



# Do Digital Writing Tools Deliver? Student Perceptions of Writing Quality Using Digital Tools and Online Writing Environments

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## Abstract

Composition instructors have seen a significant increase in the incorporation of technology into the classroom due to societal, governmental, and pedagogical demands. This study examines high school freshmen English students' perceptions of writing skills and quality using digital tools and online writing environments versus pen/pencil and paper. A mixed methods approach was used with quantitative and descriptive data gathered anonymously using an online survey after the students completed a hybrid study of poetry. The survey results suggest that students perceive their writing to be of higher quality when writing with digital tools versus using a pen/pencil and paper and that writing in online environments fosters enhanced writing skill development. The findings lead to specific pedagogical suggestions, particularly that teachers should ensure that students compose with digital tools and that online feedback opportunities are maximized to promote positive perceptions of writing. By linking the impact of digital tools and online writing environments to student perceptions of learning and writing, this study seeks to understand the influence of these tools and writing environments on students as writers and therefore on their writing itself to assist in the development of strong pedagogical practices in the increasingly digital composition classroom.

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Composition instructors have seen a significant increase in the incorporation of technology into the classroom due to societal, governmental, and pedagogical demands. Over the last decade, digital tools have been presented as a method of engaging students in their literacy practices (Dressman, McCarthy, & Prior, 2009). Education is therefore moving more online, and consequently, students ranging from kindergarten to graduate school are increasingly exposed to and required to use a variety of digital tools in hybrid learning environments, particularly to augment writing instruction. However, research shows that simply using digital tools and online writing environments does not equate to increased student learning, making it important to understand how using these tools affects student writing quality and skills (Agee & Altarriba, 2009). Studies also suggest that student perception of writing impacts writing quality (Wingate, 2010; Woo, Chu, Ho, & Li, 2011). Thus, research on the influences of digital tools and online writing environments on student perception of writing can help teachers determine best practices, improve pedagogical methods, and achieve learning outcomes as opposed to perpetuate or exacerbate negative teaching practices.

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By linking the impact of digital tools and online writing environments to student perceptions of their writing, this study seeks to identify digital tool and online environment affordances that create or foster positive student perceptions of writing and writing quality. Findings from this study can suggest strategies to take advantage of these affordances to increase positive perceptions and potentially improve student writing quality.

## 1. Literature Review

### 1.1. *Technology in the Classroom*

Technology permeates society with increasing accessibility to the internet via computers, laptops, mobile phones, tablets, and other devices. In 1996, the Clinton administration acknowledged the rise of technology and the nation's dependence on an increasingly knowledge- and information-driven economy (Department of Education, 1996, p. 6). The administration recognized that students need technology skills to be prepared for successful entry into a new, competitive workforce. Understanding yet underestimating the issues behind accessibility, local and state Departments of Education were called upon to place a computer in every classroom and increase technology instruction through the Technology and Literacy Challenge (Department of Education, 1996, p. 7; Selfe, 2008, p. 98). Government recognition of technological literacy as a fundamental skill required educators to take on the responsibility of incorporating current technology into classroom instruction. However, technology is a powerful tool that can be positively or negatively incorporated into education, and unfortunately, as Cynthia L. Selfe (2008) stated, Clinton's Technology and Literacy Challenge put computers in the classroom but did not force teachers to use and think about technology critically (p. 96).

Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe (2008) conducted a study to demonstrate the benefits and problems associated with technology use in a writing classroom. The authors observed a prolific and enthusiastic response from teachers in regards to computer use. Survey results indicated that educators observed an increase in peer teaching, teacher-student interaction, collaboration, and time spent writing in a computer based classroom (p. 38). However, upon direct observation of ten classes, Hawisher and Selfe noticed problems associated with this method of instruction. First, a great deal of time was spent writing, leaving little time for actual instruction. In addition, the authors observed a lack of meaningful exchanges between students and teachers, and collaboration was limited. These results suggested that computer use in the writing classroom cannot be blindly performed but must be critically assessed and implemented to be productive (p. 40-41).

### 1.2. *Technology and Writing*

Understanding how digital tools can affect writing skills and writing is the first step to improving pedagogical practices and learning outcomes in the composition classroom. Research has shown that digital tools positively impact the writing process in three ways: increased feedback, connection to authentic audiences, and opportunities for multimodal composing.

Amie Goldberg, Michael Russell, and Abigail Cook (2003) performed a meta-analysis of studies conducted between 1992 and 2002 to determine if word processing affected the quantity and quality of student writing in grades kindergarten through twelfth. A total of 26 studies were quantitatively analyzed, and the authors determined that the quantity of student writing increased with the use of word processing as opposed to pencil and paper. In addition, this increase was more prevalent among middle and high school students (p. 14). The quality of student writing also improved with the use of word processing compared to pencil and paper, and the quality incrementally improved as grade level increased (p. 16). The authors then used both quantitative and qualitative data to determine the factors that influenced these increases in quantity and quality of student writing, and they determined that writing with word processors increased feedback through student collaboration, peer review, and teacher feedback. Students then performed more revisions throughout the writing process compared to composing with a pencil and paper (p. 20), and motivation for writing was increased as shown in longer and more frequent periods of writing that ultimately translated into increased practice (p. 18). Through a series of studies and an extensive literature review, Charles A. MacArthur (2009) discovered that students who used word processing improved the quality of their writing because motivation to carefully construct and revise written works is increased when the internet offers an authentic audience (p. 100). However, the simple introduction of digital tools was not sufficient to instigate improvement. Students were not necessarily inherently engaged by technology (Agee & Altarriba, 2009), so appropriate instruction had to accompany the use of word processing to achieve full

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