

This year I have had the opportunity to use the My Access program from Vantage learning to supplement the instruction in my classroom. Keeping in mind that I am a beginning user, working alone (after the training provided by Vantage) to figure out what I'm doing, and by no means am yet an expert on all of the ins and outs, I have been able to do so much with my students this first year of using the program! I have found it to be a very valuable tool that has allowed me to greatly enhance writing instruction for my students.

The program has many features that I feel benefit my students:

First, the support I have received from the company has been wonderful. Because lab time has a tight schedule in my school, it is important to have all students productively working during our lab time. I am able to call the support number right while we are in the lab to resolve any technical issues we may run into (which is not often and just because I am new to learning the program) right then so the student has very little down time.

Second, the resources provided with the program are incredible. The manuals are extremely complete with everything from resources for teachers about using the program, to lessons I can use in my writing instruction that go with each prompt to teach the students about each style of writing. For example, I had materials to teach the students what each aspect being graded meant (what IS focus and meaning, etc.), what each level of writing would look like (what would get a 6, 5, 4, etc.), pre-writing forms, peer review forms, and sample papers for each topic.

Third, the program is web based. I can use this from my classroom mini-lab (I can let students work on this in free time if they have writing they need to finish), from either lab in our school, or they can even work from home (this is wonderful for when students are absent or need some extra time to catch up).

Fourth, we have found the format of the program to be very user friendly. Navigation through the web site is very intuitive for the students. Students are provided with a myriad of tools they can use for pre-writing as well as writing tools. Students can easily see exactly what they need to do to improve their work through using "My Editor" and "My Tutor".

Fifth, I LOVE the instant feedback my students are able to get with the program. They can have assistance with mechanical aspects of their writing while they are composing their work, and can see how they did in each area of the writing they were scored on and how they can improve their work (for any prompts that were not pilot or my own prompts...the list of available prompts that can be scored on all aspects rather than with an overall score grows bigger all the time).

Sixth, I LOVE the data that is available to me at my fingertips. Upon logging in I can see an overall score for my class, I can see reports that let me know about each type of student error, I can access all essays (without them needing to be printed), and I have access to parent reports. The data can be used to monitor progress of the students as well as help me pinpoint specific areas that students in this particular class need more practice with. I would NEVER be able to spend the time grading this much writing and giving the level of feedback each student is able to receive, even if I did nothing but grade 24 hours a day!

Another thing I love about the program scoring the papers (besides the TIME factor) is that the program is OBJECTIVE (and thorough). The data could provide scores that would be consistent if one wanted to compare scores between classes, schools, districts, etc. I have mostly stayed with the MY Access IntelliMetric Prompts, but did try a few of my own prompts and was pleased with the way the program was able to instantly give me an overall grade for the work (which is what I usually did anyway in the writing I USED to have to grade the HARD way before I had this program).

Seventh, I LOVE the teacher goosebumps I get while we are in the lab when a student asks me if I could please clarify what subject-verb agreement is (or asks some other specific grammar question). I am now able to have students receive INDIVIDUALIZED grammar lessons based on THEIR WRITING by the “My Editor” flagging grammatical errors (then I clarify for the student if they don’t remember what that item means). Students are much more invested in the grammatical aspects in their own work than they are when we practice with a generic worksheet about that topic.

I want to be clear about the use of this program. This is not a stick your kids in the lab and read the newspaper for the time you are in there and it will teach your kids to write. This is a prepare your students for writing before you go to the lab (teach them about that type of writing, talk about the prompt, do some pre-writing activities (many are included in the My Access resources), even have the kids paper-pencil write their draft if you are really short on lab time. Then you go to the lab where they enter their work and receive instant feedback on how they did and how they can improve. It ENHANCES what you are doing by decreasing the lag time between student submission and student feedback to about 1 second so the student can get on with the revision process.

Using this program has given me MORE time to plan the writing lessons and evaluate data rather than spending all the time I had to devote to this subject in grading the papers. Because the grading and feedback happen so quickly, students really get that writing is a PROCESS. Not having to spend my time grading all of the papers myself (I still have access to go in and look at the student papers, and even override the computer score as needed but I’m not worrying about spending hours and hours making notes all over every paper on

my own so that the student knows exactly what they need to fix) the program has freed me up to be more of a facilitator. I am available to assist students as they need me during each stage of their writing. There is no lag time (like there used to be when I human graded everything) for students to get feedback and move on to the next draft of their work. There is a smooth flow between submission, reflection, adjustments, and revisions.

I truly believe that this year I have been the best teacher of Writing than I have ever been. I'm no longer overwhelmed by the tons of grading involved in giving my students a variety of writing opportunities. I have lots of control of the tool to make it suit my particular needs and my specific curriculum. I have lots of resources included with the program to help me every step of the way from the lesson planning to the actual time in the lab using the program and following up with evaluation. I have not had to change WHAT I teach for writing to "make it fit", I have just changed "HOW" the evaluation happens (to instant feedback), and because of the additional resources given for specific prompts, I have been able to enhance what I already have to make the lessons more thorough and helpful to the students.

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Comments from students in my class regarding the program:

"It has some very useful tools for the students in the program."

"There are some really good topics that are easy to write about but the topics are hard enough to make you have to think."

"It's a lot more fun than just writing in the classroom."

"I like it because it grades you really quickly."

"They have the different areas that they can tell you what to do better based on your writing."

"It's really fun to do and it also helps you with your typing skills."

"It's fancy – it's got a lot of things you can do with the program."

"It gave me some good persuasive words to use while I was writing."

"The finished copy looks much nicer than when I write with a pencil and I like how it's easy to re-do your work."