



Software Reviews - For Teachers



Read&Write GOLD Is Solid

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If it is your job to look at computer applications for your school or district, you know that so much of what is available these days for schools is to assist in record keeping or is a throwback to older software days of drill and practice, ostensibly getting ready for standardized tests, or something disguised as "new" just because it has moved to an online format. For the latter, gone are the platform issues, but software that didn't take advantage of the technology then still has the same problem now, and that isn't fixed just by moving online. When I write this column, I always find I am trying to avoid one of these abysses or another.

But a piece of software that takes advantage of all that has come before it, adds its own brand of better to it, as well as understands what technology has to offer students with dyslexia and other learning differences, is for me an oasis in a desert of silicone. And like any oasis, **Read&Write GOLD** from Texthelp is most welcome. It's a piece of software that has so much to offer making it hard to do it justice in a short review.

If I had to sum up what **Read&Write GOLD** is all about in just a few words, I guess I would have to say that it is a word processor/research tool with every assistive technology for students and adults with dyslexia and other language based learning difficulties onboard. And it is just waiting for a challenge to its might.

Whether a student needs to go from text-to-speech or speech-to-text, the right tool is available in **Read&Write GOLD**. Text-to-speech is available for reading text files, web sites and PDFs. Scans of digital content, even partial screen scans, also make sources, not usually accessible, available to the onboard text-to-speech reader. Students can also make sound files of sources and export them to be read aloud later by their computer or downloaded in mp3 or AIFF format to be listened to on an iPod or other player. In reverse, students can dictate text and have it show up in the Word-like word processor.

To help with writing there are prewriting tools including a fact mapper that can be seen in different views including outline form. When students get to the draft stage, a prediction tool is available to help students with a limited vocabulary or poor spelling skills to cruise along in their word processing and figure out what words will help them express what they really want to say rather than settling for word choices that they can spell. Words can even be spoken while being typed so students can hear what they are typing as well as see it to see if it makes sense. An enhanced spellchecker that anticipates phonetic spelling, a dictionary and a word wizard are also available to keep writing going and on track.

But wait until you see the research tools that are part of **Read&Write GOLD**. Say a student is researching various aspects of a project - like a project on hippos that is supposed to cover where they live, what they eat and why they are endangered. They can go to a web site to find that info, highlight facts or data about each category of information they are looking for in a different color (i.e. all the location info in yellow, all the food info in blue and all the endangerment factors in green). Then all that info, in one fell swoop, can then be automatically transferred to a word processing page, tagged with where it came from, and kept in the proper category on a paper. Student can go to another site and do the same, maybe adding another fourth category to the mix. There is no stopping to cut and paste and think about where info needs to go in a set of electronic notes. It all is all quite seamless and I think is the key to a revolution in homework. If harvesting sites for info becomes this easy, then we truly can begin to ask students for analysis of that info rather than a paper full of summaries of summaries.

There are other research tools helping students to organize and categorize in this package, all of which encourage the deft manipulation of data to help students see and get the point of their research. To my mind, it is just brilliant!

While there are other assistive technology packages on the market that do many of these tasks, **Read&Write GOLD** is the only one that I have seen that combines all these tools into one place. And they even have a new package out called **Read&Write GOLD MOBILE** where this package comes on a USB drive that can be plugged into any compatible computer, so that students who are used to having all these tools at their fingertips can take this software with them home, to the library and even out into the work world giving them the tools they need to cope in a world that expects everyone to process everything in the same way.

So if you are looking for something to help the special needs students in your classroom excel, take a look at the demos on the Texthelp site. This package comes with a price tag much like buying Microsoft Office for the first time, but Office doesn't offer half the tools that this package does to capable students who just need a little extra help.

For more information on **Read&Write GOLD** and its various versions for Windows and the Macintosh operating systems, as well as pricing, see the Texthelp web site at <http://www.texthelp.com>.