

# RESEARCH IN WORD PROCESSING NEWSLETTER

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° ° STACK CRUNCHING: USE A STANDALONE TO PROCESS STUDENT PAPERS ° °

Word processing can help professors to process student papers more efficiently and fully. By its very nature, student writing tends to exhibit shared responses for the most part, and evaluative comments are likely to be repetitive and time-consuming, those very qualities which the computer is most easily able to help with. But the successful use of the insert mode must be coupled with a willingness to avoid the coldly mechanical look of "form" responses.

Specific and detailed feedback is the basis of effective communication in the learning-teaching relationship, but the sheer volume of student material that a professor must process makes possible only the briefest comments. There is usually a wide gap between what the professor could say and that which is actually returned. Oral feedback during office hours often provides the only opportunity for extended evaluation, yet too few students can be accommodated.

Word processing offers a solution, however, because most of the student-specific comments tend to be "general" and transferable in the larger sphere of student responses. Strengths and weaknesses in student writing are apt to reappear, and the professor who can articulate them most fully offers the surest guidance. Using the "insert" mode on word processors, the distance between thought and "hardcopy" is diminished, lessening the time-consuming task of making repetitive comments to students with common needs.

° ° ° ° ° ° ° ° STACK CRUNCHING: ESTABLISHING A CATALOG ° ° ° ° ° ° ° °

A catalog of possible comments must be established at first, requiring an initial time investment to identify, articulate, and key-in specific evaluative responses, realizing that the particular comment need not ever be constructed on screen again. The perennial "comma splice" problem can serve as an example: what constitutes a fully articulated piece of advice? Depending on the individual contexts of different professors, a typical response might include the following:

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See p. 40 in the text about comma splices, and go through enough drilling until you have mastered the concept. This problem often occurs when a comma is placed where a period or semicolon should go. If you can recognize an independent clause (IC), then you should have no problem.

Whatever the length or direction of the comment, it should represent a standard piece of advice that can be given to another student with a similar problem. In this case, the student is 1) reminded of where in the grammar text to refer for further explanation, is 2) given certain motivators, and is 3) provided with a handy clarification tip. Of course, the content of the comment is entirely variable.

Once a comment has been articulated on screen, it is mnemonically recorded out to the disk as CS so that recall can be achieved without additional referencing. In addition, a brief page description--"comma splice problem"--is sent out for the Table of Contents. A word processor with alphanumeric sort and an automatic table-of-contents formatting ability is most useful in this effort.

Later entries in the comment catalog (or even the initial ones) can be accumulated by "extracting" an appropriate comment from a particular evaluation sheet and then sending it out to the disk under the correct page labels. In addition, masthead-type information--relating to course number, assignment name, date, and the like--can represent an item in the catalog.

### ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ STACK CRUNCHING: USING THE INSERT MODE ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦ ◦

Once a comment catalog has been established, the insert mode is used to shape individual evaluation sheets. Masthead information is inserted with a key stroke, usually stopping the insertion at place where variables--such as name and paper title--can be inserted "within" the insert. The "halt" prompt or similar feature on word processors makes this additional feature possible.

After the masthead information, a variety of approaches can actually organize the scope and direction of the comments themselves. An "upbeat" opening statement might set a positive tone at this point: for example, "This paper is both interesting and idea-rich in many respects, so continue to work for maximum clarity whenever possible." Generously interpreted, such a comment can almost apply to every paper, but many students might welcome such softening reinforcement before more critical feedback. The "halt" insert-within-an-insert feature is also

commonly found in the opening statement so that the subject of the particular student paper can be identified.

The body of the evaluation sheet is developed systematically by balancing positive and negative comments as appropriate. As he must always do, the professor studies the paper to identify and prioritize particular strengths and weaknesses. The insert mode then allows a fully articulated comment to be added with only one, two, or three keystrokes.

On most dedicated word processors, the insert feature is simply a matter of keying-in the page label on the screen--such as SP for spelling--and then pressing the "insert" key. The entry will automatically adjust itself to the screen margins, leaving two spaces after the final period for additional inserts.

• • • • • STACK CRUNCHING: PERSONALIZING COMMENTS • • • • •

Computer-generated or other "form" responses can often seem cold and impersonal to the student. The professor will want to retain as much of the immediacy of handwritten comments as possible to impart a one-to-one sense of communication. This is accomplished by keying-in the name, title, and scattered one-sentence observations here and there in the paper--those that unmistakably reflect an engagement with student himself. These extra remarks are typed in typically after an inserted entry. The student's first name can be easily inserted before or after an inserted comment as well.

In many cases, even the personalized additions will actually turn out to have wider use. "Can you find the example I've checked on your third page" and similar seemingly paper-specific comments can be easily inserted as E1, E2, and so on.

Other means of personalizing comments merely call upon the professor's exercise of familiar tone and audience strategies. Personal pronouns are employed whenever possible--and so are contractions to convey a chatty sense of presence. So that the flow of comments will seem natural, transition words often precede the entries in the catalog. No one who teaches writing should have a problem stepping around the "processed" look of his words.

For the same reason, the professor will probably not want to advertize his procedures. Let them think that you've actually taken the time to type the comments personally--which has been done in a sense. Many students are actually encouraged to find that such an interest has been taken in them--and that volume, at least for the professor, is actively pursued. Justifying the right margin might be a give

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away, but so are comments that can be easily compared and seen as "stock" responses. To avoid this, it is helpful to collect a variety of comments to articulate the same problem. Opening comments are the most conspicuous in this sense--especially when students compare papers--and a series of them should be available in the catalog (sent out as O1, O2, etc. to the disk).

#### • • • • • STACK CRUNCHING: THE MBO-TYPE FORMAT • • • • •

An alternative to the paragraph-block arrangement of comment is the more structured MBO (Management By Objectives) approach in which feedback is organized in terms of automatically formatted subheadings: objectives, milestones, and the like. Each evaluation sheet is easily accessible to the student who wants concrete placement of his writing profile as a historical progression. The past, present, and future are clearly documented to reflect previously accomplished goals, objectives yet to strengthen, and steps for future improvement.

Scrolling of earlier comment sheets can be most easily accomplished on a word processor with a large screen memory--128K seems quite functional in this respect--and a full page display. The evaluator needs only to scroll up and down to establish the student's line of development as a writer. Computers with lesser RAM memory can accomplish a similar result by calling in successive former comment sheets from the disk. A system which automatically increments the IN and OUT functions is especially helpful. In any case, scrolling will also prevent the evaluator from repeating boilerplate comments already given to a particular student.

#### • • • • • STACK CRUNCHING: A FINAL WORD • • • • •

Writing is an important learning tool in most disciplines because it promotes a knowledge retrieval which is exact and comprehensive. Yet most professors, even in writing courses, tend to minimize written assignments because evaluative feedback is laboriously repetitive and time-consuming. The word processor can solve this problem, however, and allow for painless comment responses of higher quality and quantity than ever before.

Ideally, comments to students should identify specific problems, reinforce favorable skills, and provide additional objectives and remedial actions. The best comments are objectively based upon principles which can be readily abstracted and pinned down. The insert mode is the key to effective feedback. A wide-ranging catalog of specific "boilerplate" comments is available on disk and mnemonically coded so that a keystroke or two is enough to insert a fully developed response.



Olds, Henry F. and Others. "Word Processing: How Will It Shape the Student Writers." Classroom Computer News. 3:2 (November-December 1982), p. 25.

Salthouse, Timothy. "The Skill of Typing." Scientific American. 250:2 (February 1984), pp. 128-129, 131-133, 135.

Turner, Judith Axler. "IBM Takes Aim at Campuses, Pushing Use of Its Computers for Instruction and Research." The Chronicle of Higher Education. (January 25, 1984), pp. 9-10.

° ° COOC SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP ON COMPUTERS TO MEET IN NEW YORK ° °

The 1984 Conference on College Composition and Communication will continue to offer its Special Interest Group "The Fifth C: Computers" when it meets in New York at the end of March. Composition and literature teachers interested in exchanging ideas and information about the use of computers in the writing process are urged to meet on Thursday, March 29, from 4:00 to 5:15. Those attending are invited to bring at least 150 handouts describing your projects, plans, and interests. Further information can be obtained from Kate Kiefer, Department of English, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523.

° ° ° ° ° SOFTWARE REVIEW -- WORDPLUS-PC FEATURING THE BOSS ° ° ° ° °

Continuing our series of articles in which we conduct hands-on evaluations of popular word-processing software for 8- and 16-bit microcomputers is a look at Professional Software Incorporated's WordPlus-PC Featuring the BOSS (a sophisticated spelling dictionary). Our aim is not to endorse any product. Rather, we will list each program's major EDIT and COMMAND features, comment upon special utilities, and analyze strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to student and teacher interaction with the software in a writing-laboratory environment. If there are specifics about a program that are not covered here but about which you want to know, just drop us a note: we will try to answer your questions.

PROGRAM: WordPlus-PC Featuring the BOSS  
PUBLISHER: Professional Software Incorporated  
ADDRESS: 51 Fremont St., Needham, MA 02194  
PRICE: \$395.00 (\$495.00 w/the BOSS)  
COMPUTERS: IBM-PC & comp., DEC Rainbow, TI Pro., Victor 9000  
MEMORY: 192k  
DISK DRVS: one (two recommended)

DEFAULT TEXTFILE LENGTH:	one word
MAXIMUM TEXTFILE LENGTH:	14k (200 single-spaced lines)
SIZE OF SPELLING DICTIONARY:	90,000 words
CORRECTS SPELLING:	yes
ON-DISK TUTORIALS:	---
DOCUMENTATION READABILITY:	good
DOCUMENTATION TUTORIALS:	fair
QUALITY OF "HELP" SCREENS:	fair
MENU-SUPPORTED PRINTERS:	excellent

(An important aspect of any word-processing software package is the ease in which the user can configure it to match system hardware. WordPlus-PC's "CONFIG" program is completely menu-driven, affording the user ease of printer [serial or parallel, letter-quality or dot-matrix] and monitor [monochrome, black-and-white, or RGB] setup. There's some debate among composition instructors as to whether or not a student should have access to a spelling checker program, especially one such as this where words can be not only "flagged," but corrected on the spot by the program. Not to worry, though, since you don't have to purchase the BOSS; but it would be a shame not to, considering its "SUGGEST" option can be used creatively to open up new tutorial worlds for students [The BOSS searches for words in order of phonetic correctness, rather than just by the spelling; thus, interesting suggestions in addition to the correct one are displayed via a window.] .)

#### HELP UTILITIES

Interactive "HELP" screens	yes
On-screen "HELP" status line	---
Enable/disable on-screen "HELP" status line	n/a
Create user-defined "HELP" screens	yes

(The "HELP" screens supplied by the publisher are adequate, but nothing to write home about. The again, much of WordPlus-PC's transparency is derived from its utilization of command lines rather than menu-driven format screens. It's easy to design your own custom "HELP" screens--you can even add graphics to make them more eye-catching. Remember, if grammar/rhetoric book page-turning has your terminals tied up, on-screen tutorials can prove real timesavers.)

#### FORMATTING

Underlining	yes
Boldface/shadow print	yes

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Automatic headers/footers/page numbers	yes
Subscript/superscript	yes
Centering	yes
Document justification options (L,R,C)	yes
Word wrap	yes
Graphics	yes
Menu-driven formatting commands	---
Override menu with dot/inline commands	n/a
Save parameters with textfile	yes

(The results aren't in yet as to whether the icon, menu, or command line is the optimum choice of text-formatting mode for students. At the entry level, icons--pictures--seem to help writers affect faster editing and command operations. But for a more seasoned user, embedded command strings [lm=left margin, rm=right margin, pl=page length, pi=pitch, etc.] are preferred. WordPlus-PC utilizes embedded command-line strings. Not too many people feel strongly one way on the other about menu-driven text-formatting. What's your opinion?)

### TEXT HANDLING

Full-screen cursor scroll/control	yes
Auto text adjust after insert/delete	yes
Cut/paste	yes
Copy only (buffer)	yes
Boilerplating (library)	yes
File merging	yes
Search/replace	yes
Locate (w/o replace)	yes
Paragraph division	yes

(Technical communications teachers will appreciate WordPlus-PC's ability to print the 128 ASCII graphics characters above the normal uppercase and lowercase character set. You'll need a suitable graphics printer, such as an Epson MX-80 w/Graftrax, to accomplish this; however, the rewards will reveal themselves quickly in the text/graphics blend your students can display.)

### PRINTING

View text before printing (print-to-screen)	yes
Proportional spacing	yes
Print from memory	yes



Print from disk	yes
Background printing while editing	yes
File chaining	yes
Menu-driven formatting	---
Accepts embedded ASCII and/or ESC(ape) codes	yes

(Again, when machines are at a premium and time is of the essence, it is crucial that a word-processing program allow for background operations to occur. With WordPlus-PC, one student can be standing by the printer waiting for hardcopy output while another edits a textfile. There are separate print spoolers/buffers available, but there's always the problem of software integration to consider, since not all software works with all other software. Even if you opt for a hardware spooler/buffer, there's a chance that it might not interface with the program properly. Who needs the headaches. Our job is teaching, not calling manufacturers every other day with a compatibility problem.)

#### OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Programmable function keys	---
Integrated EDIT and COMMAND modes	yes
Menu-driven disk housekeeping utilities	yes
Binding spaces	yes
User-support phone service	yes (3 months)

(Professional Software's phone-support team is quite friendly and knowledgeable concerning their product. If they can't answer a question right away, they always get back to you promptly--a rare commodity in today's often rush-em-through software world.)

#### ADDITIONAL FEATURES

WordPlus-PC comes equipped with the usual mailmerge features found on most quality word-processing programs currently published. While there aren't a lot of bells and whistles, there is a full utilization of the computer's function keys--34 specific commands, to be precise--which affords the user maximum flexibility when it comes to underlining, boldfacing, subscripting and superscripting, and inserting/deleting text.

#### STRENGTHS

After a simple tour through the manual, the teacher can configure a FORMAT file for students which establishes basic textual parameters. After that, all the stu-

dent need do is recall the FORMAT file, type away, and store the document under any other name. Ragged and justified text is printed to screen--a feature not found on all similarly priced programs. I'll not take up too much space extolling the virtues of the BOSS spelling dictionary. You have to see it to believe it. Let's just say it's the best, fastest thing on disk at the moment, given its size and capability.

#### WEAKNESSES

There are those who say 14k maximum textfile lengths are a bother. Why not just abolish the software tyranny and allow the user to create textfiles of whatever length is personally accommodating? Well, after talking to the people at Professional Software, they make a convincing argument for limited textfile size: the more often you backup your work, the less likely you are to losing it because of your friendly utility company or a sudden heavenly outburst. Also, while the documentation is good, the folks at Professional Software could use a bit of help when it comes to indexing their program's many features.

#### OVERALL EVALUATION

Students and teachers alike should find WordPlus-PC Featuring the BOSS to be a substantial word-processing program. While it's more likely to be found in senior high and college centers, elementary teachers should take a hard look at it, too. Not fancy colors all over the screen, to be sure, but the ease at which words can be manipulated, combined with the color-coded function-key caps, could prove to be an edge worth the effort--especially if you're a growth-oriented instructor.

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The Newsletter welcomes article submissions from our readers which pertain to the applications of word processing in academic writing programs. Manuscripts should be OCR readable (Courier, Letter Gothic, or similar letter-quality typefaces) and should include a short autobiographical sketch (direct uploading of articles via modem will be enabled soon). The Editors reserve the right to edit articles, if necessary. If you want your manuscript returned, please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your submission. Address all correspondence to the Editors, Research in Word Processing Newsletter, Liberal Arts Department, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, Rapid City, SD 57701.