

Little-Known Tips for Using Microsoft Word for Clear Writing

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Introduction

With over 1.2 billion users,¹ Microsoft Word is arguably the most commonly used word processing and editing software throughout the world.

Medical writers use Microsoft Word daily for a variety of tasks, including manuscript preparation, proofing of patient-facing public health documents, medical presentations, and more. They are proficient with basic functionalities of Word, but they may not be aware of more advanced features.

Here, we provide our best tips for producing better writing using Microsoft Word. These tips apply both to the current version of Word included in Microsoft Office 365 and the standalone version currently available, called Microsoft Word 2019, which is part of Microsoft Office 2019.

Monisha's Tip: Use Advanced Proofing Features of Microsoft Word

Clear and impactful medical writing requires education and experience in medicine or health, writing skills and talent, attention to detail, and passion. Microsoft Word's little-known proofing features can be another key to producing great copy. Microsoft Word's hidden proofing features take a bit of time to find, but they are well worth the effort.

It was many years into my medical writing career that I learned about Microsoft Word's advanced proofing features. That is because these features are "hidden" and are not enabled by default.

Did you know that Microsoft Word can alert you to jargon, simpler language, and passive voice? This Microsoft Word proofing review will make suggestions for you to accept or ignore. Keep in mind the style guide for your target publication or for your target audience. For example, sometimes passive voice may be acceptable in medical and scientific writing; if the proofing review suggests you have used passive voice, consider whether it is appropriate and accept or reject Microsoft Word's suggestion.

I run a complete proofing check on all of my writing products. Here is how to get started:

Monisha's Little-Known Tips to Uncover Hidden Proofing Features in Microsoft Word

Open a blank document in Microsoft Word.

1. Go to File and select "Options" at the very bottom of the menu.
2. Under Word Options, select "Proofing" (Figure 1).
3. Go the section entitled, "When correcting spelling and grammar in Word."
4. Ensure that all boxes are checked.
5. For Writing Style, select the drop-down option for "Grammar & Refinements" (This may also be listed as "Grammar & More"; in Word 2010, it is listed as "Grammar and Style").
6. Click on "Settings..." (Here is where a lot of the proofing features live!) (Figure 2 on next page).

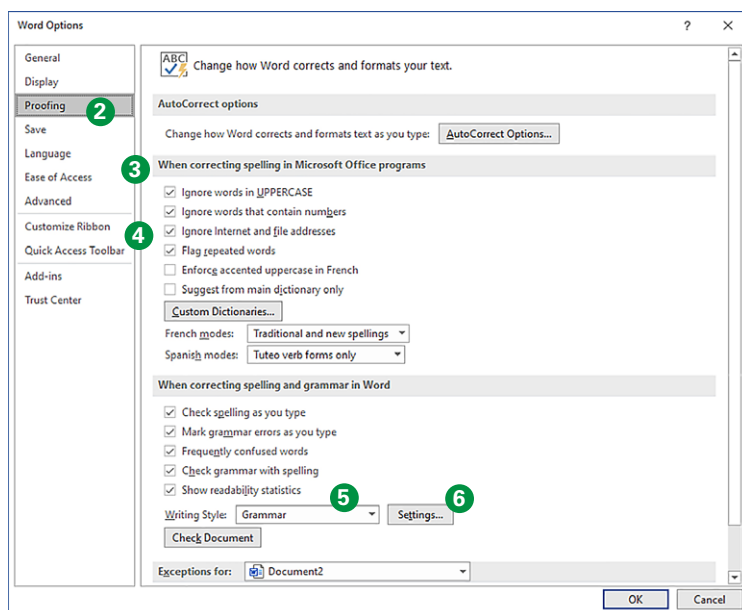


Figure 1. Microsoft Word's proofing options.

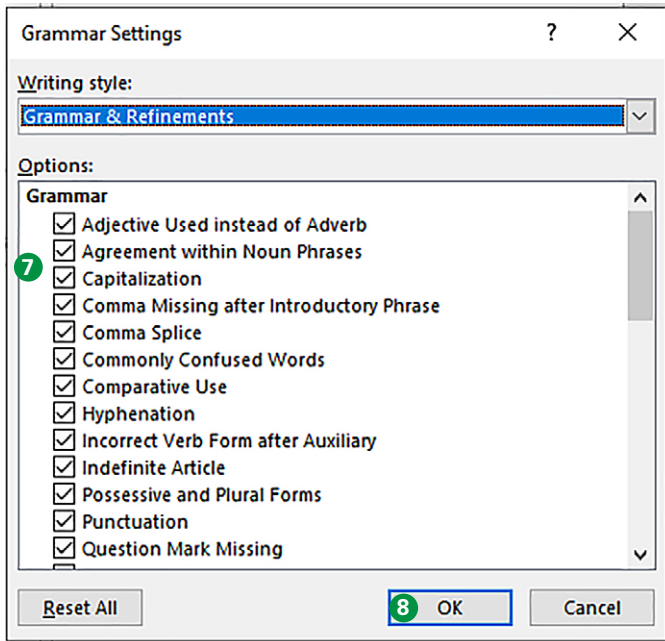


Figure 2. Microsoft Word’s “Grammar and Refinements” menu bar contains all of the little-known proofing features of the popular software.

- 7. There are over 100 (!) features listed! *I select ALL of them.*
Remember that the style guide of your target publication or audience can help guide which “suggested” changes you should accept after Microsoft Word performs the review.
- 8. Click “OK” to save changes.
- 9. Click “Check Document” (Figure 3) to allow Microsoft Word to do a new review (This may also be listed as “Recheck Document.”).

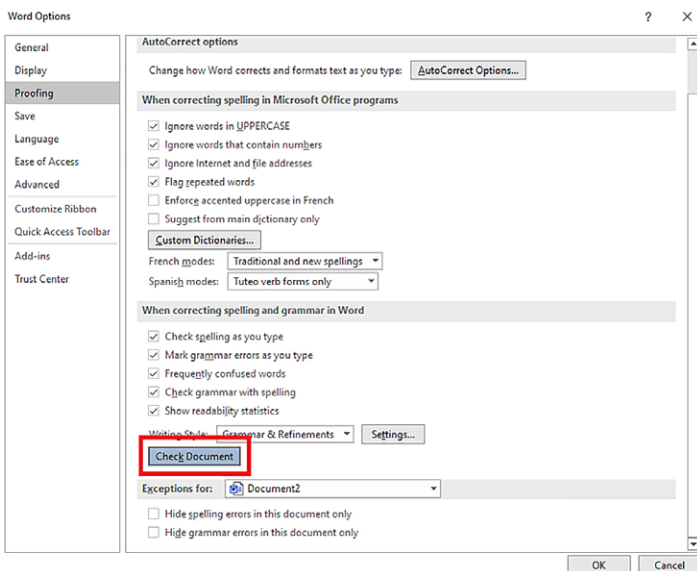


Figure 3. Once you select your desired proofing options, remember to click “Check Document” to apply them to your file.

After clicking on “Check Document,” another dialog box may appear asking you if you wish to reset the Microsoft Word spelling and grammar checker and apply the new settings. You will need to click “Yes” here.

There is another way to get to the Proofing features in Microsoft Word. You may also see the Editor icon in the Review panel of your version of Microsoft Word (Figure 4). You can click on this button, and then click “Settings.” Then, follow the steps above starting at number 6.

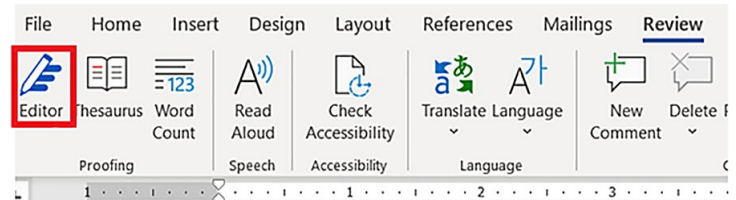


Figure 4. Clicking the “Editor” button in the Review tab of Microsoft Word’s menu bar is an easy way to access these little-known proofing options.

Of course, the Microsoft Word proofing feature is not perfect, and will not find all elements that you could (or should) refine to make your writing clearer and impactful. The proofing feature also sometimes recommends changes that you should not make in the context of your document. I have found that the proofing feature still misses some grammar or syntax mistakes. Using the feature is a start, and you may need to make additional refinements to add a human element to proofing.

Sheeva’s Tip: Use Microsoft Word’s “Read Aloud” Feature

I am always learning new things, even after using Microsoft Word and other Office suite products for over 2 decades. Recently, I learned that Microsoft Office 2019 has a “Read Aloud” function which will read your Word file out loud. This can be useful in editing if you perhaps need to do a quick pass to catch errors in the text as it is being read aloud. With the Read Aloud function, you can sit back as Microsoft reads through the document.

Our brains use different cognitive processes to read text from a page compared with listening to text being read out loud. A study out of the University of Perugia in Italy suggests that actively listening to text being read out loud may lead to more “intense and deeper information processing,” according to a report by the British Broadcasting Corporation.²

Sheeva’s Tip to Reveal the Read Aloud Feature in Microsoft Word

The Read Aloud function of Microsoft Word 2019 can be found in the Review tab (Figure 5).

When you click the Read Aloud button, a sidebar pops up with controls shown in Figure 6.

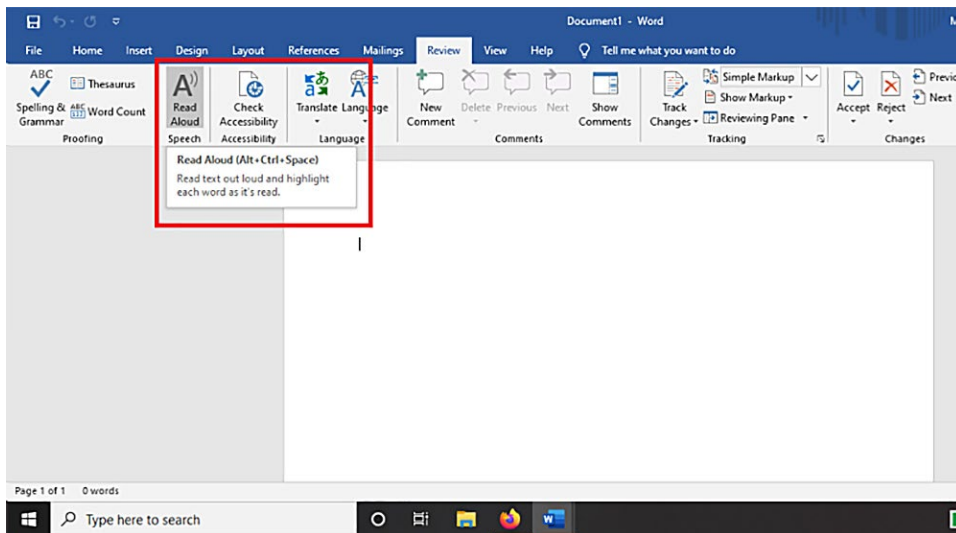


Figure 5. The “Review” tab contains the Read Aloud option in Microsoft Word.



Figure 6. Microsoft Word’s Read Aloud function button controls. From left to right, they are Back, Play/Pause, Forward, Settings, and Exit.

The settings icon allows you to select from different reading voices and change reading speed. If you are, like me, using the American English version of Microsoft Word, you can choose from several reading voices, including 2 male voices (Microsoft David and Microsoft Mark) and a female voice (Microsoft Zira).

Microsoft Word’s Read Aloud feature can be useful to quickly review a document for errors. When you catch an error, you can pause Read Aloud, make the changes, move your cursor back to where you want to start reading, and use the controls to restart Read Aloud.

There are a couple of disadvantages to the Read Aloud function. One downside of the Read Aloud function is that, if you try to type or make edits to the document while it is being read, you risk accidentally deleting text as the cursor tracks the text being read. You must first exit or pause Read Aloud mode before making any changes to the document.

Another downside of using Read Aloud is that it does not work seamlessly with the Track Changes feature in Word. When there are tracked changes in your document, the Read Aloud function simply reads the text that is on the page, whether it has been modified (deleted using Track Changes) or not. So, it is best to use a final copy of your text that does not have tracked changes in order to achieve the best results with Read Aloud.

We hope that learning about these little-known tools will help you optimize your use of Microsoft Word and help you write more clearly.

Author declaration and disclosures: Sheeva Azma owns Microsoft stock. The authors note no additional commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.

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