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AN ADJUNCT WRITING INSTRUCTION ASSISTANT, THE COMPUTER, WITH AN ILLUSTRATION

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The results of employer surveys repeatedly emphasize the importance of writing skills in all fields of business. To develop student skills in writing universities use several strategies. Some require two, three or more writing courses in the student's matriculation. Criticism of courses devoted to writing primarily rest on the premise that writing can not be taught in a single, or even several courses. To develop and hone writing skills above a basic level, students must practice daily over an extended period. Therefore a second strategy encourages writing in all subject courses. The activity of writing may improve writing ability but evaluation and instructor feedback is even more effective in improving writing. In spite of admirable intentions, many professors yield to time pressures and grade content only.

Computer Based Writing Assistance

The computer with software now available can function as an adjunct assistant for writing instruction. Software currently on the market is designed to produce better written communications.

Outline, Checker and Thesaurus Software

Outline programs help students organize thoughts, choose a presentation sequence and map communication strategy. Besides ensuring better continuity, outline programs encourage the writer to put down ideas and later organize them. Thus a major benefit is *the* lessening of writer's block. Freestyle, Framework, Idea Processor, MaxThink and ThinkTank are outline software.

Spell checkers identify misspellings and typographical errors. Most do not check homonyms. Spell checker capabilities have become a standard feature of word processing software.

After spelling is corrected many errors may still exist. Cleanup, a mechanical checker, catches careless mechanical errors such as capitals in the middle of words, open parentheses, and double typed words.

Word choice improves with the use of thesaurus software, and lessens boring repetitive use of a word. Thesaurus programs must be immediately available to be useful. Programs with advanced capabilities, like Webster's New World on-line Thesaurus, attempt to maintain grammatical consistency by preserving capitalization, tense, prefixes, etc. As with spell checkers, word-processing software now include thesaurus features.

Style Analysis Programs

Style analysis software focuses on the style of the writing. Usually this means that the program checks the copy for poor grammar and the use of passive voice, errors that make writing look unprofessional. Phase, for example, identifies redundant, verbose, and folksy writing and suggests alternatives.

Grammatik, in addition to spotting sloppy phrases, flags gender specific terms helping the writer to eliminate sexist writing. CorrecText, a recent entry into the market, has won plaudits from the industry for its very powerful grammar checker. The suggestions offered by CorrecText are often more relevant to the identified error.

Besides checking grammar Rightwriter develops four indices. The readability index measures the educational level a reader will need to comprehend the writing. The strength index measures how clear, concise and to the point the copy is. The descriptive index measures the use of adjectives and adverbs. The use of jargon is measured by the jargon index.

Grammatik, CorrecText and RightWriter check for complete sentences and subject/verb agreement. None of the three, however, can choose correct prepositions.

Some students need more than practice at writing; they need training in basic writing concepts. Two programs, Future and Conditional Verb Commands and Writing. Competency can help. The first provides rules on verb use and the second teaches letter writing, report generation and persuasion.

These writing style analysis programs are not without their shortcomings. Critics contend that style analysis software inhibits the development of a unique individual style. Rather they advocate an "official style". These critics also point out that, style analysis programs stress a "rigidity in grammar." They say that hardly a rule in the English language holds in all possible situations. It is too easy to over use or take "suggestions" literally. In addition they contend that adherence to the readability index can lead to staccato copy which is unpleasant to read. A possible outcome of the use of style analysis programs according to these opponents is stuffy writing that lacks creativity and eloquence. Critics fear too that the compulsive person may be tempted to revise and revise in an attempt to gain perfection.

An Illustration

At Indiana State University the computer serves as an adjunct assistant for writing instruction. Students are encouraged to use the spell checker and thesaurus on every writing project. On major projects when they turn in hardcopy and a disk the hardcopy serves as a basis for manually grading the content. Instructor comments are written on the hard copy. The Rightwriter style analysis program analyzes the writing project on the disk and the results are printed. A spell checker seeks out spelling errors on the disk copy. These errors are circled on the RightWriter printed hardcopy. Student receive back the hardcopy they turned in with comments about content, a copy of RightWriter results with spelling errors circled and the disk. When the results are returned the instructor answers any questions and expresses a willingness to discuss the results.

The adjunct computer assistant from the instructor's perspective works well. Evaluating written work is much less cumbersome and time consuming. The instructor looks forward to reading the content of the paper without the hindrance of correcting spelling, grammar and mechanics.

Has student writing become more professional? The starting premise was that writing skills when practiced develop over an extended period of time, thus large changes were not expected nor were attempts at measuring improvements made. Colleagues agree, however, student writing on major writing assignments has improved.