

Your Computer Isn't as Smart as You Think: Don't Fully Trust It to Proofread Your Paper!

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Computerized grammar, spelling, and style checkers have been around for over a decade now and are widely available all over campus. As their names indicate, these checkers locate potential problems within essays. For example, spelling checkers point out spelling errors, and grammar checkers point out a wide array of issues, from subject-verb agreement to word usage to punctuation errors. Style checkers also hone in on a vast amount of issues, such as misused and pretentious words, weak modifiers, and cliches. Sounds great, right? Well, to an extent, these program features are helpful...but to another extent, they're not. If you don't first understand a problem the computer is telling you to correct, you may end up fixing a problem that doesn't exist (such as an intentional fragment sentence). From this handout you'll learn what such checkers can and can't do for you (and for your paper).

Grammar and style checkers can...

- find some grammatical errors
- find some potential stylistic problems (though many of these are more a matter of opinion than of error)
- find some punctuation errors

And now for the bad news, such checkers cannot...

- flawlessly proofread for grammatical, spelling, and stylistic problems
- find problems with your paper's content or structure (i.e. whether or not you've presented good ideas in a logical order)
- find errors in logic (e.g. Men are mortal. Socrates was a man. Therefore, Socrates is immortal.)
- 4. find errors in meaning (e.g. Raining all day, the girl was able to catch many worms.)

Points to Ponder

- These program features are easily confused by complex sentence structures and tend to find problems that aren't really problems. Do not let the computer change your mind,

and your paper, unless you are 100% certain that the computer is right.

- These checkers are, at best, only part of the proofreading process. Never assume your paper's been proofread if the only thing you've done is run it through a battery of computer tests.
- If you have problems with grammar, spelling, or style that you don't understand, seek out people (such as your instructors) who can give you problem-specific feedback and individualized attention. You risk making your paper worse by using computerized advice that is only sometimes right.