

Taking Your Handwriting Digital: Writing with an Electronic Pen - 1

by Vanessa Kier

Computers are fantastic devices. When they're working properly, they save most writers a lot of time. But what happens if your muse refuses to come out to play when faced with a monitor screen? What if you need pen and paper to get those words flowing? That means a laborious, time-sucking process of entering all your lovely words into the computer at a later date. Your muse is happy, but you can't help but wonder if there isn't a way to satisfy your muse and not have to reenter your data.

Enter the electronic pen.

Electronic pens come in two varieties. The kind that requires specially printed paper in order to record your handwriting, and the kind that work on any paper.

One example of a pen requiring special paper is the Livescribe (Mac and Windows compatible). You buy special notebooks that are pre-printed with a grid of dots (these special grids can also be printed on compatible printers). While you write, the Livescribe pen captures whatever you write or draw on the paper. Later, you can upload an image of your handwritten notes into the pen's desktop software. These notes are searchable and can be exported to PDF. Third party software allows you to choose pages of the upload and convert them into editable text.

The Livescribe also captures audio and puts it on a timeline that corresponds to the writing on each page you write on. For example, say you took notes during a lecture. When you get home and upload the data, you can't read a couple of lines. Or maybe you can read them, but the short notes no longer make sense. You can touch the pen to the corresponding sentence on the paper and the pen will play back the recording. That way you can hear what the speaker was saying and hopefully recreate your thoughts.

Bella Andre (*Love Me*, July 2010) uses the Livescribe and loves it. She needs lots of different methods for composing so she doesn't put too much strain on her hands. "They're space age cool," she gushes.

Andre's biggest complaint is that the third party text conversion software she uses doesn't handle cursive writing well. She says that in order to have the image be as accurate as possible, she prints all her notes. One benefit of this need for clarity, though, is that her once terrible handwriting has improved so much even her husband commented on it.

Shannon Monroe uses the IOGEAR Mobile Digital Scribe (Windows compatible only). This pen works with any paper. It has a receiver you clip onto the page. As long as you write within the receiver's range and have positioned the receiver correctly at the top of the page, it will capture your writing. She says you need to be careful to stay within that zone, otherwise words will be cut off. The receiver has a clip that can only handle about five sheets of paper, so clipping the receiver to a full pad of paper won't work. She says her pen accurately captures her handwriting, which is a mixture of cursive and print.

Like the Livescribe, you upload the data from the Mobile Digital Scribe into your computer and it shows up as an image. The more expensive version comes with full handwriting recognition software to turn your writing into editable text.

Having the use of the Mobile Digital Scribe has been a huge time saver for Monroe. She just can't be creative while staring at a computer screen. Her muse requires pen and paper.

Both Andre and Monroe say that they need to make some corrections to the text once it appears on your computer, but both view this as a necessary, and ultimately helpful, process. It forces them to edit as they go, making the transferred copy cleaner than the original.

In addition to being a time saver, having an electronic pen allows a writer to work away from her computer. Whether this means writing in a coffee shop or at the airport, you no longer have to lug your laptop along.

Taking Your Handwriting Digital: Writing with an Electronic Pen - 2

Another use for these pens, particularly with the Livescribe's ability to capture audio, is to take notes at a conference. I always feel awkward pulling my laptop out to take notes during a workshop. It seems slightly rude. Not just because of the noise of the keys clicking away, but because the presenter has no way of knowing if I'm really taking notes or reading my e-mail. Plus, for someone like me with a bad back, having the weight of the computer on your legs adds strain to an already uncomfortable position. The prospect of being able to take notes on paper that can be uploaded later into a computer is very appealing.

So there you have it. Yet another way to enhance the writing experience and save time.

This article first appeared in the *Tech Talk* column in the October 2010 issue of *Heart of the Bay*, the San Francisco RWA newsletter.