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Research Writing: Proofread for Mechanical Errors

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Research writing: proofread for mechanical errors

Martin Maner

Nothing can replace a careful, word-by-word scanning of the paper as the last step in editing. However, computer technology has placed some marvelous tools at the writer's disposal, and it is foolish not to use them if you have a clear sense of their capabilities and limitations.

Computerized Spell Checkers

Here is what they do well:

- They quickly scan your paper for improper spellings.
- They allow you to add customized dictionary entries for unusual words, proper names, and specialized terminology.

Here is what they don't do:

- They don't spot homophone errors (*their/there*, *vein/vain/vane*).
- They don't spot the misuse of similar words (*lie/lay*, *compliment/complement*, *eminent/imminent/immanent*, *illusion/allusion*) or related word forms (*go*, *goes*).
- They don't recognize most names and unusual words. A spell checker will allow you to add an unusual word to a customized dictionary, but if you misspell it when you add it, the spell checker will never again flag the misspelled form.
- They don't recognize British or archaic spellings. You should reproduce quoted British text exactly as written, but you should not add British spellings to your customized dictionary because inadvertent uses of these spellings elsewhere in your writing will become invisible to the spell checker.

Computerized Style Checkers

Here is what they do well:

- They offer certain kinds of rudimentary advice on style. For example, they highlight passive verb constructions and ask whether you wish to keep them. They handily do automatic "readability" analyses by counting average sentence lengths and word lengths.
- They highlight common wordy phrases and suggest alternatives.
- They do a very good job spotting mechanical errors such as the omission of the second quotation mark in a pair.

Here is what they don't do:

- They don't provide reliable, flexible advice for making subtle stylistic revisions. A skilled editor will find that many of their flags are unnecessary or false. You should never slavishly follow the stylistic advice they give, though it may often prompt a useful excursion to a good manual of style.
- They have trouble handling writing that requires unusual punctuation or syntax. For instance, a linguistics paper that contains many words and phrases used as examples may stir up dozens of false warnings.

Although a style checker may produce some useful advice, to use a style checker effectively, you must know grammar and usage extremely well. Unfortunately, if you know grammar and usage well, you will find about 90% of the checker's advice to be irritating, useless, and wrong. Using a style checker is like having a highly intrusive, semi-literate, borderline psychotic shouting instructions at you while you write.

If you do not know grammar and usage well, the style checker will lead you to produce ghastly writing. The reason is that all languages, especially word order-dependent languages like English, require the writer or speaker to make countless subtle distinctions on the basis of context. But even the best and most popular style checkers use very primitive algorithms to evaluate context. One leading style checker *always* flags the word *rather*, for example, labeling it a "vague adverb" even when it is used—appropriately and precisely—in the standard formation, "[something] rather than [something else]."

To illustrate what style checkers don't do, I've used one to "correct" some excellent English prose. First, here is a famous passage from a meditation by John Donne, one of our great prose masters:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

In using a style checker on this passage, I decided to take, in every case, the *first* advice the style checker offered. My intention was to duplicate the choices that a naive user might make. Here is the result, with the style checker's changes in italics:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If *some clods are* washed away by the sea, Europe is the *lessness, also* if a promontory were, *also* if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in *people*. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

It was amusing to watch the checker arrive at the gender-neutral phrasing, "involved in people," creating John Donne, the warm, politically correct Anglican divine. Donne is given something of a Gertrude-Stein-ish flavor in that magical phrase, "Europe is the lessness." And thank heavens that we got rid of that dreadful subjunctive construction, "if a clod be washed . . ."

But this is hardly fair, you say. After all, Donne used archaic, poetic language, and the style checker in its lame, prosaic way was simply trying to flatten it out into concise, neutral, modern prose. (I love the chipper tone of its dialogue boxes as it mangles text. "Next problem?" it asks, waiting for you to press a button and have done with some more Donne.)

All right, then, let's give it a paragraph by John McPhee, who is widely considered one of our living masters of nonfiction prose:

In the many fractures of these big roadcuts, there is some suggestion of columns, but actually the cracks running through the cuts are too various to be explained by columnar jointing, let alone by the impudence of dynamite. The sill may have been stressed pretty severely by the tilting of the fault block, Kleinspehn says, or it may have cracked in response to the release of weight as the load above it was eroded away. Solid-earth tides could break it up, too. The sea is not all that responds to the moon. Twice a day the solid earth bobs up and down, as much as a foot. That kind of force and that kind of distance are more than enough to break hard rock. Wells will flow faster during lunar high tides. (*Basin and Range* [New York: Farrar, 1981], 6-7)

Again I followed the advice given by the style checker in every case, including some faulty capitalization. I obeyed the style checker's commandment to get rid of passive voice constructions, which led to phrasing that suggests that McPhee wants to blow the reader up. Of course, McPhee's two longest sentences had to be chopped up to satisfy the style checker's "readability" criterion, and important connections between ideas were thus destroyed:

In the many fractures of these big *rodents* [sic], there is some suggestion of columns. *However,* the cracks running through the cuts are too various *for me to explain by* columnar jointing, let alone by the impudence of dynamite. The sill may have been stressed pretty severely by the tilting of the fault block, Kleinspehn says. *It* may have cracked in response to the release of weight as the load above it was eroded away. Solid-earth tides could break it up, too. The sea is not all that responds to the moon. Twice a day the solid earth bobs up and down, as much as a foot, *and* That *kinds* [sic] of force and that kind of distance are more than enough to break hard rock. Wells will flow faster during lunar high tides.

Some day style checkers may be genuinely reliable tools for unskilled writers. That day has not yet arrived. Until then, ask not for whom the prompt buzzer tolls.

Use global searches to edit details

Most word processors have a "search" function that allows you to type a word (or any other string of characters) which the computer will then find throughout your paper. The search function can be used to check the paper rapidly, one last time, for entire categories of potential mistakes.

1. Before forwarding the final draft, update the list of works cited by searching for each author's name. During revision you may have inadvertently eliminated the use of some sources. Cut these from your source list to avoid padding the bibliography.

2. Check all the parenthetical documentation by searching for the left parenthesis mark: "(." Scan each citation for accuracy of form and accuracy of page numbers.

3. If you know that you tend to make certain kinds of mistakes (such as using "it's" for "its" and vice versa), use the search function to scan every occurrence of these words. If you tend to use a single space instead of two spaces after periods, use " ce" as a character string and scan the entire document. To be sure that you have avoided the use of contractions, search for apostrophes. Check for proper use of the semicolon by searching for every occurrence.

4. A word of warning: use global "search-and-replace" functions extremely carefully. (Try them first on a temporary backup copy of your paper.) You cannot simply search for " -ce" and globally replace it with "-ce-ce," for instance, because the computer will replace every " -ce," including those that follow abbreviations, those that already have an additional space, those that occur in the initials of authors' names, and so on.

These final steps were once time-consuming, but the computer has made them quick and easy.

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(Material for this article is from Martin Maner, *The Spiral Guide to Research Writing* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1996), 283-86, and is reprinted by permission of Mayfield Publishing Company.