

Why a New Computer Program May Improve Writing Proficiency

I admit to rolling my eyes when I first read the title, "[Can a Curious Computer Improve Student Writing?](#)" in *Slate Magazine*.

"Honestly!" ran my internal conversation, *"Haven't people realized by now that students need more than a computer program to become better writers?"*

But I changed my mind as I read the article, primarily because the computer program, [WriteLab](#), actually employs tactics which foster good writing – and education in general. Developed by Ph.D. candidate Matthew Ramirez, WriteLab avoids spewing out pat answers to writing errors, and instead offers solid grammatical training while employing a questioning tone known as the Socratic method, which encourages students to actually think through the writing revisions they make, rather than mindlessly ingesting a teacher's suggestions:

WriteLab goes sentence by sentence, using what's known as practical style, which Ramirez sums up as "strong, punchy verbs, getting subjects and verbs close to the start of sentences, transitioning cleanly from old to new information, and writing concisely."

Most importantly, the program takes a Socratic approach. The color-coded markers peppering the text never label a word or phrase as wrong. Instead, they ask questions. Would this sentence be stronger or weaker if you dropped this adverb? What if you switched from the passive to the active voice?

The development of the program is timely, as American students are in desperate need of help with their writing. Currently,

[only 27%](#) of them are proficient.

Granted, good writing does not result from such methods alone. Students also need to be reading [high-quality material](#) and engaging in other exercises which develop good writing skills. Nevertheless, if such a program encourages students to think and grow, it might be worth a second look.

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