



Tip of the Month:



Differentiate Instruction with Online Tools for Writing

Many children with disabilities struggle with writing assignments in school. Whether the difficulty lies with the physical act of writing (holding a pencil, using a keyboard, forming letters), writing mechanics (grammar and spelling) or getting thoughts onto paper, writing can become a painful task for students with disabilities. As writing becomes a dreaded activity, students' writing abilities further suffer through lack of practice, leading to a cycle of writing avoidance. And little wonder! Few among us would continue writing if it took us twice as long (or longer!) than our peers to write something. Or if it took us so long to laboriously form letters that by the time we finished a word we had forgotten what we had intended to write. We might only write when absolutely necessary or if we were particularly motivated. In any classroom, students are likely to have a wide range of writing abilities, so it is important for teachers to ensure that all students gain practice writing for a variety of purposes and that struggling writers have plenty of opportunities to improve their basic skills.

Integrating web tools into your teaching can be a great way of beginning to address some of these issues. There are several reasons to use these tools in your classroom. Technology itself is inherently motivating for students, and many of them are using Web 2.0 tools already (social networking, YouTube, blogging, etc.) for daily activities. For many students with disabilities, using a computer also allows them to write and create more freely. For a student with dysgraphia, for example, using a keyboard may be far easier than trying to write with pen and paper. Web 2.0 tools provide students with a variety of ways to interact with print and images and to become the creators of knowledge. Using these tools to allow them to type or record their voices rather than handwrite can help kids with disabilities better demonstrate their knowledge while participating in the same lessons as their peers. While tech tools won't replace good teaching, they can help make writing activities more accessible for all your students.

Here are some suggestions for incorporating tech tools into your lessons:

- Use [VoiceThread](#) to create a slideshow about a book the class is reading. Ask students to respond to prompts throughout the slideshow about characters, plot, narrative devices, etc. Allow students to respond using text or audio. For younger students (pre-writers) or struggling writers, visual storytelling can be an excellent way of telling a story without the demands of writing.
- Use [Twitter](#) to have students tell a collaborative story. Each student writes one line of the story until complete. See [ManyVoices](#) for inspiration.
- Ask students to write stories and create animated movies using Kerpoof. Pre-designed sets and strips can be used as story-starters, or students can design their own stories. Studies have shown that storytelling is an essential element of building language skills and can help students improve their writing.
- Use public domain images and photos on Flickr to create story projects. Ask students to use pictures to tell a story, make up a story based on a picture, or upload their own photos (more appropriate for older students) to tell a story. Current Flickr storytelling projects include [telling a story in 5 frames](#), [telling the story of a photo in 6 words](#), and [using a photo as the basis for a creative writing activity](#). Check them out for inspiration!

- Create a classroom blog using Edublogs (or other programs) and ask students to respond online to writing prompts. Allowing students to write responses online rather than in class using pen and paper could be beneficial for students with dysgraphia or other learning disabilities.
- Create individual student blogs where students post stories, responses to assigned prompts and other high interest writing. Ask other students in the class to use the comments sections for feedback. This also gives you an online writing portfolio for each of your students so you can look back at their writing over the year. Fifth Grade Web Writers is a great example of this use of a class blog. Studies have shown that teenage bloggers write more (both in and out of school) than their peers without blogs.
- Create a classroom wiki on a topic of study (Shakespeare's plays) or with classroom information. Assign each student a section to edit and add to, either alone or with a partner. If a student is a struggling writer, they may work on a section with a stronger writer and add sound clips, videos or images to enhance their writing. Writing for an audience (even if only other students) can motivate struggling writers and encourage them to write more.
- For students who struggle with writing mechanics, try suggesting a contextual spellchecker. For many students with learning disabilities, a traditional spellchecker is not sufficient as it doesn't identify misused words, or words that are spelled correctly but not used in the correct context (their, there and they're is a good example). Microsoft Word 2007 features a built-in contextual spellchecker, and other free versions exist online.
- Have students edit their documents using a text-to-speech program. Hearing their writing read aloud can help students pick out errors and misused words. Full-featured text-to-speech software programs are available, and several free (and very basic) versions can be found online. Both PCs and Macs also have simple text-to-speech capabilities built in to their operating systems.

This month's Tip and the following Featured Resources were researched, compiled and written by Alise Brann, Research Associate at **EDC, Inc.** Alise works for the National Center for Supported e-Text and the Center for Implementing Technology in Education.
View past ISN Tips of the Month at: <http://www.inclusiveschools.org/tips>.



We wanted to share this information with you about Differentiating Instruction using Online Tools for Writing. This was originally posted on the Inclusive Schools Network at www.inclusiveschools.org. It is an excellent resource.