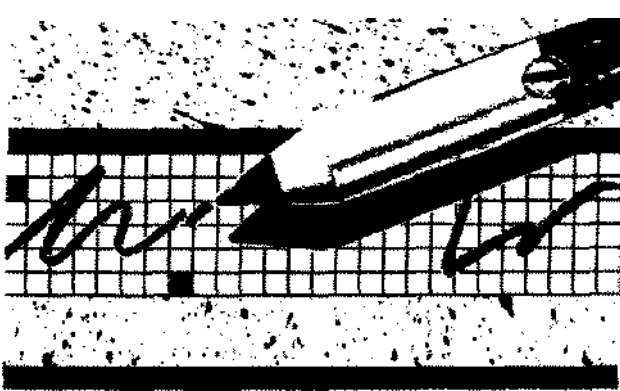
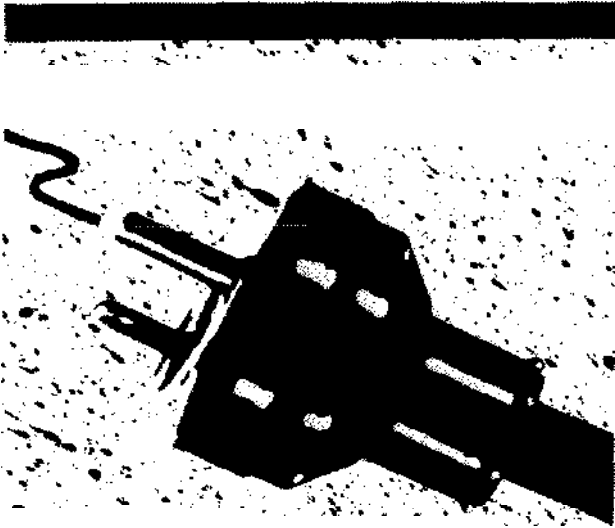


The Electronic Writer
by Daniel Johnson



The computer revolution has forced widespread change on almost all aspects of our lives. The most obvious changes have occurred in the communications and entertainment fields—cable TV, satellite communications, video, etc.

These and many less obvious developments make it easier for us to gain access to ever wider ranges of information and entertainment. Part of the so-called information explosion is simply greater access to a world of events and interpretation.

A component of the information industry little touched so far is the individual writer. It's true that the larger newspapers have been using computers and word processors for years, but the reporters are not doing anything *new*. They are only writing their news stories more efficiently and, perhaps, more cost effectively.

Writers have evolved over millenia from using hammers, chisels and stone through clay tablets, papyrus, scrolls, quill pens, to the modern age of ballpoint pens, manual typewriters, electric typewriters and now, in this electronic age, to the PC (personal computer) and word processor. Each development has made it easier and more efficient to produce written work for wider audiences.

Writing is hard work. Anything that makes it easier and reduces the frustration that comes from the purely mechanical side of production, leaves more energy for the purely creative side. For years I used a portable typewriter in a zippered case. It seemed to work fine. Then, in 1976, I bought a portable *electric*. I was amazed at the increase in the quantity and quality of my work. Not only could I produce a page in a shorter time, but it looked better because of the uniform character blackness. No longer were some characters lighter or darker because some fingers were stronger or weaker on the keys. I'm a very good typist, but I still make mistakes. Productivity was up because I no longer had to stop and erase every error. Instead, I held a corrector tape over the error, backspaced, and hit the error character again. The error was covered and I was able to resume typing. Sometimes the errors were few—one or two per paragraph—and at other times more frequent—every few seconds. When this happened, usually because I was tired or in a hurry, the frustration

rose, the error rate increased and I would have to take a break.

I couldn't really complain about the shortcomings of the electric until, in 1979, I made another quantum leap forward. I bought an IBM Selectric corrector. Not only could I type even faster (it had an element, not a moving carriage), but mistakes were no longer a problem. I just backspaced using the corrector key, hit the key of the mistake and, like magic, it would disappear. I've never calculated the increase in typing speed or decrease in time/page, but I feel intuitively that my productivity from the manual to the electric at least doubled and from the electric to the IBM, doubled or even tripled again. Another advantage was that my copy looked *professional*. Copy from the manual machine looked as if it had been done by a writer working in a corner of the basement. I certainly couldn't complain about the Selectric. Until...

Writing is not just typing. It is revising and retyping and revising again. Sheila Hailey in her autobiographical / *Married a Best Seller* described Arthur Hailey's method: "He scribbles in longhand first, a paragraph at a time, then swings around to his IBM typewriter to type the passage cleanly on paper. He then revises it, playing with a phrase, substituting a word, cutting away excess 'fat', wrestling with an awkward expression. After this amending, he types the paragraph again and again, sometimes a dozen times, until it is the best he can do. It will usually appear this way in the finished manuscript. It's a slow, laborious process, but is suited to his methodical, meticulous temperament." His quota, Mrs. Hailey says, is 600 words a day.

Arthur Hailey is a "slow" writer. But how much of that slowness can be chalked up to pure mechanical drudgery? How many hours per day does he spend just typing and retyping? A word processor would not make Mr. Hailey a faster writer, but it would give him more time to actually create. Mrs. Hailey says that while she can "hear" the words in her head, he must "see" them on paper. Fine. Hook up a word processor to a printer and each typed page is produced in a minute or so—clean, crisp and exact.

Peter C. Newman is a fast writer. Jack McClelland, his Canadian publisher, says that Mr. Newman can produce 10,000 words per week,

"and damn little of it needs revision". Could a word processor make Mr. Newman an even faster writer? Perhaps. But if it didn't, it would certainly improve the quality of his life. He would have more time to spend with his family and friends; more time to sail his boat; more time to do the many things I'm sure he would like to do if he had more time. I mention Mr. Newman in particular because he has just recently bought a PC with word processor software. Time will tell.

What particular impacts might word processors have on the writing craft? Mr. Hailey spends about three years on each book—up to 18 months researching and another 18 months writing. If we allow that up to two thirds of his writing time is mechanical, then it is conceivable that he could produce books every two years. Even his research time could be reduced because he spends time on his filing system that could be done better and faster with a PC. The prospects for Mr. Newman's readers could be more exciting. He did, after all, produce heavily researched books while running *Maclean's* magazine.

The word processor became widely available with the invention of the microcomputer. The price has fallen so that a complete model can be had for \$5000 or less. If you know people in electronics who can steer you to the proper clones and so forth, you can do even better. I purchased my complete system a few months ago for just under \$2000—including a letter quality daisy wheel printer.

Word processors will do for writing what the printing press did for the production of books. There won't be more articles published because, no matter how many are written, there is a finite market for them. But books are another story. There are those potential authors who do not have the time, or could not sustain the effort for the length of time, to write a book length manuscript. There are those current authors who will be able to produce better manuscripts. I predict that, over the next few years, publishers should see an increase in the number of quality manuscripts coming into their offices. Then, always assuming they pick the best books, we should see an upward rise in the overall quality of books. What works for quality will, of course, also work for schlock. But we may be surprised and even see a bit of improvement there as well.