

## A Different Way of Writing

By Jason Hahr

Posted on the HIAT website with permission from Jason and his family

My name is Jason Hahr, and I am a 17-year-old boy. I attend Damascus High School in Maryland. I have Cerebral Palsy and because of this I am confined to a wheelchair. Due to my disability, I need assistance in order to write. Before I was introduced to voice recognition software, my writing was done by dictation to an adult. The dictation process was a very difficult one. I would often have to rely on the schedules of the people who were helping me. Because of this, I was unable to develop good time management skills. I would often underestimate how long an activity would take me to complete. This would often inconvenience not only my school aide, but me as well. Another major drawback to dictation was the fact that since my aide spelled everything for me, I had never learned how to really spell or use proper grammar such as the use of commas, etc. However, when I was introduced to a voice recognition program called Naturally Speaking Preferred™ I saw a new hope for my future.

I was first introduced to Naturally Speaking when I was in middle school. I was overly hopeful that all my writing problems would disappear. Boy was I wrong! An assistive technology specialist introduced me to the software, and told me that it would take time to master this. She also told me that it was not the miracle solution to my writing problems. Due to the fact that I was a stubborn person at that time, I did not believe her. I assumed that the computer would be able to understand me just as well as a person, and of course, I thought that this would occur after just one day of training.

The assistive technology specialist intended to spend two hours training the voice files with me, but unfortunately, I became so frustrated that I could not accomplish anything. The program did not always understand the words I said. The frustration was so great that at times I wanted to throw the computer out the window. The assistive technology specialist told me to try saying the word again as this would help train the voice files. I, being the stubborn person I am, did not listen to her and would repeat the words angrily. This only increased the problem. The assistive technology specialist asked me to continue training the voice files at least three times a week. After a fierce week of fighting with my parents, we decided voice recognition was not going to work at this time. We would not try again until almost two and a half years later.

When I was in high school, we tried Naturally Speaking again. I believe I was more mature and resigned to the fact that the computer was not as good at understanding me as a person would be. But using a computer, I could be a more independent writer. It took a year and a half to master the Naturally Speaking program. After the initial software training, I started training the voice files by reading and dictating simple stories. After this, I began writing simple messages. Then I slowly moved on to simple school assignments like vocabulary worksheets. In the final stages of training, I wrote longer essays for my classes. But only in my junior year of high school, did I see how this would change things for me.

In my senior year of high school, I used Naturally Speaking a whole lot more than I had before. I was beginning to really see what the program could do. I knew that if I did not have Naturally Speaking, I would not be able to write papers by myself. I would always have to rely on the help of others. When my former school aide pointed out that voice recognition would be a way for me to go to college, I began to realize that this would really be a helpful tool. You see, before I had not even envisioned college, even though I had always been in mainstream classes like English,

math and history. As I began to realize that I did not have to fully depend on dictation to adults as my way of writing, a new world of possibilities opened to me.

During my senior year, a new person was assigned as my school aide. This was a smooth transition because of all the work I have done with Naturally Speaking. Now the only writing help I needed was help with answers on worksheets. I could even do my written homework by myself. My mom sure appreciated that! I have really come to understand and appreciate that this is just the way I write.

Now I am graduating from high school and I have been accepted into St. Andrew's Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina for the fall semester. I wonder if I would I have gotten this far if something like voice recognition had not come into my life. I am very appreciative of all the work that everyone has done to help me with this. I would not be where I am if it were not for all of the support, and I probably would not be leaving home to go to college if it were not for the independence that voice recognition software has given me.