

# Digital Literacy: Bridging the Gap with Digital Writing Tools

By Suzanne McKee-Waddell

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*The author argues that educators must upgrade their methods to meet students where they are in the digital age and to help young people develop digital literacy. Teaching of composition with digital writing tools is the example provided, along with a comprehensive list of tools arranged by general purpose.*

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Digital literacy is an emerging field of progressive literacy instruction. It is defined as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (Visser, 2012, para. 2). Current methodologies that deliver instruction in digital literacy are constantly advancing, and the instruction, delivery, and tools used in the classroom are being merged to create an all-inclusive learning experience. This evolving technique gives educators the ability to reinvent the methodology used to teach writing, which is crucial to the college-and-career readiness curriculum. Teachers are seeking inventive forms of digital technology instruction to enable, engage, and propel instruction in composition. Through the use of emerging digital tools, classroom teachers of composition are able to enhance the quality of teaching methods while also practically reorganizing instructional methods. The utilization of these tools, coupled with instructional curricular changes, increases student engagement with technology while promoting positive classroom curricular adjustments.

## Digital Literacy: Digital Composition and the Writing Component

For decades, the classroom setting has offered teachers strategies to formulate and implement the writing process while continuing to learn each day what it means to “teach” writing. This method of teaching forced educators, as Hicks (2009) stated, to “listen to [their] students, shape [their] responses and lessons around their needs” (p. 1).

Digital composition is one such area of literacy in which more research, specifically about partnering the writing component with technology, is evolving. In the past, teachers have facilitated instruction in digital composition in conventional “face-to-face” classrooms or programs delivered at a distance. Now, teachers are seeking more relevant media and technology tools to deliver classroom instruction on many levels. In other words, many classrooms and facilitators need access to forthcoming ideas and resources to proliferate the possibilities of digital literacies for connectivity with past and present tools that will gradually transform the way students express ideas and learn in school.

One would probably agree that, given the technological proficiency of young people, today’s classrooms are in “catch-up” mode, and students often comment that they have to “power-down” during the school day. Must facilitators power down students, or rather, as Lankshear and Knobel, proposed, should they “braid together new digital literacies and old” (as cited in O’Brien & Scharber, 2008, p. 67) to establish new literacy pedagogies? As

technology evolves, so must pedagogical practices.

Simply stated, educators should engage and embrace students' technological knowledge instead of allowing old avenues to constrain the medium of instructional delivery. As Lankshear and Knobel (in O'Brien & Scharber, 2008) suggested, even as educators maintain basic existing standards in order to strengthen digital literacies, "modes in which the practices are framed" (p. 67) are still evidential. However, this is not a change in the process of teaching and assessing literacy but an addition to the already existing foundation. O'Brien and Scharber (2008) stated that the modality and benefits of digital literacies are "socially situated practices supported by skills, strategies, and stances that enable the representation and understanding of ideas using a range of modalities enabled by digital tools" (p. 67). School personnel must embrace this range of modality opportunities and take advantage of this braiding (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) to afford literacy instruction. The braiding of these digital technology tools provides resources for this morphing instructional tool.

### **Digital Writing Tools: Bridging Digital Literacy Gap with Resources**

One evolving component of the digital literacy initiative is the component of digital writing. Educators must not negate the present standard of written instruction and print-based literacy instruction relative to the development of curriculum and forms of testing but, instead, provide ideas and agendas to supplement progress rather than obstruct the pre-existing pedagogical standard. A wide variety of braiding digital tools may be resourced into the curriculum for instructional purposes—a task now available to the teacher in the educational setting. The list of digital tool resources (Table) is designed to empower and afford compelling possibilities to engage, motivate, and enhance the classroom writing environment with the infusion of digital tool technology.

The list (Table) suggests that digital tools are available for a wide variety of components of both teaching and learning the writing process. In addition to providing resources for teachers to inspire student writing, such as visual prompts, digital tools can help students structure, edit, and publish their work. Sharing and interacting with student writing can occur in a variety of ways by utilizing collaborative tools and social media. In addition, these resources provide students an outlet for personal expression by offering the technology to produce a variety of videos, infographics, and word clouds.

### **Conclusion**

These various digital resources that improve and enhance digital writing in the instructional setting are easily accessible. New standards for writing competencies have taken a national stage as classroom teachers gravitate toward new and inventive means of embracing digital environments. As a result, these digital tools should drive teacher instructional strategies. In the proposed digital writing environment, educators will offer

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students opportunities to evolve critical thinking writing skills in preparation for lifetime learning.

Witte (2007) wrote,

[W]e know that the nature of literacy has changed in the digital age, but unfortunately, we do not have decades to catch up to this change. In other words, we cannot take three decades to put down the metaphorical “red pen” as it is related to digital instruction. (p. 59)

The modern learner has evolved, and so must modern teaching strategies. Educators, put down the red pens and join students in this technological age to redefine learning and ensure the continuity of learning.

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## Table

### *Resources to Improve and Enhance Digital Writing*

Tool	Description
<b>Collaborative Writing Tools</b>	
TitanPad	Allows students to work on one document simultaneously
MixedInk	Allows groups of any size to weave their best ideas into a single text
Google Docs	Allows students to collaborate on a writing project, spreadsheets, or presentations
Stackedit	Allows students to synchronize, publish, and share documents
PB Works	Host and share information; classroom subscription required

Typewrite	Real-time editing, syncs with Dropbox, and easy to share and edit different versions
Quip	Edit, discuss, and share in one place
Penflip	Helps students write better with others
Hackpad	Simple to use real-time wiki with innovative features; a collaborative editing tool similar to Google Docs
<b>Story Telling/Story Writing</b>	
Cowbird	Simple storytelling tool that allows students to publish their stories in public
Storybird	Make stories in minutes; free classroom accounts
Storify	Tell stories by collecting updates from social networks
Storyjumper	Teaches children to write stories in 7 steps
My Story Maker	Digital story writing: students choose their own characters, setting, and topics
Kerpoof	Allows students to create stories, draw a picture, make a card, create movies
<b>Teaching/Editing/Revising: The Writing Process</b>	
EssayPunch	Provides feedback during the writing process; interactive tutorials for essay writing
StudySync	Provides access to online books, multimedia writing lessons
ThreeRing	Free for teachers: take pictures of any paper, record presentations, upload your work; the app organizes it all
Mystery Cube	Helps students identify and summarize story elements (Grades 6-12)
Acrostic Poems	Enables students to learn about and write acrostic poems
Persuasion Map	Interactive graphic organizer that helps students map out their arguments for persuasive essays
Quillpad	Vocabulary building section along with writing lessons and exercises
Easybib	Allows students to credit and cite research information
Poetry Forge	Allows students to generate original poetry or add to existing poetry

aMap	Creates an argument map
<b>Publishing</b>	
Bulb	Allows students to create and save digital portfolios and research projects
Prezi	Presentations one can access from a browser or phone; cloud-based
PowToon	Allows students to create animated videos and presentations
ZohoWriter	Turns writing assignments into Web pages
Yudu	Turns writing assignments into newsletters or e-books
Issuu	Turns writing assignments into newsletters or e-books
Glogster	Share interactive posters; perfect for research projects, book reports, life cycles.
<b>Animated Short Videos</b>	
Wideo	Allows students to create animated videos; super easy to use
Animoto	Provides an array of tools for creating videos in classrooms
VoiceThread	Allows students to place images, videos, documentations, and presentations at the center of an asynchronous conversation
Goanimate	Create professional animated videos; subscription based
<b>Word Clouds</b>	
Wordle	Interactive word clouds; easy to use for elementary students
Tagxedo	Interactive word clouds; offers different colors, shapes, and sizes
TagCrowd	Allows students to create tag clouds from any text; simply copy and paste text to create a word cloud
<b>Infographics</b>	
Ease.ly	Simple Web tool that allows students to create powerful posters and infographics
StatSilk	Allows students to create interactive maps based on statistics

Hohli	Allows students to create a variety of charts for online display
Infogr.am	Connects live data sources to infographics, charts, and visualizations
<b>Social Media</b>	
Instagram	Allows students to use photos to share information
Twitter	Allows students to ask questions in real time
Pinterest	Allows students to share videos, websites, boards
Edmodo	Allows students to connect, collaborate, and share content and homework (Learning Management System)
Schoology	Allows students to create virtual classrooms and extend learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom (Learning Management System)
Kidblog	Student and teacher friendly; teacher has control over all posts
Weebly	Allows students to create a free Web site
WordPress	Allows students to create a free and open blog
Edublog	Allows blogs to be created for educational purposes
WIX	Allows students to build a free Web site
SchoolCircle	Allows teachers to communicate, line up volunteers, send home daily newsletters to parents
<b>Visual Prompts</b>	
Visual Writing Prompts	Search for visual prompts by subject or type of writing <a href="http://visualwritingprompts.wordpress.com/">http://visualwritingprompts.wordpress.com/</a>
Visual Prompts	Search for visual writing prompts by grade, genre, or subject <a href="http://visualprompts.weebly.com/002.html">http://visualprompts.weebly.com/002.html</a>
Easy Street Prompts	Search for picture and video prompts <a href="http://www.easystreetprompts.com/">http://www.easystreetprompts.com/</a>

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