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The Editor's Column

Writing with a Word Processor

by **Daniel Eisenberg**

Anyone who does scholarly writing on a typewriter should consider using a word processor for that purpose. The conveniences are impressive. One can insert, delete, rearrange paragraphs, find misspellings (or anything else one cares to find in the document), and print out a new version of the text whenever one wishes. I have found that it facilitates thinking and the organizing of ideas.

The systems to do this, once prohibitive for most individuals, have come down in price to where a college professor in humanities can afford one. However, they are not as uncomplicated as advertisements lead one to believe. Since I have never seen any mention of the problems of bilingual word processing,* and have had to solve a number of problems the hard way, it may be helpful to note briefly how I resolved them and give some recommendations.

First, a bit of background. I had been using an IBM MT/ST or Magnetic Tape Selectric Typewriter, the original and very primitive word processor, since 1975, when I was able to ac-

quire a used machine from a local printing company for \$2000. As the maintenance on it has become prohibitive and its features are limited, I attempted to replace it in late 1978 with a microcomputer, a disastrous experience I recounted in "How I Wasted \$4500 on a Microcomputer" (*Editor's Notes*, 1, No. 2 [Fall, 1982], 13–15; copies on request). It was not until October of 1983 that I was able to identify another system which showed promise of avoiding a repetition of the same problems.

At that time I purchased a Kaypro II (\$1595) and Juki 6100 "daisy-wheel" printer (\$695), and in December supplemented it with a Gemini 10x dot-matrix printer (\$300), used only for drafts. The Kaypro has two advantages besides its price. The first of these is portability; it assembles into a case weighing 25 lbs. No less important is that together with it came an impressive selection of software (programs). In particular, included was a popular word processing program called WordStar, Release ('Edition') 3.3, which, with minor inconvenience, can handle diacritics, one of my requirements.** My experience with this system has been a successful one, and with another program which came with it, Perfect Filer, I have computerized *JHP*'s subscription records. Also included is a program (The Word Plus) which checks spelling, though its usefulness in text containing many Spanish words is limited.

However, for those contemplating purchasing this system or any other, I offer the following comment. Computer systems and programs are always described as simple, easy to use, "user-friendly", etc. I would urge skepticism about such claims. I have by this time seen many computer manuals and programs, and have yet to see a manual that answers all questions and is free of error, or a program which does not, on occasion, do something inexplicable. All programs require the user to express instructions in some precise format. I have also

never seen a system for which limited technical knowledge (to “install” or program a printer, say) is unnecessary. However, these are not insurmountable obstacles.

Here are some recommendations:

- 1) Choose the program(s) you intend to use first, and the computer itself second. If a computer will run the program(s) you choose and is comfortable to use, its specifications are unimportant.
- 2) Make sure you have access to a person who can answer your questions, and try such a person out. Two good questions are: how high can manuscript pages be numbered, and how can the dieresis (¨) be printed over a “u”?
- 3) If possible, buy everything from one source. If you do not, and encounter problems, then the seller of one part (the computer) may blame the other part (program or printer), and vice-versa.
- 4) Try everything before buying. Don’t buy by mail.
- 5) Although “dot”-type printers have come a long way and are sure to get better, they still produce characters that at best do not convey authority to a reader of your manuscript, and they do not produce an image suitable for use by a typesetter. Impact printers, though slower, are not available at prices scarcely higher than that of an electric typewriter, and are strongly recommended.
- 6) Compilations of tips on publication recommend that manuscripts have as polished an appearance as possible. Towards that end, it is suggested that if accents, tildes, superscript numbers and the like can not be properly printed, they be written in by hand rather than approximated. Also, as a manuscript is not expected to resemble typeset pages, I strongly recommend that authors using a word processor not justify the right margin. The current level of equipment

only produces a crude and visually unattractive justification, and a ragged right margin is quite acceptable.

Although I can not give specific information on equipment other than my own, I would be glad to share what information I have.

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* While this was in press a discussion has appeared in the Spring, 1984 issue of the *MLA Newsletter*.

** Though printed correctly, they are displayed on the screen adjacent to the character, e.g. "ma ~ nana."