

Distraction-Free Writing Devices: Peter Elbow and Smart Typewriters

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Distraction-free writing devices are emerging writing tools that limit user function to streamline writing the first draft. Astrohaus' Freewrite Smart Typewriter is a standalone writing device with the sole function of composition, containing only a keyboard, e-ink display, file-management system, and Wi-Fi capabilities for cloud-based syncing. This device is directly named after the term popularized by Peter Elbow, and its design reflects his expressivist pedagogies. As Elbow's pedagogies echo throughout distraction-free writing devices, they curate an alternative writing environment by streamlining the writing process, directing the writer down a linear path through the first draft, denying the ability to make global edits while composing. This essay explores how distraction-free writing devices reflect expressivist pedagogies through the frameworks of new materialism and posthumanism, analyzing the role that materiality, distractions, and post-digital artifacts play in our writing process. As writing technologies and digital environments shape the activity of writing, their affordances and constraints create avenues for composition, guiding the writer through a unique process shaped by the device itself.

The role of the writing device in the twenty-first century is one with shifting identities and uses. In the midst of emerging large language models (LLMs), AI-enhanced writing tools, and advanced digital word processors, writing is an activity that is increasingly mediated by digital technology. Scholars across the disciplines have examined the role of this mediation through the frameworks of new materialism and posthumanism, ultimately challenging the traditional notions of authorship and subject/object relationality (Alexis, 2016; Boyle, 2018; Brown & Rivers, 2016; Micciche, 2014). As a result, the environment of digital word processors has been called back into question (Bray, 2013; Case, 2023; Ching, 2023). With so many digital tools and applications at their disposal, writers are constantly multitasking in digital spaces (Leon & Pigg, 2011; Portanova, 2017), and they are feeling distracted by the abundance of features offered in mainstream word processing software such as Google Docs and Microsoft Word (Ching, 2018; Jansson & Thorén, 2024).

However, some writers and computer engineers are resisting generative AI and traditional word processing technologies. Following a surge in distraction-free writing software marketed on their distraction-free nature—such as Scrivener, OmmWriter, and Sprinter—and the rise of calm technologies that

seek to reduce interruptions (Case, 2023), hardware is being created to combat distractions in composition. This hardware consists of various standalone writing devices that are reminiscent of the portable word processors of the past, emphasizing the experience of writing without distractions (Jansson & Thorén, 2024). At the forefront of this trend of devices is Astrohaus' Freewrite series, a line of distraction-free writing devices designed to prioritize writing the first draft. Named after the term popularized by Peter Elbow, the Freewrite Smart Typewriter is a commercial device directly inspired by expressivist writing studies scholarship (Freewrite, 2024). The Smart Typewriter features a full mechanical keyboard, an e-ink screen, and Wi-Fi capabilities for cloud-based syncing for further revision, emphasizing an uninterrupted writing flow at the expense of real-time revision. The Freewrite series is gaining popularity online, and, as of September 2024, users have written over 12,000 drafts and over 15.6 million words on Freewrite devices (Freewrite, n.d.a).

Here, I explore how distraction-free writing devices—particularly the Freewrite Smart Typewriter—can be understood through theories of new materialism and posthumanism to ultimately examine how the writing device itself serves as a collaborator in composition by streamlining the writing process. Drawing on Elbow's scholarship on freewriting, distraction-free writing devices revisit expressivist pedagogies by offering a unique path through the first draft, devoid of the perceived burden of active editing. In doing so, distraction-free writing devices offer an alternative writing experience that recognizes the inherent agency within writing devices and shapes a linear freewriting experience in the process.

While existing scholarship has touched upon distraction-free writing *software* (Ching, 2018, 2023), the materiality of the distraction-free writing *device* has yet to be closely examined in writing studies. I use the umbrella term *distraction-free writing device* to emphasize the unique role of the material writing tool, as opposed to the similar but different experience of using distraction-free writing software on a twenty-first-century computer. Even though I use the Freewrite Smart Typewriter as a case study, the Freewrite is not the only distraction-free writing device. The Freewrite still exists more broadly in a neoliberal system, and it ultimately seeks to solve the problem of distraction by increasing market share. Regardless, the materiality of an alternative writing tool creates a shift in the composition process, and the affordances provided by its limitations are worth studying in the midst of a cluttered digital era.

Distractions, Digital Matter, and Agency

The boundaries between the physical and digital world have diminished, largely in part to the various roles that computers play in our daily lives. Unlike typewriters, computers were not created to act as a writing device, and word

processing is not the twenty-first-century computer's primary identity: we use computers to write, read, contact family, watch videos, create art, play games, pay bills, and perform endless other activities, all on one device. In turn, the computer signifies the convergence of various opportunities that are all separate from writing in our minds (Jenkins, 2008). Each software is at odds with the others, competing for our attention, even when we can only perform one task at a time (Ching, 2023; Leon & Pigg, 2011; Portanova, 2017). Distractions are born out of this competition, creating a cluttered writing process in distracting digital environments (Jansson & Thorén, 2024). Distraction-free writing software and hardware, at their core, minimize access to digital matter, which can range from downloaded software, applications, or access to online content. Like physical matter, digital matter also influences the writer through the clutter of digital spaces and converging activities outside of composition (Jenkins, 2008). Even though people continue to be the primary authors of a text, actor-network theory provides a strong framework for how agency is further distributed to the surrounding material and social contexts (Dourish, 2017). While it may not be physically present, digital matter remains dynamic, and it is capable of influencing writers on digital devices.

Through the lens of new materialism, we can begin to examine the role of the computer in the writing process. While traditional materialist philosophies viewed matter as passive, new materialists view matter as active and agentic (McNely, 2019; Puzio, 2024), and posthumanism critiques the dichotomy between subject and object (Boyle, 2018; Micciche, 2014). Like physical matter, digital matter is capable of sticking to the writer, luring their attention elsewhere. Brain McNely (2019) used the term viscosity to describe this sensation, which he defines as “phenomena [that] reach out to us, grab us, arrest us... laden with rhetorical possibilities, with the potential for change, for difference” (p. 207). Viscous materials contain thick lures, and they catch our attention, creating a resonance that influences our state of being. Digital computer applications contain their own amount of viscosity, and their very existence tempts the writer, luring them away from the act of composition. Thus, viscous phenomena are rhetorical—they compel us, drawing our attention away from the activity at hand and towards something else.

If matter is capable of rhetoric and agency, the tools with which we compose are, too. While David Russell (2016) wrote that “[writing] is, in a material sense, nothing more than making marks on surfaces” (p. 26), writing technologies, in a new materialist sense, affect how those marks are *created* (Micciche, 2014). Kory Lawson Ching (2018) noted that the environment of a word processing software shapes the distractions that students face in the writing process; James J. Brown Jr. and Nathaniel A. Rivers (2016) noted that the QWERTY keyboard configuration itself precedes the act of typing, forever changing the way that

writers write; and Cydney Alexis (2016) found that the physical space where writing occurs is capable of shaping not only the writing process but also genres. In turn, the writing environment—digitally and physically—is capable of creating a sense of familiarity, focus, and opportunity for the writer. The affordances and constraints of these spaces provide unique avenues into the writing process.

The twenty-first-century computer contains digital lures that, consciously or subconsciously, demand energy from the user, for each of the computer's different identities continues to compel us. As Mark Weiser (1999) predicted at the end of the twentieth century, many technologies in the twenty-first century are invisible, and they alter the way that we navigate the world and aid us in invisible ways. Weiser (1999) defined invisible technologies as devices that “weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it” (p. 3). Casey Boyle (2018) expanded this argument by finding that we are not separate from these technologies; rather, we are in a metastable orientation with them, not just looking *at* but existing *among* material devices. In turn, distraction-free writing devices challenge the convenience of invisible technologies, striving to exist as a technology whose features are as visible as possible. While mainstream word processing software such as Google Docs or Microsoft Word will correct spelling errors, suggest typical endings to sentences, and allow plugins that suggest areas for further development and improvement, distraction-free writing software and hardware intentionally offer none of these and actively deny the option to the user. Distraction-free writing devices challenge the writing process because we, as human beings, are entangled with our material tools, and we are used to the ways that they are supposed to function (Puzio, 2024). Distraction-free writing devices recognize this entanglement, and they seek to disconnect the writer from the digital and place them back into the material world.

The Freewrite Smart Typewriter and Distraction-Free Writing Devices

Distraction-free writing devices simplify the writing environment by locking the writer out of the traditional tools that they typically use. While distraction-free writing devices resemble the design philosophy of calm technology, which minimizes the use of non-essential features in technology (Case, 2023), distraction-free writing devices block access to non-essential digital matter altogether. The operating system has a minimalist design, while the hardware also limits distractions. The e-ink screen display size available on the Freewrite Smart Typewriter (Figure 9.1) is significantly smaller than one would typically see on a laptop or computer monitor, measuring only 121mm x 68mm

(Freewrite, n.d.b). The screen is slightly smaller than an index card, and the available display space only permits ten rows of single-spaced writing at a time. The available display space is even more limited on the Freewrite Alpha, an alternative model which can, depending on the selected font size, only display between three and five lines at a time on its LCD screen. This design philosophy actively rejects the notion of editing while composing, denying the writer the affordances that typical word processing software allows. The limited screen space encourages the writer to look *forward* in their writing process, forcing a sense of linearity and leaving the writer with no choice but to continue writing.

The Freewrite further denies premature edits by omitting mouse features on the Freewrite devices, creating no possible way to navigate through their writing and click on a misspelled word or an awkward sentence. Even though there are page up and page down keys, the Freewrite does not permit the writer to alter their prose past the current location of the cursor. This restriction and forced linearity through the rough draft attempt to motivate the writer to complete a rough draft while intentionally obscuring any interruptions. These constraints sacrifice dynamicity for the sake of uninterrupted expression, forcing the writer to separate writing the rough draft from editing. The emphasis on the rough draft further echoes expressivist pedagogies; Elbow (1973) argued that “editing, in itself, is not the problem... The problem is that editing goes on at the same time as producing... It’s an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they’re the right words” (p. 5). Additionally, students often face writer’s block when overwhelmed by rigid rules (Rose, 1980). Mike Rose (1980) wrote, “composing calls for open, even adventurous thinking, not for constrained, no exit cognition” (p. 399). The combination of the small screen size and lack of document navigation forces the writer to prioritize the text that is immediately present.



Figure 9.1. Freewrite Smart Typewriter. Photo by the author.

The Freewrite Smart Typewriter's screen is placed just above the keyboard at about a ten-degree angle, directing the writer's head down while composing. Instead of viewing a typical computer monitor that is positioned at a 90-degree angle from the keyboard, the writer is looking down at the device, keeping their eyes fixated on the keyboard and their hands. Unlike distraction-free writing software, distraction-free writing devices are entirely framed around the material keyboard itself, directly integrating the act of typing into the writing process. Brown and Rivers (2016) suggested that we must "notice what each of our hands is doing in concert with QWERTY as we compose sentences" (p. 223), particularly because the keyboard emphasizes the relationship between the writer and their material device. The ergonomics of the Freewrite device reconnects the writer's eyesight with their hands, nodding to writing by hand and reintroducing the performance of writing. Just as the original typewriter was referred to as the literary piano (Kern, 2015), the act of typing itself relies on this rhythmic motion, and the act of typing on physical keys provides haptic feedback, emphasizing the materiality and gestures shaped by QWERTY itself (Jansson & Thorén, 2024).

Peter Elbow, Linearity, and Expressivist Pedagogies

While distraction-free writing devices shape the writing process, they are not conducive to all stages of the writing process. The Freewrite Smart Typewriter echoes expressivist pedagogies, and the device's design philosophy nods to Donald Murray's initial framework of the writing process. Murray (1972) argued that the writing process consists of three distinct stages: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting. Even though pre-writing and re-writing are essential parts of the writing process, distraction-free writing devices actively prohibit global edits; they exclusively serve the writing stage. Peter Elbow (1973) argued that "writing has the advantage of permitting more editing. But that's its downfall too" (p. 5). In response to Elbow, distraction-free writing devices, at their core, are in service of the first draft and freewriting exercises, not the full writing process. Distraction-free writing devices are not meant to work in isolation, but they create a writing environment to start writing and exploring ideas, encouraging the writer to find their own voice in the process. In doing so, such devices create a collaboration between the distraction-free writing device and the computer itself, requiring two material tools to see the writing process through to its end.

Encouraging the writer to discover their own ideas through the act of freewriting, distraction-free writing devices direct the writer down a linear path through the first draft. By writing the first draft, Elbow (1973) argued that "you should expect yourself to end up somewhere different from where you

started. Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with” (p. 15). However, modern-day word processing software makes this difficult: they allow the writer to make global edits while composing, interrupting the drafting process with real-time editing. Spelling or grammatical errors are recognized, and the software immediately alerts the user with a colorful squiggly line, breaking the natural flow of composition with notifications of lower-order concerns (Buck, 2008). Distraction-free writing devices hide those errors from the writer, separating line edits from the writing process while directing the rough draft forward. The inherent design philosophy of distraction-free writing devices force a direct linearity through one stage of the broader writing process that is otherwise nonlinear.

Distraction-free writing devices pave the way for writers to explore their thoughts while moving forward, eliminating the urgency to step back and re-route. In turn, writing without feeling the need to adhere to rules or revision helps prevent writer’s block (Rose, 1980), moving the writer further through the draft to reach an endpoint. By emphasizing this forward-moving composition process, distraction-free devices shape the composing process itself. They shape not only how writers interact with their drafts, but also how they reflect expressivist thought by conceptualizing the act of writing as one of self-discovery rather than product-oriented perfection.

Conclusion

Distraction-free writing devices are emerging devices, and research in writing studies regarding their implications for pedagogy has yet to be published. It should be noted that there is no clear subject/object relationship between the writer and the writing device. As Laura Micciche (2014) noted, “writing is contaminated, made possible by a mingling of forces and energies in diverse, often distributed environments” (p. 502). Thus, writing is a collaboration between the writer and the writing device, and distraction-free writing devices recognize this relationship by putting the author’s unfiltered thoughts at the forefront of the writing process, not a variety of digital features. Future research need not be concerned with whether or not alternative writing devices *improve* writing quality; instead, we should be concerned with the ways that we are entangled with our devices, existing *among* them, being shaped *by* them while simultaneously shaping them, too, in the process (Boyle, 2018; Bray, 2013).

While it isn’t feasible to implement these devices on a wide scale across writing programs, students should experiment with a variety of writing devices and environments. Examining the role technology plays in our composition process is more important now than ever as generative AI continues to

find its way into all facets of digital composition. As blue books are returning to composition classrooms, writing instructors are left questioning if the writing device is representative of their pedagogical values in praxis (Shirky, 2025). Now is the time for students and scholars alike to revisit the study of the writing device. Examining the role that devices play enhances our awareness of the influence our technologies have over our writing processes. In learning more about how different technologies shape writing, we learn more about ourselves and the decisions we make as we mindfully use computers in our daily lives.

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