Crucial Computers

In his 1990 essay "Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer", Wendell Berry claims that he will never buy a personal computer because he believes them to be unhelpful to writers, environmentally irresponsible, and a poor replacement for the typewriter. Today, despite vast improvements to the computer, he still refuses to purchase one. These claims are unjustifiable because the computers of 1990 are more efficient than the typewriter and provide completely new functions that do not detract from the writing process used for a typewriter. The computers of today continue this trend of efficiency and functionality to the point where they are bringing us closer to the things that Berry says matter to him: "peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work."

Berry's main objections to the computer are that it would eliminate his wife from his process and would damage the environment without majorly improving his writing. Berry's wife could not only continue to type and revise his essays on a computer, but she could do so more efficiently because of a computer's ability for the user to make revisions to a document without retyping it. This efficiency, while admittedly not improving the quality of the writing, can allow the same quality of writing to be produced more quickly, which will improve the quality of writing on works with a deadline, such as newspaper articles. This saves not only time but also paper. The decimation of forests caused by a typewriter's excessive paper usage is no less destructive to the environment than the strip-mining of coal, if not more so due to its contribution to global warming.

While Berry's claims about 1990's computers are illogical, his refusal to use a modern day computer can only be attributed to stubbornness. Modern computers are cheaper, more convenient, more energy efficient, smaller, and better working than the devices they replace. In addition, they replace not only the typewriter but, with the advent of the Internet, libraries, the postal service, retailers, and newspapers. The Internet's unique ability to connect the entire world instantaneously is the most important innovation since Gutenberg's printing press. This connectivity can inspire change by raising awareness of issues pertaining to ecological health, world peace, and economic justice. It can spread political information which increases government transparency and political honesty. The rise of social media allows people to communicate with separated family members such as soldiers that are stationed overseas, work with colleagues on the other side of the world, and more effectively organize community events.

The computer provides a more efficient platform for writing, conserves more paper than a typewriter despite its power consumption, complies with Berry's requirements for new technology, and is a force for good in the world. It is a definite improvement over the typewriter to the point where the two machines can hardly be compared. With the diverse and efficient functions offered by recent technology, anyone who can buy a computer should buy a computer.