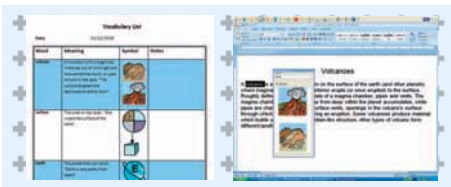# Read&Write GOLD

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REVIEWED BY: JOHN DABELL

Pupils with special educational needs often experience greater success when they are allowed to use their strengths to work around their challenges – and assistive technologies can help bypass or compensate for their specific learning difficulties. So where do you look if you are serious about improving your literacy support to struggling readers, those with literacy difficulties such as dyslexia, mild visual impairments and those with English as a second or third language?

Read&Write GOLD from Texthelp Systems is one of the most dynamic and creative multidimensional software programs on the market and has earned itself a reputation for being an example of assistive technology at its best. It has been designed to help improve reading comprehension, enable struggling writers produce quality written documents and assist users in conducting research. So what is it?

Essentially, it's an intelligent toolbar that sits unobtrusively on top of any open Windows application such as word processors, email, internet, spreadsheets or databases, and enables users to work inclusively together with their peers by offering additional support when reading or composing text.

It would be unfair to single out any one particular aspect for special praise because there are so many core features to get excited about – but having said that, I would definitely draw users' attention to the improved Text to Speech function. Basically every piece of text in an application can be speech enabled and read back using RealSpeak, with word highlighting to help vocabulary recognition. The enhanced Screenshot Reader allows learners to access previously inaccessible text, including that embedded within an image or contained within inaccessible Flash or locked PDF files – now that really opens doors! The new picture dictionary feature is ideal when supporting comprehension as words can be illustrated with images. And for those learners with print disabilities, Read&Write GOLD software also contains Daisy (Digital Accessible Information System) Reading technology.

When it comes to writing, Read&Write GOLD is clever enough to learn a learner's writing style and predict one word ahead from any application. There is an advanced Phonetic Spell Checker feature that will correct errors based on a user's spelling patterns, and definitions of the suggested corrections can be read aloud. The Speaking Dictionary provides audible definitions and sample sentences; the Sounds Like feature allows learners to identify the difference between homophones; and the new Verb Checker element allows you to select from past, present or future tenses to allow you to establish the correct conjugation.

Within the software you will find three Research Tools. The Fact Finder is a web search tool that searches on a selected word through a default search engine. This is brilliant because quite often users with literacy difficulties will flop in their search for information because of their distinctive spelling patterns. The Fact Folder helps to capture text from any application, classifies it, attaches pictures and bibliography information, and records its source. That's impressive. The Fact Mapper is ideal for producing a visual representation of facts and ideas and is very useful for mind-mapping not to mention revision. You also get a new vocabulary tool that allows you to build a vocabulary list by highlighting unknown words, which can then be used in Word where dictionary definitions and images for each word are shown.

So, what are the snags and snares? Well, to be fair, Texthelp has addressed previous gripes by making various improvements and additions after listening to customer feedback. I think the biggest drawback is simply that there are so many features to explore; there is a danger that you won't access a third of what is available (as well as the hefty 135-page training guide, there are plenty of YouTube videos available to help, as well as a reasonably user-friendly Quick Start Beginner's Guide). Read&Write GOLD isn't cheap so it may be out of reach for many; but it has to be said you do get a lot of invention and support for your money. My only other concern is that pupils, once familiar, could get too reliant on something that is essentially designed as a support.

VERDICT:
Pure gold
This innovative and inclusive solution won't eliminate literacy learning difficulties, but it can help learners reach their potential and experience success with working independently. Access a 30-day free download and try it for yourself.

BOG STANDARDS

Now celebrating its 25th Anniversary, Loo of the Year Awards is promoted by The British Toilet Association and is run this year in association with headline sponsor Lepicol. Councils enter their school toilets as they recognise the annual LOYA as a proven, cost effective and independent annual assessment of the standard of their pupil/student toilet provision management. They also enjoy proper recognition for their efforts: 'Good loos are proven to be good for pupils, staff, management and governors'. There are national awards for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which will be presented at the Awards Presentation Event, to be held this year on Friday 7th December. (Loo of the Year Awards, 01403 258779, loo.co.uk)