Not long ago, I wrote an article about my enjoyment of using an old-fashioned typewriter for producing a first draft of an article (Nicoll, 2014). I also suggested that using a typewriter might be a good “prescription” for those suffering from writer’s block or procrastination.

One problem with a typewriter is that the draft is produced on paper—which presents the challenge of moving from analog to digital media. This, unfortunately, is still an issue that doesn’t have a good solution. You can either scan the document and edit it (which is usually a pain in the neck since...
scanning technology is limited) or re-key it on your computer. I tend to go with the latter since I often edit during the re-typing process.

I like typewriters and I like gadgets, so I pay attention to trends and innovations. That is why the Freewrite (formerly known as the Hemingwrite) caught my eye when it was announced in 2014. The Freewrite was advertised as a “distraction-free writing device.” It would have a mechanical keyboard (similar to a typewriter) for the tactile experience of producing a document, but it would also have an e-Ink screen, Wifi connection, and cloud back-ups to facilitate the editing process after the first draft was done. The developers were two engineers, Adam Leeb and Patrick Paul, who seemed to have the credentials to create this machine. I signed up for the mailing list.

Timing is everything. On December 10, 2014 I was at my computer when an e-mail came through that their Kickstarter campaign to fund the machine was beginning in minutes. Without barely a second thought, I jumped in and became a “crazy early” backer (#2, actually) for an investment of $349USD. The original prediction was that the Freewrite would ship in September 2015.

Here we are, in May of 2016, and my Freewrite arrived at the beginning of the week. I think I, and a some of the other 1096 backers, all had a few anxious moments that the machine would never become reality (always a worry when backing Kickstarter projects) but Adam, Patrick, and the rest of the Astrohaus team were pretty good at keeping all of us informed about the production process. Dozens of details needed to be addressed, from finding a reliable supplier for the e-Ink screens to selecting the perfect mechanical keys. In addition, they moved their base of operations from Detroit to New York City and have spent the last 8 months “commuting” between China,
Hong Kong, and New York. I know from pictures they posted that my Freewrite was built by hand. I don’t know if that will still be the case when they get to the mass production stage but it’s pretty cool to know that I have something that right now, is unique in the world.

IMMEDIATE THOUGHTS

I needed a document to really put the machine through its paces—something more substantial than “Hello World! My Freewrite is here!” I decided to take my own advice and write this first draft—“distraction-free”—to see if it made a difference in the writing process.

The Keyboard

The Freewrite is all about the keyboard—or at least that is a major component. It is a mechanical keyboard, not a membrane one as you find on your computer. If you remember the joy of typing on an IBM Selectric, then you know what mechanical keys feel like. Technically, each key has a switch which registers when pressed about halfway, giving a noticeable “click” and tactile experience for the typist. Supposedly, this reduces typos, double-typing, and makes typing faster and smoother (Dizon, 2016). For me, I like the clickety-clackety sound and I like the feel of the keys under my fingers. Remember, the Freewrite is an evolution that is somewhere between a typewriter and a computer. The keys bring it back to the typing experience and I like that. A+

The e-Ink Screen

If you look at the photo to the left you will see the 5.5” diagonal e-Ink screen
front and center. e-Ink is the same technology used in the Amazon Kindle (but not very many other things as it has not found much use in the world, despite its amazing technology). e-Ink looks like paper and is easy on the eyes and easy to read. It also stays true to the typewriter experience. The cursor on the screen moves slower than I type—which at first was annoying. But now, 670 words in, I am getting used to the pace and finding that I am slowing down, too, and carefully framing each thought. This is definitely congruent with my typewriter prescription so A for the speed and screen.

Another advantage of the e-Ink screen is that it could be used in bright sun, unlike most laptops or tablets. I am not sure I will be out writing articles at a picnic table, but you never know.

Keyboard Commands

The Freewrite was designed to be distraction-free and not a substitute for a word processor so the actual special keys are limited. There is a backspace key for correcting, and page up/page down keys for reviewing, but’s that’s about it. There is no way to move up or down line-by-line, which could be potentially annoying. This was requested by many backers and I know a few cancelled their orders because the developers refused to incorporate this feature. As I am typing this, I see errors that I cannot fix now, but will fix when I get this document to my computer. It is clear this machine is designed for “stream of consciousness” writing while I am more of an “edit as I go” type of
writer. Time will tell if I change my writing style or if this becomes a drawback in the utility of the machine.

The only other special keys on the keyboard are two “new” keys (for starting a new document); “special,” which cycles through the mini-screen below the larger e-Ink screen with various bits of info, including the time, number of words, numbers of characters, and something mysterious with circles, numbers, and the date. Last is a “send” button which sends my document to my connected Dropbox account (I can also select Google Drive or Evernote). At least it is supposed to send my document to Dropbox—I have pressed it several times and nothing has shown up. Hmm. B for this feature, at this moment. It needs improvement.

FROM THE FREEWRITE TO THE COMPUTER

The first part of this article was written on the Freewrite; now I am at my desktop. As noted, I pressed the “send” key which was supposed to sync my draft to my Dropbox, a link I had set up previously. This part of the writing process did not go smoothly.

The connection to Dropbox is through an interface developed by Astrohaus called “Postbox.” I set this up but it was not without problems. Documents weren’t showing up consistently in various folders and I could not download them to Word. I finally resorted to cutting and pasting but that removed all formatting, including spaces between paragraphs and indents. Even more annoying, Word wasn’t showing typos or misspelled words (of which there were many, since the Freewrite doesn’t have a spellchecker). As I looked at my 1000 word document, I realized it was going to take me as long to edit it
as it did to write it—and it still wouldn’t be finished!

For some reason, I had the bright idea to go and look at the document in Postbox where it appeared with the minimal formatting I had applied. I copied and pasted it into Word and voilà! A document I could work with. I had saved myself time with editing and fixing, but I had wasted an equal amount of time coming up with a workaround. At this moment, I was ready to give the Freewrite software an F.

Not content to let this go, I wrote to the developers and told them of my frustration. Adam quickly got back to me by phone and email (A+ for customer service). As it turned out, I had discovered bugs that had not come up in any of their previous testing. They appreciated my feedback and detailed explanation of the various problems I experienced; by the time we chatted on the phone, many of the problems had already been fixed. As Adam noted, their emphasis in recent weeks had been on the firmware and getting Freewrites shipped out the door to their excited owners. They anticipated software glitches and knew they could push fixes to the machines over the air. That’s fine, but it still made for a frustrating experience for me—which I guess I should have expected as a super-early adopter.

OTHER THOUGHTS

My writing experience wasn’t distraction-free. My iPad was pinging and I did check email. I also answered the phone. I suppose I could have sequestered myself but that is not the way I work. And, as I noted above, “distraction-free” was not the appeal of the Freewrite for me—I was much more about the typewriter experience. In that regard, I would call the machine a success.
It is small and light, with a handle that folds out from the back making it very portable. The battery is designed to last for several weeks on a single charge. Clearly, if you like to tote your writing machine to the library or class, the Freewrite will be great. But laptops are also light and portable, so on this point, I think the comparison is a wash.

What about cost? This is a pricey little device. I received a significant discount being a Kickstarter backer but the regular selling price is $549USD (although it is currently on sale for $499USD). That's a lot of money to spend for a single-use machine—even if the keyboard is great. I have seen lots of people commenting that if it cost $99USD they might consider buying one. Knowing what went into the production of this device, I doubt it will ever come down that much. To me, the future fate of the Freewrite hangs in the balance on this crucial issue. If the developers stay true to their word to continue making innovations to the writing experience on the device and sending documents to storage for subsequent editing, I think it could find its market and be a success.

CONCLUSION

Did I throw away $349USD on a machine that is going to be obsolete before it finds an audience? That’s a good question. I have a long history of being an early adopter (Palm Pilot, Kindle, Amazon Echo, to name just a few) and being one of less than 1000 owners, at this point, makes this a fun and quirky experience. I know if I went to a coffee shop and pulled this out, I would get more than a few puzzled looks and lots of questions. But writing is not about showing off. Is this going to be a machine that works for the long haul? As I said above, I think there is a potential niche user base.
What about you, dear reader? Should you consider a Freewrite? While I would love to recommend it whole-heartedly for everyone, I can’t. At its current price point, it cannot be justified as an all-purpose machine for all people, or even a fun gadget. Knowing the type of writing that the vast majority of Nurse Author & Editor readers are engaged in, I am not sure the Freewrite is going to make your job simpler or faster. On the other hand, I know a lot of people who wish they could just use a typewriter—they hate the features of word processors, don’t know how to use them well, and spend a lot of time fixing mistakes and formatting errors (or paying people like me to make the corrections). In that regard, the Freewrite is an ideal interface between typewriter and computer. If this describes you, you might want to check out the machine for your writing armamentarium: https://getfreewrite.com/

And…if you want to support innovation and two entrepreneurs, and want to encourage them to continue their creative development ideas, then you also might consider ordering one of these machines. American ingenuity at its best!

REFERENCES


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