Viewpoint
Word processing for the masses

By Michael Ball

The way I understand it, Isaac Asimov plots out a novel nightly in his sleep; mentally writes it while munching muffins and won't eat again until he's finished the first draft. Even before microcomputers computers appeared, he was producing more words than a Radcliff College poetry class. Now that he uses a word processor, he apparently never misses lunch.

Let us not be concerned with how food rules his life. Rather, let us ask what he could possibly know about word processing.

For someone who can bear, rear and marry off a huge family of prose annually, computer-aided editing is a frill. The Asimovs of the world have all the right words; they only quibble with where one might fit better. It's like the duchess directing the household help, "Now Boyd, try the divan to the left of the fireplace."

The rest of us display our creativity with clever word plays on our grocery lists. For us, *real* word processing holds promise.

The programs for all those electronic secretaries have much too heavy a hand, and yet they do not reach far enough. Those little special-function keys perform "mundanities," such as moving phrases or even paragraphs from one place to another. Another key makes a repeat search to help you replace *cowardly* with *pusillanimous* everywhere,

That's very nice if you have all the right words there somewhere, but for someone who can spend a week of evenings drafting a bread-and-butter note, other functions would be more useful. We need keys that elevate our lowly prose, software that understands what we mean to say.

I began to think word processing was another case of "them that has shall get," when, as I was trotting to the Very West Village Deli one morning, I found my type of computer store.

I knew that Even a B.A. Can Microcomputer Shop was for me— a sign on the door read, LET THE MACHINE DO THE WORK!

As I walked in, a woman who looked startlingly like my tenth grade English teacher, smiled knowingly. Without a buzzword or look of disdain, she took my arm and sat me before the FULZAYD Word Fixer.

The function key names sold me on the equipment. They truly are for the rest of us. They include:

A **LIGHTEN UP** key, for when witty ideas read like an instruction manual.

A **SCHOLARLY** key, to dress up your simple speech and make it fit to read for people who really cough, "Ahem. "

A **MEALYMOUTH** key, to tone down your angry letters and notes, so the people you're mad at still like you.

A **GET-TOUGH** key, to add forbidding innuendo and legal allusion to your complaints to companies.

A **PERFECT-QUOTE** key, to save hours of searching Bartlett's for the phrase you sort of remember from college.

A **TRENDY** key, to remove clichés and replace them with phrases current in news magazines.

A **TRANSITION** key, to make one completely disparate idea follow another naturally. Note: this could easily replace the paragraph-move function.

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Author's note: This appeared in 1983 and made a small splash in the popular culture, beingly widely quoted in USENET and elsewhere in the pre-Web Internet days.