

USING THE COMPUTER TO IMPROVE YOUR WRITING

You already know that the computer lets you easily type in text, shift it around, and make small changes. It can do even more for you if you make the most of its capacities and know its limitations. Here are some practical tips on using the computer as a writer's tool. Use the **Help** key in your word-processing program to learn more about the functions mentioned here.

Composing

Though some writers benefit from the tactile experience of writing notes and drafts by hand, you may be surprised how much power you gain by doing all your drafting and editing on the computer.

1. You don't have to create clean or fully developed text even for your first draft. Try jotting down your ideas as they come, without looking up spelling or other details. To mark places where further work is needed, just insert *////*, leave blank space, or use the highlight from the menu bar. This will help you create a partial or full draft quickly—then go back and strengthen it.
2. Try doing brainstorming on screen. Write anything that comes to mind about your topic, then see what you have said. It's encouraging to scroll through your results later and find worthwhile bits to develop. If you feel stuck, turn off the screen lighting and type in whatever occurs to you. You'll probably be surprised at how much sense these seemingly random jottings make.
3. Outlining is made easy too. Even a simple list of points to cover helps get you started. You can use **Enter** and **Tab** to set up an initial structure. If you like to work from a full outline, try the built-in outliner (under **View**) to put your initial ideas into a logical arrangement. With any type of outline you can fill in as much as you want in each session of writing and then revise your plans as your ideas develop.
4. A simple idea: don't double-space your text until you're ready to print it out. You need to see as many lines as possible on screen to get a sense of the flow of your work.
5. Save time by using short forms in your first draft. Then use the **Find and Replace** function (**Ctrl-H** in Word) to replace the short forms with full wordings. For instance, you can type *sov* while you're writing your draft, and then replace it with *sovereignty-association* when you're ready to print. (But confirm each replacement.)
6. Keep all your drafts in case you want to go back to an earlier version. Use the **Save As** function from the **File** menu to rename the drafts in sequence (that's easier than navigating the automatic **Versions** option in Word). Later you can open multiple windows to see two or more drafts at once. Email drafts to yourself for backups.

Revising and Editing

Word processing comes into its own with the hardest work of good writing—cutting, arranging, and rewriting. Get to know what your computer can and can't do to support you.

1. Don't be deceived by the finished look of text on the screen. Try using the two-page **View** to see more than one page at once. That lets you check whether some of your paragraphs are too long and whether the sections of your paper are balanced. Also print out your paper at least once and read it through critically, checking overall flow and logic. (A [writing-centre appointment](#) can help you achieve that perspective too.)
2. This may make you want to restructure your essay completely. Luckily, the computer makes that easy with its cut-and-paste functions (**Ctrl-x** and **Ctrl-v** for PCs). If you're uncertain about where a section should go, try copying it and looking at it in both places; then you can choose which you prefer and revise further to make it fit. You can combine versions easily too. With the choices in **View**, you can see a number of windows at once and copy from one file to another.
3. It's worthwhile—especially for group work—to use the **Comment** command from the **Review** menu. You can write notes to yourself or your co-writers that show up beside the text but don't change its layout. The **Track Changes** function from the **Review** menu in Word is also worth learning. Once turned on, it automatically uses different-coloured fonts to show editing possibilities that you can accept or reject later.
4. The **Review** menu offers a number of functions for proofreading and editing that can be helpful if used with care. However, be sure the **AutoCorrect** option is turned off, or you could end up with nonsense.
5. The **SpellCheck** function can help mend typos as well as spelling errors. Set the language to Canadian English rather than US or UK English. Don't accept all the suggested changes. If spellcheck flags a word as wrong when you are sure it isn't (as happens with names and technical terms), then add that word to your built-in "dictionary" so the computer recognizes it the next time. Keep in mind, though, that the computer won't tell you that you've mistyped *form* for *from*, much less that you've misused *principle* for *principal*.
6. Only use the **Thesaurus** (also part of the **Review** menu) **if** you already have a good vocabulary and want to be reminded of possibilities when you are looking for the right word. A thesaurus supplies words in the same general category as the word you're wondering about, but gives no guidance on meaning or sense.
7. So don't ignore your **print or online dictionary** as a resource. You will have to look up the words that spell checkers don't recognize, and also cross-check thesaurus suggestions for exact meanings and usage. Use it instead of a thesaurus when you wonder if a particular word is the right one.
8. The **grammar checkers** built into word processors (again under the **Review** menu, usually grouped with spellcheck and thesaurus) are seldom useful. About half of grammar-check flags are wrong, and the explanations are not clear. It's best to leave the box blank for the offer to "check grammar." For usable advice on sentence structure and grammar, see the files in the [Revising](#) section of this website.
9. The basic **Find** function (**Ctrl-F**) can help you do your own style-checking. For instance, if you know you tend to overuse or misuse a word or phrase, let **Find** call up each instance so you can see if another wording would be better. Even looking at each use of *and*, *but*, or *however* can help you improve and vary your sentence structures.