

THE TROJAN HORSES OF WRITING: GRAMMARLY, SPELLCHECK, GRAMMARCHHECK, MICROSOFT'S SPELLING & GRAMMAR

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They are pervasive in the online classroom: Spellcheck, Grammmarcheck, Grammarly, and Microsoft's Spelling and Grammar. Their promise is to correct, suggest, and improve one's writing. As the distance learning course is one that touts and encourages the students' use of resources in the online classroom and offered by the school, these editing tools are like a beautiful gift found sparkling on the seashore, begging to be welcomed inside the writer's world. Yet each has an inherent danger: They become Trojan horses: offering so much good at first glance; yet, often delivering the incorrect and incomprehensible. The more one knows the pitfalls of these editing tools—as well as plusses—the better one can assist students in their misuse and use.

INTRODUCTION

For many students, writing is a challenge and even a nuisance for two primary reasons: the substantial number of rules and exceptions to the rules, and time needed to compose to get everything exactly right. Prior to the internet, the only way to make sure university essays, corporate missives, and other writings were error free was to consult grammar books. Large, cumbersome, and labor-intensive, these resources contributed to the negative student experience and perception about writing. Fur-

thermore, about one-half of college students lack confidence, especially with writing and especially for historically marginalized groups (cf. Mallette, 2017; Ruecker, 2021). Technology can seduce learners and even their instructors into thinking there is an easy solution. Accept the gift of technical writing assistance and all will be well.

Like the Trojan Horse, the advent of the internet gave writers Spellcheck, Grammmarcheck, Grammarly, and Microsoft Grammar & Spelling as gifts that promised to make writing almost instantly perfect with only a few clicks. The trick, however, is that these tools neither

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produce perfect writing nor do they make users better writers.

with the above three software self-editing tools.

THE BIG FOUR

- Grammarly is used by folks so often that it has become pervasive. In fact, as of 2024 it is estimated 30 million people use this software (Harris, 2024). Yet, “A study conducted by J. M. Dembsey of the Howe Center for Writing Excellence shows that Grammarly has a 41% margin of error with the majority of mistakes stemming from Grammarly flagging errors that didn’t actually exist” (Fiverr Team, 2021).
- As of 2022, the most recent data available, 36% of Americans use Spellcheck versus 7% using a dictionary (Griffith). Certainly, Spellcheck has taken hold to once again save time and give supposed accuracy. But here problems also abound: Words that sound the same but are spelled differently, called homonyms, are arbitrarily noted as correct, even when wrong, as Spellcheck knows nothing about context. Thus, although “I want to take you to lunch” has “to” spelled correctly Spellcheck will also give a thumbs up to “too” and “two,” both incorrect spellings for the context of the sentence.
- Grammarcheck fares no better. While no specific data exists on how many use this tool, a quick type of “GrammarCheck” into a search engine produces hundreds of GrammarCheck sites offering either free downloads or immediate use of the product. An additional search of problems with GrammarCheck will also find multiple websites, offering such items as giving incorrect grammar suggestions.
- As for Microsoft, with 400 million users (Stradling, 2024), its Grammar & Spelling tool is used by many on a daily basis but with the same problems as derived

LOOKING AT SPECIFIC POTENTIAL PITFALLS

A quote by Steven Austin (2020) in *Writers Weekly* nicely summarizes the overall problems with using these self-editing tools:

An algorithm will point out issues, but it will not explain why they are problematic—at least, not in a clear and concise way. Self-editing programs—even the premium, advanced options—often make mistakes no human ever would. All an algorithm can do is pinpoint aspects that are supposed to contribute to ‘bad writing.’ The problem is these artificial quasi-intelligent systems are incapable of detecting nuance.

“Self-editing programs—even the premium, advanced options—often make mistakes no human ever would.” Spellcheck is a good example of this: “... according to literacy expert Louisa Moats, research has shown that for students who have writing or language disabilities, spellcheck correctly identifies and fixes intended words about 53% of the time. This means there is about a 50/50 chance that spellcheck will fix the errors” (Braintrust Tutors, n.d.).

“All an algorithm can do is pinpoint aspects that are supposed to contribute to ‘bad writing.’” For example, these tools often suggest the passive voice is always wrong when that is not always the case. An overall item that applies to all self-editing tools is this: “... the notes a writer receives are nothing more than suggestions. ... The biggest downfall of relying entirely on online software is accepting too many of the program changes may make the narrative sound robotic and unnatural (Austin, 2024). Because these tools now make use of artificial intelligence (AI), the resulting text may also be nonsensical.

“The problem is these artificial quasi-intelligent systems are incapable of detecting nu-

ance” (Austin, 2020). Spellcheck, in the example given above, is infamous for this, and much research supports it, such as this from the Rimbar (2017): “...while spell-checkers help eliminate surface errors, they have very little influence on correcting the errors on the cognitive level.”

Alleged mistakes are often marked or missed too often; the more text there is, the more inaccurate the tools become while providing guidance that is often too technical or general to be of help without an instructor’s feedback (Dodigovic & Tovmasyan, 2021; O’Neil & Russell, 2019; Zinkevich & Ledeneva, 2021). Getting a draft that is excessively marked by a technical tool without clear clarifications also tends to dissuade student writers.

Overall “Watch Out Fors”:

- Accepting too many suggested revisions may trigger warnings about potential Artificial Intelligence misuse, leading to detrimental disciplinary outcomes. The tool may also pull from other sources available online as AI cannot create its own content.
- User’s intellectual property and/or privacy may be compromised as these tools may copy and suggest the writer’s content to others. Students should be encouraged to read the “fine print” of any tool they decide to use so that they are aware of the potential for an app to pull from their personal communications (e.g., social media posts or messages to family).
- These tools do not make users better writers: “Feeling” good about writing does not necessarily mean that the composition is skillful writing or that the user can now compose at a more proficient level in the future. Grammarly, for example, makes excessive promises that its product will make your writing “brilliant,” worthy of “good grades,” and “free of mistakes and plagiarism” because their tool has “everything you need to ace your assignments” (Gram-

marly, 2022). The reality is that at best, such tools can only make a writer adequate with grammar and mechanics, and they are not recommended for all students (Dodigovic & Tovmasyan, 2021; O’Neil & Russell, 2019). Beware of grammar checkers bearing gifts – they could be Trojan horses.

- Often these tools do not allow for nuances related to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA). For example, a plural pronoun is now recommended when referring to a singular antecedent unless the subject has clearly self-identified, nor do they allow for all Englishes but assume that only one—typically American—standard form is correct.
- There is a general lack of ethics. For example, some of these programs begin with a free account and then require subscriptions or higher levels of payment for users to receive assistance, potentially taking advantage of students who are often anxious about their writing. This practice is especially concerning given that about one-half of college students are struggling to meet their basic needs like food and housing (Vilme, et al., 2022).

GUARDRAILS/GUIDELINES

All of what has been written thus far gives a bleak look at Grammarly, Spellcheck, Grammarcheck, Microsoft Spelling & Grammar, and other similar self-editing software tools. However, value is to be found, with a good word of caution: When writing be sure “... that your own writing style and personal voice still shines through, even when you are editing yourself. Do not take every single suggestion from the tool; otherwise, your finished product might not even sound like you wrote it when the editing process is complete” (Summers, 2025).

Consider these positives:

- Let students know that an indication by one of these tools that something is amiss might, in fact mean, something is amiss. Have them consider this a second pair of eyes, but do not rely on the software for a 100% fix. Some good old-fashioned legwork – either on the internet or in a print book can be sure the correction is correct – or even warranted.
- Demonstrate how to use these tools for editing but not for revising. Students should be encouraged to compose and revise using their own ideas and voice while keeping the focus on the tools to checking for editorial issues, such as spelling and punctuation.
- Spellcheck can alert students to unfamiliar words – words not in their vocabulary (often, Spellcheck might not recognize unusual words and, although spelled correctly, indicate them as wrong). Remind students to keep a list of these and use them to expand their vocabulary.
- Communicate a **disclaimer** that summarizes potential pitfalls, emphasizes tips for appropriate use, and links to additional resources/examples. This disclaimer should be shared in writing in multiple places (e.g., the syllabus and course announcements) and verbally during course lectures and discussions.
- Offer norming and practice opportunities as low stakes, low/no graded activities. Let them see what the tool shares and how to make decisions. Also, provide opportunities for students to share their work in progress to get and give feedback to one another without the use of technology.

With proper pedagogical guidance from their instructors—including the use of these editing tools—about 87% of students will do fine in writing courses and graduate, even those with at-risk factors (Ruecker, 2021).

CONCLUSION

It is going to be even more tempting for students to use these self-editing tools as they continue to expand. Certainly, not all students will be stopped from dipping into one or more of them nor should educators steer students completely away from new tools: however, at least they can be made wiser as to their application. Students should be reminded that the technology serves them not the other way around. Writers must maintain control and responsibility for their own original work. Educators must be knowledgeable enough to inform learners about the potential pitfalls while balancing that instruction with information on how to appropriately use these tools. Unlike the Trojans of long ago, hopefully students will heed the warnings.

REMEMBER: The Trojans would have been better off had they not dropped their defenses to bring the horse inside.

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