Exercises
Microsoft Word grammar checker (MSGC)

We have compiled these exercises and classroom activities to encourage students to become more self-reflective, confident, and critical writers when using grammar- and style-checking tools.

Some exercises have been designed with a specific tool in mind, while others are more generic. Most can be adapted for use with any other writing tool, as long as the two tools fulfil similar functions. Some activities may work better as individual student tasks; others as small group exercises, or even class-wide discussions. Again, feel free to adapt the format to match your needs.

While we created most of these activities ourselves, we also borrowed some suggestions from other teachers and scholars of writing who were happy to share their ideas. In addition, encourage your students to freely experiment with these tools as a way of learning about each tool's capacities and limitations.

Learning to correct spelling & grammar mistakes without the MSGC

individual 👤 group 👥

Teach your students to first write and edit with the MSGC disabled. Afterwards, allow them to compare their corrections (or their peers' corrections) with those identified by the MSGC. Warn your students in advance about the limitations of the spelling and grammar checker. Discuss any disparities between what the student/peer/tutor thinks about an alleged mistake and what the MSGC says.

Becoming aware of reliance of auto-correct and real-time editing

individual 👤

Have your students type up a small assignment while the MSGC is turned off. Tell them they are not allowed to edit while typing (so no using the Backspace/'Delete button!). Follow this exercise with a discussion of the difficulties encountered.

Additionally, you might ask the students to write an assignment by hand (without the use of any digital devices). Follow that with a discussion of how different writing instruments affect the processes of thinking and composing.

Engaging MS Word in creative writing experiments

individual 👤

Encourage your students to experiment with MS Word as the platform for writing. Do this by asking them to use MS Word for composing a text that does not fit the standard template of writing, e.g., concrete poetry or fictional SMS message exchanges between themselves and their peers or family. Ask them to reflect on how MS Word's writing environment (created predominantly for business communication) constrains or otherwise affects more creative and informal kinds of writing.

Exploring the relationship between form and content

individual 👤   group 👥   classroom 👥

Provoke your students' thinking about the relationship between design and text, or form and content by asking them to pay attention to the templates offered by MS Word. How do the former affect the latter?

As an experiment, show them a badly written complaint letter that has been created using an MS Word template for formal letters. Ask them what's wrong with the letter and whether it breaks any formal communication rules. They are likely to first spot small formatting errors (words written in all caps or misspelled words), while ignoring the inappropriate style and tone, and the messy structure of the letter.

Questioning the authority behind MSGC rules

classroom 👥

Encourage your students to question the rules of style, grammar and convention, and the origins and sustainability of prescriptivism in language. Ask them what constitutes authority in language learning, and whether a tool like the MSGC is authoritative.

Discuss what the phrase "standard English" might encompass: who created it; whom does it serve; and how justifiable is its dominance in the context of the contemporary English-speaking world?

Using readability function for revision

individual 👤   group 👥

Carl Whitman recommends investigating MS Word readability scores as a way of prompting revision at the sentence or paragraph level. To see if shorter words and sentences really result in a more readable text, Norman Otto Stockmeyer also advises putting the readability function to test. Encourage your students to perform similar experiments with texts of various types.

Rethinking language conventions with MS Word

classroom 👥

Activity suggested by Alex Vernon in his article "Computerized Grammar Checkers 2000":

Observe "the inextricable link of the programs' checking options with certain styles of writing." Discuss "how rhetorical context determines grammar and style expectations and standards" and how "these language practices and standards aren't absolute." Discuss "what styles the word-processing software of our choice employs, the checking options it considers appropriate for that style, and the implications thereof." Let students "challeng[e] the assumption of a universal student/academic discourse – as if the conventions of business communication and poetry explication are the same…"

(Re-published with the author's permission.)

Revising and editing with MSGC (multiple ways to experiment and explore)

individual 👤 group 👥 classroom 👥

Activities suggested by [Alex Vernon](#) in his article "Computerized Grammar Checkers 2000":

- "Ask students to brainstorm other possible checking options, other styles, and the checking options appropriate for that style.

- Have students, either individually or in small groups, articulate responses to program feedback to their own writing. Students could present their responses either in writing (in a separate document, or in annotations) or orally. Having students work together especially helps students decipher incorrect and misleading program feedback.

- Task students to run Grammar-as-you-go on a completed text and – since the GAYG function simply underlines suspect constructions – to address the flagged items without accessing the checker's feedback (by clicking the right mouse button). An improved sentence makes the underlining go away. This is a version […] for marking the text without identifying the problem, thereby teaching students to learn to edit themselves. It also avoids the confusion of misleading feedback altogether.

- Focus on a particular issue by having students check their papers with only one checking option (or several options that look for the same essential issue), as described with "wordiness" above. Increase the number of issues checked as the semester progresses.

- Ask students to write "bad" sentences, either to successfully trigger the checker or fool it.

- Hold contests, pitting human checkers against one another and against the computer.

- Have the computer and the students independently search for subject-verb agreement errors.

- Compare the rules of the grammar checker with the discussions of the same issues in your writing handbook. If you choose an issue on which the sources disagree, you have instantly challenged any monolithic sense of language use students might possess, and have taken a solid step toward enabling students to analyze the rules, the rhetorical situation of their writing, and deciding for themselves (not to mention just getting the handbook off the shelf)."

(Re-published with the author's permission.)

Investigating the MS Word features

individual 👤 group 👥 classroom 👥

These activities, used by Tim McGee and Patricia Ericsson and recounted in their 2002 article "The politics of the program: ms word as the invisible grammarian", can be adapted to suit the current versions of MS Word:

"If teachers are confident that the software can't really be broken (and it can't—Microsoft has made sure of that), then we can feel free to ask students to help us investigate it. Whatever age students we teach, many know more about playing with computers than we do, and they are usually more eager to do it. We can ask them to look at the options that the MSGC offers. Once they are inside the software, we can encourage questions about the various grammar, usage, and style choices that Microsoft offers. We think that more

than a few students will notice that under the 'Formal' option in word 97, the checker has all but three possibilities turned on—and one possibility that is not on is to check for gender-specific words. If we ask them to check into the explanations of the grammar and style options, they can check to see if their notions of 'Commonly confused words' match up with the ones Microsoft provides."

(Re-published with the authors' permission.)