



# BEYOND PAPER AND PENCIL

by Renée Jordan

**A**s a Learning Specialist I often work with students who struggle with the writing process. Sometimes my students need in-depth instruction on written conventions, whereas other times they merely need an alternative medium for demonstrating their writing skills. The best way to build students' writing competencies, regardless of their current ability, is to offer them multiple opportunities to practise. Therefore, it is vital that as educators we find tools, beyond paper and pencil tasks, that our students will find engaging and motivating. The following resources are tools I routinely use and recommend for struggling learners.

## STORYBIRD

Storybird is a free, beautifully crafted web based application for reading and writing. Students sometimes struggle with the motivation to write, and it is important to provide them with engaging, meaningful ways to practise their writing skills; in my experience Storybird does just that. This tool is especially valuable for students with strong visual and spatial skills as it houses a wealth of high quality, artist created images that children can use as inspiration for their writing. In addition, Storybird allows students to infuse the same images into their stories in order to help them tell their tales. I have found that this aspect allows teachers to better evaluate their students' ideation and content even when their language capabilities may be limited. Beyond the outstanding imagery, Storybird infuses games and puzzles into their application to help further motivate reluctant writers. As for teachers, Storybird enables them to create and store robust libraries of student work. These work samples can then be shared with parents and administrators as examples of student written output. In addition, lesson creation and assigning grades are features of the Storybird application that are integrated right into the site.

## ESSAY EXPRESS

The most common challenge I see in students in the upper elementary through early high school grades is the inability to structure and craft a cohesive essay. The breakdown in the writing process that causes students' difficulties can manifest in a number of areas, including generating ideas, effectively sequencing information, formulating a sentence, or appropriately executing standard written conventions. One tool I have come to find invaluable for supporting struggling writers in this process is Essay Express. This program provides foundational skill development by employing nine cognitive strategies which break down, teach and strengthen each skill that is critical in constructing a well-structured essay. Essay Express was thoughtfully designed as a step-by-step process that students can progress through at their own rate, which allows the program to meet the needs of your students who have different writing abilities. It is a beneficial writing program for both special education and mainstream settings, since all students, regardless of learning needs, can benefit from continually strengthening their writing ability.

## STATIONARY STUDIO

I believe in personalized learning and differentiated instruction. When working in special education or inclusion settings, I have found Stationary Studio to be a prized tool for helping adapt my curriculum. Stationary Studio is award winning, curriculum based writing software designed to develop literacy skills in the elementary grades. Like Storybird, it offers artistic imagery by award winning children's author Peter H. Reynolds that teachers can tailor to their curriculum as they design their own writing handouts, prompts and stationary. In addition, Stationary Studio provides digital and hardcopy options to get your students writing in both contexts, as well as several built in literacy lessons. Furthermore, as a teacher you are able to augment the lines, layout, colour and

spacing of the writing materials you create so that your students with special needs are able to use the same beautiful, high quality writing paper as their peers. This is a great alternative to having your students use the plain, augmented paper. This program offers busy teachers a flexible option when planning their lessons, and the unique ability to adapt and personalize learning materials to their unique group of students.

## COMIC LIFE

Comic Life can feel like it requires a few more tech skills than the aforementioned tools, however, it is actually incredibly intuitive and easy to use. Visual storytelling is a great medium for students to use to share their ideas. Comics are an alternative way for students to express their creativity, while building their writing skills in a way that isn't overwhelming. In particular, Comic Life is a fun, play-based program that helps students engage in this process. Students are able to select from templates to get them started, as well as upload and edit their own images to help tell their stories. Students are then able to craft, insert and edit text, which can be viewed in the comic book form or a text only format. At times, a blank page can feel intimidating to struggling writers, but it is amazing to see what students can accomplish when they are allowed to use images to story board their ideas. Often when my students change their comics to the word-only, Script Editor format they are shocked at how much they have written. Beyond writing, Comic Life also allows your students to bolster their 21st century learning skills of graphic design, simple photo editing and digital photography.

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