



Writing for the Web: Blogs and Wikis to Support Literacy

Center for Technology Implementation

Overview

Writing for the Web can help increase motivation for writing and help your students learn how to adapt their texts for different audiences, tasks, and purposes.

Innovations in computer technology in the past 20 years have changed the way most people live, work, shop, and communicate. Education has changed too. Now, students can upload assignments to a class website, e-mail questions to their teachers, and work on assignments with distant peers using instant messaging, online discussion forums, and wikis.

Writing online, through blogs, wikis, or discussion forums, can boost student motivation for writing and help students learn to adapt writing for different audiences, tasks, purposes, and disciplines. How is writing a well-researched page for Wikipedia different from writing a personal blog? These writing skills, and learning to use media in a variety of situations, are critical parts of helping your students meet the College and Career Readiness Standards for Reading, Writing, and Speaking and Listening.

Using in Your Classroom

The use of classroom blogs and wikis can have social and educational implications for students with disabilities and struggling students.

Nearly universal access to mobile and wireless technologies means that today's students regularly e-mail, IM (instant message), participate in chat rooms, and post to blogs and social networking sites as a means of communication and social interaction. **Harness these technologies** to help boost your students' writing skills!

Blogs

Blogs can serve as a medium for recording thoughts and impressions on a particular topic. Blogs are (mostly) free and easy to create, so you can have a blog set up and running in minutes.

Several websites offer educational packages to allow you to create individual student blogs, giving the teacher complete control over content. This ensures that blogs don't become places for inappropriate comments and bullying. If your classroom blog will feature student writing and discussion, you may want to consider using blogging tools geared towards student and classroom use.

Wikis

A wiki is an online software tool that allows multiple users to collaborate and generate Web content, typically for reference purposes. The most well-known example of a wiki is Wikipedia, but there are many uses for wikis in the classroom setting.

- ▶ Classroom wikis are often used for collaborative writing projects and group projects. Because all changes are tracked to specific users, this is a great way for a teacher to see how much each student has contributed.
- ▶ Consider using sites such as Wikipedia to launch discussions on the dangers of completely open collaborative networks. Can students find incorrect or misleading information on a Wikipedia page? How does the community respond to these types of issues? What are the benefits and drawbacks of open collaboration?

Depending on how blogs and wikis are used in the classroom, they can have a number of benefits for all students, especially struggling writers and students with disabilities.

For students who struggle with organization:

- ▶ Post assignments, notes, handouts, and reminders on your classroom blog or wiki so that ALL of your students can access the material if needed.
- ▶ A common difficulty for students with learning disabilities (LD) or ADHD is misplacing or forgetting schoolwork—your class blog or wiki can provide a central location for students to locate important information and can help with organization.

For students who struggle with memory or processing information:

- ▶ Make video lectures, slideshows, and other relevant materials available so students can review multiple times if needed.
- ▶ Have students **create their own wiki entries, videos, or slideshows** on various topics. These resources can then become part of a library that your students can access for extra help or explanations.

For students who struggle with classroom participation and discussions:

- ▶ Students with **dyslexia or other learning difficulties** may struggle to find the right words quickly in high-pressure situations; for example, being called on in class discussions.
- ▶ Online discussions can allow students to think carefully about their answer and post it when they are ready, thereby improving the **quality of discussion and participation**.

For students who struggle with writing production:

- ▶ Allow students to respond to writing prompts using the classroom blog or a wiki page.
- ▶ Posting their assignments online can be especially beneficial for those **students who struggle to produce significant writing** in class.
- ▶ Responding online can allow students who **struggle with handwriting** to make use of speech-to-text or word-prediction software to aid them in their writing.
- ▶ Writing on a classroom wiki also can be a great way of encouraging your students to write and edit collaboratively.

For students who struggle with motivation for writing:

- ▶ Personal narratives and storytelling tend to be high interest and can help motivate reluctant writers.
- ▶ Blogging can be a great way for students to express their thoughts and feelings, and encourage writing.

As educators introduce blogs, wikis, e-mail, and other current digital communication strategies, they should be explicit about the difference between the formal language required for written communications and the **less formal language** frequently used in blogs, e-mails, and text messaging. Educators may want to set expectations for correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure for some assignments while setting relaxed expectations for others.

What the Research Says

Because journal writing, creative writing, and personal storytelling tend to be high interest, they may help encourage reluctant or struggling writers to write more frequently (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). Indeed, a recent study has shown that teen bloggers tend to write more often (both online and offline) than teenagers without blogs (eSchoolNews, 2008; Lenhart et al., 2008). In addition, the act of telling stories helps improve language and reading skills (Huffaker, 2004); therefore, blog writing can potentially help students with LD to become stronger writers. The act of writing a blog also means students are writing for an audience, which can be motivating. In a recent survey of teen writers, one student commented that "...if I knew that other people were going to read what I wrote and react to what I was writing, then I would make it better and I would want to do the best that I could at it" (Lehnhart et al., 2008, p. 52).

Similar to blogging, writing for a wiki may be of greater interest for students than writing a traditional research paper, which also can encourage reluctant authors to write more often. Wikis have another possible benefit for students with LD in terms of their collaborative nature. Whether writing for a classroom wiki page or adding content to a public wiki, such as Wikipedia, writers are working with others in the community to share knowledge. Writers edit one another's work, comment on inaccurate information, and share their areas of expertise. Writing for an audience may help motivate reluctant writers and improve writing skills (Lenhart et al., 2008). This format not only provides students with LD valuable feedback on their writing, it can also give them a platform for sharing something they know a great deal about. Many students with LD may have low self-esteem or feel anxious because of their difficulties in school. Becoming an "expert" on a wiki page could boost students' self-concept and help them recognize their strengths.

References

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