



Industry guru raises questions...

Spell-Checking Software: Is it Write or Wrong?

A University of Pittsburgh study indicates that spell-check software may level the playing field between people with differing levels of language skills.

In other words, we may all write and sound alike—and still be wrong.

Word Versus Wisdom

In the study, undergraduate students were asked to proofread a one-page business letter—half of them using Microsoft Word, with its annoying red and green lines underlining potential errors. The other half did it the old fashioned way, they used their heads.

Without grammar or spelling software, students with higher SAT verbal scores made, on average, five errors, compared with 12.3 errors for students with lower scores. Using the software, students with higher verbal scores reading the same page made, on average, 16 errors, compared with 17 errors for student with lower scores. In other words, the software made both groups look smart.

Shaky Results

Spell-checking software is so ubiquitous that some have come to trust it too much. Grammar and spelling technology is meant to help writers and editors, not do their writing.

The study found the software helped students find and correct errors in the letter, but, in some cases, they also changed phrases or sentences flagged by the software as grammatically suspicious, even though they were correct.

For instance, the letter included a passage that said, "John Ames would be the best candidate. Ames has been in political rolls for many hears."

Software noticed the last "s" in "Ames" and suggested changing the

Proofreading Tips

Check out *TechTopics* No. 12 for another view on spellcheckers.

Tips to avoid embarrassing and costly proofreading mistakes and blunders are included.

The technical bulletin will be helpful to any person who creates documents for publication.

You can get a free subscription to *TechTopics* by completing a form on the Copresco website.

verb from "has" to "have," as if it were a plural. The spellchecker ignored "rolls," which should have been "roles" and missed "hears," which should have been "years."

Grammar and spelling software may never approach the complexity of the human mind, or replace the creativity of the human experience as expressed in words.

Computer programs can suggest correct speech, but to follow them is to make all of us sound alike or appear brighter than we are—or allow more silly errors to pass through.

According to a research study back in 1990, Macintosh users wrote at an 8th grade level and PC users wrote at a 12th grade level.

Less Distractions

It seems that the Mac typographic format encouraged a simple sentence structure (and perhaps some alliteration) with childish vocabulary. PC users were not distracted by form and therefore concentrated on content.

The original article appeared in *Academic Computing* in January 1990. An English instructor at the University of Delaware noted that freshmen using Macs seemed to be turning in essays that were not as well written as those done on the PC.

Good Looks—Less Substance

When authors (writers, editors, etc.) deal with both form and content, there is a noticeable reduction in grammatical structure. They focus on what the text looks like rather than what it says.

It makes no difference if it is a Mac or a PC—it is the preoccupation with format that diminishes attention to the details of the English language.

And don't get me started on calculators and the loss of basic math skills.

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Thanks for Your Help

Thank you for responding to our survey regarding the physical condition of *Overnight Lite* when the postman brings it to your door.

The consensus was that *Lite*, a self-mailer, stands up to Postal Service brutality quite well, but some rubbing of the digital image does occur.

Full survey results can be found at the same website address you used to access the survey form last month.

In Copresco's spirit of ongoing testing and continuous improvement, we've printed this month's *Lite* on dull instead of gloss-coated stock. Is this better? Worse? No difference?

Please let us know by sending your comments via e-mail to the address at the bottom of this page.

Memorial Day

Copresco will be closed Monday, May 31, for Memorial Day. Enjoy the start of the summer season.



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Address Correction Requested

Little Bobby ran into the drugstore and exclaimed, "Quick! My dad is hanging by his pants from the fence..."

"What can I do?" the clerk asked.

"Put new film in my camera," Bobby replied.



A little boy was telling his parents about his experience at camp. "I even got to see a man who makes horses!" the boy exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" the mother asked.

"He was nearly finished when I was leaving... he was nailing on the feet."



One woman to another: That's my side of the story... now let me tell you his.



A Texas fisherman was talking about his struggle catching a 25-pound bass.

Friend: "So, did it put up much of a fight?"

Texan: "Yep, but not half as much as the 10-pound grasshopper I caught it with."



Upon seeing an elderly man looking under his seat after a movie, the usher asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"Well, I lost a piece of candy," the man replied. "And my teeth are still stuck in it."



Filling station attendant: "Looks like your oil is OK, but your engine needs changing."

"I've been doing the work of three people lately," an overworked employee told his boss, "and I'd like a raise."

"I can't give you a raise," the boss answered. "But if you tell me who the other two people are, I'll fire them."



A young girl was walking her dog when a neighbor said, "What a beautiful puppy! Do you have papers for her?"

"We sure do," the girl replied, "all over the floor."



"Believe me," the salesman said to the lady, "it will pay for itself in no time."

"Good," the woman replied. "When it does, send it to me."



Conversation overheard at a boys' camp: We're going home tomorrow, so I guess I'd better rumple my pajamas and squeeze out half the toothpaste.



A driver tucked this note under the windshield wiper of his car: "I've circled the block for 20 minutes. I'm late for an appointment, and if I don't park here, I'll lose my job. 'Forgive us our trespasses.'"

When he came back he found a parking ticket and this note: "I've circled the block for 20 years, and if I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. 'Lead us not into temptation.'"

Sitting in the back of a movie theatre, a man says to the usher, "If you find me a better seat, I'll give you a handsome tip."

The usher moves him to the second row, and the man hands the usher a quarter. The usher looks at the quarter and then leans over and whispers, "The wife did it."



An anonymous e-mail sent to the weather center: I thought you'd be interested in knowing that I just shoveled three feet of partly cloudy from my front steps.



The world's best after-dinner speech: "Waiter, please give me both checks."



A man walks into a butcher shop and orders a pound of sausages. The butcher prepares the order and says, "I'll bet you a pound of sausages that you can't get the meat off the shelf behind me."

The man studies the shelf carefully, and then replies, "I'm not betting... the steaks are too high."



Michael: "Today in school, a kid said I look just like you."

His proud father: "And what did you say?"

Michael: "Nothing. He was a lot bigger than I am."

