

RESEARCH IN

WORD PROCESSING

NEWSLETTER

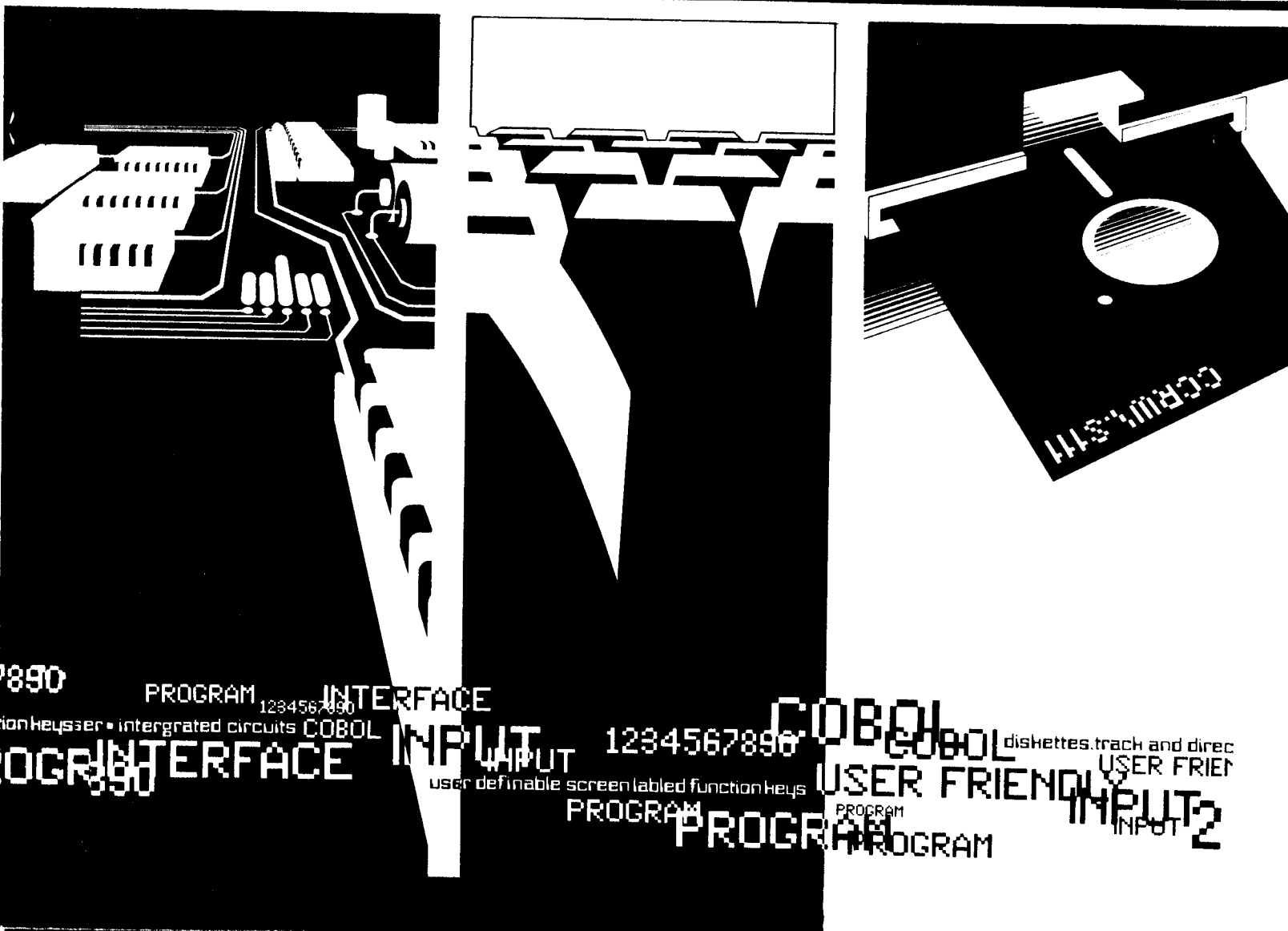
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*Research in
Word
Processing
Newsletter*

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Improving Your Writing With Style Analysis Programs

Mauro G. Di Pasquale, M.D.

I'm not one of those rare writers who can get it right the first time around. Much of what I initially write must be rearranged and pruned so that the final product is easy to understand and free of grammatical errors and verbal clutter. To help me in this rewriting process, I make liberal use of style and grammar checkers.

While these programs can improve your writing, they won't make a writer out of you if you have trouble getting off a letter to Aunt Bessie. They will, however, improve your writing style so that whatever you do write will be better understood.

The prototype to all the present style and grammar checkers is AT&T's *Writer's Workbench*. This program, which requires a megabyte of main memory and only operates under Unix, contains over thirty programs for analyzing text, including several which give an overview of the readability and overall style of the document.

Most of these programs work by comparing your writing with one or more dictionaries of questionable words or phrases, marking those it can recognize and which it feels can be improved.

Long sentences, past tense, awkward phrases, split infinitives, gender, cliches and jargon are flagged and suggestions made for improving them. Double words and punctuation, unbalanced brackets and quotation marks, and capitalization and punctuation errors are usually (but not always) spotted. All these programs provide a summary of writing styles, often with readability and comparative indexes.

A few programs, such as *Readability* and *PC Style*, analyze your text and measure its readability. These programs do not check for grammatical errors, and, rather than make specific suggestions for improving content, make only general suggestions for improving the overall readability of your writing style.

In the MS-DOS world the two best style and grammar checkers are *RightWriter* and *Grammatik II* (I wasn't impressed as much with *Punctuation and Style*, and *Electric Webster*). These two programs, although similar in some respects, have important differences.

The best readability program I have seen is appropriately titled *Readability* (*PC Style* also measures readability but is more limited in scope).

Style and Grammar Checkers

Electric Webster

Although once considered a good program in the CP/M environment, *Electric Webster* is essentially a spelling checker that just happens to include a style and grammar checker. In fact to use the grammar checker you first have to use the spelling checker. *Electric Webster* is somewhat dated — its talents as both a spelling checker and a style and grammar checker are limited compared to other dedicated programs. However, if you need a combination spelling and grammar checker, it might be all you need. It has a 50,000 word dictionary, and it looks for 22 types of grammatical problems, including passive voice, imprecise words, awkward constructions, and long phrases.

RightWriter

RightSoft, Inc., bills *RightWriter* (latest version is 2.1) as a “new software package that will help business people write more effective correspondence, reports, and manuals — an automatic document proofreader for the IBM PC and compatibles.”

Like (both *RightWriter* and *Grammatik II* would have caught this capitalization error) all good style and grammar checkers, *RightWriter* analyzes

documents for errors in grammar, usage, punctuation, and Style (however, all style and grammar checkers would miss *this* capitalization error since they don't recognize first-word capitalization as an error — they can't make that value judgment).

RightWriter points out wordy phrases, weak sentences, and overused words. For example, *RightWriter* suggests replacing “very unique” by “unique,” the phrase “in view of the fact that” by “since,” and “between you and I” by “between you and me.” Cliches, redundant phrases, slang, passive voice, and jargon are all flagged as being undesirable.

Recommendations are inserted directly into the document text, and a summary is added at the end. The summary is a measure of the document's overall readability (according to the grade level needed to understand it) and the strength of delivery. The summary also includes an analysis of sentence structure, and an alphabetical list of frequently misused words (this list can be customized by a companion program called *RightWords*).

There is virtually no learning curve in learning to use *RightWriter* since it can only be used one way — you type “right” followed by the name of the file to check and then wait for the program to check the document and prepare a marked up copy and a summary. You then go over the document and make any suggested changes which seem appropriate — there are no variables to consider and no parameters to change.

In fact, no provisions are made for customizing any of the parameters (except for the summary list of frequently misused words). For this reason *RightWriter* would appeal to beginners and those who simply wish to use a good style checker but don't want to spend the time and effort involved in learning how to customize programs. For those who have special needs and don't mind a steeper learning curve, *Grammatik II* would be their best choice.

Grammatik II

The CP/M version of *Grammatik* was the original microcomputer style checker. The MS-DOS version, *Grammatik II*, is significantly enhanced and offers increased power and versatility. I found *Grammatik II* a snap to use since I had made extensive use of the CP/M version. It is, however, a more difficult program to learn and use than *RightWriter*. Both *RightWriter* and *Grammatik II* are compatible with *Microsoft Word*, *WordPerfect*, *WordStar*, *MultiMate* and most other leading word processors.

Documentation for both programs are easy to follow, and explain the programs in detail. *Grammatik II* includes an excellent little pamphlet, "World's Shortest Writing Course — How to Write With a Personal Computer."

Although they perform similar functions, *Grammatik II* can be customized to reflect your writing style while *RightWriter* cannot. Since the (both programs would have caught the double words) phrases dictionary is an ASCII file, you can use a word processor to revise it (deleting phrases you're not likely to misuse and adding phrases that for you are a problem). You can even lace the program with criticisms of certain words and sentence structures that you wish to avoid.

Both programs provide an index of readability based mainly on sentence length and number of syllables. These readability scores give you a rough idea of the level of education necessary to understand the document. Improving readability by shortening sentences and using simpler, more direct words can make your writing more readable but not necessary more coherent (coherence, not readability, is more a measure of a writer's ability, but coherence and context cannot yet be measured electronically).

Thus, the major limitation of style checkers (this is to be expected since you can't program subjective judgment into a computer), is their inability

to recognize contextual errors. Style checkers can only suggest changes and should only be used as a guide — the final decision must always be yours.

Readability Programs

Although both *RightWriter* and especially *Grammatik II* analyze readability, there are two programs available just for this purpose.

PC Style

PC Style, a shareware program, analyzes readability based on the number of action verbs (the more the better), long words (the fewer the better) and long sentences (the fewer the better). Although *PC Style's* analysis is rather limited, for some it might be all they need to improve their writing.

Readability

Readability, a much more comprehensive and useful program than either *PC Style* or the readability features of any of the grammar and style checkers, analyzes your text according to the length of words, the length of sentences, and most importantly, the ratio of bricks (the 400 most common words in the English language) to mortar (all the other words).

Readability makes no attempt to analyze semantics or content, because it can't as yet, but it does analyze every word and sentence in your text and compares the resulting analysis with other pieces of writing (nine in all, ranging from young people's books through magazine feature stories to bureaucratic reports).

Readability breaks down your sentences into simple, normal, difficult, wordy, etc., depending on the number and type of words in the sentences. Especially useful is the breakdown of the sentences into the type of words used, whether

bricks or mortar. Bricks are the important words that are used to convey meaning. The short bridging words that tie everything together and make the sentences easier to understand are called mortar. You also get a list of the times you have used certain words, warnings about words that should be avoided, words that are often used incorrectly, etc. Using your word processing program, you can easily customize these comments by including words that you wish to keep an eye on.

Readability's usefulness is in pointing out pitfalls to avoid, such as too many long words, too many long sentences, monotonous word selection, and monotonous sentences. With it you can get some insight on how difficult or pompous your writing is, and if it's right for the audience you're writing for.

Summary

Which program should you use? It depends on your needs. The best overall program is *Grammatik II*. It does it all and you can tailor it to your needs. However, if you want the simplest program to use, then *RightWriter* might be a better choice. And if you're a seasoned writer and are mainly interested in analyzing your writing style, then *Readability* may have what you're looking for. But no matter which one you choose, your writing will benefit, and Aunt Bessie might even be able to understand your next letter.

Software Mentioned

Electric Webster

Cornucopia Software, Inc. PO Box 6111, Albany, CA 94706.

Grammatik II

Reference Software, 330 Townsend Street, Suite 135, San Francisco, CA 94107.

PC Style

Buttonware, Inc., PO Box 5786, Bellevue, WA 98006.

Readability

Scandinavian PC Systems, Inc., 9709 Eldwick Way, Potomac, MD 20854.

RightWriter

RightSoft, Inc., 2033 Wood Street, Suite 218, Sarasota, FL 33577.

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Manuscript Submissions Welcome

The *Newsletter* welcomes article submissions that pertain to word-processing, text-analysis, and research applications in professional writing situations, either corporate or academic. Also, hardware and software reviews are encouraged, but please contact Dr. Jim Schwartz, Hardware/Software Review Editor, **before** submitting them (call Jim at 605-394-1246). Manuscripts should be submitted on MS-DOS 5 1/4" floppy disks using *Aldus PageMaker*, *XEROX Ventura Publisher*, *WordPerfect*, *Microsoft Word*, or standard ASCII format. The Editors reserve the right to edit manuscripts if necessary. If you want your disk returned, please send enough postage to cover the return cost along with a self-addressed mailer. Address all correspondence to the Editors, *Research in Word Processing Newsletter*, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, 501 E. St. Joseph, Rapid City, SD 57701-3995. Jim may also be reached on *CompuServe* (70177,1154).

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November 1, 1988, is the deadline for 1000-word abstracts (6 copies) of proposed papers, software demonstrations, and poster sessions (and other sessions) for the combined 16th International ALLC Conference and the 9th ICCH Conference, to be held in Toronto on June 6-10, 1989. The conference is sponsored by the Association for Computers and the Humanities (ACH) and the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing (ALLC). In addition to presentations on scholarly or pedagogical applications of computers to text and publishing, papers on all aspects of computing in linguistics, ancient and modern languages and literature, history, philosophy, art, archeology, and music are invited for presentation at the conference. Contact Professor Ian Lancashire, ALLC-ICCH Conference, Centre for Computing in the Humanities, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1A5, or call (416) 978-4238.

Technical Communication Conference in Seattle

Seattle, Washington, is the site of IPPC 1988, or "On the Edge: A Pacific Rim Conference on Professional Technical Communication," on October 5-7, 1988. Sponsored by the Professional Communications Society (PCS) of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), a full-range of panel discussions, workshops, and papers will address the concerns of technical communicators, including word processing, desktop publishing, online research, and the like. Contact Jim Souther, 2508 102nd NE, Bellevue, WA 98004, or call (206) 454-0864.

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The Fourth Conference of the European Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics will be held April 10-12, 1989, in Manchester, England. Five-to-eight page summaries (6 copies) of possible papers should be sent by October 1, 1988, on any aspect of computational linguistics, including, but not limited to morphology, lexical semantics, computational models for the analysis and generation of language, speech analysis and synthesis, computational lexicography and lexicology, syntax and semantics, machine translation, computational aids to translation, natural language interfaces, knowledge representation and expert systems, and computer-assisted language learning. Contact Harold Somers, Centre for Computational Linguistics, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, Manchester, England M60 1 QD, or call (+44-61) 236-3311, ext. 2333.

Computer Using Educators Conference in San Jose

The 1988 CUE Conference will meet in San Jose, California, on October 21-22, 1988, offering a full-range of panels and papers for secondary and primary teachers using computers in the classroom, including word processing in writing courses. Contact Pat Cleland, Executive Director for Computer Using Educators, P.O. Box 2087, Menlo Park, CA 94026, or call (415) 328-2248.

American Society for Information Science to Meet in Atlanta

The ASIS 51st Annual Meeting will take place October 23-27, 1988, in Atlanta, Georgia. The conference will provide scholars information about technological developments in libraries, including CD-ROM, database searching, electronic archives, computer-based research, information utilities, hypermedia, and electronic publishing. Contact the American Society for Information Science, 1424 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20036.

Publishing Conference in New York

The 1988 Folio:Show, the 14th Annual Publishing Conference and Exposition, will meet in New York City on October 31-November 4, 1988, and will offer numerous presentations dealing with computer applications to publishing and journalism, including a major emphasis on desktop publishing. The business concerns of magazine, newsletter, and book publishers will be addressed along with the needs of individual writers in those markets. Contact the Folio:Show/Fall, 911 Hope Street, Six River Bend Center, Box 4949, Stamford, CT 06907-0949, or call (203) 358-0594.

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