

Grammarly's Place in the Writing Process

As with any tool used to improve writing mechanics, Grammarly can be an effective companion to the writing process, but it does not replace the human component (the writer) or the need to carefully proofread during the revision and editing stages of writing. Grammarly belongs to the family of *automated written corrective feedback* (AWCF) software that is powered by *artificial intelligence* (AI). AI mimics the way a human would perform a task by using algorithms to teach computers to understand and process human language for improving writing mechanics. Similar AI programs include the spelling and grammar-checking tools within MS Word, Trinka, Linguix, ProWritingAid, Quillbot, and Ginger. AWCF software gives users feedback in real-time to help make written communication clearer and free from grammatical errors. These digital writing tools check spelling, grammar, clarity, word choice, and plagiarism and offer suggested corrections.

The perception can be that AWCF tools like Grammarly will save students the time required to carefully proofread, revise, and edit drafts. Research studies continue to confirm that writers cannot depend solely on AI programs and that such tools cannot substitute for proofreading or having another set of qualified human eyes proof writers' work. Grammarly can be a beneficial screening step during the initial proofreading process, but writers using Grammarly will want to be aware of those areas uncovered by research studies where it performs inconsistently or inaccurately.

Where Grammarly Performs Consistently Well

- Spelling errors
- Missing words
- Capitalization errors
- Passive voice
- Usage issues with *effect* vs. *affect*
- Pronoun-antecedent agreement problems
- Double negatives
- Culturally inappropriate wording/politically incorrect language

Where Grammarly Falls Short (Performs Inconsistently or Inaccurately)

- Improperly punctuated quotes
- Commas that set off parenthetical phrases (interrupters)
- Comma splices
- Articles
- Prepositions
- Verb tense shifts
- Subjunctive voice
- Parallelism issues

Grammarly as a Resource, Not a Replacement

The human writer serves as the foundation of the entire writing process and remains the central core of each stage of that process. While many useful tools can assist the writer during the writing stages, these resources are intended as supplemental companions to revising and editing of text, rather than meant as replacements for human writers and editors. The *revising step* allows you to reshape and improve the content, organization, and flow of what you have written during the drafting step. Therefore, careful proofreading during the revision stage becomes even more critical and should never be replaced by the exclusive use of AI software to do the work of improving upon what was written during the drafting stage.

The Research: Primary Shortfalls of Grammarly

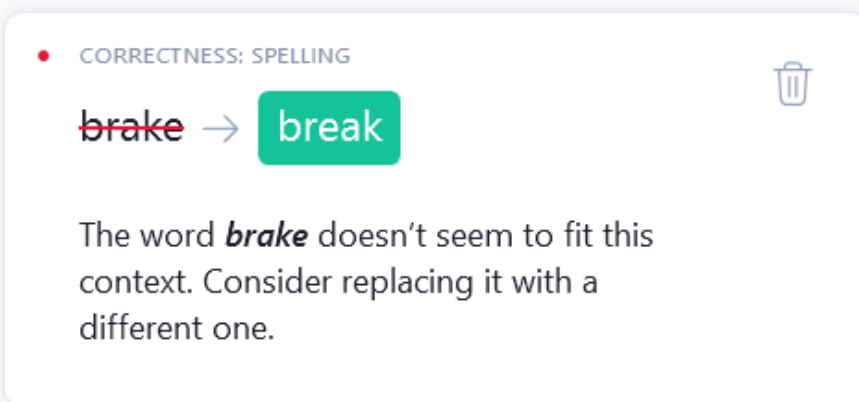
- ▶ Grammarly flags perfectly grammatical sentences as having errors 10% of the time (Perelman, 2016).
- ▶ Grammarly uses technical language in its explanations, which can discourage students who do not have prior knowledge to apply. The app cannot connect sentence-level issues to higher-order assessments of structure and clarity (Dembsey, 2017).
- ▶ Grammarly should be used in conjunction with input from a tutor, as the program is not accurate enough for independent use to be justified (O’Neill & Russell, 2019).
- ▶ Grammarly feedback overwhelmed students who were less experienced writers, and they tended to accept inaccurate feedback related to unfamiliar grammar rules. These students said they “will just accept the feedback” if unfamiliar with the rule and not bother to read explanations when not immediately clear on why something was flagged as wrong (Koltovskaia, 2020).
- ▶ Students who used both Grammarly and a writing center saw the benefits of each feedback source and chose which one to use based on their stage in the writing process. Students relied more on the writing center feedback for higher-order concerns and used Grammarly for final paper editing (Zhang et al., 2020).
- ▶ Although Grammarly performed better than MS Word, it still flagged less than 50% of the errors in the writing samples tested. Researchers concluded that grammar checkers such as Grammarly could not be relied upon as the sole means to provide comprehensive feedback on student compositions (John & Woll, 2020).
- ▶ Grammarly is more appropriate for surface-level errors, such as prepositions, articles, and noun-verb agreement, while instructors are needed for issues related to awkward phrasing and cohesion (Bailey & Lee, 2020).
- ▶ While Grammarly achieved the highest overall accuracy of the five grammar-checking apps tested (at only 44.4%), none of the apps were able to achieve accuracy higher than 11% in cases of sentence structure errors and no more than 25% for semantic errors. The results of the study suggested that relying solely upon grammar-checking apps would leave the majority of writing errors undetected (Sahu et al., 2020).

- Software developer Jacob Bergdahl (2020) discovered a flaw in Grammarly where a blogger had submitted a sentence about human behavior when playing racing video games. Grammarly incorrectly proposed replacing “brake” for “break,” because it did not understand the context (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Incorrect Suggested Revision Involving Context

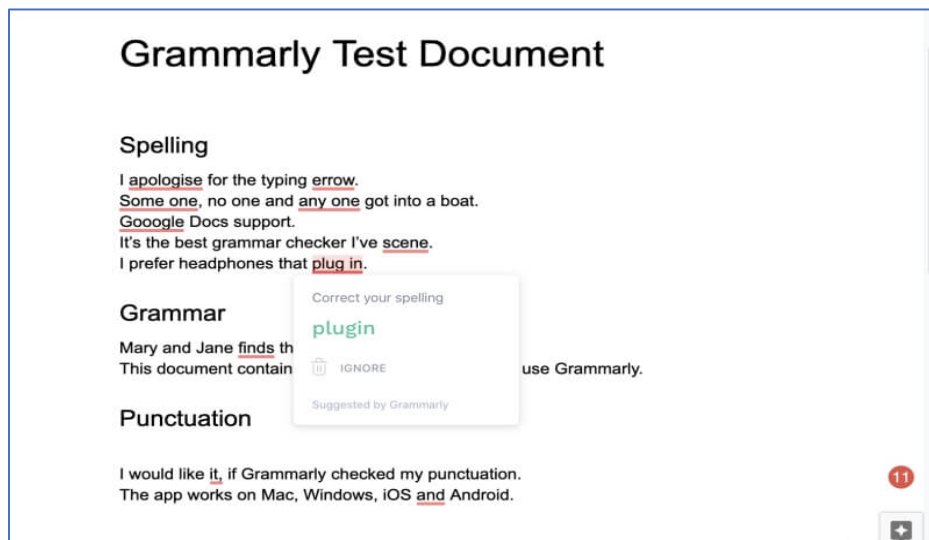
friends to each other. One of your friends may brake early when a turn is approaching, while another breaks late. One might ram their competitors, while another friend might opt for cleaner



Also, in the sentence “I prefer headphones that plug in,” Grammarly suggested replacing “plug in” with the noun “plugin.” In the intended context, the original verb was the correct usage.

Figure 2

Incorrect Replacement Involving Context



► One of the main reasons a qualified human editor is preferable to AI software lies in the area of coherence of facts in writing. A writer may state contradicting statements in the same text, but if the text is grammatically correct, with proper syntax and correct vocabulary, Grammarly will not detect the discrepancy in facts. Only skilled human eyes would discern the contradictions. AI programs are not intended as standalone editors, but rather as complements to human editors for the purpose of fine-tuning texts (Majewski, 2020).

Role of the Writing Center

Grammar-checking programs like Grammarly find their greatest value during the fourth stage of the writing process, *editing*. This critical step in the writing process also allows you to improve upon word choice and writing style. Grammarly can help detect many but not all grammatical and spelling errors. Careful proofreading remains central to the editing process to uncover grammar and formatting errors and to confirm that all sources are cited properly. The LU Online Writing Center and Residential Writing Center offer our students constructive feedback and writing resources to improve writing skills in ways that no AI program can replicate.

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