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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of how grammar checkers may help or hinder students by analyzing the performance of the Microsoft Word 97's Grammar Checker at flagging and explaining errors frequently made by college students. Thousands of sentences were fed into the program. Results indicate that it caught some of the errors reliably (e.g. subject-verb agreement errors) and others at least occasionally (e.g. comma and capitalization errors). However, the program does not catch most pronoun or modifier errors, and it occasionally labels a correct sentence as an error. An indication is provided regarding the writing style settings needed to catch each type of error. Findings suggest that some students can improve their documents using Grammar Checker if their writing is relatively free of errors, and if they are willing to consult a grammar handbook occasionally. Recommendations to teachers promoting Grammar Checker include: (1) encouraging students to proofread; (2) ensuring that students have a basic understanding of sentence structure and grammar terminology; (3) explaining limitations of Grammar Checker; (4) suggesting that students select "custom" as the writing style; (5) helping students select grammar and style settings appropriate for their level of expertise; (6) encouraging students to run Grammar Checker with Help turned on; and (7) suggesting that students consult a grammar text when they do not understand information in the Help box. Contains 31 figures presenting Help boxes generated by the software program. (EF)

# An Evaluation of Microsoft Word 97's Grammar Checker.

by Caroline Haist

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

# AN EVALUATION OF MICROSOFT WORD 97'S GRAMMAR CHECKER

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## INTRODUCTION

Will grammar checkers help or hinder students? That's a question an increasing number of writing teachers are asking.

The publishers of the early grammar and style software made extravagant claims about their products' performance, claims that were, in my experience, unfounded. These days, grammar checkers, although still far from perfect, are much better and easier to use as well. In fact, it's hard to ignore them. Students using recent versions of Microsoft Word, the most common word processor now in use, may already be reacting to the green wavy lines that underline potential errors in grammar and problems in style, as well as to the red ones that underline errors in spelling. And some teachers and writers of textbooks are suggesting that they should.

As a college writing teacher, I wanted information on the performance of the new grammar checkers before making a similar recommendation to my students. I was not able to find any, however. References for word processors, such as *Word for Windows 6 for Dummies* by Dan Gookin, explain how to use grammar checkers but not how they perform. Dan's only comment on performance is not even accurate. "WinWord's grammar checker is a wonderful tool, and I hate it," writes Dan. He says that it does "a great job distinguishing between *I* and *me*, *neither* and *nor*, and other similar stuff" (p. 86). In fact, when put to the test, Word 6's Grammar Checker seldom distinguished between *I* and *me*. I'm not sure what problem Dan could have with *neither* and *nor*. What Dan hates about Grammar Checker has nothing to do with its performance or with grammar, for that matter: "It keeps telling me how far I have strayed from the boring style that the folks who gave the checker life think is the 'one true path'" (p. 86). Doug Lowe, author of *More Word 97 for Windows for Dummies*, is more positive in his observations, which, of course, are about Word 97's somewhat improved Grammar Checker: "In fact, Word 97 is...the first word processor available that comes with a grammar checker worth using" (p. 36). However, he includes no details on its performance.

It seemed that I'd have to discover on my own how reliably Word 97's Grammar Checker, the grammar checker my students use, detects the errors Microsoft claims it can detect. Therefore, I spent part of my sabbatical this last school year feeding it many of the thousands of sentences in the electronic grammar test bank I developed for my college.

I found that Word 97's Grammar Checker catches some errors reliably (e.g. subject-verb agreement errors) and others at least occasionally (e.g. comma and capitalization

errors). However, it does not catch most pronoun or modifier errors, although they are listed in the documentation. Occasionally, it labels a correct sentence as an error. Although most of the explanations Grammar Checker provides in the Help boxes are helpful, some are confusing and, in at least a couple of cases, just plain wrong (e.g. explanation of pronoun case required after *to be*).

The writing style selected in the Spelling and Grammar Options box (casual, standard, formal, technical, or custom) affects the number and types of errors caught. Selecting the casual writing style, for example, causes Grammar Checker to turn on only five of the 21 settings. These five settings do not include those required to detect fragments, run-ons, and errors in possessives and plurals. However, they do include Misused Words and Phrases, settings that catch less obvious errors, such as *who* used instead of *whom* and a present tense used in the same sentence as a past. They also include some supposed stylistic problems most teachers are not concerned about (see section on style settings).

In order to help teachers customize Grammar Checker for their students, I have indicated what settings are required to find the errors mentioned in each section at the end of that section. I determined which setting was responsible for catching a specific error by pressing the Options button in the window that appears when the error is spotted. In the Options window, I pressed the Settings button in the bottom right corner. In the next window, the setting responsible for spotting the error is highlighted.

To evaluate the advice Grammar Checker offers users, I consulted a representative number of the grammar texts used in many colleges and listed at the end of this paper. For information on current usage, I chose the latest edition of *Fowler's* and the currently very popular *Woe Is I* because they seem to represent two extremes in types of usage references: the traditional and the trendy.

I've not attempted to include every type of grammatical error and usage problem Grammar Checker claims to spot. For a complete list, please consult the documentation that Word 97 provides through its Help menu. There is a copy of this list in the appendix.

What follows is an analysis of Grammar Checker's performance at flagging and explaining errors anglophone college students frequently make. Of the many Help boxes that pop up as Grammar Checker is run, I've included those that offer explanations and/or examples that I feel require comment, as well as the settings responsible for spotting these errors.

## FRAGMENTS

Grammar Checker catches about 60 per cent of the type of fragments students typically write. Help offers sound suggestions for correcting fragments. However, under the heading Fragment, it gives examples of only two types: word groups missing verbs and/or subjects (Figure 1, first example, and Figure 2, both examples) and a subordinate adverb clause standing alone (Figure 1, first example). Grammar Checker flags relative clauses standing alone under the heading Fragment or Question or less commonly as Possible Question. It also flags participles used as main verbs but labels them as subject-verb agreement errors (see Figure 3, second example). A noun plus relative clause (e.g. *John, who is my best friend*), a type of fragment not shown in any of the examples, is also caught but flagged as a subject-verb agreement error (see Figure 3).

As well as missing almost half of fragments and labeling some as subject-verb agreement errors, Grammar Checker occasionally suggests that correct sentences are fragments. Here are two examples. In these

**Fragment**

If the marked words are an incomplete thought, consider developing this thought into a complete sentence by adding a subject or a verb or combining this text with another sentence.

- Instead of: Since we were late anyway.
- Consider: Since we were late anyway, I ordered another cup of coffee.
  
- Instead of: Ordered a hot pastrami sandwich.
- Consider: Catherine ordered a hot pastrami sandwich.

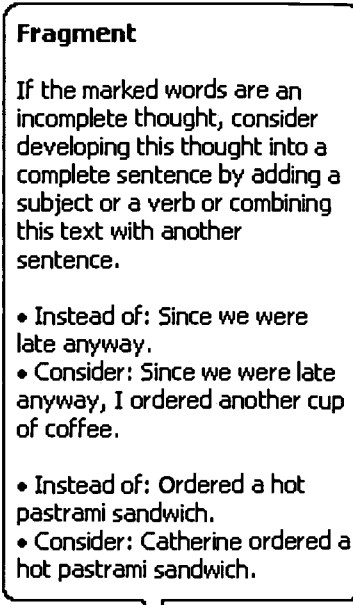


Figure 1

**Fragment**

If the marked words are an incomplete thought, consider developing this thought into a complete sentence by adding a subject or a verb or combining this text with another sentence.

- Instead of: Meteors the entire night.
- Consider: We watched meteors the entire night.
  
- Instead of: A rose by any other name.
- Consider: A rose by any other name still smells sweet.

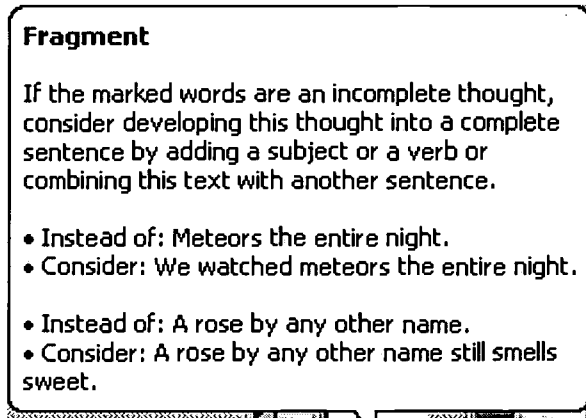


Figure 2

**Subject-Verb Agreement**

The verb of a sentence must agree with the subject in number and in person.

- Instead of: Joe drunk a pint of cold milk.
- Consider: Joe had drunk a pint of cold milk.
- Or consider: Joe drank a pint of cold milk.
  
- Instead of: I going to the store.
- Consider: I am going to the store.
- Or consider: I go to the store.

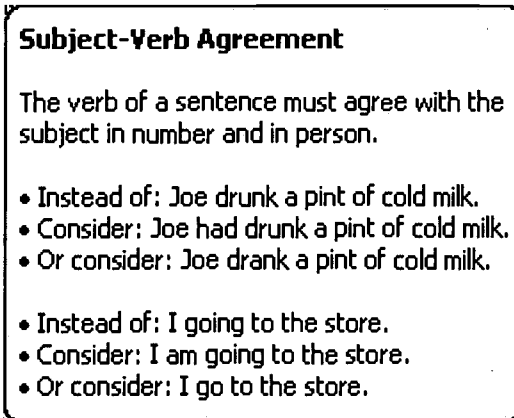


Figure 3

examples and in those that follow, the words under which Grammar Checker places its wavy green lines are in bold. Errors not caught by Grammar Checker are underlined.

- These inspections, which I conducted with my partners, George Black and Trevor Cline, were mainly visual.
- Everyone who starts diet and exercise programs does not necessarily stick with them.

Although Grammar Checker does not label complete sentences as fragments very often, students need to know what makes a sentence complete to avoid changing correct sentences.

In the documentation, sentence fragments are listed under Sentence Structure. However, few are caught with only this setting on. As I mentioned above, the setting Subject-Verb Agreement (see Figure 3), as well the Phrases and Punctuation settings, also catches fragments.

### RUN-ONS

Grammar Checker does not perform as well when it comes to catching run-ons. It flags only about 40 per cent of these errors. There are three different Help boxes that seem to pop up at random when run-ons are spotted. The word *run-on* is not used, however, either in the description of the error or in the explanation, although it appears in the

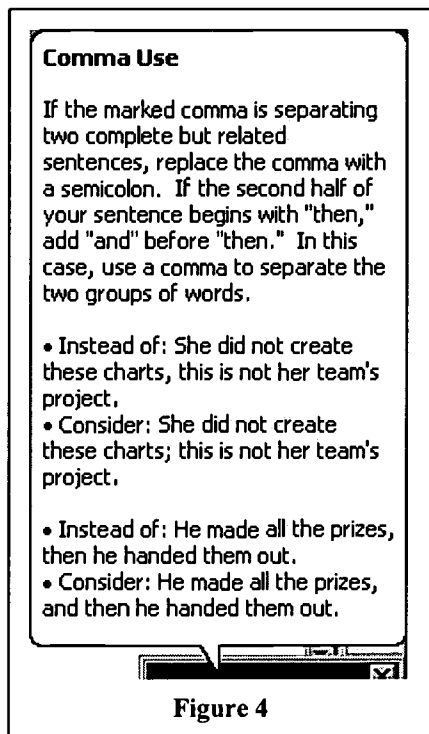


Figure 4

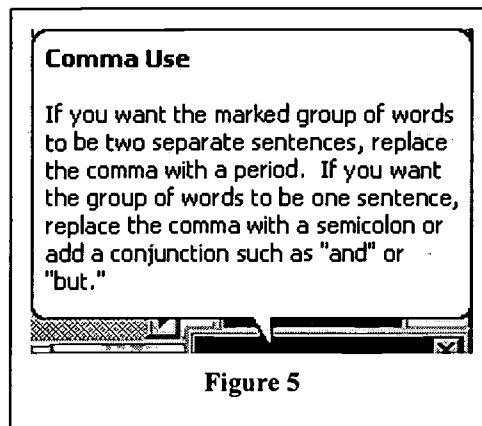


Figure 5

documentation (see the appendix).

Under the heading Comma Use, Help explains that two complete sentences need to be separated by a semicolon, not a comma (Figure 4).

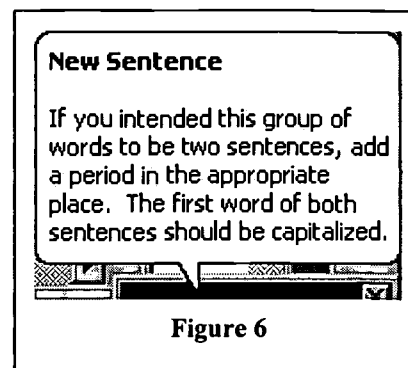
Help may also suggest creating two sentences (Figures 5

and 6) or adding *and* or *but* (Figures 4 and 5).

Help suggests a semicolon for "related" sentences; a period, for "separate" ones. In fact, it opts for a semicolon for 70 per cent of the run-ons Grammar Checker flags. Thus students may end up using semicolons even in documents requiring an informal tone.

Occasionally correct sentences are labeled as potential errors. For both of the following sentences, Help provides the explanation shown in Figure 6.

- My husband will soon be without a wife if I hear **again this year his usual excuse for not buying me an anniversary present.**
- **Realizing that hard work did indeed influence my success,** I changed my attitude.



Occasionally, rather than passing over a run-on entirely, Grammar Checker flags the problem but offers the wrong advice. In the following sentence, it flags the comma as an error but Help's Comma Use box suggests that the comma be removed rather than replaced with a semicolon or a period.

- This fantasy continues, I feel the warmth in the air as my hair blows in the wind.

Although most of the sentences that Grammar Checker flags as run-ons are errors, students should know what a run-on is so that they do not change correct sentences.

Although the term *run-ons* is listed in the documentation under the Sentence Structure setting, Grammar Checker catches very few of these errors with only this setting on. With the Punctuation setting also on, its performance is much better.

## SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS

As mentioned previously, Word 97's Grammar Checker is surprisingly good at spotting and correcting subject-verb agreement errors. Earlier checkers that claimed to catch these errors did so only if the subject was directly in front of the verb. *The boys runs fast* probably would have been flagged but not *The boys on my team runs fast*.

The test I gave Grammar Checker did not contain sentences as simple as either of these. Instead, I fed it close to 200 of the types of sentences found in grammar exercise books written for secretarial students. Its score was a respectable 72 per cent. Given the simplicity of the examples in the two boxes Help provides to explain this error (see Figures 3 and 7), this performance is surprising. Here are three examples of errors caught:

- If I say nothing, either my mother or my **sister are** certain to question me.
- My **brother, as well as my aunts, have** organized a family picnic.
- Among the noisiest of the children **are my young cousin.**



Help provides a choice of two corrections for each of these three sentences (“sisters are” or “sister is,” “brother has” or “brothers have,” and “is my young cousin” or “are my young cousin”) but no explanations. The only clues are provided by the highlighted words.

Grammar Checker occasionally flags a correct sentence as a potential subject-verb agreement error, but it does so very seldom. When it does, its suggestions don't make any sense, so students are not likely to change their correct sentences. Here are two examples:

- Stan Rogers is the **musician who was killed in that plane** crash. (Suggestion: “musician who was killed in that planes” or “musicians who was killed in that plane”)
- How far away **are the nearest airport and train station**? (Suggestion: “is the nearest airport and train station” or “are the nearest airport and train stations”)

Sometimes Grammar Checker incorrectly flags sentences with subject-verb agreement errors as other types of errors. In both of the following sentences, it detects a comma error, not a subject-verb agreement error. Grammar Checker incorrectly suggests removing the commas following the highlighted words.

- My breakfast habits, always so **comforting**, has been compromised irreversibly.
- These **figures**, made available at the meeting, shows that sales have broken all previous records despite the sluggish economy.

In spite of these occasional glitches, Grammar Checker is reasonably reliable at finding subject-verb agreement errors. However, students may need to keep a grammar text handy to check rules with which they are not familiar, especially since Help offers no explanation more complex than the fact that subjects and verbs must agree (see Figure 7).

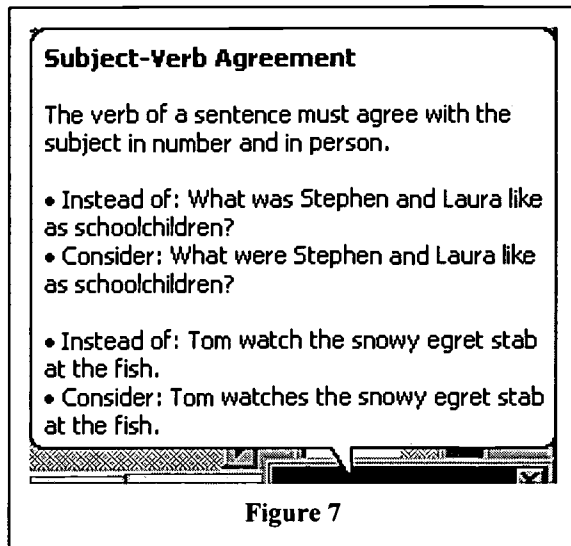


Figure 7

Logically, the Subject-Verb Agreement setting needs to be on in order for Grammar Checker to find subject-verb agreement errors. It is one of the few settings always on no matter which writing style users select.



## OTHER PROBLEMS WITH VERBS

As well as flagging verbs that don't agree with their subjects, Grammar Checker spots verbs in the indicative mood that should be in the subjunctive, incorrect forms of irregular verbs, and shifts in verb tense.

### SUBJUNCTIVES

The following two sentences represent the most common situations requiring the subjunctive, not the indicative, mood. Their verbs are flagged, and the correct subjunctive forms are provided: "were" and "go."

- I wish I **was** a bird.
- I suggest that he **goes** home.

The explanation in the Verb Use Help box for this error does not mention the word *subjunctive*, however. Here is the reason provided: "...use the specific form that reflects the mood of uncertainty." Nor is there an explanation of how subjunctives are formed.

### INCORRECT FORMS OF IRREGULAR VERBS

About 50 per cent of errors in the formation of the simple past and the past participles of irregular verbs are caught, some, of course, by Spelling Checker (e.g. *catched*, *freezed*, and *hided*).

Most errors made by anglophone writers occur when the past participle is used instead of the simple past (the first two sentences below) and vice versa (the last two). The former error is spotted more reliably than the latter, as illustrated in the sentences below. Verbs in the first, second, and third sentences are flagged; the error in the fourth sentence is not.

1. **We done** that yesterday.
2. **They seen** a bear in the driveway.
3. Joan has **swam** across that river several times this month.
4. Having broke the window, we ran away.

Corrections are suggested, but the explanation provided in the Verb Use Help box for this type of error is a general one: "Your sentence may contain an incorrectly formed verb tense."

## SHIFTS IN VERB TENSES

Grammar Checker flags verbs with different tenses if they have the same subject. Here is an example:

- **Karen ran home and finds that she has forgotten to turn the water off.**

The explanation provided in the Verb Use Help box for this type of shift is a specific one and the examples are helpful. Unfortunately, the whole sentence is underlined and no corrections are suggested.

Another Verb Use Help box is provided for a shift in tenses when the subjects are not the same. The examples in this Help box both involve indirect speech, in which consistency in tenses is, of course, required. The explanation offered, however, is too general: "Generally, if the first verb of your sentence is in the past tense, all subsequent verbs must be in the past tense." This rule implies that the present tense of the second verb in the following sentence is wrong:

- Last summer, Leanne fell into the water, and now she is afraid to go near the lake.

Grammar Checker, fortunately does not flag *is* as an error.

The verb problems described in this section are flagged if the Phrases setting is on.

## PRONOUN PROBLEMS

The word *pronouns* appears a number of times in the list of errors Grammar Checker catches (see the information listed under the headings Misused Words, Relative Clauses, Subject-Verb Agreement, and Style: Unclear Phrasing in the appendix). However, Grammar Checker doesn't provide much help with common problems such as errors in pronoun-antecedent agreement, reference, shifts, or case. Some pronoun-antecedent agreement and case errors are caught - but only in specific situations and then not all that reliably.

### PRONOUN-ANTECEDENT AGREEMENT

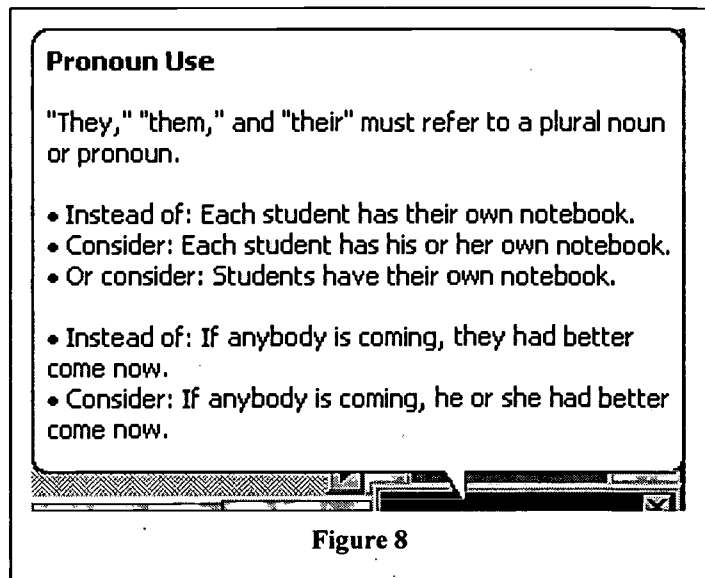
Unfortunately, the most common type of pronoun-antecedent agreement error, like the one in the following sentence, is not caught:

- When a student enrolls in Physics 405, they must be prepared to work hard.

About half of pronoun-antecedent agreement errors are flagged, however, when the pronoun's antecedent is an indefinite pronoun. As shown in Figure 8, *each* and *anyone* are sometimes flagged when a plural pronoun is used to refer back to them. Although

not mentioned in Figure 8, *everyone*, *everybody*, *someone*, *somebody*, *no one*, *nobody* are also occasionally spotted; however, *either* and *neither* are not.

Grammar Checker provides corrections for the errors it flags, suggesting that *their*, *they*, or *them* be changed to the corresponding singular forms. When appropriate, it offers two possible corrections, including the option of changing the indefinite pronoun to a plural noun, as in the first example in Figure 8.



## PRONOUN CASE

To most grammar teachers, the use of *who* instead of *whom* and *whoever* instead of *whomever* is of less concern than the annoying *me and Sam* (as subject). The advice provided by *Woe Is I* is that "you can use *who* instead of *whom* in conversation or in informal writing" (p. 9). The same text devotes one page to an explanation of the difference between *I* and *me* (p. 11). Yet Grammar Checker flags the former error rather consistently (about 70 per cent of the time) and ignores the latter.

### Personal Pronouns

Grammar Checker handles rather well pronoun case errors after comparisons and makes an attempt, although not a very good one, at handling such errors after the verb *to be*. However, it is not programmed to catch objective personal pronouns used as subjects, as mentioned above, or subjective pronouns used as objects.

The result is that the most common types of pronoun case errors students make, illustrated in the following three sentences, are not flagged:

- Him and Mary got lost.
- We saw Michael and she at the movies.
- John sat between Mary and I.

Word 97 can pick out subjects of sentences with reasonable accuracy (see section on subject-verb agreement) and distinguishes between *who/whom* and *whoever/whomever* (see section on the case of interrogative pronouns). Therefore, it is surprising and disappointing that it has no routine to flag *me*, *us*, *him*, *her*, and *them* when used as subjects or *I*, *we*, *he*, *she*, and *they* when used as objects. Actually, the sentence *Me*

and Sam went to the movies is flagged, but only as an error in word order. The suggested correction is *Sam and me*.

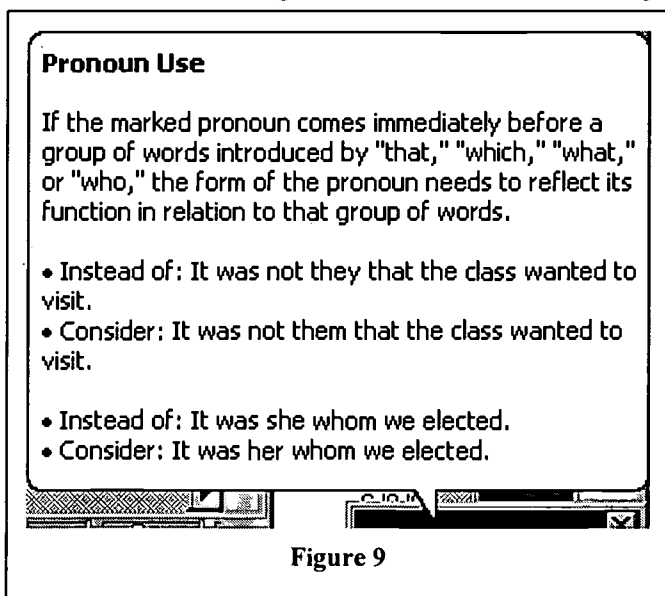
Pronoun case errors such as those mentioned above can generate false error messages. The following sentence is labeled as a fragment, although no such message is generated if the incorrect pronoun *her* is changed to *she*.

- **Laura and her disagreed about which route to follow.**

Grammar Checker does address two other less common pronoun case problems: what case to use after the verb *to be* and in comparisons. It deals very badly with the first problem but rather well with the second.

The question of what pronoun should follow the verb *to be* is one that does not concern most grammar teachers. Even the writers of most modern grammar texts accept *It is me*, especially in speech and informal writing. According to *Woe Is I*, "*It is I* is just about extinct" (p. 10). And here Grammar Checker follows this trend, flagging neither *It is me* nor *It is I* (when these constructions are not followed by additional words). However, it does tackle the *It is/was* expression when the personal pronoun is followed by a relative clause (see Figure 9). That's a surprise given the fact that this construction is not a common occurrence, either in speech or in writing. That's also a problem because the explanation given in Figure 9 is grammatical nonsense, and the application of this nonsense results in correct sentences being flagged as errors.

In Figure 9, the suggestion is that we ignore the function of the personal pronouns (*they/them* and *she/her*) in their own clauses and determine instead the function of the relative pronouns (*that* and *whom*) that refer to them. In the first example, *that* acts as the object of *to visit*. Presumably, this is the reason *them*, not *they*, is considered correct. Likewise, in the second example, *whom* is the object of *elected*, and thus *she* is considered wrong and *her* is considered right.



**Pronoun Use**

If the marked pronoun comes immediately before a group of words introduced by "that," "which," "what," or "who," the form of the pronoun needs to reflect its function in relation to that group of words.

- Instead of: It was not they that the class wanted to visit.
- Consider: It was not them that the class wanted to visit.
  
- Instead of: It was she whom we elected.
- Consider: It was her whom we elected.

Figure 9

Both the grammatical explanation and the resulting examples are, of course, incorrect. The case of a personal pronoun is always determined by its function in its own clause. In both of the examples in Figure 9, the personal pronouns (*they/them* and *she/her*) are subjective completions and therefore should be in the subjective form.

Unfortunately, it's not just the information and examples in Figure 9 that are wrong. Grammar Checker's programmers have been consistent in applying their "rule," and the result is

that correct sentences are flagged as errors (e.g. the first sentence below) and incorrect sentences are left alone (e.g. the second sentence). Some errors are caught, but for the wrong reason. Whenever the relative pronoun following the personal pronoun is in the subjective case, Grammar Checker, following its incorrect "rule," considers the subjective case correct. The result is that *her* in the third sentence is correctly flagged as an error.

1. It is **he** that we want to hire. (Correct but flagged as an error.)
2. It is **him** whom we should interview next. (Incorrect but flagged only as wordy.)
3. It was **her** who ran for president. (Incorrect and flagged as incorrect.)

Occasionally, an incorrect pronoun that does not directly follow *it is/was* is flagged, but for the wrong reason. In the sentence below, Help correctly suggests changing *me* to *I* and provides the explanation shown in Figure 10:

- How thoughtful it was that Mary and **me** were invited to sing at the wedding.

Presumably, it is the *it was that* construction, which, of course, has nothing to do with the case of *me*, that causes this error to be flagged. When the sentence starts with *Mary and me*, no error message appears.

Grammar Checker sometimes flags correct sentences as incorrect and offers confusing,

misleading, and sometimes wrong explanations, all over a point in grammar not worth this much attention to begin with. Better advice would be to reword such sentences to avoid wordy constructions involving the verb *to be* and personal pronouns or if the emphasis created by such constructions is important, to substitute nouns for the pronouns.

In fact, the *It was \_\_\_\_\_ who/whom/that* construction is often flagged as wordy. In the following sentence, *she* is flagged, first incorrectly as a pronoun use error with an incorrect suggestion and then as a wordiness problem with a correct suggestion.

- It was **she** whom we elected. (Pronoun Use: Suggestion: "It was her whom we elected"; Wordiness: Suggestion: " We elected her.")

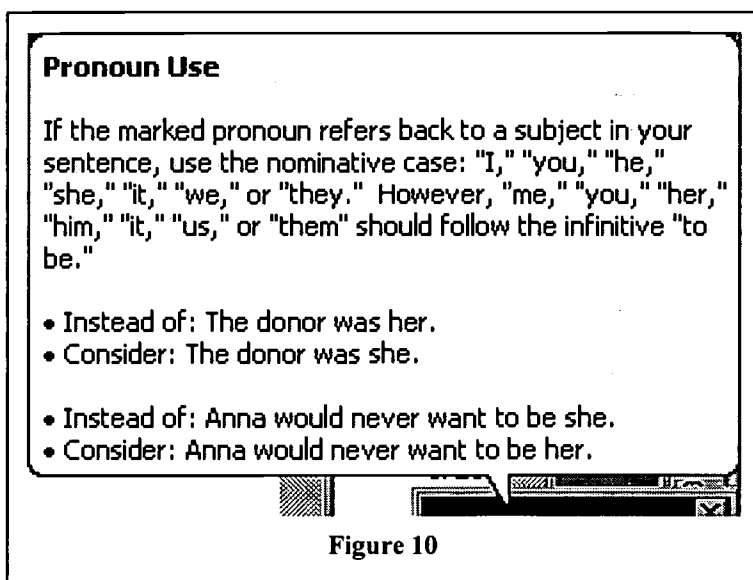


Figure 10

Grammar Checker makes another stab at dealing with personal pronouns following *to be*. In this instance, the explanation is, strictly speaking, correct, although the second part of it is confusingly restrictive and should be handled as a separate situation (see Figure 10). This separate explanation could then include the fact that objective pronouns should both precede and follow all infinitives because subjects, subjective completions (covered in Figure 10), and, obviously, objects of infinitives take the objective case. Of course, it should be no surprise that Grammar Checker does not flag subjective pronouns used instead of the objective ones before and after infinitives:

- I want she to remind we of the meeting tomorrow.

The pronoun case errors Grammar Checker deals with most effectively are those in comparisons using *than* or *as*. Most incorrect pronouns are caught, and the explanation is helpful (see Figure 11). Adding the implied verb, as Help suggests, does increase clarity, especially in sentences that are open to two different interpretations. For example, the following sentences are both correct but have different meanings (enclosed in parentheses). Grammar Checker suggests adding *do* to the first sentence but does not flag the second.

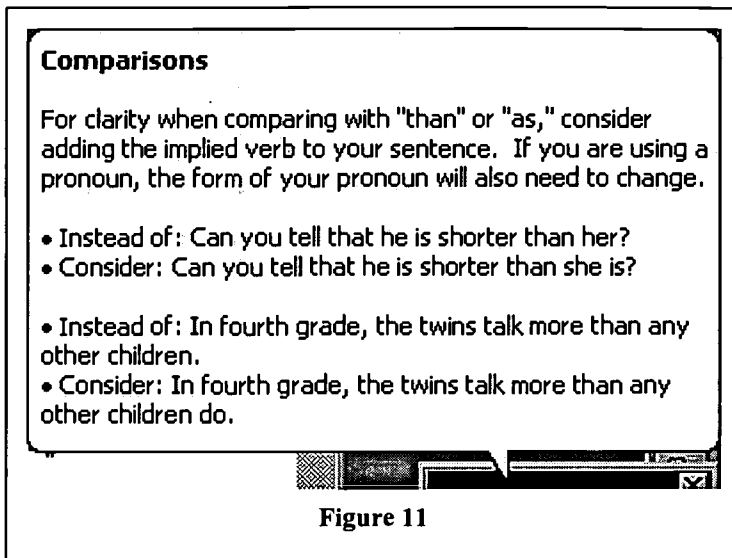


Figure 11

- They respect you more than I. (They respect you more than I respect you.)
- They respect you more than me. (They respect you more than they respect me.)

### Interrogative and Relative Pronouns

As was mentioned above, Grammar Checker does a good job of catching *who* used instead of *whom* and *whoever* used instead of *whomever*. It underlines over 60 per cent of such errors. The explanation offered when such errors are flagged is helpful (see Figure 12), but many students are confused by a sentence like the following and may need to check the more detailed help offered in most grammar texts.

- Give the book to **whomever** wants to read it.



Grammar Checker correctly flags *whomever* as an error, but the explanation offered - that *whomever* should be used after a preposition – is confusing. *Whomever* follows the preposition *to*, after all. However, the case of *whoever* or *whomever* is determined by the words that follow it, not by those that precede it. In its own clause, *whoever/whomever* is the subject of *wants*. Therefore, *whoever* is the correct choice. As for the object of the preposition *to*, it is the entire noun clause *whoever wants to read it*.

**"Who" or "Whom"**

Use "who" or "whoever" as a subject in a sentence. Use "whom" or "whomever" as an object or after a preposition.

- Instead of: Whom reads the magazine?
- Consider: Who reads the magazine?
  
- Instead of: Whoever you pick needs to have a strong voice.
- Consider: Whomever you pick needs to have a strong voice.




Figure 12

## REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS

Grammar Checker catches the most common type of reflexive pronoun error made even by relatively skilled writers: overuse of *myself*. Over 80 per cent of errors involving *myself* are caught, and most of the time the pronoun offered instead (*I* or *me*) is the correct one. The Help box gives a good explanation, which includes the most common type of error: *myself* used in connection with one or more nouns (see Figure 13).

The fact that the personal pronouns ending with *self* and *selves* are also used for emphasis is not mentioned in either the documentation or any Pronoun Use Help box. Nor does the error in the following sentence generate an error message:

- The workers himself cleaned up the mess.

All pronoun problems described above require the Misused Words setting on in order to be flagged.

**Reflexive Pronoun Use**

It is incorrect to use pronouns such as "myself," "yourself," "herself," "ourselves," and "themselves" alone as subjects, as in "Andrew and myself went to town." These pronouns may be used as objects, as in "I hit myself," only when the pronoun refers back to the subject.

- Instead of: They heard herself on the radio.
- Consider: They heard her on the radio.
  
- Instead of: They saw himself in the store.
- Consider: They saw him in the store.

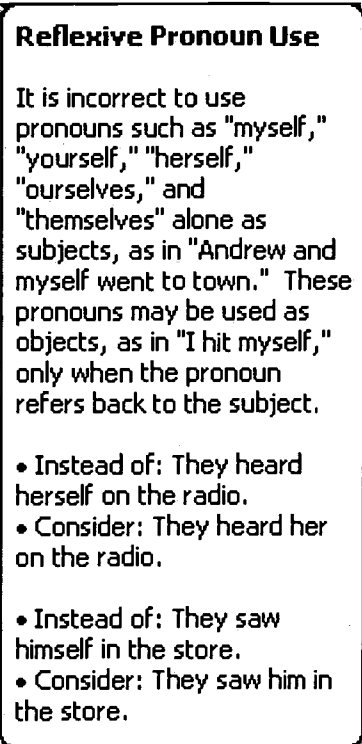


Figure 13

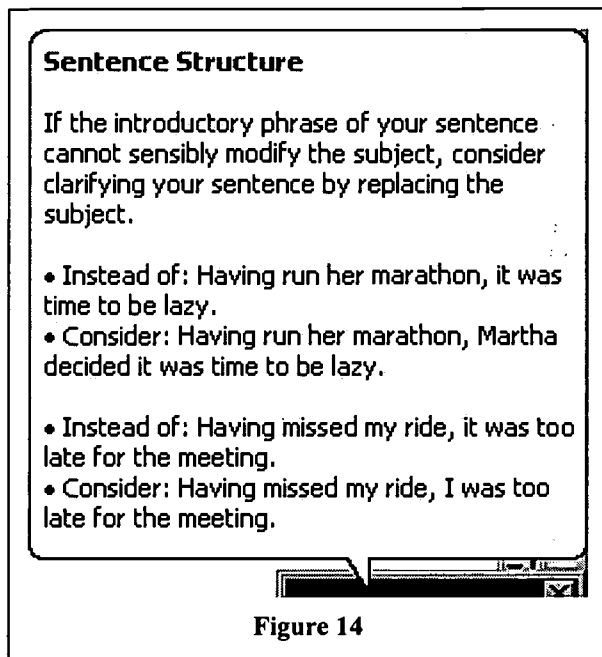
## MODIFIERS

Grammar Checker claims to offer help with a variety of modifier errors. Unfortunately, these don't include many of the types of errors students make. Most dangling and misplaced modifiers, adjectives used instead of adverbs, and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs used instead of the comparative, for example, are not flagged.



## DANGLING AND MISPLACED MODIFIERS

Although Word 97's documentation does not mention dangling modifiers, an occasional one is flagged if the setting Sentence Structure is on. The following sentence causes the error message shown in Figure 14 to be displayed:



- **Having a busy conference schedule**, it will be necessary for us all to eat at the same time.

Unfortunately, only sentences starting with participles and having *it* as their subjects are flagged and only about 50 per cent of the time. When *after* is added to the beginning of the sentence above and to the sentences in the examples in Figure 14, the errors are not spotted. In addition, if the independent clauses in the examples in Figure 14 are changed to *the day was a success* and *the bus was my best option* respectively, “the introductory phrases” still “cannot sensibly modify the subjects,” but no error messages appear.

Sometimes dangling modifiers following a slightly different pattern are flagged as well. The following two sentences also cause the Help box shown in Figure 14 to appear:

- **Being students now**, finding time to study is important.
- **As a poor student**, loans were my major means of support.

On the whole, Grammar Checker spots few types of dangling modifiers and not very reliably at that. It's not much better at spotting misplaced modifiers. Again, only specific types of misplaced modifier are flagged.

One type of misplaced modifier occurs when an adverb is placed between two verbs or verbals, causing the reader to wonder which action is modified. Grammar Checker catches errors like this if the Misused Words setting is on – but only if the confusion is caused by leaving out the word *that*. Adding the missing *that* corrects this error (see Figure 15). Another way is moving the adverb, one that Grammar Checker does not suggest. The first example in Figure 15 can also be clarified or corrected in the following ways with or without adding *that*:

- Today he will announce (that) the bus will be late.
- He will announce (that) the bus will be late today.

Grammar Checker does not catch all errors of this type (fewer than 50 per cent), nor will it catch instances of misplaced adverbs when there is no missing *that* in the sentence.

Grammar Checker provides help with several other types of misplaced modifiers. For example, if students place the adjective *more* in front of a modified noun, Help suggests rewording the sentence to avoid ambiguity. Here is an example from this Help box:

- Instead of: The boardroom needs more comfortable furniture.
- Consider: The boardroom needs more furniture that is comfortable
- Or consider: The boardroom needs furniture that is more comfortable.

#### Missing "That"

If your sentence can be interpreted in more than one way, consider inserting "that" within the marked group of words to clarify the meaning.

- Instead of: He will announce today the bus will be late.
- Consider: He will announce today that the bus will be late.
- Or consider: He will announce that today the bus will be late.
- Instead of: He thought realistically his dog would not pass obedience school.
- Consider: He thought that realistically his dog would not pass obedience school.
- Or consider: He thought realistically that his dog would not pass obedience school.

Figure 15

Although the title of the Help box that explains this error is Sentence Structure and the setting required to spot it is Sentence Structure, the error is described in the documentation under the Style: Unclear Phrases heading (see the appendix).

Grammar Checker also tackles some misplaced modifier errors that do not seriously affect the clarity of the sentence. Split infinitives and split verb phrases fall into this category. *Woe Is I* states that "the caution not to split infinitives has been 'debunked'" and that "there never has been a rule that parts of a verb phrase should not be split" (pp. 182, 185). *Fowler's* agrees (p. 738). The setting that causes these errors to be flagged is Phrases, listed under the grammar, not the style, section.

#### OTHER PROBLEMS WITH ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

Grammar Checker claims to catch adjectives used in place of adverbs if the Misused Words setting is on and offers a good explanation when it spots such errors (see Figure 16). However, when put to the test, it catches them only when the modifiers come right after the verb. The errors in the second and fourth sentences are not flagged:

1. They finished **quick**.
2. They finished their work quick.
3. George spoke **good** during the interview.
4. George handled himself good during the interview.

Another modifier error spotted, according to the documentation, is words "incorrectly used as adverbs." Thus, certain "colloquial" words such as *real*, *way*, *too*, *mighty*, *plenty* when followed by an adjective or adverb are flagged if the setting Style:

Colloquialisms is on. The suggested correction for all of these expressions is *very*. It's usually the part of speech that's at fault (e.g. *real big* instead of *really big*). However, the only explanation provided in the Help box is that these expressions "may be used informally" but not "for a more formal or traditional tone."

Incorrect use of the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs is also mentioned in the documentation (under the heading Misused Words). However, it is incorrectly formed comparatives and superlatives (e.g. *more bright* and *most good*) that are caught, not comparatives used instead of superlatives and vice versa. The errors in the following sentences are not flagged:

- Sam is the better runner on the team.
- George is worst than his brother.

Problems with negatives are another type of modifier error Grammar Checker finds. The dreaded double negative is flagged when the Negation setting is on. Here is one of the examples provided in one of the Negation Use boxes: "I did not do nothing to make the situation worse."

Less serious types of negation errors are flagged and explained in a second Negation Use box (e.g. "The store is not more crowded on Saturday night than it is on Sunday.") The Wordiness: Style setting spots problems like the following: "Anna does not dislike Julie." According to Grammar Checker, this sentence has "too many negatives."

Misused adjectives of various kinds are also flagged and labeled as Number Agreement errors. At least one such pair is commonly misused even by experienced writers: *fewer/less*. Most of the other errors Grammar Checker flags as Number Agreement errors are not likely to be made by anglophone writers except as typos. They include

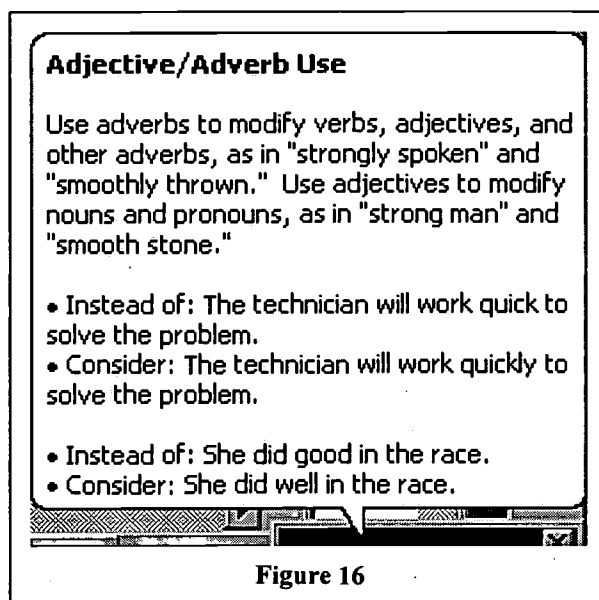


Figure 16

the use of *this*, *that*, and *much* with plural nouns and *these*, *those*, and *many* with singular nouns. The Phrases setting catches these and other Number Agreement errors. The Phrases setting also flags misuse of the articles *a* and *an* and of the adjectives *all* and *entire*.

In addition, with the Style: Colloquialism setting on, Grammar Checker reminds students not to modify adjectives such as *empty*, *final*, *perfect*, *unique*, and *equal*. Overuse of *this* and *these* is also flagged.

As has already been noted, the modifier errors mentioned above require a number of different settings to be on. Sentence Structure, Misused Words, Negation, and Phrases settings, as well as the Style settings Colloquialism and Wordiness, catch a limited number of these errors.

## PARALLELISM

If students attempt to join words or groups of words that do not have the same function with a coordinating conjunction such as *and*, Grammar Checker may flag the resulting error, but only about 25 per cent of the time.

**Sentence Structure**

If you want to give certain parts of your sentence equal emphasis, construct these parts in a similar fashion. Repetition of word patterns or key words will make your sentence more balanced and easier to read.

- Instead of: I do not know the person's name or how to contact her.
- Consider: I do not know the person's name or telephone number.
- Or consider: I do not know how to find her name or how to contact her.

- Instead of: She told the receptionist her name and where she was from.
- Consider: She told the receptionist her name and the name of her company.
- Or consider: She told the receptionist what her name was and where she was from.

Figure 17

The explanation offered if students try to join a question and a statement is clear, as are the examples. Students are told that "two word groups having conflicting purposes, such as a question and a statement" should be rewritten "as separate sentences." However, the explanation provided when students join a noun to a verb phrase or dependent clause may lead them to think that only emphasis is at stake (see Figure 17). Most grammar texts label such constructions as grammatical errors rather than problems in style. In *The Gregg Reference Manual*, parallel structure, which includes examples similar to those in Figure 17, is the first item in the section on sentence structure (p. 247). In *The Canadian Writer's Handbook*, faulty parallelism is found in the section called Common Sentence Errors and Weaknesses (p. 164).

Many parallelism errors occur when students attempt to use correlative conjunctions. Grammar Checker implies that they need change only the order of the conjunctions to correct this type of error (see Figure 18).

However, students often write sentences like the following, where simply moving the conjunctions does not work, as the two corrections in parentheses demonstrate:

- Not only did he speak with authority but also illustrated his talk with personal incidents. (1. He not only spoke with authority but also illustrated his talk with personal incidents. 2. Not only did he speak with authority, but also he illustrated his talk with personal incidents.)

Both the Sentence Structure and Misused Words settings catch parallelism errors.

## POSSESSIVES

The documentation for Grammar Checker states that, with the setting Possessives and Plurals on, "use of possessive in place of a plural, and vice versa", as well as "omitted apostrophes in possessives, is caught" (see the appendix). Grammar Checker's actual performance, however, is somewhat disappointing. Even with both Grammar Checker and Spelling Checker on, fewer than half of the errors students typically make in the use of possessives are caught. Another problem is that Grammar Checker does not attempt to distinguish between the singular and plural forms of possessives

## PLURALS IN PLACE OF POSSESSIVES

Grammar Checker catches not quite 50 per cent of missing apostrophes. The errors in the following sentences, for example, are not flagged:

- The slug is one of natures less attractive creatures.
- That report represents two months hard work.

When it does catch such omissions, Grammar Checker explains how possessives are formed rather than how they are used (see Figure 19). Spelling Checker catches most missing apostrophes if the results are words that are never correct under any circumstances, e.g. singular nouns ending in *y* (*familys*), plural nouns not ending in *s* (*childrens*), common first names (*Janes*, *Jims*). In each of these instances, the correct possessive form is one of the options listed in the suggestion box.

### Order of Words

If you are using word pairs such as "either/or," or "both/and," place each part of the pair in similar positions within your sentence. For example, if "either" comes just before a noun, "or" should come just before a noun.

- Instead of: He competed both in 1990 and 1994.
- Consider: He competed in both 1990 and 1994.
- Or consider: He competed both in 1990 and in 1994.
  
- Instead of: She called me either on Friday or Saturday.
- Consider: She called me on either Friday or Saturday.
- Or consider: She called me either on Friday or on Saturday.

coming

Figure 18

Occasionally, Grammar Checker suggests that a non-possessive plural word requires an apostrophe, so students should be advised to check before automatically clicking on the Change button. The following sentence is such an example:

- You could see the deer freeze and the **rabbits** crouch into a position that would allow them to bounce away if necessary. (Suggestions: "rabbit's," "rabbit")

The second suggested form (*rabbit*) is especially disconcerting since it is not a correct form under any circumstances.

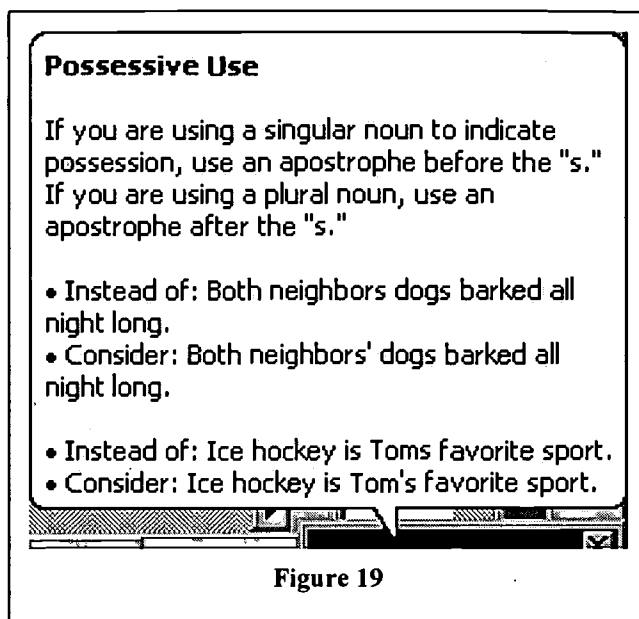


Figure 19

## POSITION OF APOSTROPHE

Grammar Checker does not check the position of an apostrophe. Therefore, when it spots a plural used instead of a possessive, its suggested corrections usually include both the singular and the plural possessive forms even when the choice is obvious, as it is in the following sentences:

- My **mothers** brother is coming for a visit at the end of July. (Suggestions: "mother's" and "mothers")
- The rock injured the **boys** eye. (Suggestions: "boy's" and "boys")

## POSSESSIVES IN PLACE OF PLURALS

If students make a word possessive when it is in fact simply a plural, Grammar Checker sometimes comes to their rescue – but less than 25 per cent of the time. The error message generated is shown in Figure 20.

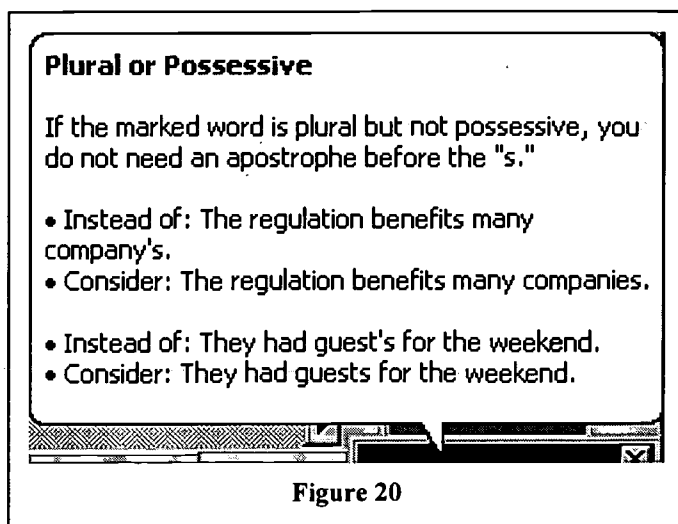


Figure 20

Spelling Checker also catches incorrect apostrophes if the results are words that don't exist. Therefore, apostrophes in the third person present singular form of verbs are



flagged as long as these verbs never double as nouns. Thus *Write's*, *choose's*, and *bring's* are caught but not *call's*, *play's*, and *run's*. Also flagged are apostrophes in some possessive pronouns: *her's*, *our's*, *your's*, and *their's*. Inexplicably, *his'*, *hers'*, *ours'*, *yours'* and *theirs'* are not.

However, students should be warned not to trust Spelling Checker's advice if common last names are involved. It does seem to be programmed to accept the simple plural of some common last names. For example, *I am visiting the Browns* and *Where is the Smiths' boat?* do not result in error messages. *Don't try to keep up with the Joneses and the Kennedys* does, however. *Jones's* and *Kennedy* and *Kennedy's* appear in the suggestion boxes. *The Kennedys' dog* and *the Joneses' cottage*, although correct, also result in error messages.

### FORMATION OF POSSESSIVES

Unfortunately, Grammar Checker's explanation of the formation of possessives is simplistic (see Figure 19). There is no advice on what to do when a singular word ends in *s* and a plural word does not end in *s*. An example of the former appears in one of the Help boxes entitled Possessive Use, one suggesting that "for clarity, 'what' or 'who' is owned or possessed" should be specified. Here is the first example from this box:

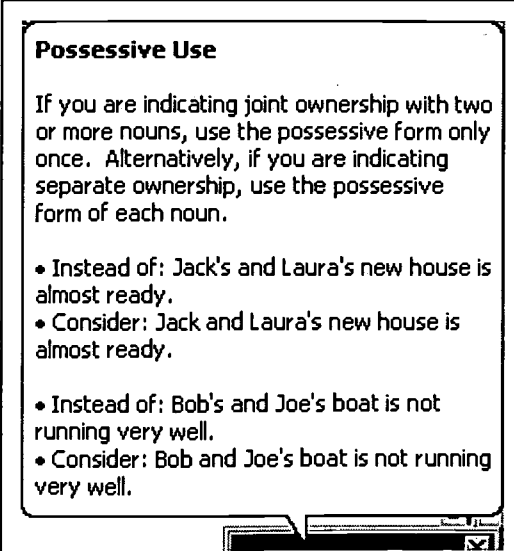
- Instead of: We always have Thanksgiving dinner at Aunt Lois'.
- Consider: We always have Thanksgiving dinner at Aunt Lois' house.

Although this way of forming the possessive of singular words ending in *s* is common for some words, it is not the only possibility, and in the case of the possessive of *Lois*, not common at all. *Woe Is I* (p. 38) does not even mention this possibility and advises instead always adding 's to singular words ending in *s*, *z*, or *x*. *Fowler's* gives the same rule but adds that only an apostrophe is commonly used after "ancient classical names," e.g. *Mars'*, *Herodotus'* (p. 61). But when 's is added to singular words ending in *s*, creating *Aunt Lois's house*, the result is Spelling Checker's red wavy lines under *Lois's*.

There is no explanation about what to do with plural words that don't end in *s*, and there are no examples of such words in the Help boxes on possessive use. Spelling Checker, however, flags errors such as *childrens'* and *mens'*.

### ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS WITH POSSESSIVES

The problem of apostrophe use when more than one person owns something or someone is also addressed (see Figure 21). The Help box shown in



**Possessive Use**

If you are indicating joint ownership with two or more nouns, use the possessive form only once. Alternatively, if you are indicating separate ownership, use the possessive form of each noun.

- Instead of: Jack's and Laura's new house is almost ready.
- Consider: Jack and Laura's new house is almost ready.
  
- Instead of: Bob's and Joe's boat is not running very well.
- Consider: Bob and Joe's boat is not running very well.

Figure 21



Figure 21 mentions separate ownership, as well as joint ownership, and correctly explains how to indicate both. However, both examples demonstrate joint ownership. Also, in practice, Grammar Checker assumes joint ownership even when separate ownership is obvious, as it is in the following sentence:

- **Joan's** and Mary's mothers are both coming to the meeting.

Grammar Checker flags this sentence, provides the explanation shown in Figure 21, and incorrectly suggests changing *Joan's* to *Joan*.

Grammar Checker flags as potential problems three other common uses of possessives. These are possessive forms of "non-living objects," possessives "used without 'what' or 'who' is owned or possessed," and the use of two possessives in a row. The Possessives and Plurals setting detects the first two; the Style: Colloquialism setting, the last one. Although in each case the advice offered is sound, it does not need to be followed in all circumstances.

Help suggests avoiding possessive forms of "non-living objects" if "a more formal or traditional tone" is required. The two examples provided, however, are not sentences that appear "formal" in either content or structure. It's hard to imagine a writer using the sentence containing *the chocolate pie of my favorite restaurant* in a situation requiring a formal tone. In its section entitled The Living Dead, *Woe Is I* calls the rule stating that "only living things can form the possessive with 's...a musty old custom" (p. 186).

Clarity is always the most important consideration in writing, and Grammar Checker gives clarity as the reason for avoiding both possessives "used without 'what' or 'who' is owned or possessed" and the use of two possessives in a row. However, in the first example in the Help box addressing the former problem, there is little chance of confusion: "We always have Thanksgiving dinner at Aunt Lois'." Two possessives in a row can sometimes sound awkward as does "the little boy's dog's collar," the second example in the Help box Grammar Checker provides for this problem. However, often two possessives do work, especially if one is a proper noun, as is the case in the following sentence:

- **Sue's father's** jokes are always very funny.

Grammar Checker flags the two possessives but offers no suggestions for improvement. The result of rewording the sentence is clumsier than the original and no clearer: *The jokes of Sue's father are always very funny.*

As was mentioned earlier, Grammar Checker's setting Possessives and Plurals and Spelling Checker catch most of the errors described above. Another setting mentioned above, helpful in catching two or more possessives in a row, is Style: Colloquialism.

## PUNCTUATION

When it comes to spotting punctuation errors, Grammar Checker provides help to those students whose typing skills leave something to be desired. An extra space after a comma, two punctuation marks in a row, or an impossible combination of marks (e.g. a comma followed by a colon) all cause green wavy lines to appear. However, for those who have a tendency to use extra commas and aren't sure when to use a colon, Grammar Checker is less helpful.

### COMMAS

Grammar Checker occasionally reminds students to insert or delete commas, but it is not very reliable. That's not surprising given the purpose of commas: to clarify meaning. In many instances, the addition of commas changes the meaning of the sentence, and only the writer knows the intended meaning. Here is an example:

- Noreen claims Janet wrote the report.
- Noreen, claims Janet, wrote the report.

Grammar Checker flags neither sentence.

In order to discuss Grammar Checker's performance at flagging sentences in which commas must be inserted or deleted, I've divided commas into four categories and will note the help Grammar Checker provides with each:

1. Commas used to clarify the meaning of the sentence. Without them, the sentence could be misread.
2. Optional commas, ones many writers leave out but whose use is not considered wrong.
3. Commas that help to divide the sentence into logical parts and to separate interrupting words and groups of words from the rest of the sentence. Although leaving these commas out won't always confuse the reader, many writers commonly use them.
4. Commas in the wrong place. These commas make the sentence less clear and/or don't follow the conventions mentioned in 3.

### Commas Essential for Meaning and Optional Commas

Because meaning often determines whether a comma is essential or optional, Grammar Checker can't offer much help distinguishing an essential comma from an optional one. The following sentences all start with short introductory phrases or clauses not normally requiring a comma to separate them from the rest of the sentence.

1. In the morning the sun shone brightly.
2. In the morning sun streamed into the room.
  
3. While inside we decided to close the windows.
4. While inside the dog started to howl.
  
5. As John **knows** we decided to do nothing.
6. As John **knows** nothing was decided.
  
7. Not long after that Kenneth decided to quit.
8. Not long after Kenneth decided to quit.

In the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth, sentences, however, the commas are necessary to prevent the sentences from being misread, a fact that grammar checkers will never be able to decipher. In fact, Grammar Checker flags only the fourth and fifth sentences, suggesting a comma after *knows*.

### Conventional Comma Uses

As far as the conventions are concerned, Grammar Check takes a stab at some but does not even try to tackle others. What follows is an assessment of Grammar Checker's ability to flag errors in conventional comma use.

#### After Introductory Words, Phrases, and Clauses

Grammar Checker is best at flagging commas omitted after introductory words, phrases, and clauses (see Figure 22). Unfortunately, its programmers got a little carried away: students are reminded to add a comma even after short phrases that do not function as transitional expressions. Most writers, of course, omit these. A series of introductory phrases or a long introductory dependent clause by convention needs a comma after it, but Grammar Checker reacts only about 60 per cent of the time when such commas are missing.

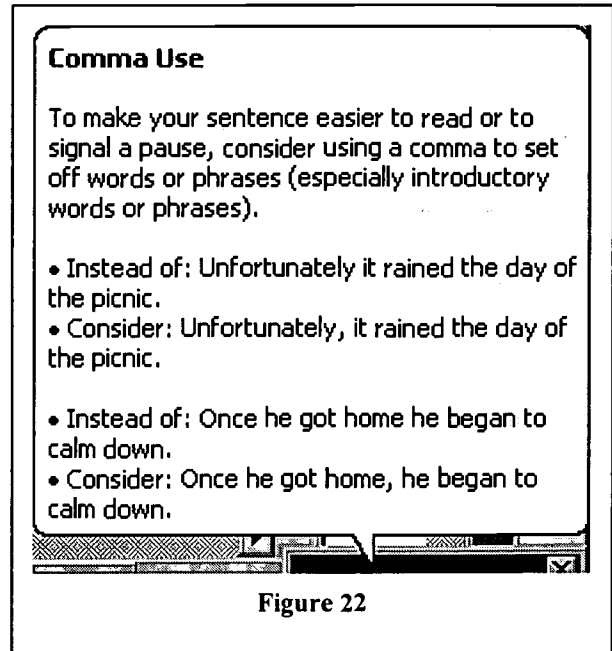


Figure 22

The following sentences demonstrate these problems. In the first two sentences, Grammar Checker does not suggest required commas; in the last two it suggests commas that are not required.

1. Although I vowed to stop smoking for the fifth time this year I lasted only three days.

2. Uncomfortable about being at the convention under false pretenses John left the meeting early.
3. In **1966** Harry graduated from college.
4. On **Saturday** I went to the mall.

### In Dialogue

Commas misused in dialogue should be easy enough to flag. In fact, a comma missing after one of the common verbs that are used to introduce dialogue is sometimes spotted. In the first of the two sentences that follow, the missing comma is flagged. The missing and misplaced commas in the second, however, are not:

1. Herbert **said** "I am going to deliver the reports now."
2. "Gerald is late again", said John "and this time he has no excuse."

### In Series

The use of commas in a series is usually the one comma convention that students observe most reliably, and Grammar Checker's usefulness to most would be limited to finding those omitted in error. However, Grammar Checker does not reliably spot commas omitted in a series. Many sentences like the following two trigger no Comma Use message:

- Be sure to pick up gin tonic limes ice and glasses.
- She is going to bring balloons streamers and paper hearts for the Valentine's Day party.

There are two Help boxes with messages about series. The first (see Figure 23) warns students not to place commas between two items joined by *and* - sound advice but not needed by most students. The second Help box appears only if students select the *always* setting after "comma before last list item" in the Grammar Settings box and then only if all the other items in the list are correctly separated by commas.

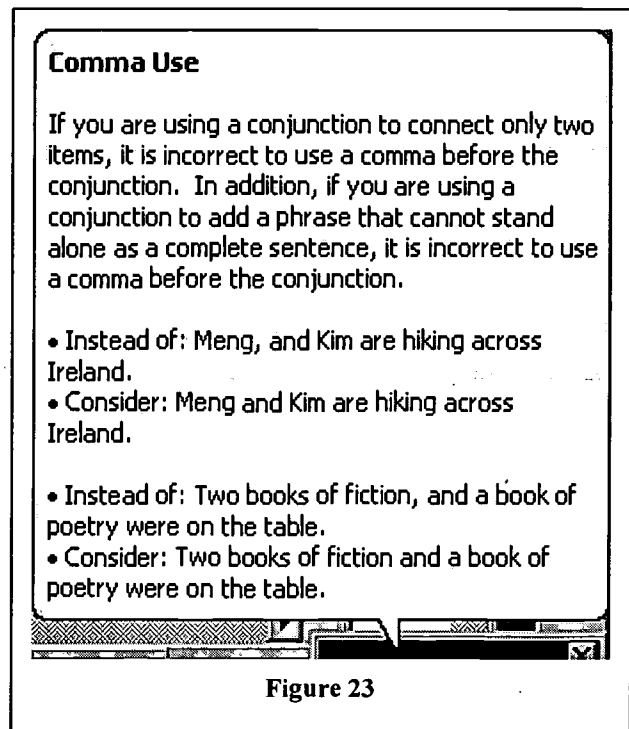
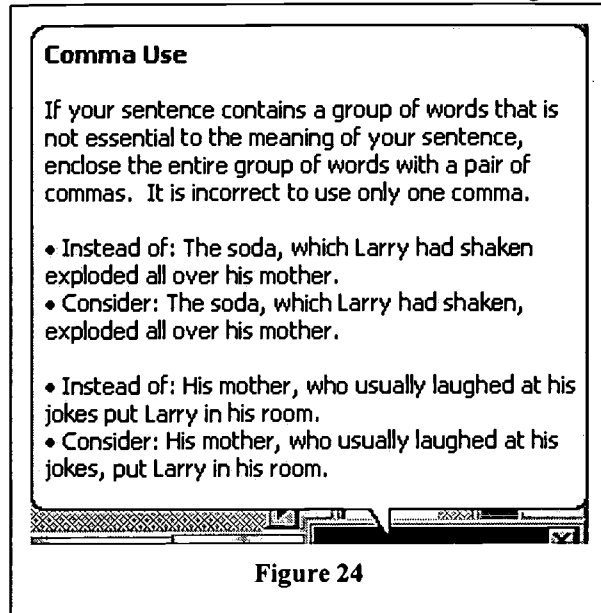


Figure 23

## Around Interrupters

A comma convention explained in a Help box but not reliably applied concerns “groups of words not essential to the meaning of the sentence,” sometimes called interrupters.

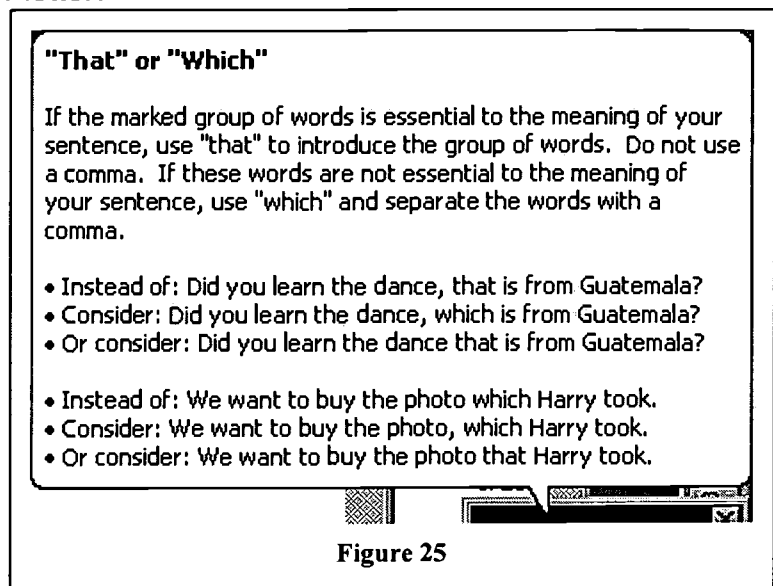


As shown in Figure 24, Grammar Checker reminds students to use two, not one, commas to enclose “the entire group of words” that is not essential to the meaning.

Although non-restrictive clauses are not the only interrupters that require two commas to separate them from the rest of the sentence, they’re the only type of “non-essential” expression illustrated in Figure 24. They’re also the only type of interrupter flagged, but only when one rather than two commas is used. The following sentences contain examples of common interrupters (underlined) enclosed with just one comma. They don’t trigger error messages.

- Their size on the other hand, depends upon their diet and mobility.
- Despite some earlier culinary disasters, I persevered and became I don’t mind telling you, a passable cook.
- After Mr. Paulson, the new office manager returned, we got back to work.
- Your qualifications are impressive Harold, but you should present them more professionally in your cover letter.

Grammar Checker offers one additional piece of advice on the one type of interrupter it does recognize: non-restrictive relative clauses. That’s the use of *which* to introduce non-restrictive clauses and *that* to introduce restrictive clauses. Grammar Checker can’t, of course, tell students which type of clause to use and thus whether or not commas are required. However, it is very thorough when it comes to locating a comma before *that*



and the absence of a comma before *which*. When the Help box shown in Figure 25 pops up, however, students should realize the two corrections given for each example have different meanings, and that most sentences flagged can't be corrected both ways.

### Before Coordinating Conjunctions Joining Independent Clauses

Even in grammar texts that cover commas sketchily and lump their uses into no more than three or four categories, one use is always featured: the comma before the coordinating conjunction joining two or more independent clauses. It's the first rule mentioned in *Woe Is It's* rather short section on commas (p. 137). However, if students leave out such commas, Grammar Checker will not attempt to find them and thus provides no Help box on this comma use.

### Commas in the Wrong Place

If we judge reliability by the number of Help boxes devoted to a topic, we would conclude that Grammar Checker is excellent at spotting commas in the wrong place. Three situations are described in addition to those already mentioned: between subject and verb, between the verb and its complement, and before infinitives. These three boxes all provide good advice and helpful examples. Flagging such errors consistently is another matter. Fewer than 10 per cent of incorrectly placed commas are caught.

### SEMICOLONS

For students who occasionally use semicolons instead of commas, Grammar Checker provides a good explanation when it spots such errors (see Figure 26). The problem is that it spots very few. When I replaced all the commas in a document with semicolons, only 5 per cent of the errors that resulted were flagged.

Grammar Checker is more reliable in flagging semicolons used in place of colons. The error in the following sentence is flagged, although no suggestion for correction is provided. Figure 26, which is provided as explanation, is not much help in this case.

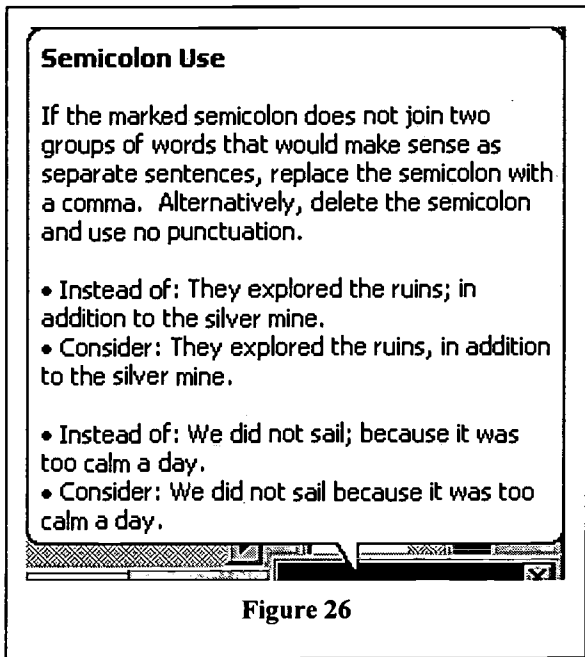


Figure 26

- Mr. Black suggested these three dates for the meeting; January 30, February 2, and February 12.



Occasionally, a correct use of the semicolon is flagged as a potential error. This happens with some regularity when the verb in the second independent clause is omitted. Here is an example:

- Henry scored three goals; James, six.

This so-called error is flagged as Semicolon Use, and no correction is suggested.

The semicolon's use to separate a series of items in which one or more contains commas is not mentioned in the one Semicolon Use box. However, its use for this purpose (as demonstrated in the sentence below) is not flagged as an error:

- Last summer I visited Toulon, France; Dresden, Germany; and Oxford, England.

Not surprisingly, changing the semicolons to commas does not generate an error message either.

For Grammar Checker's performance in finding commas used incorrectly to join two independent clauses, please refer to the section on run-ons.

## COLONS

Some students are overly liberal with colons, using them anytime they see a list; others introduce lists with commas instead of colons.

Grammar Checker provides an explanation and example of the first type of error (see Figure 27), and flags colons used incorrectly in this way quite consistently (80 per cent of the time).

Unfortunately, Grammar Checker flags correct uses as well. In the following sentence, it suggests omitting the colon:

- Instead of lasagna, this is what we'll serve: spaghetti, a salad, and crusty bread.

Grammar Checker provides no help whatsoever for students who resist using the colon and substitute a comma instead. Errors such as the one in the following sentence are not flagged.

- Please send the following employees to my office at 10 a.m., James, Jim, Fred, and Joyce.

Other uses of the colon (to introduce an explanation,

**Colon Use**

Use a colon after a complete sentence to set off a list. It is incorrect to use a colon to set off a quotation.

- Instead of: The breakfast specials are: blueberry pancakes and broccoli quiche.
- Consider: The breakfast specials are blueberry pancakes and broccoli quiche.
- Instead of: The CEO said: We will expand our base in the next six months.
- Consider: The CEO said, "We will expand our base in the next six months."

st, we

Figure 27



for example) are not mentioned in Help's one Colon Use box (see Figure 27) and Grammar Checker may well flag such colons as errors. In the following sentence, it suggests omitting the colon:

- He is trying to become what he has always **admired:** an Olympic figure skater.

In addition, students who have been taught to use colons to introduce quotations may be confused by Help's general warning: "It is incorrect to use a colon to set off a quotation" (see Figure 27).

## APOSTROPHES

For Grammar Checker's performance in spotting missing apostrophes in possessives and incorrect apostrophes in simple plurals, see the section on possessives and plurals.

Help for writers who use contractions is provided by Spelling Checker. If the apostrophe is omitted from a contraction or put in the wrong place, spelling errors result. Of course, if the mangled contraction results in a word, no red wavy lines appear (e.g. *Id* for *I'd*, *Ill* for *I'll*).

Grammar Checker flags all correct contractions if the setting Style: Contractions is selected.

## END-OF-SENTENCE PUNCTUATION

End-of-sentence punctuation is mentioned in the documentation (see the appendix), but help is provided only with question marks.

### Periods

A missing period may not be spotted, even if the next word is capitalized. If it is detected, this error will be flagged as a comma error (see section on run-ons); if not, it may be labeled as a long sentence, possibly alerting the student to the error.

### Question Marks

In obvious cases such as the sentence below, Grammar Checker will spot periods used instead of question marks.

- Does George want to leave now.

In less obvious cases such as the sentence below, it may question students about their intentions, providing the Fragment or Question Help box (Figure 3) already mentioned in the section on fragments.

- Which he will never forget.

Possible overuse of question marks, demonstrated in the following sentence, is also flagged:

- George wanted to leave now?

### **Exclamation Marks**

Excessive or inappropriate use of exclamation marks is not flagged.

### **QUOTATION MARKS, PARENTHESES, AND DASHES**

No error message appears when one of two quotation marks required is omitted, as in the following sentences:

- "I want to leave now, screamed Henry.
- I want to leave now, " screamed Henry.

Since quotation marks are used only in pairs, it should be a simple matter for a program to flag the errors in the last two sentences by checking to see that a sentence always contains an even number of marks.

As has already been mentioned in the section on commas, Grammar Checker catches a missing comma after forms of *to say* but does not flag other missing commas or incorrectly placed commas in dialogue.

Parentheses and dashes are not mentioned in the documentation and thus not surprisingly, no error messages associated with their misuse appear – not even when only one parenthesis is used.

Most punctuation errors are flagged with the Punctuation setting on. Omitted question marks are sometimes spotted with the Sentence Structure setting on.

### **CAPITALIZATION**

Grammar Checker sometimes catches a lower-case letter used instead of a capital and an occasional incorrectly capitalized word. Although it claims to detect "capitalization errors, such as proper nouns" and "overuse of capitalization," it detects errors only in very specific circumstances.

Grammar Checker's performance at detecting capitalization errors varies depending on the type of error. In combination with Spelling Checker, it catches about 50 per cent of non-capitalized proper nouns but almost no incorrectly capitalized words except those it considers "minor" words.

Its performance is not surprising given the difficulties involved. No grammar checker can be expected to detect the subtle differences between the following pairs of sentences:

- He walked along Main Street.
- He walked along the main street.
- She used Krazy Glue to repair the vase.
- She used ceramic glue to repair the vase.


It is even difficult for Grammar Checker to assess whether or not a word in front of a capitalized word is part of a name. In the following sentence, in which *College* is incorrectly capitalized, Grammar Checker suggests capitalizing *finish*:

- Now my plan is to go far away to **finish**

**Capitalization**

It is incorrect to capitalize the seasons of the year or the academic years (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior).

- Instead of: Laura's Junior year in college exposed her to many new ideas.
- Consider: Laura's junior year in college exposed her to many new ideas.
- Instead of: In Summer, she returned home to work in the local factory.
- Consider: In summer, she returned home to work in the local factory.




**Figure 30**

**Capitalization**

Capitalize the marked word if it is part of the name of a business, a place, a building, or a monument.

- Instead of: Her apartment has a lovely view of glacier mountain.
- Consider: Her apartment has a lovely view of Glacier Mountain.
- Instead of: The conference was at Spirit lake.
- Consider: The conference was at Spirit Lake.




**Figure 28**

**Capitalization**

Capitalize the marked word if it is part of a title, the name of a place, or the name of a person. Do not capitalize minor words such as "of," "a," and "the" unless these words officially begin the name of the place or the title, as in "The Hague" or "The New Yorker."

- Instead of: The mean dog that mr. Crotchety owns can almost jump his fence.
- Consider: The mean dog that Mr. Crotchety owns can almost jump his fence.
- Instead of: She had a good time visiting the Hague.
- Consider: She had a good time visiting The Hague.



**Figure 29**

## College.

Figures 28 and 29 explain the types of non-capitalized proper nouns Grammar Checker claims to flag. Sometimes, non-capitalized names of holidays are also spotted, especially if the second word is *day*. For example, *Remembrance day*, *Labor day*, *Thanksgiving day*, and *Boxing day* are flagged if one or both words are non-capitalized. However, *Christmas day* and *Valentine's day*, both names where the first word is a proper noun, are not flagged as errors. Neither is *New Year's day* nor *New Year's eve*. When spotted, such errors result in a much more general and, under the circumstance, less helpful explanation (shown in Figure 29), offering neither a rule for nor an example of the correct capitalization of special days.

Spelling Checker, of course, looks after spotting words that are always capitalized: names of the days of the week, names of the months of the year, and words derived from proper nouns (e.g. *english*, *greek*). Actually, using AutoCorrect, found in the Tools menu, students can choose two options that will automatically change the lower case letters they may accidentally type to begin days of the week and the first word in a sentence to upper case. If they don't select these options, these two errors are flagged anyway: the first by Spelling Checker (as has already been mentioned) and the second with the Capitalization setting. There is even a special Help box explaining that the first letter of a sentence must be capitalized.

According to the documentation (see the appendix), Grammar Checker tackles "overuse of capitalization." In fact, it can be relied on in only a few situations. "Seasons" and "academic years" are two, and they are mentioned in Figure 30. Incorrectly capitalized points of the compass are sometimes flagged as well, although they are not mentioned in Figure 30. In the following short sentence, Grammar Checker correctly suggests that *North* should be *north*, but provides the Help box shown in Figure 29 and thus no explanation:

- Henry walked **North**.

Adding even one modifier, however, causes the error to go undetected:

- Henry walked North toward the mall.

Except in these few situations and then not very reliably, excessive use of capital letters is not flagged. Not one of the capitalization errors in the following sentence is flagged:

- The Little Boy Ran Through His Friends' Back Yard and Down the Street to the Middle of the Town.

As has already been mentioned, Grammar Checker does flag all instances of what it calls "minor" words (articles and short conjunctions and prepositions) and as explanation provides the Help box shown in Figure 29. The non-capitalized words in the sentence above are flagged when capitalized. This feature is useful when students

are trying to determine what words to capitalize in the title of a published work. However, the explanation provided in Figure 29, which contains no examples of capitalized "minor words" or titles, for that matter, may confuse them.

Logically, the capitalization setting must be on in order to flag capitalization errors. Spelling Checker and AutoCorrect will also help catch some errors.

## COMMONLY CONFUSED WORDS

At first glance, Grammar Checker's list of "homophones or other commonly misused words" is impressive: 89 word pairs plus explanations are listed. This list appears when the button provided in the Commonly Confused Words section of grammar and writing style settings is pressed (see the appendix).

Some earlier grammar checkers flagged every instance of such word pairs, providing definitions of both words in the pair but not analyzing the correctness of a particular word in its sentence. Many writers found it annoying to find windows popping up each time they used *its*, *then*, *there*, etc., and this may be the reason Word 97's Grammar Checker has changed its tactics. It alerts the writer only when it finds an error; the trouble is it does not find many – just over 10 per cent of errors in documents containing many errors in the use of the most frequently confused pairs of words.

Why is Grammar Checker's performance so poor? First, many of the most frequently used word pairs are not on its list.

Surely, writers have more opportunity to confuse *accept/except*, *affect/effect*, *all ready/already*, *than/then*, and *weather/whether* than *augur/auger*, *broach/brooch*, *dingy/dinghy*, *hew/hue*, and *yolk/yoke*. The latter are on Grammar Checker's list, but the former are not. Also on Grammar Checker's list are a couple of word pairs that Spelling Checker takes care of because one of the words is never correct: *thats/that's* and *their's/theirs*.

Surprisingly, Help's list is not accurate. Some words not on the list are flagged (e.g. *hole/whole* and *to/too/two*). These words even have their own specific Help box instead of the general one that appears when incorrect uses of words such as *their/there/they're* and *knew/new* are

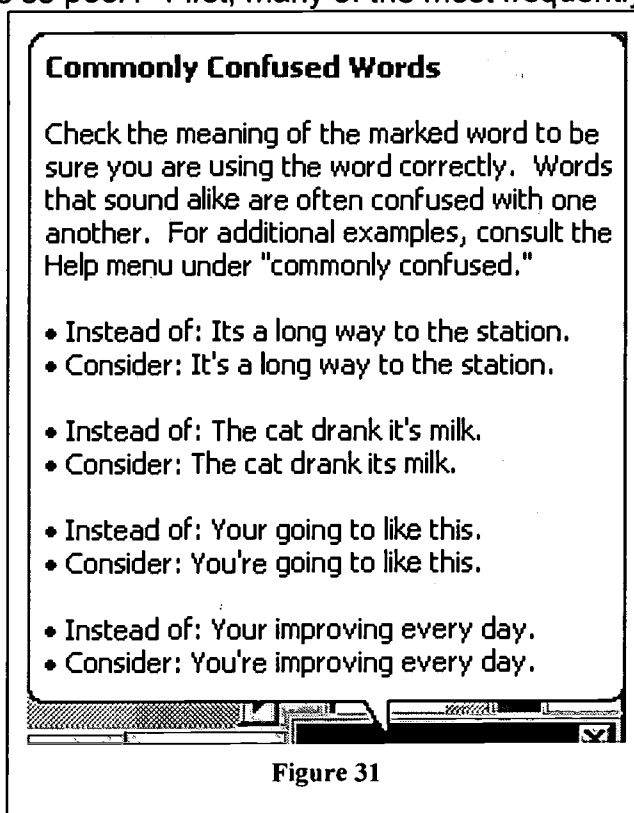


Figure 31

flagged (see Figure 31).

As has already been mentioned, frequently used word pairs are flagged not much more than 10 per cent of the time. As the following sentences demonstrate, less common words on the list are not flagged reliably either. Not one of the incorrectly used words is caught.

- May I borrow your augur?
- My silver broach is tarnished.
- Her blouse was a dingy white.
- What hew of blue is her dress?
- This egg yoke is a deep orange.

If Grammar Checker does flag a word, it is likely to be an error – but not always. Here is an example of a correct use of *principle* labeled as wrong:

- You just have to keep one **principle** in mind: as soon as the money is gone, the holiday is over.

*Principal* is suggested, and if that confuses students who thought they knew the difference, the Help box, which does not mention *principle* or *principal*, won't help (see Figure 31). It's interesting to note that *principle* is not flagged when the sentence ends at *mind*.

The limited number of word choice errors Grammar Checker flags require the Commonly Confused Words setting to be on.

## STYLE SETTINGS

The problems in style that Grammar Checker tackles are listed in the last part of the appendix. Although it flags these problems reliably, not all teachers will agree that what's listed are truly problems. In addition, some problems usually associated with style rather than grammar are listed among the grammar settings.

There is no problem with Grammar Checker's performance at locating the words and constructions listed, as might be expected. It's easy, after all, to program a grammar checker to locate words and expressions identified in its dictionary as clichés, colloquialisms, specific to gender, and jargon. Once students understand the meaning of these terms and the reasons for avoiding such words and expressions, they should be able to benefit from most of the Help messages and suggestions generated by their writing. However, they should be warned to use common sense when considering

whether or not accept Grammar Checker's advice. Depending on the audience and purpose of a piece of writing, colloquialisms and jargon are acceptable. Depending on context, sometimes only a gender-specific noun makes sense. Here is an example, for which Grammar Checker suggests "heroes":

- I like reading about Victorian **heroines** who are in love with villains.

Other aspects of style Grammar Checker flags are contractions and sentences starting with *And*, *But*, and *Hopefully*. One can't help but wonder why these aspects are addressed at all. *Fowler's* has this to say about contractions: "Contractions are exceedingly common in informal writing and increasingly found in various kinds of formal contexts" (p. 180). *Woe Is I*, as might be expected, goes a step further: "Isn't it time we admitted that the contraction has earned its place in the sun?" (p. 72). And the authors of both books find nothing wrong with starting an occasional sentence with *And* or *But* (Burchfield, p. 52; O'Conner, p. 181). The use of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb is a different matter entirely. Those who oppose its use as such oppose it no matter where it is found in the sentence.

When deciding which style settings to turn on, writers need to remember that some style settings flag what are usually considered to be grammatical, not stylistic, problems. The Style: Colloquialisms, Unclear Phrases, and Wordiness settings flag certain types of modifier errors (see section on modifiers), and the Style: Colloquialisms setting catches one type of possessive error (see section on possessives).

Another concern is that some problems that are generally considered aspects of style are listed among the grammar settings. The passive voice, which Grammar Checker flags very reliably if the Passive Sentences setting is on, is an example. The placement of Passive Sentences among the grammar settings may give students the impression that passive verbs are wrong. Unless students know the difference between active and passive verbs and can identify situations where the active voice is preferable, this setting is best turned off.

End-of-sentence prepositions are surely more a stylistic than grammatical problems (if problems at all). *Fowler's* calls the never-end-a-sentence-with-a-preposition rule "a persistent myth" (p. 617); *Woe Is I*, "a bagaboo" (p. 83). Neither are the authors of these books appalled by split infinitives and verb phrases (Burchfield, pp. 736-8; O'Conner, pp. 82, 85). Yet the end-of-the-sentence preposition is flagged with the Phrases setting on as are split infinitives and verb phrases (mentioned in the section on modifiers). Because the Phrases setting is used to catch a number of grammatical errors (listed in the appendix), turning this setting off to avoid the end-of-sentence prepositions and split infinitives and verb phrases messages also means losing unrelated and possibly more important suggestions.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

In spite of its many shortcomings, chances are that some students can improve their written documents by using Grammar Checker if their writing is relatively free of errors and if they are willing to take some extra time. To benefit from spelling checkers, students need to be able to spell reasonably well and be willing to open a dictionary (a book, that is) now and then. To benefit from grammar checkers, they need to be able to write reasonably correctly and be willing to consult a grammar handbook now and then. It helps if they have a basic understanding of common grammatical terms, although Help avoids some of the less commonly understood terms (e.g. subjunctive mood).

In closing, I recommend that teachers who decide, as I have, to promote the use of Grammar Checker consider the following suggestions:

- Have students proofread their work to eliminate as many errors as possible before using Grammar Checker. The more errors there are in a sentence, the more likely Grammar Checker is to provide incorrect suggestions
- Make sure that students have a basic understanding of sentence structure and are familiar with basic terminology used to explain errors in grammar.
- Explain to students the limitations of Grammar Checker.
- Suggest that students select "custom" as the writing style and help them select the grammar and style settings most appropriate for their level of expertise and for the type of assignment.
- Encourage students to run Grammar Checker with Help turned on. They can do this by clicking on the button marked with a question mark located in the bottom left corner of the Spelling and Grammar dialogue box.
- Suggest that students consult a grammar text when they don't understand the information in the Help box.

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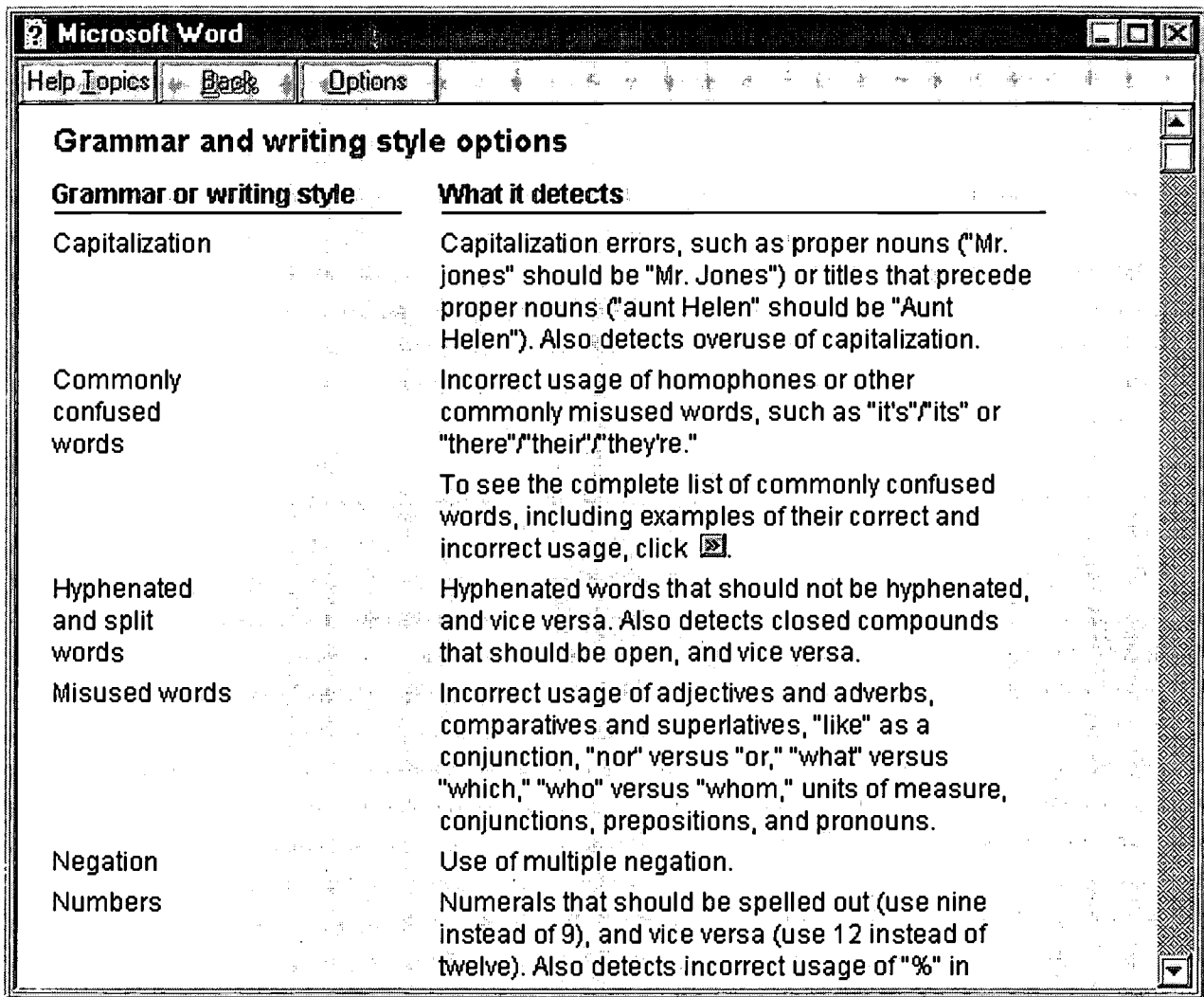
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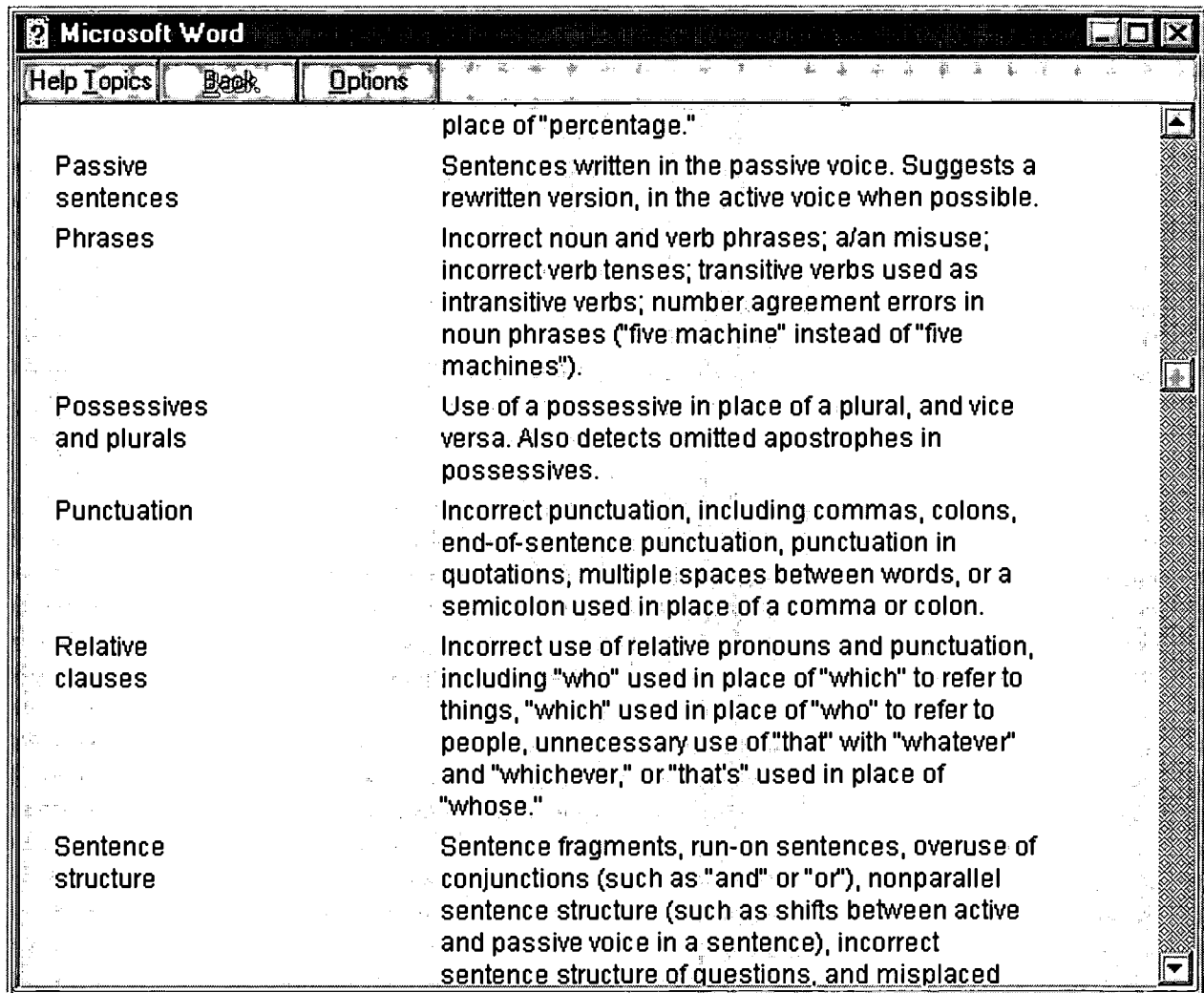
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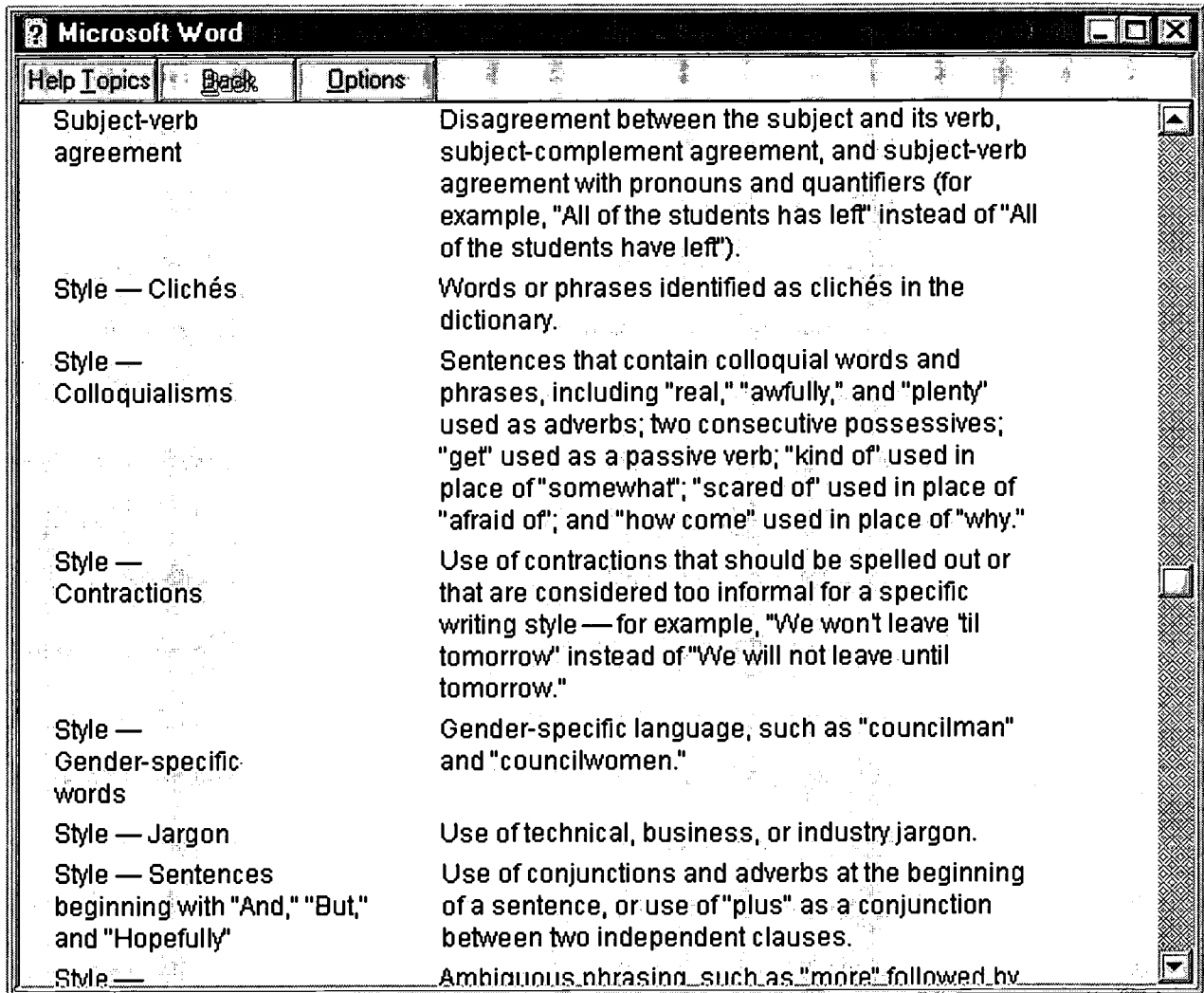
## APPENDIX: WORD 97'S GRAMMAR AND WRITING STYLE OPTIONS



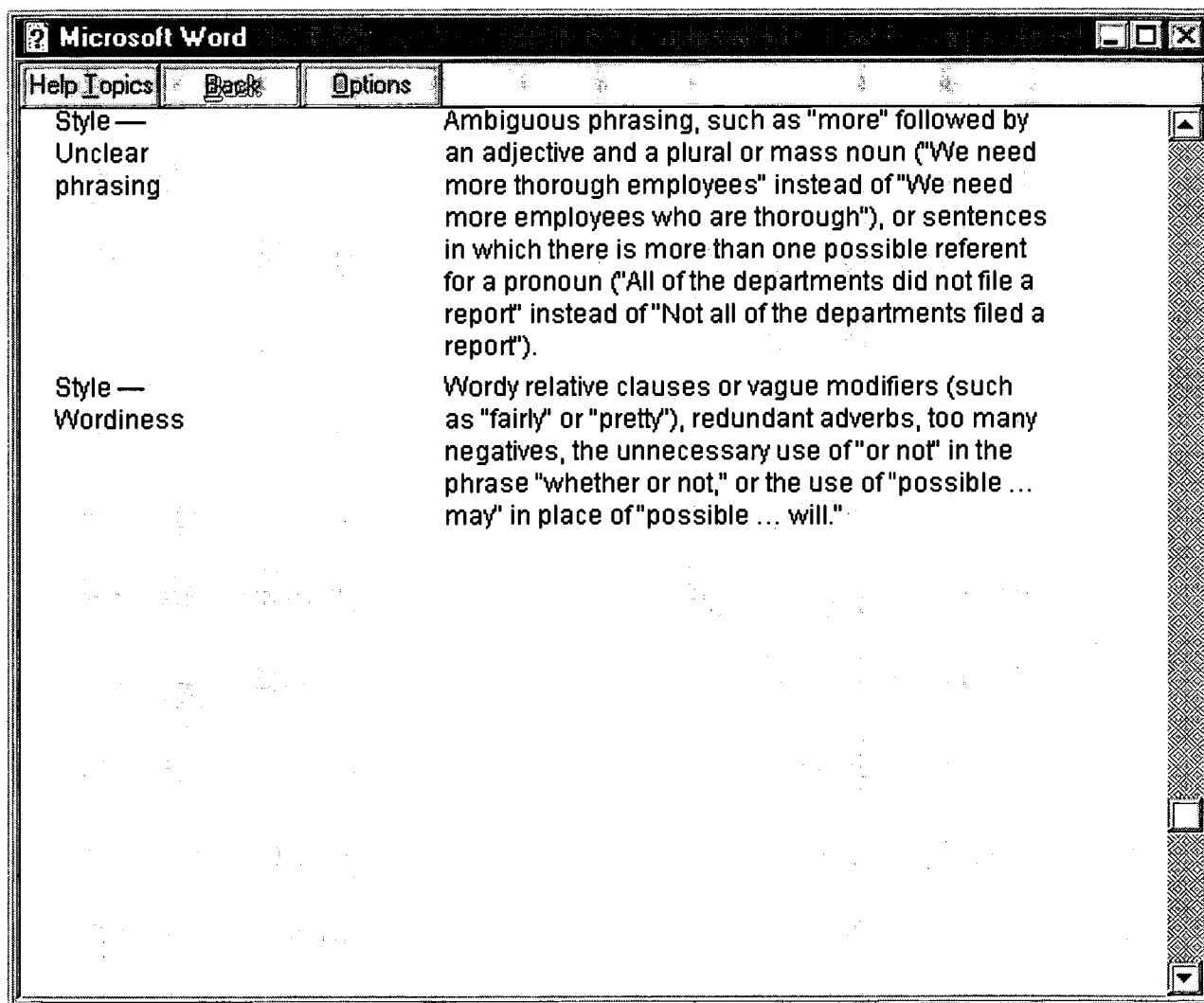
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