Speak to Me!
Writing With Voice Recognition Software - 1

by Vanessa Kier

Wouldn't it be great if you could work on your story hands-free? Meet your page goal while driving? How about while taking a walk or folding laundry? Welcome to the world of voice recognition software.

Voice recognition software takes your speech and translates it into written text. The concept is one bound to appeal to writers. But how well does it work?

Three years ago I tried Dragon NaturallySpeaking by Nuance, perhaps the most well-known voice recognition software, while recovering from a herniated disk in my back. Since sitting up was excruciating, my sister bought me Dragon so I could work while lying on my back. Unfortunately, when I tried it the text translation of my speech was so riddled with errors that I couldn't always figure out what I'd intended to say.

Frustrated, I gave up.

Rachael Herron had a similarly frustrating experience last year with MacSpeech Dictate. She was looking for a way to compose during her long commute but gave up because of the amount of time needed to edit the text.

However, there are testimonials galore on the Nuance website from happy users. And voice recognition technology has come a long way since I last tried Dragon. So I set out to see if I could find a satisfied user closer to home.

Enter SFA-RWA member and author Bella Andre. She's been using Dragon since January 2010 and loves it.

A hand therapist recommended that Andre try voice recognition software to ease the strain on her hands caused by years of playing the piano and typing. Andre calls Dragon "a lifesaver." She doesn't know how people with hand pain survived when the only alternative to typing was equally painful longhand. She now composes her entire first draft in Dragon.

Although Andre uses it solely for composing documents related to writing—drafts, notes, synopsis—the website says Dragon can be used for many other tasks, including sending e-mail and surfing the web.

How, exactly, does voice recognition software work? It depends on what platform you're using. If you're working on a computer, you speak into a microphone and the software puts your words on the screen in your standard word processing program. If you're using a program on a mobile device, such as Dragon Dictation for the iPhone and iPod Touch, you speak into the microphone and when you're done (there's a 20 second maximum recording length) the program sends the recording of your voice up to its server. The server translates your words and downloads them back to your device. You can then either e-mail the text or copy it into another program, such as Notes.

How is the accuracy? Andre says that Dragon gets about 90% of her words correct. Maybe as much as 95% if the microphone is positioned exactly right. She does have to type in a correction every minute or so, but finds that she's able to get into a rhythm so the switch between speaking and typing is seamless. The microphone she uses with her computer, a standard headset with earphones and microphone, is quite good at canceling background noise, such as her kids. She admits that in order for the software to pick up her words accurately she needs to speak slower and clearer than she would in a normal conversation. Yet it has no problem picking up her voice when she's whispering a love scene so the babysitter won't overhear, or when her voice is altered because she has a cold.

Previous versions of Dragon required you to read a ten-minute training speech so the program could learn your voice pattern. The website claims the program now learns your voice without script reading. For unusual words you can spell them out verbally or use the train feature to record just that word then typing it.

Punctuation is added verbally. Although this sounds like a chore, Andre says it was surprisingly easy to train herself to include punctuation commands such as "open quotes." She did turn off the auto format feature so it wouldn't interpret a pause for thought as the end of a sentence.

While I didn't stick with Dragon all those years ago, I did start using a voice recorder to capture story ideas and occasional scene snippets. What I learned from speaking my thoughts aloud was that speaking a story feels very different from writing it. Putting aside the possible embarrassment by having what are usually private thoughts overheard by any family members or neighbors within earshot, I've always hated the sound of my voice. Hearing my voice speak for my characters just feels wrong. So how does a writer stop this awkwardness from interfering with her storytelling?

Andre says people need to get over the embarrassment. What's necessary when using a voice recognition program is the will to train yourself to think differently about your story and work past your hangups. She pointed out that the software takes us back to the ancient, oral tradition of storytelling. Think of it as you acting out the story.

Although she uses Dragon every day, if Andre hasn't used it intensively for a while she admits that it takes a little bit of time to get back into the flow of composing verbally. Because there's a time lag between speaking and seeing the text on the screen, Andre composes more in phrases when using Dragon instead of sentences. Using the mobile version with its 20-second limit per chunk is even harder, so those ideas are more disjointed. That text generally needs more editing for flow.

Has Dragon affected the quality of her writing? Yes, for the better—which surprised me. When Andre first submitted an important three chapters to her agent, she didn't mention that she'd used Dragon. Her agent came back and said it was the best stuff Andre had ever written! Speaking her story seems to have tapped into her storytelling ability in a way her typing hadn't.

What about productivity? Andre says that she can get a lot of pages written if she's really into the flow of the speaking mindset. Also, using Dragon on her iPhone has allowed her to get 2,000 words down

while on a walk. The Dragon website says there are certain voice recorders that are compatible with Dragon, allowing you to be anywhere and record your thoughts for later upload into Dragon. And Dragon now has a wireless option, which would allow you to work without being tied to your computer by a microphone cord, say, if you wanted to compose while ironing.

What are the disadvantages? Voice recognition software is pricey. It's also risky—there's no free demo. If you use the mobile application and your connection goes down while the data is being transferred to Dragon's server, you lose everything. Since you can start recording again immediately after your initial 20 seconds are up, it's possible to aggregate pages before saving. Andre once lost ten pages on her iPhone when the connection broke.

If you use the program on the iPod Touch, you have to be connected to a wi-fi network, which limits your mobility. And for older generation devices you need to purchase an external, iPod compatible microphone since the device doesn't come with a built-in microphone.

What's the verdict? For anyone with chronic pain, the inconvenience of correcting the program seems negligible compared to the advantage of being able to compose free of pain. And for anyone willing to change the way they think about their stories, voice recognition software is a viable alternative method for meeting those page goals.

Andre would absolutely recommend Dragon to other writers. After talking with her I was inspired to play around some more with the new iPod Touch program I'd downloaded. We're still learning to get along, this new version of Dragon and I, but I think it will become another useful tool in my portfolio.

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