufficient. Yet WANDAH does give the occasional student who can't get untracked the opportunity to get moving again.

Those students who do use the prewriting section feel most comfortable using the freewriting. And yes, the flashing light does bother a few. But after a few tries at it, most don't even pay attention to the screen. Other features, such as nutshelling, seem to work better as additional prewriting activities assigned by the teacher. For example, the questions asked by WANDAH in nutshelling can help writers to focus on topics which they have already worked out. It becomes a review that saves the teacher a little bit of time that might otherwise be spent reading over topics and asking basic questions about support and organization. Our experience indicates prewriting with WANDAH seems to be best suited for a supporting role.

However, we have found the reviewing and revising aids to be more effective in helping students to reach their final product. To be sure, not all these exercises are always beneficial, and none of them are of any real value without the supervision and direction of a teacher. Yet we have found that within the framework of process writing, these aids can be very helpful. Two of the aids that seem to have the greatest impact on actual student revision are the “be verb” search and the sentence-length graph.

In the “be verb” search, the students can see how many of their sentences contain potentially weak “be verbs.” If left at that, most students say, “I have sixty-two percent ‘be verbs.’ Is that good?” The value of this aid lies in the approach of the instructor. Before the writer uses the aid, the teacher must explain how “be verbs” might weaken a student’s writing. This becomes a good mid-composing activity. Students must then think for themselves. “Would this sentence sound better with an active verb? How can I make the change?” Of course, this creates some good opportunities for peer evaluation and comment. One teacher has assigned a rough draft containing zero percent “be verbs” to his class. After some discussion and peer evaluation, the students may then go back and add those “be verbs” they feel will help the paper. Although *WANDAH* does not suggest how the verbs could be replaced, by locating the verbs *WANDAH* allows the student and the teacher to look at ways writing could be enhanced with the use of active verbs.

The sentence-length graph works in much the same way—to assist in the writing instruction. On his own, a student looking at bar graphs of words per sentence may mistake the green rectangles for the New York City skyline, and, without supporting instruction, that is about how valuable this part of the program can become. Put in a discussion of complex sentences or sentence variety, however, and the skyscrapers can become a visual aid to determining sentence style. Although this feature in and of itself cannot show students how they can improve their sentence length or how they can create the same sentence sense that a Hemingway or Faulkner had, *WANDAH*’s graph can help support the class discussion on sentences or the comments made in a peer evaluation. Once again she becomes an instructional “tool.”

Other aids in the revision section can be used effectively. Although the “Commenting” portion of *WANDAH* is not as effective as oral discussion, it can be used as another approach for peer evaluation. My students have enjoyed the change from the usual format of one-to-one discussion. Used sparingly, “Commenting” can be a refreshing change. The mechanical and usage reviews are very simple and probably not suited for the majority of high school student writers. But when I turn my number “9” class (read “Seniors’ Last Chance to Learn How to Write Before Graduation” class)

loose on the mechanics, usage, and spelling checks, the reviews become very helpful. With some pre-use instruction and some more instruction the first time through, most students can get through the reviews with little help the next time. I would agree that some areas of the revision section are not very helpful. In fact, the “tion” words and “gender-specific nouns” are two that I have not used. Students with time are welcome to examine their texts for these potential problems, but I have seen little use for them. The nice part about WANDAH is that instructors can decide what best suits their needs, use those parts and leave the rest.

The third part of WANDAH that needs to be considered is the word processing itself. Is it adequate? Well, I like it, but I’m computer illiterate. Students are comfortable with it, especially if they are not used to another word processor. If they use something else at home or in school, then it becomes a matter of which they feel more comfortable with. The chronic “Oh, I didn’t see that” readers of instructions do get lost at times. Fortunately, that hurdle has been overcome with the hiring of our full-time aide. She and the teacher, along with one or two student aides, are able to keep most students writing at least smoothly, if not always beautifully. As students spend more time with WANDAH, the mystery and confusion diminish.

So, what’s the final analysis? Is WANDAH able to leap tall essays on her own? Can she rescue the average student in Metropolis, U.S.A., from writing paralysis? No. But then neither can White’s *Elements of Style* or Elbow’s *Writing With Power*, yet taken as a part of a writing instruction package, they can all help. That’s how we see WANDAH. She’s not the paragon of writing instruction because she was never meant to be. WANDAH is something the students flow in and out of in their writing process. WANDAH doesn’t start and end the process but rather helps the students along, much as a favorable current can help a swimmer or boater. I’m sure that more sophisticated programs will come along and WANDAH will be outdated. Obsolescence in tools is inevitable. Yet to deprive students of the opportunity to use WANDAH because of her “primitive” word processing or simplistic analyses is to deprive the student of an opportunity to use one more tool in his or her writing program.

Bill Emmett has taught English at Logan High for ten years. His introduction to WANDAH, though not exactly epiphanal, was at least pretty neat.