

## The Write Idea

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*Technology-enhanced writing support: how it works.*

GUEST COLUMN | by Michele Israel



**Emily Bonack, English 9 and AP Language and Communications teacher at Merrill High School, in Merrill, WI, knows all too well what happens to students who are not at grade-level writing proficiency: confidence lags, frustration overwhelms, and motivation declines. Writing becomes a very daunting charge that students resist.**

Bonack laments that this resistance presents a communication obstacle, and impedes educational and career trajectories. “Students,” emphasizes Bonack, “need to know how to write well because it is going to greatly affect their future. And determine whether they can communicate, with clarity, what it is that they want...and ultimately work towards those desires.”

With many students to teach, it is hard for Bonack to guide each one’s writing journey, especially in the absence of requisite, grade-appropriate ELA skills.

# [The programs] facilitate student-teacher conversations during valuable learning moments.

Thus the reason Bonack uses two technology programs from Turnitin that support students' writing efforts. Revision Assistant (RA) gives students immediate automatically generated formative feedback on core writing skills. Feedback Studio (FS) lets teachers respond to students' writing and check for proper source attribution. All of Bonack's students have iPads that make it easier for them use the software when they need it.

Each tool's unique attributes—RA being student-centered and FS teacher-directed—bolster competencies in ways Bonack admits she cannot do by herself. With 150 students across five classes, it is only possible to have students work on the same, non-differentiated assignment. They get a bit of direction to get them started. But, then they are on their own during the revision and drafting process, which not all students negotiate well.

“We'll do some activities in class,” explains Bonack. “But I tell the students that I can't really see where they're at because I don't have time to grade 150 papers three times, or to touch base with 150 students three times, in depth, throughout the course of one writing project.”

The writing event is ultimately a summative event. Students submit papers for a grade, but have not had much support. Only those who are adept at the writing process are likely to get top honors.

Bonack acknowledges that the features of RA and FS, combined with quality instruction, are what get many students over the writing hump. And allow her to narrow her instruction in more targeted and useful ways.

## **How it Works**

With RA, students work from writing prompts (some with reading passages) linked to a concept. For example, a 9th-10th grade Civil Service assignment requires composing a high school newspaper editorial (argumentative writing) discussing whether high school graduates should spend one year in service before going to college.

On this assignment, students work independently during the pre-draft process, primarily relying on feedback from RA to guide them. They can request a Signal Check, RA's signature feature, that highlights text students are struggling with, and gives them feedback on trouble spots in the areas of language and style, organization, and claim and focus.

Students make suggested changes on the spot and get more feedback: a red flag for something that still needs adjustment; a green flag for a job well done (a major confidence builder!).

If the Signal Check's response is confusing, students can reach out to Bonack directly for help. She might lead a mini-lesson, or help them with grammar, punctuation, and parts of speech, which RA does not address. If many students struggle with the same concept, Bonack will conduct a full-class lesson.

What about the students who do not (or rarely) request Signal Checks? Bonack can monitor their progress and work through RA and provide support/encouragement where needed.

Once the pre-drafting process is done, students use FS to fortify learned skills. Basically, says Bonack, the message to her students is: “Show me what you can do now that you’ve learned the steps of how to write this particular type of assignment.”

FS is what Bonack views as the summative stage of student writing during which she helps students to understand her comments and edits/revisions. “With FS,” explains Bonack, “I can drag and drop frequently used comments right onto a student’s paper, add voice comments, have the software check grammar, and engage the tool’s similarity report to scan for possible plagiarism or mis-citation.”

## **Impact**

RA heightens students’ willingness to self-correct, embrace effective writing practices, and get beyond the first-draft-is-the-final-draft syndrome. FS reinforces their ability to tackle different types of writing, while encouraging them to use sources honestly and in an informed fashion.

Then there are the “bells and whistles” that make the tools gamelike...and fun, two enticing features that further motivate.

Also, students like that they can rely on the device for assistance, rather than announcing their need in front of their peers, or asking the teacher for help. Bonack explains that for some students, it’s easier to get feedback (and affirmation) from a computer than a person.

Sometimes, students are frustrated, not with the tool, but with the gaps in their writing. They are sorry they did not master the skills earlier on.

Bonack talks about a 9th grader who was just done with writing. He seemed to think that everything he wrote wasn’t good enough,” she laments. “He never turned anything in because he claimed it was ‘trash.’ ”

RA turned him around. “Being able to run his first few drafts through the software,” says Bonack, “versus through a human being (who he thought was judging him), he was able to actually complete something and turn in a paper that he deemed good enough.” She adds that he did not become a wordsmith overnight, but he was no longer a reluctant writer.

Bonack shares another story that points to the benefits of RA as an instructional tool. Last summer, she had her AP Language students complete AP Language prompts through RA. Students had to achieve at a certain level per writing category.

“This requirement,” explains Bonack, “motivated students to turn in their best possible drafts. I was able to analyze their class readiness and knowledge levels to arrive at a benchmark from which to start the class in September.”

Finally, Bonack, along with other English teachers in Merrill Public Schools (MAPS) know for sure that the tool/teaching mix helped raise student scores on last year’s MAPS’ ELA exam.

## **Apps Alone Make Not Good Writers**

Bonack says that students’ writing improvements are not just the result of the Turnitin programs. “The tools do not replace the teacher,” she emphasizes, underscoring that they facilitate student-teacher conversations during valuable learning moments.

She notes that the RA and FS cut down on the time it takes Bonack to sift through papers to give short bursts of feedback that students may or may not read. Bonack likens this to math. “If a student,” she relates, “gets a question wrong on a math test, it’s a lot easier for the math teacher to say, ‘You got this one wrong and here’s why.’ ”

This does not happen in English class. “If a student has three or four paragraphs that don’t flow with the organization of his or her essay,” relates Bonack, “I have to read the entire essay to see how the paragraphs don’t fit, and then try to explain that to the student.”

So, RA and FS turn that essay into the “math question” that Bonack zones in on – easy to target, easy to explain, easier for the student to fix...with improvement and pride all the way around.

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