A Personal Editor in Their Pocket: Benefits and Challenges of Using Grammarly in College Courses

Stephanie Lewis Thompson
Purdue University Global

Teresa Marie Kelly
Purdue University Global

Abstract

This article examines voluntary use of Grammarly in online Composition courses, including its effect on student writing, how students feel about using it, and what challenges arise when teaching with it. This will also discuss strategies to help educators overcome these challenges and describe appropriate uses of Grammarly.

Keywords: Grammarly, composition, editing, AI

Educators and other experts in Composition agree that effective writing begins with correct grammar; however, faculty often struggle with helping students improve their grammar and mechanics. By design, instruction in composition and other rhetorical skills focuses on writing outcomes, especially when it comes to helping English language learners (ELL), Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students, neurodiverse learners, and first-generation college students gain confidence in the conventions of academic writing. Teaching effective writing includes introducing students to tools including Grammarly, an online grammar, style, and plagiarism checker, to improve their own skills. As growing numbers of employers and even the US military use Grammarly or similar products, understanding appropriate usage of these tools develops a desirable professional skill as well as an academic one.

Students may not fully understand what "effective" writing entails, particularly in an academic setting. They are often more comfortable writing informal text messages, emails, and social media posts that do not need to be edited carefully for punctuation or grammar. Kurtis Clements' podcast "The Four C's of Effective Writing" (2023) describes the four characteristics needed to ensure writing is effective; it should be "clear, concise, complete and correct." "Clear" writing should be understandable to the target audience and involves both word choice and organization. "Concise" writing avoids unnecessary words, while "complete" means that questions are anticipated and necessary information is included. Finally, "correct" writing is carefully edited and proofread; the author avoids common errors that may impede understanding like run-on sentences and follows grammatical conventions such as subject/verb agreement. In the United States, college faculty generally expect students to follow Standard English conventions for academic compositions. Grammarly and similar apps help students improve their writing skills through modelling Standard English conventions.

Grammarly, Word, and other programs also expose students to acceptable writing conventions in "Standard English." What writers consider "Standard English" can vary depending upon the setting, but a general set of rules does govern what kind of writing is acceptable in an academic or professional setting. Wiesen (2023) notes that "Standard English is not typically established by an organization or political agency, but is instead created through common agreement on how English should sound in a particular area" (para. 3); it "can refer to pronunciation and word choice common in standard speaking, as well as certain standards in written language, often called standard written English" (para. 4). Teaching students how to follow these rules is a critical component of composition courses, and given the increasing focus on writing across the curriculum (WAC), all educators should be prepared to help students navigate the rules of Standard English.

However, a number of challenges face educators seeking to do this. Students may not understand basic grammar and punctuation rules. Grammar vocabulary—comma splices, dependent vs. independent clauses, phrases, parallel language—might as well be a foreign language to many of them. English Language Learners (ELL) and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students' writing is shaped by their own languages, and they may struggle to understand the word order and grammatical structures of Standard English. So, how might using Grammarly help address these concerns?

Grammarly was designed by a group of Ukrainian entrepreneurs in 2009. The free and professional proofreading tool uses Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify grammar and punctuation errors, confusing sentences, and misspellings and offer recommended corrections. As the site's mission statement notes, "we strive to help people achieve more through effective communication, whenever and wherever they write in English . . . Our tools augment your skills at every step, including landing your intended tone, refining complicated sentences, and turning rough ideas into polished communication with accurate spelling, punctuation, and grammar" (Grammarly, 2023, para. 1). What started as a tool to help people polish their work emails is now used by millions of writers to hone their sentences and achieve the "clear, concise, complete, and correct" goals so many composition instructors seek to help their students achieve.[1]

While numerous K-12 and higher education institutions have licensed Grammarly's paid version for this very reason, students can easily sign up for the free version of the tool. However, the premium version offers more robust recommendations for revision as well as a plagiarism detector. Grammarly is most valuable as a "just in time" feedback tool, allowing students to see errors and receive recommendations as they are writing. Comparing the feedback provided by Grammarly to that offered by writing tutors and professors can help to build a student's understanding of Standard English and develop their own editing and revision skills. Grammarly provides reports that allow students to see how their vocabulary,

[1] NOTE: This refers to the original version of Grammarly, not the new GrammarlyGO, which is much more like ChatGPT and other generative writing programs.

sentence structure, and editing skills are evolving, a much-needed confidence-booster for many students. The reports also evaluate elements like clarity and engagement, so a student who may struggle with punctuation can see that they have an engaging writing style, another way to build their confidence. A free citation generator also assists students in creating APA, MLA, and Chicago-style citations, a task many students find daunting. Just as calculators provide invaluable assistance to math students, Grammarly and other AI tools like Turnitin can help students navigate the challenges of academic writing. Unlike generative AI such as ChatGPT, which creates writing for users, Grammarly supports skill and confidence building. When faculty share and model these applications as well providing best practices for their use, students do find extra encouragement and support to write original works instead of turning to generative AI to write for them.

Perhaps most importantly, Grammarly reinforces the importance of considering audience, purpose, and context when writing. Users choose the type, format, and style they are using for a particular assignment; a formal academic essay with a knowledgeable audience and a persuasive purpose will generate different recommendations than an informative business email for an expert audience. Users also have control over the results; they choose whether or not to accept editing recommendations, just as one would when collaborating with colleagues in a Google Doc. Finally, Grammarly will not just rewrite sentences for them. It will indicate that a sentence may be too long or confusing for the intended audience, but typically, the user is going to have to figure out how to revise the sentence to make it more understandable.

As O'Neill and Russell (2019) note, little research currently evaluates Grammarly's effectiveness as a teaching and learning tool, and much of the current research focuses on how Grammarly can help ELL students, an area that O'Neill and Russell acknowledge. However, one recent study explored how Grammarly facilitates self-directed learning (Wardatin et al., 2022); users reported positive experiences using the app. Caveleri and Dianati (2016) reached similar conclusions several years ago and credit this effectiveness at least partially to students'

positive reactions to the software. Teresa Marie Kelly found similar reactions among her students when she polled them about their use of Grammarly: 80% identified it as the first or second-best resource suggested to them in college composition 1 (T. Kelly, personal communication, 2022). One student noted that Grammarly helped them "become a better writer by showing me what just changing a few words can do for clarity," while another said the app "improves my ability to construct a professional, appealing text." Testimonials like this show the value of Grammarly in a variety of writing contexts as well as its positive effect on the students' overall academic experience.

Hurdles do remain. Students in the study conducted by Wardatin et al. (2022) noted some technological challenges and difficulties using some features, and as generative AI tools like ChatGPT gain popularity, students may be inclined to adopt a tool that will rewrite those confusing sentences for them. Educators can point students towards Grammarly's YouTube channel for more assistance with maximizing the app's features and remind students that the tool can help them

to identify the errors anyone might miss. Even the most seasoned writers misspell words or misplace a comma.

Perhaps the most important result of Wardatin et al. (2022)'s study is that students reported the importance of their teachers' input; the app will not replace quality writing instruction. Faculty should not require Grammarly or use it to replace their own feedback. Grammarly is an AI tool, and students are still writing for people, not computers. Students should not expect to contest grades with "but, Grammarly said this was okay." Not all suggestions are good ones, as many may have learned through experiences with peer reviewers and tutors. Grammarly is another tool in their toolbox and gives them another perspective on their writing techniques, and educators have a responsibility to teach ethical use of technologies that can improve their communication and professional skills.

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