Free, Effective eTools for Teaching Writing

Kirtland Eastwood
Lauryn Gallo
Jessica Piggot

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Kirtland Eastwood
Lauryn Gallo
Jessica Piggot
Eastern Michigan University

Abstract
Web-based tools can be excellent sources for teaching writing skills in an interactive way. With the internet available, the options are endless, but it can be difficult and time-consuming to locate quality sources to teach the desired skills. This paper discusses the use and applicability of ten free and effective eTools for helping students at various levels to develop their writing proficiency. Included tools address skills for pre-, during, and post-writing that are easy-to-use for both students and teachers. Classroom implementation of these eTools allows students to actively engage in the writing process in a more meaningful way.

Introduction
The use of technology in education and language learning is not a recent trend. With the ever-increasing presence of technology use in daily life, educators must take advantage of the available tools to help students achieve language learning goals and to become informed, critical technology consumers. Many researchers have called for teacher awareness and pedagogical consideration of technology, including Kessler (in Perren et al., 2012) who argues that pedagogy needs “to exploit the potential that technology offers us to represent language in varied ways” (p. 6). Other researchers have also recognized the advantages of using the internet to help English language learners (ELLs) achieve language goals. Warschauer (2002) points out that with the internet as “an essential medium of information exchange”, language teaching must shift toward the use of web-based tools for both retrieving and sharing knowledge (p. 455). The incorporation of web-based tools for teaching writing has been recognized by MacArthur (2009), who encourages the use of word processing, outlining, and concept mapping tools for struggling writers. While the use of technology is not without its difficulties at times, Pan and Zbikowski (1997) state that “new technology has made the writing process easier for writers” (p. 118). Both technology and writing skills are essential for students entering any discipline, and it is therefore irresponsible for language teaching to ignore this relationship.

Many students come into the classroom with extensive familiarity and comfort with various technological tools, while others may still be unfamiliar with most technology. However, Warschauer (1999) found that students are often very aware of the necessity of technology for both effective language learning and developing “information/communication literacies” (as cited in Warschauer, 2002, p. 455). In addition to recognizing the value of technology, many students enjoy its implementation in the classroom. Galy, Downey, and Johnson (2011) completed surveys of adult students that showed they enjoyed learning from online tutorials and eTools (electronic and web-based tools), especially those that captured audio and visual and encouraged student interaction. Since students will be using and encountering technology in countless ways in their lives, teachers should make the most of their learners’ motivation and enthusiasm for using technology for educational purposes.
Teachers must actively seek out information concerning existing tools to serve students’ language learning and other educational needs due to the consistent increase and improvement of technology. Warschauer (2002) argues that teachers should be familiar with current computer assisted language learning (CALL) software and must “have successful strategies for evaluating and adapting the new waves of software that will surely come” (p. 457). As teachers search, find, and evaluate available technology resources, they become familiar with the processes they will require of their students and can ensure that student learning is most effective. Pan and Zbikowski (1997) assert that “fostering greater awareness of the most recent technologies will be worth the effort” (p. 118), and this sentiment is echoed by Warschauer (2000), who writes that the pervasive nature of information and English interaction online requires that pedagogy work toward integrating these communication tools into the language classroom (in Warschauer, 2002, p. 455). To further discuss how technology can improve language learning, this paper highlights ten web-based or software tools teachers can incorporate into curriculum to improve student writing proficiency.

When selecting eTools for this project, it was important that they be free of any cost and easy to use for both students and teachers. The eTools selected target intermediate level ELLs, but can be adapted to a wider range of proficiencies. The final criteria considered while selecting eTools for writing is effectiveness for teaching or improving writing skills. These eTools provide students a hands-on way to develop necessary writing skills while appealing to a variety of learning styles. The selected eTools have been enumerated upon below according to whether they are mainly used during the pre-writing, during writing, and/or post-writing stages of the writing process, although many tools can be used at different stages. An essential goal of this project is for these tools to help guide students and teachers through various aspects of the writing process in new and innovative ways through the use of technology while increasing student engagement and motivation. The eTools can be used for outlining, brainstorming, and organization during the pre-writing stage; paraphrasing, summarizing, and organization during the writing stages; and feedback and peer review during the post-writing stages.

**Pre-writing Stages**

*Spiderscribe*

Spiderscribe is basic mind-mapping software that allows students and teachers to connect Word documents, pictures, text notes, event dates, and maps to assist in the brainstorming process. This tool allows the user to drop and add new information onto their page, connecting the information to create mind-maps which can be made private, public, or accessible to certain individuals for collaborative purposes. The map can be saved as a file as a JPG or PNG and exported or shared via email.

Intermediate to advanced students can use Spiderscribe to create a writing portfolio by adding Word documents and images throughout the semester. These students and also use Spiderscribe to brainstorm and organize a personal narrative using maps, personal images, and lists to chronologically organize events. The same process can be used to retell historical events. Spiderscribe can also be used to organize and/or brainstorm information for classroom presentations by using the icons to organize and visually represent travel plans, a prospective business, a personal narrative, a utopian society, etc. The Spiderscribe map can be used to present these ideas to fellow students. Beginning to intermediate students can use Spiderscribe to create a picture dictionary using text notes and images. The text notes can be deleted to study for quizzes and exams. These students can also create a picture story by adding images and then
write a short story based on the images. These students can also use maps and images to learn how to give directions and describe basic geological and regional features.

Unfortunately, Spiderscribe may not be ideal for the collaborative process due to password restrictions. Of course, this limitation can be overcome by having a common email and password created by a group for collaborative purposes. Another limitation is that video and sound cannot be added to Spiderscribe mind-maps, which can be overcome somewhat through adding links to YouTube videos or other web pages.

**Stixy**

Stixy is an online bulletin board created by adding text, photos, documents, task lists, stickies, and more. Users can move and add to these widgets to create organization or visual appeal. This tool allows the initial user to add viewers via email invitation, and provides the option of allowing viewers to add to the board and receive bulletin board updates. Teachers can determine the level of access students have to each Stixyboard through security options.

Intermediate to advanced students who have formed writing groups can use a Stixyboard to assign tasks/roles and identify due dates as they collaborate. Group members can also add stickies to discuss various aspects of the writing process. Students with these proficiency levels can also create a Stixyboard during the prewriting stages with various documents, links, images, etc. pertaining to their chosen topic that could be useful in narrowing their topic. These widgets can be moved around on the board to provide further organization and clarity during the writing process. Teachers can also ask students to post content-based material to a classroom Stixyboard as a warm-up activity. Students access this board and respond to the material (either electronically or with pen and paper) for a desired amount of time (3-10 minutes). Meanwhile, beginning to intermediate level students can work in small groups to create a Stixyboard with items that will be covered in the next class or unit. To access prior knowledge, students view the board and respond either digitally or with pen and paper to the items on the board. Students can also find links, images and YouTube videos that help them understand certain cultural concepts (football, fashion, holidays, food, etc.). As more information is added to the board, students develop a clear idea concerning the cultural concept.

One limitation of Stixy is that it may send numerous update emails based on the activity level. This limitation can be overcome through changing certain settings in the user’s account. Another limitation is that Stixy does not include video and sound additions to the Stixyboard, which can be overcome somewhat through adding links to YouTube videos or other web pages.

**Wridea**

Wridea (2012) is a tool that promotes creative brainstorming. The structure of this tool provides visually stimulating organization and guidance. Students are able to generate unlimited topics or ideas for their papers. These topics can be color-coded by subject, which is helpful when there is an overlap in subject area where topics can be grouped under a similar heading. Under each heading, the student is able to insert sub-categories, where space is provided to type in notations or thoughts that could be expanded upon in the later development of the paper. Each “Wridea” can be saved under a different title and more than one brainstorming session can be created and worked on simultaneously.

A unique feature of Wridea is found by clicking on the “Idea Rain Session” tab whereas the student can visually see all their “categories” descending in random order down the screen in groups of two or three in their original color-coded design. As the topics “rain” down, the user
has the ability to click on a topic, where it will freeze in place, allowing it to be viewed directly next to another falling topic. In this way, students are able to place their ideas in varying order to generate more developed ideas or organization. As an added feature, all the brainstorming sessions can be accessed and manipulated simultaneously by multiple fellow users. In this way, teachers can assign a group brainstorming session, where students must work together to develop ideas based upon a specific topic and share ideas to develop their future papers.

Wridea is used for generating and organizing thoughts and ideas, but it does not instruct them on how to use the ideas nor how to utilize their ideas to construct a paper. This tool is specifically designed as a pre-writing tool, and thus does not incorporate elements of writing technique and structure within it. Students would need specific instructions on how to create the desired structure of the paper.

**Mind42**

Mind42.com (2012) is used as an organizational tool for creating, storing and sharing ideas. This outlining tool allows students to customize their information and integrate various forms of text and media in one place. The structure of the outline provides the central theme in the middle, and then allows students to create new “mind maps” that branch out in lateral form. The topics and sub-topics can be customized by color and font, which contributes to organization and structure. The tool has the ability to add text, hyper-links, and URL addresses that provide additional information as well as upload images that correspond to the outline topics. This is useful when writing research papers, as the outline can contain links to PDF files or online articles. Each new outline can be saved for later review or editing. Because of the versatility of this tool, it can be utilized by various proficiency levels, from high beginner to advanced.

One feature of Mind42.com is the “sticky note” application, where students can click on the picture of the sticky note, drop it anywhere on the outline, and type a message on it. Sticky notes can be used as reminders for further research, questions, or comments. Each project has the ability to be shared and edited by additional parties, who can be “invited” using their email addresses allowing easy collaboration. Information and maps can be imported and exported as well, enabling teachers to assign group research projects, in which each group member has access to the same outline. Also, this tool provides a way for students to collaborate using live chat, through Google Talk, giving students the ability to talk with each other without having to meet in person. In addition, Mind42.com incorporates a time management guide as a way to help students prioritize their projects on a time line. This tool allows students to appoint priority based upon percentages and a built-in calendar allows due dates to be highlighted. Students are also able to save their map in the “public folder” which allows future students to access their outline for reference material.

Mind42.com has some restrictions related to functionality. The tool itself is a way for students, mainly groups of students, to create ideas and store their resources for the future development of the paper, but it does not critique the actual content the student is generating. The instructor would need to monitor or assess the outlines as they are being created to ensure that it will translate into content that is relevant for the paper. Another slight limitation is that the main hyperlink box is designed to take students to the topic’s corresponding Wikipedia page, which is not the most ideal site for academic research.
**During Writing Stages**

*Edublogs*

Edublogs is a tool used to engage students through the creation of a class blog that can serve as an effective forum for student discussion and collaboration. Teachers can upload any type of file including PDFs, PPTs, and video. Teachers can either have students create their own blogs to be added to a class site or they can create one blog that enables all students to contribute. Either way, students create their own avatar and are able to have online discussions with fellow classmates. Students can respond to teacher prompts or form an online discussion and improve their digital writing skills while doing so.

Although all class blogs require consistent teacher monitoring, Edublogs has a blacklist that helps reduce this responsibility. The blacklist option allows instructors to add words or phrases that students should exclude from their blog posts. Any posts or comments that contain these words or phrases will be rejected and students will not be able to upload those posts or comments until the words or phrases have been removed. A limitation of Edublogs is the common problem of frequent email updates sent to the creator’s inbox. Edublogs does allow the blog creator to use plug-ins to decide what type of notifications should be sent to their inbox via email.

**readwritethink “Essay Map” & “Persuasion Map”**

The readwritethink “Essay Map” and “Persuasion Map” (2010) are two of many available online tools for outlining writing in a more visually appealing way than the traditional pencil-and-paper format. What is particularly nice about these maps is that they provide an easy-to-use, interactive process for outlining that guides users through each level of their paper, one step at a time. For the “Essay Map” users start with the introduction and are instructed to input key information, the paper topic and main ideas. Then, with the simple click of an arrow, students can go to the next level to input their main ideas and in the third level, they input supporting ideas for each main idea. Finally, in the last level, students are prompted to write notes or sentences to conclude their paper and tell the reader what to take away from their essay. The “Persuasion Map” follows the same format, but prompts are worded for persuasive essays and ask students to consider what point they are arguing, what reasons support this viewpoint, and what examples demonstrate their reasons. At any time in the process students can maneuver throughout the outline to review or edit information. They can also save or email their incomplete maps as RWT files (unassigned or unknown file extensions that can later be opened through the Web tool site). Completed outlines can be saved or shared via email as PDF documents and can be printed out. Users could even enter a name and title and print a blank outline, which still provides an alternative format for more visual learners.

The main use of these tools is during the pre-writing stage when students are outlining their ideas for their papers. However, students can also be asked to use the tool in a consciousness-raising activity in which they use a source paper (from class or one they have found individually) to outline the author’s thesis, main points, and supporting ideas. This type of activity can show learners how an outline can improve the organization and cohesion of a paper, while simultaneously introducing them to a helpful web-based tool they can use for their own outlining. Teachers can ask students to outline their papers using these tools or provide the tools as an alternative to the more formal outlining format with hierarchical alphanumeric or bulleted points. This provides an effective way for teachers to implement technology into lessons in a way that puts students in control of the tool, while also offering options for students’ various
learning styles (visual, kinesthetic, etc.). Additionally, because these tools are fairly easy to use and the language in the prompts is not difficult, they can be used with ELLs in K-12 settings, around grades 9-12, as well as in university settings with high-beginner to advanced learners.

There are some restrictions with the tools that limit their applicability for certain instructional purposes. The main limitation is that the tools are formatted for an essay with no more than three main points, which makes their use difficult for longer papers. In situations where the writing will have more than three main points, students could use the tools as a starting point for outlining to be later expanded upon, or they could use more than one map to incorporate their additional main ideas (simply copying or leaving the information blank for the introduction and conclusion). Another restriction is in the amount of text allowed in the map boxes, which is more limited at the third level (supporting ideas or examples). However, this could actually be an advantage for some learners who struggle with recognizing the purpose of an outline. Sometimes students think that they need to write their outline in complete sentences, since they will ultimately be using the information to write their papers; these students may struggle with learning to write concise notes to identify their ideas as a guide for expansion during later stages of the writing process. This text limitation can help students overcome this tendency by forcing them to restrict their words to only the most pertinent information. Even with these few limitations, the readwritethink “Essay Map” and “Persuasion Map” are excellent eTools for learners to interactively engage in the outlining process in a very visually interesting format.

Post-writing Stages

Paraphrase Self-test

The “Paraphrase Self-test” (Lewis, 2010) is a very simple, easy-to-use tool that tests the degree of similarity between a “base text” (from a source text) and an individual’s paraphrase of that text. It can be used in the during and post-writing stages when students are writing and revising their paraphrases. Users copy-and-paste or type in the base text in the author’s words into one box on the webpage and then input their paraphrase, written in their own words, into another box. The tool immediately displays any overlapping information between the base text and paraphrase in two different formats. The first format color-codes directly matched words between the two texts, displaying words that were not copied in the base text with strikethrough text (Figure 1) and leaving original words in the paraphrase uncolored and underlined (Figure 2) (The base text in this example is from Brown 1989, p. 66). This is the more visually appealing format and is easier to understand at a quick glance.

Second, students in ESL/EFL programs around the world differ widely in nationality, language background, and level of English ability. For example, at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the vast majority of our foreign students are from Asia, whereas the foreign student populations at institutions in the United States tend to include more Europeans and Middle Easterners. (James Dean Brown, Improving ESL placement tests using two perspectives, TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1989)

Figure 1. Color-coded base text using Paraphrase Self-test tool.

Students in programs learning English all around the world differ greatly in nationality, language background, and English ability. Brown says that at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the majority of international students are from Asia, but the foreign student populations at institutions in the United States include more Europeans and Middle Easterners. (Brown, 1989, p. 66)

Figure 2. Color-coded paraphrase using Paraphrase Self-test tool.
The second format is with plain text: the text in the paraphrase that is unmarked is copied from the base text, text with strikethrough appears only in the base text, and text that is underlined is original to the paraphrase (See Figure 3).

Figure 3. Plain-text format using Paraphrase Self-test tool.

Second, students in ESL/EFL students in programs learning English all around the world differ widely in nationality, language background, and level of English ability. For example, Brown says that at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the vast majority of our foreign international students are from Asia, whereas the foreign student populations at institutions in the eastern United States tend to include more Europeans and Middle Easterners. (James Dean Brown, Improving ESL placement tests using two perspectives, TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1989) (Brown, 1989, p. 66)

This tool allows the user to gauge the success of a paraphrase very quickly by determining if the paraphrase is too closely worded to the source text. Teachers can demonstrate how to use this tool to check for overlapping text between the source text and the paraphrase, and students can be asked to use this tool to check their own paraphrases either in or outside the classroom. For learners who are struggling to understand why their paraphrase is not sufficiently reworded, this tool can provide an instant visual that clearly shows students the amount of copied text, even if the words appear in a different order in their paraphrase. The Paraphrase Self-test can also be used with longer segments of text, such as with a summary of a source text. The color-coded format provides the fastest and easiest means of determining the amount of directly copied text. The simplicity of the tool lends to its applicability at various proficiency levels, from high beginner to advanced.

Based on its purpose, this tool is mainly limited to checking paraphrases and summaries for use of one’s own words. Unfortunately the tool is not designed to determine if a paraphrase is actually adequate and can only identify copied (and not copied) text. The tool cannot recognize synonym use or appropriate diction, so paraphrases or summaries that simply replace words with similar words are not detected. Students must be instructed on all elements of an appropriate paraphrase or summary and should be cautioned that use of the Paraphrase Self-test tool alone does not constitute a successful paraphrase or summary. Rather, its use is one step in the process of writing and revising a paraphrase or summary. Students should use the tool to check their rewording, and even the reordering of the ideas, but must also consider the process of writing the paraphrase and their use of vocabulary. Finally, students should be reminded that it is often acceptable or even necessary for some of the words from a source text to be used in the paraphrase or summary, especially for key content words or terms that have different meanings or uses when reworded. Students should be made aware of the purpose for the Paraphrase Self-test as a quick, easy way to visually identify the degree of rewording in their paraphrases and summaries.

**Jing**

Jing is a tool that is downloadable through TechSmith and can be used to create a screencast (video) that records written and spoken commentary when used with sites like A.nnotate. Users can create an image or video to share on Screencast.com by simply clicking and dragging over the desired content on their screen. Images can be edited with highlighting, frames, text, and arrows. With videos, users can record up to five minutes of audio, pausing during recording when necessary. Videos and images can be saved (and are also stored in Jing history) or shared via Screencast.com. To share a video or image, users simply click a button to share, which directs them to the screencast link that can be copied and pasted into an email.
Coupling written and spoken feedback using Jing is an excellent way to address the needs of learners in the during and post-writing stages. After creating and uploading the video, the creator can email the link to the writer. The writer is able to view all written feedback, while simultaneously listening to spoken comments. Many students like receiving spoken feedback and may feel that they are engaging with their teacher in the writing process more than they would be with written feedback alone. This tool can also help teachers circumvent time-consuming meetings with individual students while still giving high quality and quantity of feedback. Combining the use of Jing with written and visual feedback through a tool like A.nnotate allows students to receive more types of feedback, which addresses a wider range of learning styles (visual, linguistic, auditory). Students can also be asked to use Jing in the peer review process, particularly if the teacher wishes to incorporate some speaking practice into the writing course. This will, of course, require the teacher to demonstrate how students can download and use Jing. Due to the integration of reading and listening skills, this tool is best used with intermediate and advanced learners.

This process, particularly when combining written and spoken feedback, can be relatively time-consuming for the teacher. Teachers can choose to only provide spoken comments using Jing depending on the level of the learners, or they can use Jing and A.nnotate together only on writing assignments for which they want to provide a larger quantity and quality of feedback. Additionally, since the video time limit is five minutes, if the teacher wishes to provide more spoken feedback, s/he will have to create more than one video. In most cases, five minutes is sufficient for providing feedback, and may even be necessary when a teacher has limited time available. Another consideration when using Jing is that students with low listening ability may struggle to understand the spoken feedback. This could be supported with adjusted teacher talk for certain learners, as well as with the integration of written feedback. Students are also able to replay the video as many times as they wish. Despite these limitations, Jing can be a very effective and enjoyable way to improve the writing feedback process for both teachers and learners.

**PaperRater**

PaperRater (2010) is an electronic tool used to help students improve their writing skills by running their paper through a systemized correction process. This tool is specifically designed for the post-writing process, as a useful way to critique the finalized piece of writing. Once the student has written their paper, the content is simply copied and pasted into the rater, and a full evaluation is generated based upon six categories: title checker, spelling, grammar, word choice, style and vocabulary. The categories are labeled with corresponding colors, as Figure 4 illustrates:

![Figure 4. PaperRater categories.](image)

The **Title Checker** is the first element, as it simply checks for appropriate capitalization and grammar. The **Spelling** element picks out words that are deemed misspelled which are then highlighted in red, while the **Grammar** check does the same, with correct grammar indicated by green highlights. The **Word Choice** section scores the content based upon “the number and quality of trite or inappropriate words, phrases, and clichés found in your paper” (2010). For this
section, the rater provides a score of below average, average and above average, and provides an explanation for the score given. It is also in this section where the paper is scanned for usage of plagiarized materials. The Style heading will calculate the percentage of certain word choices, like the use of pronouns, auxiliaries, conjunctions and prepositions, to allow the student to see any trends of word types that are used frequently versus infrequently. Finally, the Vocabulary Words category scores the use of effective vocabulary words and, if needed, provides the link to their Vocabulary Builder to help improve this area.

PaperRater allows for students to select the kind of paper they are having assessed as well as the grade level they are writing for, which allows the rater to evaluate based upon the correct criteria. For example, the rater assessment is different for a research paper than a book report and there is also variation depending upon the grade level. This helps the rater perform more accurate evaluations. Because of these customizations, PaperRater is ideal for all proficiency levels. Also, for each grading category, if improvement can be made, the score box includes a Tip Section, which provides students written feedback on ways to improve that particular skill set. At the end of the evaluation, there is a Grade tab, which will give students a final grade on the paper as a whole, along with a detailed explanation on the reasoning behind the grade. Because of the fact that PaperRater provides such feedback for a multitude of areas, this is a useful tool for teachers as a way to have students self-correct their papers before they submit the final product, as a way of peer editing.

Despite the fact that PaperRater does incorporate many areas within writing that would be subject to correction, this tool should not serve as a final correction aide. Students need to understand its limitations, as the final grade that appears at the end of the evaluation does not correlate with the final grade from their instructor. The purpose of this tool is just to provide the student with feedback, in which case additional reviewing of their paper would still be suggested and or required. The PaperRater spelling and grammar check do not always discover all errors and the plagiarism detector is not guaranteed to detect all plagiarized material - just because a plagiarized paper passes through PaperRater undetected does not mean it will pass inspection when reviewed by a peer or an instructor.

Conclusion

Writing can be a challenging task for many ELLs who are struggling with the integration of many language skills into one complex process. These eTools are meant to support students’ progress throughout all stages of the writing process while increasing their motivation by learning through technology use. Of course, there is and will continue to be a limitless supply of web-based tools and apps for teaching students to write, but these ten tools offer a great start for the proactive teacher.

Authors’ Note

Kirtland Eastwood, Lauryn Gallo and Jessica Piggot are affiliated with Eastern Michigan University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jessica Piggot at this email address: (jessicanicole146@gmail.com).
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