

# The Think Tank

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## From the Editor...

The theme for this issue of *The Think Tank* involves computers. As you know, they can be useful little devices, helping us perform a myriad of tasks effectively and efficiently. Surely everyone knows that a computer can be used to word process a report or create a database. What this issue will explore, then, are the ways in which students can use computers, above and beyond these more common uses, to stand out academically.

While Dan Pepin takes us back to the 70's to remind us just how lucky we are to have computers, Melissa Kendall wonders just how fortunate she is to be a student in the new millenium. Senior Writing Consultant Jessica Dodge suggests that students take advantage of e-mail to develop their relationships with faculty. Finally, Irene An and Melissa Mancuso offer advice to those using the Internet to perform research.

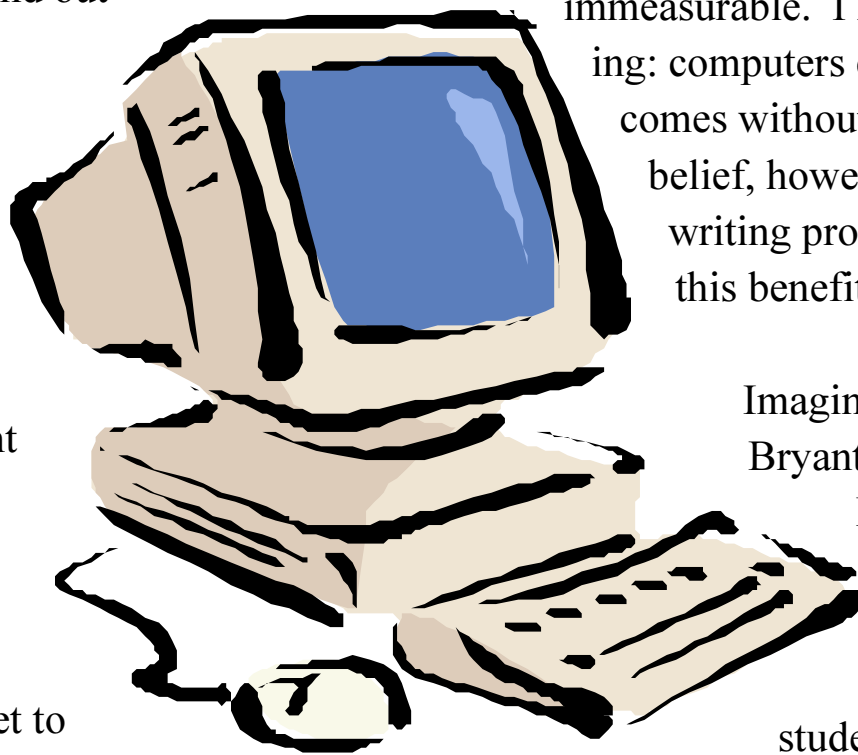
This issue supports the idea that computers can be a great tool for college students--if used correctly. Hopefully we'll encourage you to use your computer--or

those in Koffler--in increasingly productive ways. ♦

## A Trip Back in Time

by Daniel Pepin, Writing Consultant

As a computer information systems major, I feel compelled to promote the tools of my trade. Ever since I began writing papers in high school, I have realized that the value of a computer in the writing process is immeasurable. I know what you may be thinking: computers can be a pain. Well, nothing comes without cost. I stand firmly by my belief, however, that computers make the writing process easier, and we often take this benefit for granted.



Imagine, for a minute, that you were a Bryant student thirty years ago.

Bryant may well have had a mainframe computer for storing important data, but there were no workstations for student usage. Instead of a computer on your desk, you had a typewriter.

Now imagine that you received an assignment to write a six-page paper for your Introduction to Literary Studies class.

## Quotes of the Month

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."  
-- Arthur C. Clarke

"The economic and technological triumphs of the past few years have not solved as many problems as we thought they would, and, in fact, have brought us new problems we did not foresee."

-- Henry Ford II

*The Think Tank* welcomes contributions from students, faculty, and staff. Send submissions to JP Nadeau, editor, the Writing Center, Hall 6, 4th floor. This newsletter is published monthly through the Bryant College Academic Center for Excellence and the Writing Center. Visit our *Think Tank* archive, located at [http://www.bryant.edu/~ace/WrtCtr/Think\\_Tank.htm](http://www.bryant.edu/~ace/WrtCtr/Think_Tank.htm) to view past issues!

Your task was to research influential authors and write about their life. Since there was no Internet (Al Gore hadn't invented it yet!), you were forced to make the journey to the school library. You first looked in the card catalog under the author's name. Finding what you needed took about twenty minutes. There was no ProQuest, so, to find the most current information, you had to flip through volumes of Readers' Guides to find what you were looking for. You could not simply print out articles; instead you had to take out magazines and publications and take notes on what you needed for your paper. When you could not find what you were looking for, you had to venture off-campus to another library that had the information you sought. Any "searching" you did was by hand!

When you finally had the information you needed to write your paper, you had to prepare a draft before you could think about typing. You couldn't just type it straight away, because it would have been nearly impossible to edit it once typed. It would have needed to be re-typed, and you wouldn't have had time for that! Instead, you had to write out a rough draft by hand, make corrections, and decide on a final draft before the document was typed. Next, you had to type the final draft, and, oops—you made an error so you'll have to use white-out so you don't have to re-type the whole page. When you finished the first page, you realized that you didn't leave room for footnotes, so you had to start all over! Too bad you didn't have a program that would put your footnotes in automatically and space them correctly for you.

After much toil, you finish your paper, but you see a few last-minute spelling errors. You can't just fix them and re-print the paper. Instead you have to re-feed each page into your typewriter and figure out a way to fix the errors. What a pain! A spell checker would have really been nice. Finding yourself back in the year 2000, you realize just how much you've taken the convenience of computers for granted. ❖

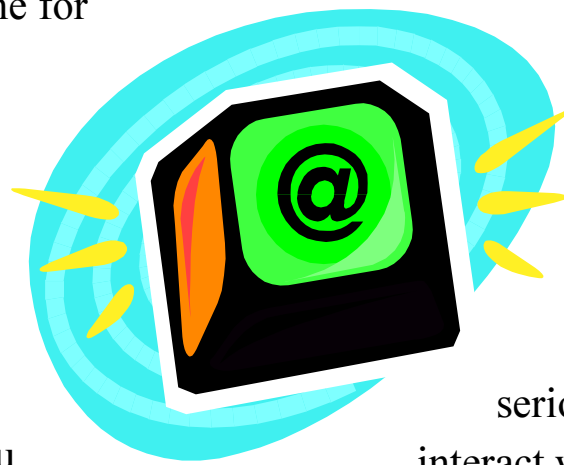
## E-mail: Another Way to Connect with Faculty

by Jessica Dodge, Writing Consultant

I'm no computer whiz. Sure, I passed PPS and I can get around basic programs well enough. I even own my own computer (if you can call it that!). But

when my computer refuses to print, telling me my "parameters are incorrect," I have no idea what it's trying to tell me. Not knowing the easy solution to fixing my "parameters," I opt to completely reinstall my printer driver. Even though I've become rather proficient at this, as parameters are a consistent problem for me, I assume I am doing things the hard way. My point, as I do have one, is this: I have no sure-fire, shortcut tips to lend you regarding computers and academics.

Of course there are things I've learned over time—you know, that whole trial and error process to which so many people refer. For instance, I've learned to ALWAYS save my file in more than one location because my policy professor won't accept tears in place of a 30 page case analysis. Oh, and when I'm browsing the web, looking for that gold mine of a site that will help provide evidence for my ten page psychology paper, I shouldn't forget to track the site address so I can find it again—you know, when I sit down days later to actually write.



These are tidbits that anyone with a little experience could tell you. The one unique thing I can tell you—and it is something people know, but don't take seriously—is that computers are a great way to interact with professors. Whether I have questions about an upcoming exam, that paper that's due in two days, or the reading/class discussion, I've found that professors are quite responsive to e-mail.

So, even if I can't tell you where to go to find the best academic web sites, or how to get your computer to turn a page of mediocrity into a masterpiece with a single keystroke, I can tell you that something as simple as e-mailing your professors can do nothing but help you. And that's good news, right? ❖

## Your Paper, Your Work

by Irene An, Writing Specialist

When I was an undergraduate, computers were used for word processing and creating spreadsheets, and e-mail was in its early stages. My classmates and I happily waited several minutes for a report to print or an equation to calculate on the screen. Bill Gates was not the richest man on earth and the country was blaming Bush for a sluggish economy.

What a difference a decade makes.

Gates now rules the world and Clinton's scandals don't scathe his appeal to the public because the NYSE is breaking records and jobs are plentiful. In ten years, the world has transformed from a physical entity to an intangible one. And the world of academics is no exception. All of this is credited to this box of plastic, wires, and metal chips at which I now sit.

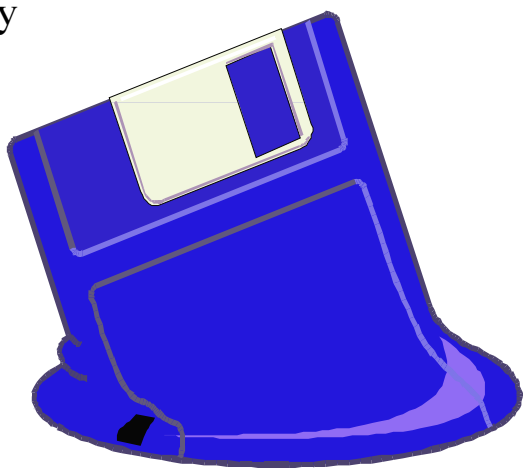
But I digress; this you already know.

I assume you use the computer to perform all the activities I used to do--and then some. I imagine that you use Lycos, Goto or Altavista to research material for papers or projects and Hotmail or Yahoo has your name in its e-mail files. Shopping is infinitely more rewarding through MyPoints or Cybergold. And now you can get an actual paper just by searching or going to chat rooms and requesting a paper on a particular topic.

Plagiarism you say? You bet. And if your professor is the suspicious type, you may be lashed with just punishment for such deviance. However, what if you throw ethics to the wind, take that risk, and assume your professor won't go snooping into the cobwebbed corners of cyberspace?

I can imagine what you may be thinking: *Maybe, just maybe, I could get away with it!* Not likely. I'm sure you have suspected that your writing style is a type of signature. Signatures are all different, right? So are writing styles. You know how art experts can tell the difference between a fake Picasso and the real thing? Professors can easily differentiate writing styles, especially since they read hundreds of papers per semester. And when your professor is accustomed to seeing you write in a more familiar tone with funny anecdotes here and there, if a strangely aloof, jargon-filled paper enters the picture, hellooooo "F"...or worse.

Speaking of grades, what makes you think that



paper on the Internet is any good? How do you know it wasn't written by a high school sophomore, who got a "D" on it, and is vying some sort of twisted revenge on the rest of student-kind?

Even if that isn't the case, papers plagiarized off of the Internet don't come close to matching the assignment you've been given. In order to illustrate this point, I searched Netscape, Hotbot, Goto, MSN, and Altavista for a paper dealing with the ways the economy affects social structure. Doing simple and advanced searches using Boolean queries with the words "economy," "social structure" and "paper" produced nothing of relevance. After over thirty minutes of searching, I came up empty-handed, although I did find papers on Mexican heritage and the work Primary Colors. Spending that time writing the paper would at least give you peace of mind and a few other substantial benefits.

Benefits? What benefits? You are trudging through a topic about who-knows-what and I'm telling you there are benefits? Absolutely. You will actually gain the practice that you need to be a good writer and communicator. Most companies today want people who communicate well. And within the structural corporate ladder, it's those individuals who've proven their verbal and written communication skills that get promoted faster and have staying power.

Isn't that what education is all about...to learn how to use your brain and develop knowledge and skills so you can succeed in your future career? It may not be instantly apparent why you have to write all these papers on different topics in so many different ways...but when you write cover letters, reports, proposals, and other documents years from now, you'll understand. ❖

## Electronically Jinxed

by Melissa Kendall, Writing Consultant

My mother repeatedly tells me that, for some unknown reason, I was born electronically jinxed, and that every time I buy something electronic I should buy the lifetime warranty with it.

When I tell you that I am electronically jinxed, I'm not joking. I am constantly repairing parts on my car that mechanics say are "very unlikely to break."

Within the past four years I have managed to mysteriously break four phones, two cameras, four computer monitors, two stereos, and a scanner. I have also managed to crash my computer three times in one year, and now I'm unable to view graphics!

Based on that, one can see why I might be a little uneasy about using a computer. I can honestly say that, after repeated crashes and error messages, I do not trust my computer. These problems have set me back hours on papers, projects, and other assignments. Have you ever accidentally closed the program that you were working in, or had an error message appear which shuts down that particular program? What I've learned from these experiences is that it is a very good idea to back up my work *while* I'm working on it. Now this might seem like common knowledge to you, but, because it is so easy, it is also the quickest thing to forget. If you don't back up your work, you might be left screaming and kicking your computer. I cannot even recall all of the times that I have been so frustrated with my computer that I wished I never had it.

Then, after I wish that I never had a computer, I think, what would my life be like without one? I would have nothing to save me from countless hours of rewriting drafts when all I had to do was hit "open file" and make my changes. I would spend more time spell checking each draft. I couldn't send my friend back home a "hi-how-ya-doin?" within seconds. And I would not have endless pages of information right at my fingertips via the Internet.

I guess that if you really think about the benefits associated with computers, you can learn to live with a little frustration. Just like us, they are not perfect, but they certainly do save us a lot of time! ❖

## **The New Age of Electronic Research**

*by Melissa Mancuso, Writing Consultant*

In the past few years, researching topics for term papers has changed dramatically. We have gone from using the Dewey Decimal System to using search engines and key words to find the information we need.

Last semester I became very familiar with ProQuest and NorthernLight.com while conducting research for my Urban Sociology course. Many professors, my

sociology Professor included, require students to cite academic sources, including journal articles or educational and governmental documents. ProQuest and NorthernLight.com are helpful for finding such academic sources.

ProQuest is available on the computers in Hodgson Memorial Library and is quite simple to use. By double-clicking on the ProQuest icon, one is presented with an option to search all databases or to select a particular database. With an exact field of study, it is best to choose a specific database. By then typing in the research topic and a publication date range, a list of related abstracts and articles will appear on the screen. The articles may be viewed and/or printed.

Similarly, NorthernLight.com provides quality research with a few clicks of the mouse. When connected to the website, one can specify a topic in the "search for" box. However, unlike ProQuest,



NorthernLight.com lists websites, instead of articles, corresponding to the requested topic. Custom search folders listed in the margins can also help narrow the search field. The articles and web sites that result from searches on ProQuest and Northernlight.com usually qualify as academic. A student should always check with the professor when in doubt, however.

Convenience, speed, and accessibility are key elements in conducting research. With modern technology, all of these desirable elements of research are possible. ❖