ne often hears from younger writers that they can't imagine how anyone managed to compose an article, much less an entire book, with a typewriter. Kerouac banging away at his Underwood portable? Hemingway perched over his Remington? They might as well be monastic scribes or cave painters.

But if the modern word processor has become a near-universal tool for today's writers, its impact has been less revolutionary than you might think. Word processors let us create sentences without the unwieldy cross-outs and erasures of paper, and despite the occasional catastrophic failure, our hard drives are better suited for storing and retrieving documents than file cabinets. But writers don't normally rely on the computer for the more subtle arts of inspiration and association. We use the computer to process words, but the ideas that animate those words originate somewhere else, away from the screen. The word processor has changed the way we write, but it hasn't yet changed the way we think.

Changing the way we think, of course, was the cardinal objective of many early computer visionaries: Vannevar Bush's seminal 1945 essay that envisioned the modern, hypertext-driven information machine was called "As We May Think"; Howard Rheingold's wonderful account of computing's pioneers was called "Tools for Thought." Most of these gurus would be disappointed to find that, decades later, the most sophisticated form of artificial intelligence in our writing tools lies in our grammar checkers.

But 2005 may be the year when tools for thought become a reality for people who manipulate words for a living, thanks to the release of nearly a dozen new programs all aiming to do for your personal information what Google has done for the Internet. These programs all work in slightly different ways, but they share two remarkable