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Writing Proper

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Writing Proper

Getting the most out of the Grammar Checker in Microsoft Word

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The grammar checker in Microsoft Word can be a powerful helper for any writer — so long as you take care setting it up. If you don't, it can be a serious annoyance, underlining word after word with green wavy lines — leading many to switch the function off altogether.

So let's look at how to get the most out of Word's grammar checker (the following guidelines apply to Word version 9).

First Steps

1. Click "Tools" on the top menu bar.
2. Select "Options" (this brings up the "Options" window).
3. Click on the "Spellings & Grammar" tab at the top of the "Options" window.
4. Now click the grey rectangular "Settings" button, near the bottom right of the open window, just below where it says "Writing Style". (The "Grammar Settings" window will open).

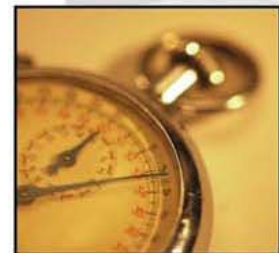
Writing Style

At the top of the "Grammar Settings" window is a drop down menu that allows you to choose a writing style — Casual, Standard, Formal, Technical or Custom. I recommend you select "Custom" and go through the list of options that appear further down the "Grammar Settings" window, ticking those grammar and style rules you feel are useful and un-ticking those you don't. Do this and you'll have a grammar checker that fits *your* style — and not a rigid stickler to formality that bears little relevance to the *real* world of writing.

Okay, let's work our way down the list and sort out which options, help, hinder, or just plain annoy...

The first set of options asks whether you want:

- "Punctuation required with guides" — best to select "don't check", rather than "inside" or "outside", because, for instance, a comma may need to be inside or outside quotes, depending on the circumstances.
- "Spaces required between sentences" — setting this to "1" will serve you well in most working contexts. The majority of book publishers and magazines, for example, stipulate one space between sentences in your digital typescript.



Now let's move on to the "Grammar" options:

Capitalisation

Tick

It's helpful if you forget to capitalise the first word of a sentence or omit to make the "e" in "England" a capital letter. It also detects over-use of capitalisation.



Commonly Confused Words

Tick

It's useful if you inadvertently confuse words like "their" and "there", or "desert" and "dessert" (I'm sure you don't, but there may be less common words you do sometimes confuse).

Hyphenated and Compound Words

Tick

I never know whether to slot in a hyphen in terms like "3-year plan". Fortunately, Word lets you know you need a hyphen between "3" and "year".



Misused Words

? You decide

This option isn't perfect, but it will highlight instances where you could choose a more appropriate word to make a sentence clearer or more correct.

Negation

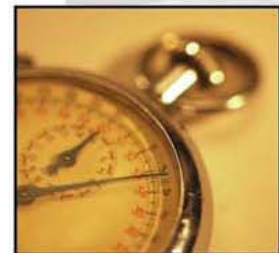
Don't tick

Unless you're likely to write: "I can't hardly believe that", or "I don't need no advice".

Numbers

Tick

It tells you when numbers should be spelled out ("nine" instead of "9"). And vice versa ("14" instead of "fourteen").



Passive Sentences

? You decide

Flags the use of passive voice and, where possible, suggests an alternative sentence written in active voice. Don't accept Word's alternatives too often, however, otherwise your writing can become flat and robotic sounding.

Possessives and Plurals

Tick this

It makes sure your use of apostrophe is correct: e.g. “the car’s exhaust system” (singular), “cars’ exhaust systems” (plural). It also highlights instances where you have forgotten to use an apostrophe.

Punctuation

? You decide

It highlights incorrect use of punctuation (you might have used a comma, where a semi-colon would be more appropriate). This can be helpful, but more often than not, it’s confusing.

Relative Clauses

? You decide

Tells you when you should have used “which” instead of “who” when referring to things; or when you should have used “who” instead of “which” when referring to people. This can be useful, but sometimes rules have to be broken in the interests of a sentence sounding right.

Sentence Structure

? You decide

Highlights sentence fragments, overuse of conjunctions (“and”, “or”, etc), or when you’ve shifted between active and passive voice in a single sentence. It also flags when you’ve phrased a question wrongly. Again, the problem with this rule is that rules sometimes have to be broken. For example, advertising copywriters regularly use sentence fragments because they make sentence and paragraph structure more lively and compelling.

Sentence-Verb Agreement

Tick

This is handy for catching typing errors like this: “The book are full of mistakes”.

Verb and Noun Phrases

Tick

Highlights incorrect use of verb and noun phrases and catches typos like “These five machine”, which should read “These five machines”.



Now we come to the “Style” options:

Clichés

Don't tick

Used sparingly clichés can make your writing more effective; they help you “speak the language” of your target audience.



Contractions

Don't tick

This highlights instances where you've used “don't” instead of “do not”. You'd obviously select this option if you were writing for a very formal audience. Most audiences, however, prefer writing that sounds conversational and are quite happy with “don't” and “they've”.

Colloquialisms

? You decide

Select this option only if you are unsure when you are using colloquialisms (informal figures of speech, which are “conversational” in tone). Again, intelligent use of colloquialisms helps you relate to your target readers.



Gender-Specific Words

Tick

Flags use of sexist language, such as “chairman” and “chairwoman”.

Jargon

Tick

If you're writing for a general audience and find yourself using technical, business, or industry jargon, you need to select this option.



Sentence length

Tick

Flags sentences longer than 60 words. Long sentences send readers to sleep, so it's helpful to be reminded to keep your sentences short.

Sentences Beginning with “And”, “But”, and “Hopefully”

Don't tick

Language is continually changing and these days starting sentences with conjunctions like “And” and “But” is fine — *unless* you're writing for a very formal audience.

Successive Nouns (more than three) Tick

Flags instances where you've strung too many nouns together in a sentence: e.g. "Internet business marketing communications consultancy." You need to avoid this kind of writing as it confuses people.

**Successive Prepositional Phrases (more than three)** Tick

Highlights sentences like this: "The book on the shelf in the corner at the library on the edge of town was checked out." Sentences that use "in", "at", "an" and "on" a lot make prose sound lifeless. So it's wise to spend time rephrasing them.

Unclear Phrasing Tick

Flags ambiguous phrases like: "All of the departments did not file a report", which would work better as, "Not all departments filed a report".

**Use of First Person**

? You decide

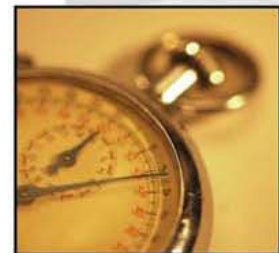
Flags the pronouns "I" and "me". Technical writers might find this useful, as they don't usually write in the first person.

Wordiness Tick

Even the best of us manage to include redundant words in our prose. This will help you weed them out.

Words in Split Infinitives (more than one) Don't tick

The average reader doesn't know or worry about split infinitives. Only tick this if your readers happen to be sticklers for precise grammar.



If you have any of your own tips for improving Word's grammar checker, please email me at: feedback@plainwords.co.uk

Plain Words – The Big Picture

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