

Digital Tools Improve Student Writing, Pew Study Reports

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Digital tools encourage students to be more invested in their writing, facilitate collaboration, and encourage personal expression. These tangible benefits help develop writing as an important life skill for today's youth. A new survey by the [Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project](#) concludes that digital technology offers "helpful tools for teaching writing."

According to the middle and high school teachers surveyed, digital technologies are having positive effects on their students' writing abilities. The key benefits include being able to revise their work easily and share their projects with others. Kristen Purcell, Associate Director for Research at the Pew Internet Project noted that a plurality of teachers acknowledge the "increased opportunities for expression these digital tools offer".

- 78% of teachers surveyed say digital tools such as the Internet, social media, and cell phones "encourage student creativity and personal expression."
- 96% agree digital technologies "allow students to share their work with a wider and more varied audience"
- 79% agree that these tools "encourage greater collaboration among students"
- 50% say digital technologies make it easier to shape or improve student writing.

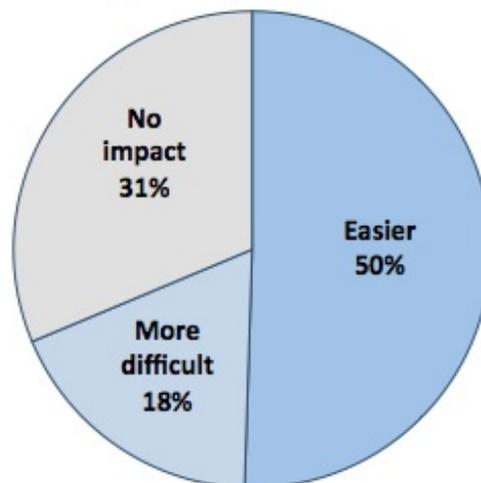
Revision and collaboration on the rise

Because it's easy to edit using digital tools, students revise their writing more often than they did in years before they had access to computers. One teacher explained, the "GoogleDocs and SmartBoard combo... allows us to unpack the revision process, which back in my pre-Internet classroom days was pretty much a black box."

Another teacher provided an example of a collaborative experience that happened outside of the normal class time—a learning moment that would not have been possible

50% say today's digital technologies make it EASIER for them to shape or improve student writing

Do today's digital technologies make it EASIER or MORE DIFFICULT for you as a teacher to shape or improve student writing, or do they have NO IMPACT?



Source: The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Online Survey of Teachers, March 7 to April 23, 2012. Based on a non-representative sample of 2,067 middle and high school teachers.

50% of educators say digital technologies make it easier to shape or improve writing.

without digital tools: “I was just reading a paper in Google Docs, commenting, etc. and was joined by my student in that document. She must have received an email that I commented, went to check out the document while I was grading it, and sat and watched as I read and commented. There’s something to that.”

Negative impacts: shortcuts, impatience

Though students have increased opportunity for written expression, and collaborate about their work more readily, digital technologies also affect student writing in negative ways. Just over two thirds of the teachers surveyed noted that students are more likely to “take shortcuts and not put effort into their writing.” Other issues include plagiarism, diminishing grammatical skills, a rise in informal language, and a growing reliance of spelling checkers.

Critical thinking is an overall challenge for kids. Keyboards and Internet collaboration have not made students more critically aware or thoughtful. In fact, many teachers observed that instant access to information and easy communication have made teens more impatient for quick results.

Which “digital tools” are used in classrooms?

Students and teachers use a range of digital tools inside and outside the classroom, including projectors connected to computers (97% of teachers report using these); dedicated student workstations (96%); cellphones or smartphones (73%); computer carts (71%); digital cameras (67%).

Used less frequently, but still listed under the umbrella of “digital tools” are digital video recorders, interactive white boards, ebook readers, and tablets. Only 43% of teachers reported using tablets, however, those percentages are rising. (The numbers were gathered in the spring of 2012, although the report was released on July 17, 2013.)

“Access to information is power”

Digital tools help improve writing and encourage students to write more often, however 94% of surveyed teachers still believe it is important for students to continue writing by hand. Some tests, such as AP exams, require handwritten answers, as do many day-to-day activities.

This survey definitively reflects a shift in attitude of educators. Teachers have acknowledged the learning power of digital tools. One teacher summed it up: “What we’ve created with technology is a piece of paper and pencil which can appear anywhere around the Earth in a nanosecond. That is pretty amazing. And, for better or for worse, that is where the world is heading. We are establishing that those with digital abilities to read and write will have the access to the information. Access to information is power.”

Survey details

These findings emerge from an online survey conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project in collaboration with the College Board and the National Writing Project. It is a non-probability sample of 2,462 middle and high school teachers currently teaching in the U.S. and its territories, conducted between March 7 and April 23, 2012. Some 1,750 of the teachers are drawn from a sample of advanced placement (AP) high school teachers, while the remaining 712 are from a sample of National Writing Project teachers.



Classroom image via Shutterstock, Chart via Pew Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project.

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