

Speed Up Student Feedback with Text Expansion Applications

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To provide written feedback to a large number of students is time consuming but an important aspect of a language instructor's job. In addition to the time required, for those who use a computer to provide feedback, excessive typing may increase the risk of a repetitive stress injury (RSI). Using text expansion software saves time and keystrokes, and still allows for customized comments to individual students. There are several text expansion applications for the Apple and Windows platforms and browser extensions for Firefox and Chrome available. There are numerous reviews of the different applications and extensions, but the reviews only examine general use cases and don't target language instructors. This paper will look at specific uses of text expansion applications, by focusing on TextExpander, a Mac application, to demonstrate how to reduce the amount of time and number of keystrokes required to provide text feedback to students and in the process lessen the risk of a repetitive stress injury.

Text Expansion: What Is It And How Does It Work?

Providing effective and meaningful feedback to students, an important part of an instructor's job (Hattie and Timperley, 2006), is a time-consuming process, and for those who use a computer to give textual feedback there is the risk of a repetitive stress injury (RSI) such as carpal tunnel syndrome from excessive typing and mousing (Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, 1998). There is a certain irony because the promise of computers has always been that they will save us time and make our lives easier. For that promise to come true, however, the user must often spend a lot of time finding software applications or the computer settings to make this convenience a reality. Text expansion software, when used appropriately, can help to reduce the time and keystrokes required to provide feedback to students.

Text expansion software allows the user to type a short phrase or abbreviation that the software then expands into a full word, phrase, or paragraph. People may be familiar with auto fill, a feature that has been available in web browsers for many years, which automatically fills in passwords, mailing addresses, or email addresses for online forms. A similar feature is predictive typing or auto complete that has made typing on smartphones and tablets much easier because it allows the user to type in only a few letters and the software suggests words that the user can select quickly. The Macintosh OS X operating system and iOS on iPhones and iPads have a text replacement feature (Figure 1) that lets the user create a number of text abbreviations in the system preferences under the Keyboard settings that when typed will expand it into a sentence, phrase, or longer text. These text replacement abbreviations work across Apple applications like Pages, Numbers, or Notes. Microsoft Office has a similar feature called AutoText which allows the user to create preset expressions, but like the feature in OS X it only works with Microsoft Office applications: Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. With text expansion applications (Appendix), the user can create regularly used items and a corresponding abbreviation that is typed to trigger the insertion of the item into webpages, word processing documents, spreadsheets or email messages.

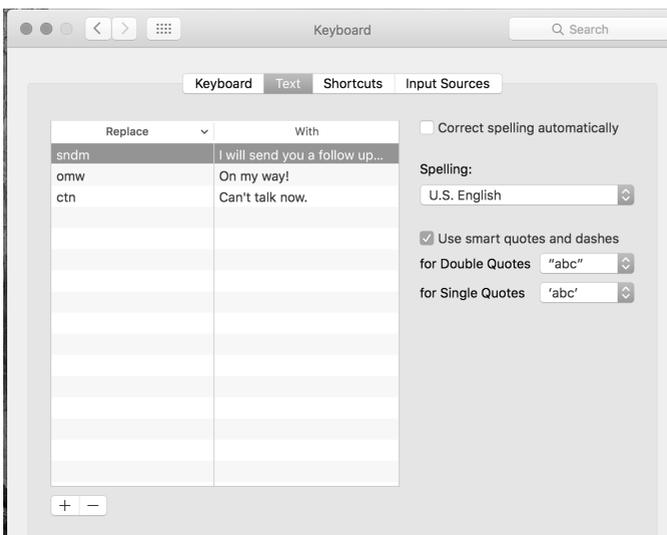


Figure 1. Text replacement feature found in Apple's OS X and iOS operating systems.

Text Expansion Software For Busy Teachers

To demonstrate the utility of text expansion software I will focus on Smile Software's TextExpander, which can be used on a Mac, iPad, and iPhone. The features of other text expansion applications are very similar.

Text expansion software is suitable for any type of text that you find yourself using repeatedly. It can be especially useful when providing feedback to students on their assignments because students often make similar mistakes that require the same correction or feedback to be provided again and again. For example, in TextExpander you can create a "snippet", the content that you want to insert, and a unique abbreviation that when typed replaces the abbreviation with the content in the snippet. For example, if you would like the student to replace nouns with pronouns in a paragraph you could use a snippet like this:

Don't repeat the same nouns over and over. Try to use pronouns. If you would like to more information on how to use pronouns, go to this website (<http://www.>).

By typing a short abbreviation like "npr" this 27-word snippet can be instantly inserted into a Microsoft Word document, a Web browser window of a learning management system like Moodle, or even an email to provide feedback to students. It is also possible to include formatting, for example, bold, italics, or colored text.

There are settings in TextExpander that control how the abbreviations are expanded and what keys are used to trigger a snippet insertion. It is important not to create an abbreviation that is part of a common word because you will constantly be adding text when you don't intend to. It is also a good idea to think about the keys that you want use to trigger the insertion so that the abbreviations can be typed with one hand. This is especially useful if you find yourself using a mouse in your right hand and typing with your left. This point sometimes conflicts with the need to keep the snippet to something that is easy to remember.

Table 1 shows some examples of possible snippets (ones that I use) and the abbreviations that trigger them. The software comes with some default abbreviations and snippets, but the user needs to create ones that will meet his or her needs. There is a feature that can be turned on that suggests snippets and abbreviations when the software detects text that is commonly repeated.

Table 1
Communication between EMI and Language-teaching Faculty

Abbreviation	Snippet
wd	(Check the word order. Move the word to ^.)*
cg	(Check the grammar.)
cs	(Check singular or plural.)
rld	Carefully read the instructions to the assignment again. You were supposed to write an email to complain to the company about a problem, not tell me about a problem you had with a company.
chpn	If you see % add a pronoun. A pronoun is something like "he", "she", or "it".
spt	It seems you have trouble using the simple past tense form. This website might help you. < http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/simplepast.html >

*The snippets in parentheses are inserted directly after the word or phrase the student should check. Those without parentheses are inserted later in the document.

In cases where you want to provide feedback for presentations or email messages to students that need to be slightly customized for each person, TextExpander has the capability of creating a boilerplate snippet with fill-in fields and pull-down menus. First, you need to create the fill-in snippet (Figure 2) by typing in the standardized text and the parts that need to be customized for each student. Once that has been created, Figure 3 shows what appears after typing the abbreviation “Pfb” (presentation feedback) where it is needed. In the window that subsequently appears, make the necessary selections from the pull-down menus, type text in the boxes, decide if the student needs to have additional feedback text, and then click OK. TextExpander then inserts the text shown in Figure 4 into the document or email message.

Text expansion software is also useful in creating tests and quizzes where the wording of the instructions for questions needs to be consistent. For example, when creating a dictation exercise it is possible to create a snippet to insert the text below whenever it is necessary to include instructions.

Listen to the conversation and fill in the blanks with the correct words. Be careful with your spelling.

Text expansion applications aren't limited to only phrases, sentences or paragraphs. They can also insert photos, computer code, or html. More

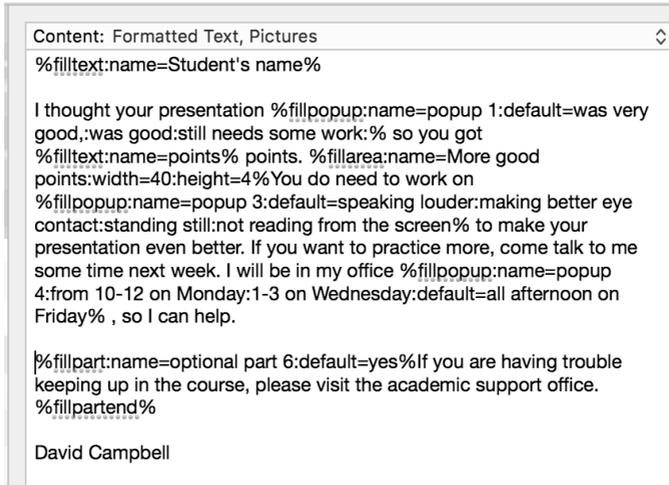


Figure 2. The snippet for a feedback form created with Smile's TextExpander.

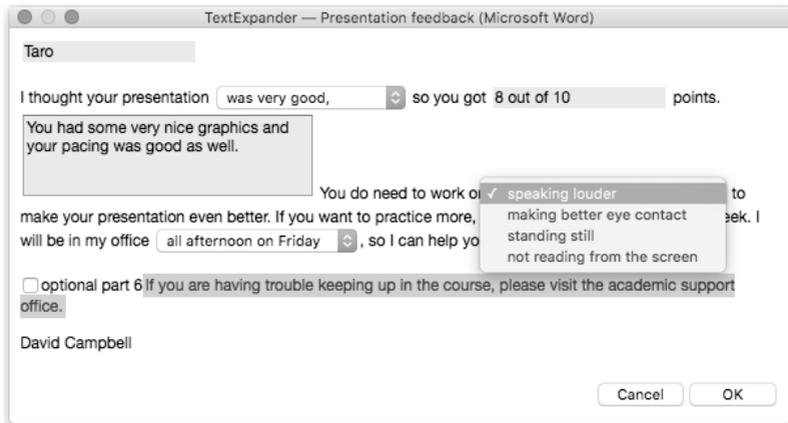


Figure 3. Personalized feedback form created using TextExpander. Teacher chooses from the menu items and enters desired custom text as desired for each student.

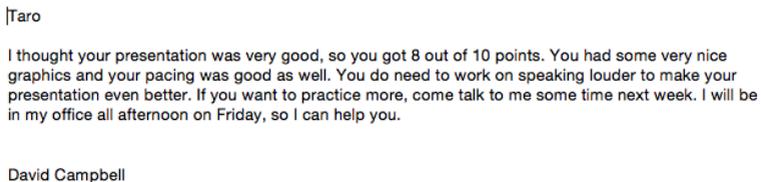


Figure 4. The actual feedback which the student receives.

importantly, for people with limited Japanese writing skills, polite emails in Japanese (e.g., よろしくお願ひします。申し訳ございませぬ。or お世話になつております。) are just one short abbreviation away. It is also very useful to complete school forms that need to be filled out with similar information. Type the text once to create a snippet, give it an abbreviation, and that lengthy text can be inserted with just a few strokes of the keyboard.

Conclusion

If you are looking for ways to easily and quickly provide textual feedback to students and reduce the risk of RSI, text expansion software is worth exploring. It does take time to create the snippets that you need, and it can be difficult to remember the abbreviations when you get a large collection, but once you have created them, you can use them repeatedly. You will find that once you start using abbreviations to automatically insert text, you will have a difficult time using a computer that does not have text expansion software installed.

References

- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112.
- Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. (Sept., 1998). Typing Injuries TIFAQ. Retrieved from http://www.tifaq.org/articles/carpal_tunnel_syndrome-sep98-well-connected.html

Author bio

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Appendix

Mac & Windows

- TextExpander (Mac) (<https://goo.gl/aVjm6v>)
- Typinator (Mac) (<http://goo.gl/4hHd3f>)
- Breezy (Windows) (<http://goo.gl/Z8LYJ>)
- Phrase Express (Mac & Windows) (<http://goo.gl/fQswZd>)
- FastFox (Mac & Windows) (<http://goo.gl/1GQB0n>)
- Auto Text Expander (Mac & Windows) (<http://goo.gl/NcUQwd>)

Mobile

- TextExpand (<https://goo.gl/liGEvb>)
- TextExpander (iPhone App Store)

Browser Extensions

- Auto Text Expander for Chrome
- Text Complete for Firefox

Reviews of Text Expansion Applications

- “How to use TextExpansion” (<http://goo.gl/B1VP>)
- “Text Expanders Shrink Your Typing” (<http://goo.gl/nqgQd7>)
- “7 Awesome Uses For PhraseExpress” (<http://goo.gl/a6HgXK>)