

Study: Spell-check can worsen writing

Friday, March 14, 2003 Posted: 9:38 AM EST (1438 GMT)

PITTSBURGH, Pennsylvania (AP) -- How might you drag a good writer's work down to the level of a lesser scribe? Try the spell-check button.

A study at the University of Pittsburgh indicates spell-check software may level the playing field between people with differing levels of language skills, hampering the work of writers and editors who place too much trust in the software.

In the study, 33 undergraduate students were asked to proofread a one-page business letter -- half of them using Microsoft Word with its squiggly red and green lines underlining potential errors.

The other half did it the old-fashioned way, using only their heads.

How they fared

Without grammar or spelling software, students with higher SAT verbal scores made, on average, five errors, compared with 12.3 errors for students with lower scores.

Using the software, students with higher verbal scores reading the same page made, on average, 16 errors, compared with 17 errors for students with lower scores.

Dennis Galletta, a professor of information systems at the Katz Business School, said spell-checking software is so sophisticated that some have come to trust it too thoroughly.

"It's not a software problem, it's a behavior problem," he said.

Not meant to fix everything

Microsoft technical specialist Tim Pash said grammar and spelling technology is meant to help writers and editors, not solve all their problems.

The study found the software helped students find and correct errors in the letter, but in some cases they also changed phrases or sentences flagged by the software as grammatically suspicious, even though they were correct.

For instance, the letter included a passage that said, "Michael Bales would be the best candidate. Bales has proven himself in similar rolls."

The software -- picking up on the last "s" in "Bales" -- suggested changing the verb from "has" to "have," as if it were a plural. Meanwhile, the spell-check ignored "rolls," which should have been "roles."

Richard Stern, a computer and electrical engineer at Carnegie Mellon University specializing in speech-recognition technology, said grammar and spelling software will never approach the complexity of the human mind.

"Computers can decide the likelihood of correct speech, but it's a percentage game," he said.



NO SPELL-CHECK HERE: First grader Devin Dunham practices his spelling words under the gaze of a volunteer on his school's playground in Vincennes, Indiana.

**"Computers can decide the likelihood of correct speech, but it's a percentage game."
-- Richard Stern, Carnegie Mellon University**