

Multimedia™ INTERNET@SCHOOLS

A reprint from
Multimedia &
Internet@Schools

The Media and Technology Specialists' Guide to Electronic Tools and Resources for K-12

PRODUCT REVIEWS

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Managing Editor/News & Reviews Editor

Electronic Resources for Schools

REPORT CARD

- ★★★★★ — Highly Recommended
- ★★★★ — Recommended
- ★★★ — Good
- ★★ — OK in some cases
- ★ — Don't consider

This section provides concise, original reviews of new or important hardware, software, Web sites, & electronic media that relate to the K–12 curriculum. All reviews are written by practicing educators who, in most cases, have used the software in a school environment. Where grouped into broad, age-appropriate categories, these categories should not be viewed as prescriptive. To facilitate “comparison shopping,” these reviews are highly structured. Reviewers prepare a “report card” based on a five-star scale.

GENERAL INTEREST SOFTWARE/WEB SITES

WriteBrain

Company: Sunburst Technology, 1550 Executive Drive, Elgin, IL 60123. Phone: (888) 492-8817; Email: Service@sunburst.com; Internet: www.sunburst.com or www.sunburst.com/writebrain.

Price: A 1-year contract is \$20 per student; the minimum required purchase is for 50 students. A single building contract or site license for as many as 500 users is \$2,000 per year. For licenses for more than 500 users, the cost is \$3 per student. Multiple year discounts are available.

★★★★★ | REPORT CARD

Installation	A
Content/Features	A
Ease of Use	A
Product Support	A

Audience: Grades 2–8.

Format: Web-based: multimedia writing program.

Minimum System Requirements:

Windows systems: 450 MHz processor, 128 MB RAM, Windows 98, 1024 x 768 screen resolution.

Macintosh systems: 500 MHz Power PC G3, 128 MB RAM, Mac OSX 10.2 or later, 1024 x 768 screen resolution.

Recommended browsers include Netscape 8.1, Firefox 1.5.0.1, Internet Explorer 6, or Safari 1.0.3 or later. The free plug-ins Flash Player 7 and Shockwave Player 10 are also required.

Description: WriteBrain is a standards-based online writing environment with the tools teachers need to customize instruction for all students. The program, intended to complement any writing curriculum

for grades 2–8, offers management, reporting, and communications tools. A text-to-speech feature is available to help younger students.

Reviewer Comments:

Installation: Initially, installation involves setting up an account. Once that is done, the final step is to make sure the system requirements are met.

The only installation problem I encountered was caused more by our school network than by WriteBrain. The program requires the latest version of Shockwave Player, a free add-on that can easily be installed on stand-alone computers.

In our district, any installation without administrator access to Windows NT, 2000, or XP-equipped computers is a problem. Even with access, the permissions can be tricky. Our district network administrator had to experiment with levels of restriction to find a way to install the newer version of Shockwave.

Before the installation, most of WriteBrain worked with the older version of Shockwave Player, although some text was a little hard to read.

Since this was a problem with our network and not the program itself, I'm giving a high installation rating. However, the WriteBrain developers could have done users a favor by making the program more compatible with additional recent versions of Shockwave Player. **Installation Rating: A**

Content/Features: WriteBrain is basically an online writing environment or community that can be used by students in grades 2–8 to improve their writing. The program's sophisticated lesson, management, communication, and other tools make the job easier and possibly more successful for teachers than older methods that don't involve computers or the Internet.

The teacher tools include more than 150 standards-based lessons in 11 genres. The lessons can be used by entire classes or individual students and can be modified by teachers for specific situations. Teachers can also create new lessons; WriteBrain helps to correlate these to state standards for all 50 states.

Differentiated instruction is facilitated by lesson modifications, as well as by the ability to turn on or off tools such as the spell checker. Rubrics and checklists can also be modified for specific groups.

Correcting or assessing writing is always a chore. WriteBrain helps teachers by including customizable teacher and peer evaluations as well as self-assessments based on commonly used rubrics. The program also generates standards-based reports by students, teachers, schools, or districts, including graphic representations of the data.

Test preparation content helps students prepare for state tests with writing prompts modeled after those found in state writing exams. It includes timed assessments.

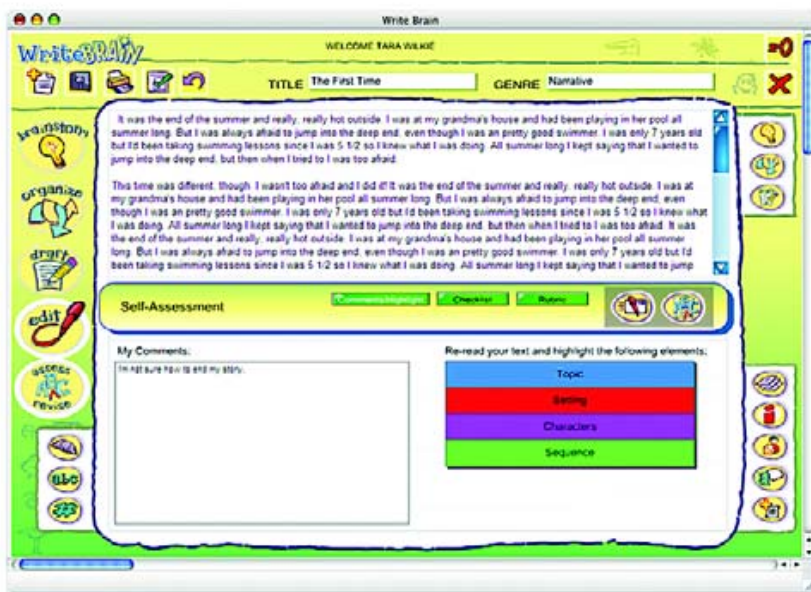
Student writing is guided through every step—including brainstorming, organizing, drafting, editing,

revising, and publishing. This is done in a recursive process that enables continued student improvement and helps develop critical thinking skills. Student work is kept in an online portfolio that can be accessed at home or at school.

Assessment—both at the end of the project and while writing—is accomplished by peer collaboration, self-assessment, and self-regulation monitored by teachers, as well as by teacher evaluation. These and other processes are supported by excellent student, teacher, and parent communication tools.

WriteBrain may be a little difficult for younger students and others who have problems reading, but a text-to-speech function helps with that.

Teacher and student pages are pleasant, clear, and easy to navigate.



Write Brain from Sunburst Technology

gate. Students use a full-featured word processor with buttons along both sides of the paper for various functions such as printing, changing fonts, and so on.

WriteBrain makes the process of writing instruction easier for teachers by helping with lesson planning, assessing student writing, and managing results. The writing process is fully organized, as close as the nearest computer, and easy to use, with everything only a button-click away.

This program can perhaps make writing instruction more successful by enabling teachers to have students write more at different levels and on different topics—with all of the needed steps and evaluation close at hand. WriteBrain also provides a well-thought-out collaboration process that enables and improves more student writing.

This is an excellent program but, even so, I have three minor concerns. The first is that successful use of WriteBrain depends on students having enough computer access, which probably means several sessions per week in a computer lab, perhaps supplemented with one or more classroom computers. That is currently not possible in my school district, and I suspect the same is true elsewhere.

The next concern is that the program's word processor, while easy and relatively intuitive to learn, is nonstandard in the sense that it is very different from commonly used word processors. Users comfortable with computers can easily make the transition, but it might be easier for students if the interface were a bit more standard.

Finally, I'd like to see WriteBrain add an Internet-based engine for correcting writing. Several testing companies and others offer these services, and though they may not be perfect, they generally work well. Adding one to this program, which still relies on teacher correction in the last analysis (with the support of peer evaluations and self-assessment), would save even more teacher time during the writing process. The addition of a correction engine would make this already outstanding program an even more useful tool. **Content/Features Rating: A**

Ease of Use: WriteBrain teaches a complex process, and learning to use the program is a bit complicated. Teachers and administrators will want to acquaint themselves with the program before use to be prepared to help students. Once the initial learning curve is completed, however, this is a very easy program to use. **Ease of Use Rating: A**

Product Support: Product support is offered through clear online help materials for students and teachers. A number of tutorials and Webinars are available for teachers and building administrators to guide them through some of the processes that may cause confusion. Customer service and tech support are available online or via a toll-free telephone number. **Product Support Rating: A**

Recommendation: WriteBrain, or a program like it, should be used by every school.

This is the best and most complete program of its kind that I have seen. WriteBrain is very well thought out and developed, and I recommend it for use in all grade 2–8 classrooms.

Sunburst should develop and market a version for home schoolers and for use by parents living in school districts that don't make the school edition available. **Highly recommended.**

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