The Style-Checker as Tonic, Not Tranquilizer

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D.N. Dobrin argues that style-checkers, like Valium, distract writers from "thoughts [that] make sense or are worth saying" (30). I argue that checkers quicken writers precisely when they already have an idea worth saying, worth saying well.

When you have annotated a hundred student papers and pick up a journal like CCC to recharge your professional battery, which version would you prefer?

Version 1
Finally, a cognitive process model of the sort presented here is both a theory and a distillation of data. It represents in our case the range of processes observed in detailed data on fourteen writers, whose behavior, we should add, invalidated a number of other "reasonable" models we constructed along the way. Because such a model is data-based rather than speculative, it reflects behavior of individual writers rather than of the world as a whole. However, this means that it can offer us a concrete working hypothesis which can be tested against new evidence.

Version 2
We observed fourteen writers and theorized about their cognitive processes. Their behavior invalidated several "reasonable" models we constructed along the way. We derived our final model from data, not from our speculation. Our model reflects how these fourteen write, not how others do. Now we can test a concrete hypothesis against new evidence.

GRAMMATIK, a computer program, helped me revise the original, written by Linda Flower, John R. Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Shriver, and James Stratman (21). GRAMMATIK checked three forms of the verb to be. As Joseph M. Williams counsels, I replaced to be with strong verbs; and I compressed.

If you prefer the original, stop now. I have nothing more to say to you.

I contend that those who prefer the original value jargon more than clarity. I acknowledge that the original "sounds" more academic. These overtones help to explain why academic functions as a pejorative in the lexicon of many intelligent citizens.

The clearest prose often requires prodigious amounts of time. After GRAMMATIK focused my strategies, I spent twenty minutes on this one paragraph. At that rate, I would require 100 minutes per printed page.
I would need sixty-one hours and forty minutes to revise their entire thirty-seven-page article. I think their research deserves that much extra effort.

I did not expect the computer to think for me. GRAMMATIK flagged to be only because I told it to. The 987 items in its master list do not include forms of to be; my own drafting file does. My file also flags nominalizations, which I negotiate more cautiously. Nominalizations often contain action which I can put back into verbs.

GRAMMATIK allows writers to harness it for their own strategies. In files for special occasions, users specify what and how GRAMMATIK should annotate. GRAMMATIK can both describe and prescribe. For example, another of my files prompts GRAMMATIK to identify a few problems specific to my Chinese students of English; users can expand it. I have created still other files: one to monitor emphatic forms to gauge possible stridency; two more to monitor first- and second-person pronouns; another to count conjunctives, subordinators, and transitional.

I would never load all these files at one time. I use my drafting file mainly for a preliminary draft. I use the modified master file in the final stages, usually after I have checked spelling. Some files best analyze completed texts, not drafts.

Ron Bauer observes in his manual for GRAMMATIK that "if GRAMMATIK II has a flaw, it's versatility." Ironically, the versatility that I most respect cost GRAMMATIK points when PC Magazine reviewed it:

It is loaded with options that make your document analysis reflect the writing you do. Unfortunately, many users are not in a position to handle the responsibility this imposes—partly because entering phrases is so difficult and partly because they buy a program to follow its rules, not write their own. (Raskin 192)

Some teachers buy new software also to "follow its rules, not write their own." Some prefer a pacifier to a prod. Many have no precise goals for their syntax, and some who do know the kind of syntax they want still refuse to learn all but the simplest computer terminology required to make a program serve them.

A colleague once complained that she finds GRAMMATIK "too mechanical," yet she admitted she does not know how to edit out those features that annoy her or how to add others. She could learn these skills quickly enough from GRAMMATIK's manual but has chosen not to. She has learned neither to use the windows of her word processor nor how to add her students' names to her spelling checker. The few hours it took me to explore GRAMMATIK'S options have paid off plentifully. GRAMMATIK has helped me with most of my essays published during the past four years.

I control GRAMMATIK; it does not control me. Before the second version supplied one, I wrote my own program to prepare my own dictionaries for GRAMMATIK. Because I do not write to avoid potholes, I welcome GRAMMATIK as a way to negotiate potholes purposefully after my ideas have momentum.
I do not ask GRAMMATIK to advise me every time I use principle or principal, but I do need it to prompt me for discrete and discreet. A reviewer found that I misspelled one of these in a book, and I shall not burn again for the same offense. I also ask GRAMMATIK to flag -ize words as well as my pet Latin—for example, e.g., viz., et al. I do not let it compare my prose to that of Hemingway, "The Gettysburg Address," or an insurance policy, although GRAMMATIK will do so. I leave glib gimmicks to readers of PC Magazine, to whom Raskin appeals.

I delete few of these functions, however. Occasionally, GRAMMATIK shocks me with evidence that I said something I thought I never say. Although I rarely wash out my mouth with soap, I carefully launder my manuscript.

All writers need mechanical help; that's why they buy a faster printer, a more versatile word processor, a larger thesaurus or spelling checker, a ram disk for more speed. I welcome help with the mechanical matters. Several phrases make us wordy; certain phrases mark us as pretentious. At times, I even ask GRAMMATIK to scold me with advice I deplore, as when it tells me I've begun a sentence with a coordinate conjunction or I've split an infinitive. Sometimes I ignore the prompt; sometimes I heed it, especially when I know an editor holds those prejudices, and I don't want to miss the publication's readers.

Stephen Reid and Gilbert Findlay warn against style-checkers:

In order to meet the second condition, that the analysis should lead to direct improvements in a revision, even the measurements which do correlate with essay quality need to be used with some caution. Research which studies the relationship of revised essays to holistic scores should provide more accurate guidance in this area, but our initial findings suggest some starting points. Reducing the percentage of abstract words and spelling errors can be accomplished directly and with measurable effect on essay quality; however, students should not expect that direct changes in word length, sentence length, or readability will improve an essay. The correlation of average word length to quality, for instance, cannot be directly addressed in revision. Substitution of lexical units for the mere sake of length would change the data and practice in writing which increase active vocabulary; a student could meaningfully raise his or her average word length from the low mean (4.3) to the high limit of 5.0. The fact that these measurements can be improved only indirectly suggests the overall importance of scribal fluency. Since sentence length, word length, and readability are all measurements of scribal fluency, the results of this study seem to suggest that more classroom time should be spent on improving scribal behavior than on practicing those discrete grammatical and stylistic elements which do not correlate significantly with essay quality. (22-23)

Abandon style; it does not earn good grades. How's that for nurture?

Reid and Findlay retreat as they prescribe. I used my drafting file to revise their prose:

A student who expects to improve prose must apply our analysis cautiously. Even when our counts correlate with good grades, further research needs to define precisely how the correlation occurs. For example, we found that
grades go up when students spell correctly and use few abstract words; but one cannot exchange a word for another as mechanically as one can alter spelling. Perhaps students should read more if they expect to use words effectively. Then possibly they can raise average word length from the low mean (4.3) to the high limit of 5.0. Sentence length, word length, and readability measure scribal fluency. Classes need to improve these rather than practice with those discrete grammatical and stylistic elements which do not correlate significantly with grades.

Stripped of academese, Reid and Findlay sound silly. They conclude only that students should read more, and only to win higher grades. For their own prose style, Reid and Findlay either did not consult, did not understand, or did not agree with their own style-checker: Writer's Workbench.

Recently, I sent one of my own programs to several who have published about computers and composition. Some reported to me that I had sent them a bugged copy. When the program requested a carriage return, it did so with the symbol "<", as do dozens of computer programs and manuals. These respondents, however, entered the "less-than" and "greater-than" keys, and the program bombed. I improved the program when I expunged this jargon, but I also realized new vulnerabilities for those who depend on software chosen by persons who demand absolute simplicity.

The computer is a Rolls Royce for which much software provides only a hand crank. I, too, welcome easier starts, but I prefer to crank by hand rather than to use the Rolls for its ash trays. I also suspect that only when writers and teachers learn to program will we get truly sophisticated software for writers.

My dean at the University of Wisconsin once asked me, "Oh, word processing—you can teach that in about three hours, can't you?" Yes, with the same rewards as when you spend your first three hours with Shakespeare at a production of Hamlet. It profits little to know how to move a block of text if you have no good strategy for the move.

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Works Cited


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