

IN THE SERVICE OF GOOD WRITING

My Like-Hate Relationship With Word's Grammar Checker

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ABSTRACT

Microsoft Word has a built-in grammar checker that can help you spot common grammatical errors, such as noun-verb disagreements, that you need to correct. However, Word's grammar checker also makes many suggestions that you should ignore. For example, it systematically flags all uses of the passive voice, even when the passive voice is the right choice. Word also tells you that some sentence adverbs or conjunctive adverbial elements are expressing uncertainty, even when no uncertainty is being expressed. Word often flags short, common words of Anglo-Saxon origin—suggesting instead a big, fancy word that is harder to read or has a different meaning. I put up with this nonsense because Word occasionally makes a good suggestion that keeps me from looking stupid. In this article, I explain why I ignore most of Word's grammatical advice. I also explain how I use other features of Word (the Read Aloud feature and some custom macros) to spot problems that no grammar checker can find.

INTRODUCTION

Can machines really think? That's a hard question to answer. In 1950, Alan Turing asked a different question: can a machine exhibit intelligent behavior that is equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human being?¹ Turing called such an assessment the imitation game, but it is now called the Turing test. The current version of Microsoft Word's grammar checking function fails the Turing test. It is good at flagging some grammatical errors (eg, noun-verb disagreements). However, it does not understand the meaning of English words. If you are a good writer, Word's grammar checker will give you far more bad suggestions than good ones. Nevertheless, Word's occasional good suggestion will help you avoid looking stupid. In this article, I explain why I ignore much of Word's advice and how I try to find the problems that Word overlooks.

FALSE ALARMS AND BAD ADVICE

The following are, at least in my experience, the most common false alarms that Word's grammar checker makes. Fortunately, if you are a dedicated reader of this column, you will know when to ignore Word's bad advice.

Anglo-Saxon Words and Plain Language

Word's grammar checker often suggests that I substitute some highfalutin word for a simple, powerful word of Anglo-Saxon origin. For example, it flagged *hard work* and suggested that I replace *hard* with *challenging*, *arduous*, or *demanding*. Thus, Word's advice goes against the principles of plain language, which is a legal requirement for some kinds of writing.² Use the simple, readable word of Anglo-Saxon origin (see the box: Anglo-Saxon Words) whenever its meaning is clear. Whenever Word suggests a highfalutin Latinate word for a simple, Anglo-Saxon word, I'm tempted to choose the option of "don't check for this issue." I resist that temptation because Word occasionally makes a good suggestion.

ANGLO-SAXON WORDS

In 1066, William of Normandy (also known as William the Bastard) became William the Conqueror, as he invaded Great Britain and claimed the English throne. In the aftermath, his Norman French nobles replaced the aristocracy of England. For centuries afterward, the aristocracy in England spoke the Norman dialect of French and used Latin for legal purposes, whereas the common people continued to speak their Germanic Anglo-Saxon tongue (Old English, the language of *Beowulf*). The eventual blending of those languages gave rise to Middle English (the language of Chaucer), which later evolved into Early Modern English (the language of Shakespeare) and then the English that we speak today. About a quarter of the words in today's English dictionaries are of Anglo-Saxon origin. Yet those words form the backbone of our language. They are the strong, hard-working words of the common people. (Most English obscenities are Anglo-Saxon in origin.) When Winston Churchill wanted to rally the British people in their darkest hour, he spoke words of Anglo-Saxon origin: "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." All of those words came from Anglo-Saxon, except for *surrender*, which came from French.

Passive Voice

When a verb is used in the active voice, the subject is the agent of the verb (eg, I eat). If the verb is transitive, there

will also be a direct object (eg, I eat pie). The passive voice allows you to express the same idea, but with the pie as the subject of the sentence (ie, the pie was eaten by me). As I explained in [Passive Voice and Expletive Constructions](#),³ George Orwell's essay *Politics and the English Language* gives us a confusing lesson about the passive voice. First, he tells us to avoid using the passive voice; then, he gives us a passage that contains the most powerful uses of the passive voice in English letters.⁴ Feel free to use the passive voice under the following circumstances:

- When the agent of the action is unknown, unspecified, or of lesser importance than the act itself.
- When you must give a list of agents or a complicated description of an agent. (Why make the reader wade through all that before they get to the verb?)

When Word's grammar checker finds an instance of the passive voice, it gives you the options "Ignore once" and "Don't check for this issue." I'm tempted to choose the latter; but once in a while, Word spots an instance where the active voice really would be better.

Sentence Adverbs

Word's grammar checker often flags sentence adverbs, saying "Words expressing uncertainty lessen your impact." This is irritating for 2 reasons:

- A sentence adverb doesn't always express uncertainty.
- Sometimes, the purpose of the sentence is to express uncertainty.

As I explained in [Editorialize with Sentence Adverbs](#),⁵ a sentence adverb is a disjunct: it doesn't modify a particular word in the sentence. Rather, the sentence adverb concisely expresses the speaker or writer's opinion about whether something is true or likely or how they feel about something. Thus, it is a sneaky way to editorialize. Both of the following examples are expressions of opinion; however, the second sentence (which uses a sentence adverb) is less obviously an opinion:

- 😊 **I think it is probable that** the infection is due to *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.
- 😊 The infection is **probably** due to *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.

Sentence adverbs can also be used to express how you feel about a possibility or a fact:

- 😊 **Hopefully**, this antibiotic will work.
- 😊 **Fortunately**, the bacteria are sensitive to penicillin.

A sentence adverb can also be used to acknowledge what other people might think. For example, the word

actually can be used to point out that the information is contrary to what the reader might expect.

Word's grammar checker flags *literally*—again saying "Words expressing uncertainty lessen your impact." Yet *literally* does not express uncertainty. It came from a Latin root meaning "according to the letter." *Literally* can be used to point out that you are using the original or real meaning of a word. Of course, some people use *literally* to emphasize a metaphor, which means that they are using the word *literally* unliterally (eg, she was literally over the moon when she heard this). Sometimes, people use the word *literally* to mean simply or just (eg, then you literally cut the sausage in half). So, you need to think about how you use this word.

Word's grammar checker flagged *after all* as an expression of uncertainty. Yet *after all* does not express uncertainty. Quite the contrary—English speakers put *after all* in the predicate to serve as a sentence adverb meaning "despite early problems or doubts."

Conjunctive Adverbs

English speakers also put *after all* in front of a clause to introduce evidence to support what they have just said. Thus, *after all* can serve as a conjunctive adverbial phrase. Conjunctive adverbial elements help you achieve coherence in your writing. (To cohere means to stick together as a unit.) Conjunctive adverbial elements tell your reader how your ideas are interconnected.

In [Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch...](#),⁶ I provided a list of common conjunctive adverbs and adverbial phrases, along with their meanings. Several readers have told me how much they appreciated this list. I suggest that you build your own list. Whenever Word flags a conjunctive adverb or adverbial phrase, look it up, think about its meaning, and add it to your own list.

Contractions

Some grammar checkers flag all contractions (eg, *don't* for *do not*). I actually prefer to use the contractions that involve the word *not* (eg, *don't*, *couldn't*, *shouldn't*, *wouldn't*). Even someone with minimal English proficiency knows what these contractions mean. Yet even native English speakers can skip over the word *not*, thus misreading the sentence. A negation that is built into the verb by the contraction is nearly impossible to overlook. Nevertheless, I avoid most other contractions (eg, *I've*, *would've*, *I'd*) because they don't improve clarity. Fortunately, Word ignores the *not* contractions. Thus, I decline Word's offer to ignore contractions.

HOW WORD CAN HELP YOU SPOT WHAT ITS GRAMMAR CHECKER MISSES

Word's grammar checker is surprisingly good at parsing

sentences and at looking words up in lists. Thus, it can usually identify the subject and the finite verb of a clause and check whether they agree in number. Likewise, it is good at flagging words that are commonly misused. However, Word has no way of knowing what you meant to say, whether you said what you meant, or whether a reader can figure out what you meant. In particular, Word cannot spot unclear pronoun referents (see *Who Are We? When Is Now? Where Is Here?*⁷) and misplaced or dangling participial phrases (see *Watch Out for -ing!*⁸).

To catch what the spell checkers and grammar checkers miss, I use some of Word's other features. In particular, I wrote 2 useful macros that I added to my Quick Access toolbar. One highlights all numerals and words that represent numbers (eg, *two* and *million*) in green. I can then remove the highlighting from each number after I check it for accuracy and style (eg, using 2 vs *two*). The other highlights all personal pronouns (eg, *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *we*, *they*), relative pronouns (eg, *that*, *which*), and possessive adjectives (eg, *my*, *our*), as well as the word endings of participles (eg, *-ing* and *-ed*) in turquoise. Then, I check to see whether the pronouns have clear referents and whether the participles and participial phrases are misplaced or dangling.

You can write your own version of these macros by clicking on View, Macros, Record Macro, and then searching for characters or character strings, replacing them with highlighting applied, and selecting replace all. To add a macro to the Quick Access toolbar, click on the dropdown arrow at the right-hand edge of the toolbar and select More Commands, Macros. After you have added a macro to the Quick Access toolbar, click on Modify to adjust its display name and give it a special icon.

Word does not know what you meant to say. Its spell checker will ignore most instances where you used the wrong word—as long as the word you wrote is in its dictionary. Likewise, its grammar checker will ignore most

instances where you used the wrong word or said something that you did not mean—as long as the sentence is grammatical. To spot those problems, I use Word's Read Aloud feature, which I also added to my Quick Access toolbar. As you listen, the wrong word (eg, *pubic* when you meant *public*) may just grate on your ear.

CONCLUSION

Word's grammar checking feature is often irritating, but its occasional good catch is invaluable. The same goes for other grammar checkers that I have used. To make proper use of them, you need to know enough about grammar to evaluate their advice. Meanwhile, Word has some other features that can help you spot problems that no grammar checker can spot.

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