

Software Reviews - *For Teachers*

Essay Express

by Diane S. Kendall, Editor, Children's Software Press

□ There are some sure tells when a piece of software is a winner. First, it loads like a dream. Second, I don't have to spend hours looking over the manual to figure out how to use it or how to recommend you use it. Third, it uses technology to enhance the material or, in other words, it's not just a souped-up set of worksheets forced into a software program. Fourth, it holds my attention 'cause, let's face it, I've been looking at software now for twenty-five years so I do get bored.

□ But can you guess what the most important criterion is for an A-plus rating? It's actually pretty simple – it is that I wish I had had this software when I was a student.

□ So what is this piece of software that I'm ready to rave about? Essay Express from Fablevision is its name and teaching about essay writing for grades 4 to 8 is its game.

□ To be honest, there's nothing that's all that new here. There are lots of pieces of software and books that get back-to-the-basics when it comes to helping kids learn to write better. What works here is a fun story line, a sense of humor, appealing graphics and characters, and a dissection of the essay writing process with the identified and promoted purpose of helping kids get better grades.

□ Now I know that there are a lot of workbooks and other materials for kids that profess this same purpose. But there is something about the presentation of this material – almost like a group of kids sitting down at a lunch table and whispering to each other about how to get better grades from a particular teacher – that sells it in this case. To give you the plot in brief, Vee Vee Valdez, a tough cookie executive from CogniTV, decides to hire a rock band to write songs that will help kids with schoolwork – kind of a middle school version of the popular real life Schoolhouse Rock animated videos that were dispersed among the cartoons on Saturday morning on ABC-TV for many years. The first topic she picks to cover is essay writing, but the band doesn't know much about the subject so they get educated in little video, text and short quiz segments that pare the essay writing process down into small parts. Everything is covered from how to brainstorm to how to make the essay dazzle. A lot of it is just common sense, but that's the stuff that turns the light bulbs on in kids' heads – even kids who are better intuitively at the essay writing process.

□ Of course the band members are an eclectic group and have their own commentary on the essay writing process, which makes for some good fun and insights. (My favorite band member is a guy named Emale.) Once they get the material covered – what to do before, during and after the essay writing process – they make up a rock tune to cover that segment and once you've heard their take on essay writing, you'll never sit down in front of your computer with a simple case of writer's block ever again.

□ If you are assigning essays in Language Arts or one of the content areas, I think you'll find it worthwhile to run this software by your students before you get too deep into the process. It may be one of the nicest things you ever do for them besides just being a smart move educationally.

You can get a 30-day free trial of Essay Express on the Fablevision web site.

