

# The Day

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## Schools Turn To Web Site As Interactive Writing Coach

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Submit, blink and there you have it: an instant evaluation of your essay.

The computer-generated score, usually on a scale of 1 to 6, assesses five aspects of writing, including organization, language use and style. Accompanying the score is feedback for improvement.

MY Access!, a Web-based computer program, is being used in schools around the country to help students improve their writing. Ledyard and Stonington high schools recently began using the program to prepare students for the Connecticut Academic Performance Test.

Teachers and administrators at both schools say they generally like having MY Access! but still consider it a pilot program. They say the instant feedback is helpful for teachers, who, relieved of the need to correct every paper, can give more frequent writing assignments.

But they say the program should be used as a supplemental tool, not as a replacement for instruction by teachers. There are limitations to the program, which struggles to accurately assess creative writing and analytical thought.

Stonington High School sophomore Anna Victoria said that if, for example, a student were writing an essay on Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," the program wouldn't say: "Oh, that's such a nice way of describing Romeo's eyes when he's looking at Juliet."

That's where the teacher comes in.

"I see the writing process as being part science and part art," said Clint Kennedy, director of technology for the Stonington school district. "The MY Access! program helps with the science aspect of it. ... But then it allows the teacher to focus more on the art side of the writing process, which the technology can't handle."

The program complements teacher instruction by freeing the teacher of the "repetitive" task of grading papers, Kennedy said.

"Computers aren't very smart at all, but when given a task, they're very efficient at it," he said.

Harry Barfoot, vice president of sales and marketing at Vantage Learning, said about 1 million students use the Pennsylvania-based company's MY Access!, including an estimated 15,000 students in about 60 Connecticut schools. Vantage Learning is in its seventh edition of MY Access!

"These are 21st century tools," Barfoot said.

The program has more than 600 essay topics that teachers assign, such as: "Should we stop the death penalty?" It uses technology called IntelliMetric, which is also used for scoring the writing portions of the GMATs and MCATs —

standardized tests required for admission to graduate business and medical schools.

Barfoot said the computer “is not a thinking machine” that can independently distinguish good from bad writing. But the sophisticated program can “model what a human being would say (about) a piece of writing,” he said.

Software licenses cost \$36 per student per academic year. Ledyard purchased \$1,500 worth of licenses for 60 students this year. Superintendent of Schools Michael Graner budgeted \$10,000 for expanded use next year but, due to budget constraints, may cut that amount.

Stonington is one of seven high schools that last year received a new state grant that provided funds to purchase laptops for high school classes in which writing is vital to instruction. It also included money for use of artificial intelligence-based writing software such as MY Access!

Karen Kaplan, executive director of the state Commission for Educational Technology, educational technology consultant for the state Department of Education and program manager for the grant, was enthusiastic about the value of such programs.

“With artificial intelligence, students can get specific, targeted feedback several times in a PERIOD!” Kaplan wrote in an e-mail. “... This gives students a chance to write more, and learn how to improve their writing with immediate feedback.”

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Ledyard High School has created an English class designed specifically for daily use of MY Access! Graner said the class is geared for students who are at risk of performing poorly on the CAPT.

But use of the program is not simply intended to raise CAPT scores, he said. The CAPT just happens to test skills students should be developing anyway, he said.

And the way to improve those skills is through practice.

“The kids are doing a lot more writing,” said Graner, a former English teacher. “I think that’s the huge key. To the extent that we can do that, I think we’re certainly going down the right road.”

Ledyard English teacher Diana Riley teaches one of the two classes solely devoted to use of MY Access! If the program helps improve CAPT scores, the class will have been worth it, she said.

But Riley has noticed some “kinks” in the system. She said the automated nature of certain feedback gets repetitive, to the point where some students have memorized them and no longer find them useful.

Riley said the program appears to look for key words to gauge proper organization of ideas. An essay that begins an argument with, “First of all,” followed by, “Secondly” and then, “In conclusion,” may be deemed well organized when that isn’t necessarily the case, she said.

Riley has also noticed that the program may consider an argument well supported for the mere use of citations, regardless of what actual text has been placed within quotation marks.

Riley only factors in the MY Access! scores as part of her overall grade. When grading, she also considers student effort, preparation and attitude. The program saves each rewrite of an essay, allowing teachers to track students’ progress.

While Riley approves of using the program to help students improve their CAPT scores, more widespread use could “restrict styles of writing” and force students to be “more formulaic” in their prose, she said.

Despite the program’s shortcomings, Riley said students appear, for the most part, motivated to raise their program-

generated scores.

Brittney LaBrosse, a 10th-grader at Ledyard High School, said she likes getting immediate computer responses to her essays.

“Cause then you're not waiting and you can start (revising) right away,” she said.

Because access to the program is individualized, LaBrosse, 15, can log on from any computer with an Internet connection.

“Brittney is really motivated to get a good grade,” said teacher Kelley Benzing. “And she's always on the Internet anyway, so she just hops on.”

Marguerite Santos, 15, a 10th-grader at Stonington High School, said she didn't always find the program's feedback helpful. It might indicate that she was doing something wrong, she said, but it wouldn't explain what she needed to correct.

Anna Victoria, 15, said the program is “an easy and quick way to improve your writing.”

But, she said, “If you're a bad writer, writing on the program won't necessarily make you a better writer.”

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Stephen Bickford, principal of Wheeler High School/Middle School in North Stonington, researched MY Access! and said he was disappointed by the program's “automated feedback.”

He said the program might be helpful for younger students who still need technical writing assistance. But at the high school level, where English classes teach in-depth literary analysis that involves “subtlety of thought,” he felt the program was unnecessary.

“We think we're beyond the grammar,” Bickford said. “We're focused on the thinking.”

Bickford, who has taught Advanced Placement English at Wheeler, decided against using the program at Wheeler because he didn't want the school to rely on the program as a “crutch” for student assessment.

“I didn't want something to take even one minute away from teacher input,” he said.

Several professors at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education said they were unfamiliar with the program. Connecticut College English professor Charles Hartman, too, had never heard of MY Access!

But Hartman, co-director of the department's creative writing program and its poet in residence, has a unique understanding of the relationship between computers and language. Hartman designed a computer program called “Prose” that writes random but syntactically correct sentences in English.

He said programming a computer to write is “surprisingly easy.” Many people have attempted to teach computers to read, but because it is such a complex task, such attempts have had limited success, he said.

“If you start to talk about using computer programs for a kind of higher-level critique of writing ... I'll just say I'm quite sure nobody has trained the computer to recognize an idea,” Hartman said.

*Regional*



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*Brittney LaBrosse, 16, a sophomore at Ledyard High School, fine-tunes an essay using the Web-based essay assessing program MY Access!*



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*Brittney LaBrosse, 16, a sophomore at Ledyard High School, says she likes getting an immediate computer response to her essays.*