USE GRAMMARLY LIKE A WRITING AND MEDIA CENTER PRO.

Grammarly is Iowa State’s latest resource to help you become a stronger writer. However, Grammarly isn’t perfect — and you need to know its limitations and strengths. The WMC’s Communication Consultants, working alongside composition and linguistics experts, have compiled these five pro tips to integrate Grammarly into your revising process.

1. Turn off Grammarly until you want to check for correctness.

Your brain translates your ideas into the words you want to write very, very quickly.

However, you can only hold the words you want to write in your mind for a short period of time. These short periods of composition are what linguists call “p-bursts” (Chenoweth and Hayes, “The Inner Voice in Writing”).

Grammarly, by comparison, is slow. It constantly sends your text to its servers and back to your computer, delaying your feedback by as much as 20 seconds.

Because p-bursts occur in the rapidly decaying “working memory,” interruptions like Grammarly’s corrective feedback will make you forget what you were composing.

Remember: “If you have to cogitate, deactivate” — Jim Ranalli, ISU Linguist

2. Before editing, learn Grammarly’s color-coded error categories

Correctness
Finds misspelled words, determiners and articles (a/an/the/this, etc.), subject-verb agreement, comma misuse, and more conventional mistakes.

Grammarly is built on massive databases and historical grammar rules. For simpler sentence structures in non-creative genres, Grammarly will tell you how standard academic English should look.

Clarity
Flags passive voice, wordy sentences, and “hard-to-read” text.

Grammarly prefers active voice and simple sentences.

It will ask you to limit consecutive prepositional phrases, split sentences in two, and remove excessive phrases (e.g., “in fact” is often flagged).

Engagement
Recommends for you to choose words that are not commonly misused or overused (e.g., if you use “important,” it will suggest “essential”).

It will also note how many times you use the same word and it will suggest synonyms, regardless of context.

Delivery
Gives feedback on how hedging, politeness, formality, slang, and usage conventions (e.g., using future tense or personal pronouns) might sound to a reader.

By adjusting the document settings for audience, formality, and domain, Grammarly will change its expectations for your delivery.
3. Follow Grammarly’s grammar and punctuation suggestions; question Grammarly’s style and vocabulary suggestions

**GRAMMAR:** Research suggests Grammarly is generally good at detecting grammar and punctuation errors. But, no one really knows where Grammarly’s assumptions about “good writing” come from. Many legitimate stylistic and creative sentence structures are flagged as incorrect (Perelman, “Grammar Checkers Do Not Work”).

**STYLE:** It inaccurately (or questionably) suggests the best vocabulary words, the proper professional tone, or the appropriate style for your prose. Be wary of its style suggestions.

**VOICE:** Grammarly prefers active voice at all times. Many contexts and genres prefer passive. Neither passive nor active voice work best ALL the time. Use your best judgment.

Remember: Use Grammarly’s feedback judiciously. You have four options for each suggestion: accept Grammarly’s change, read the “learn more” tab, dismiss Grammarly’s suggestion, or revise on your own.

4. Use Grammarly to learn more about your grammar and usage knowledge.

+ To learn more about your writing, click on Grammarly’s “Overall Score / See Performance” icon.
+ Don’t put too much stock in Grammarly’s score. This is not an accurate reflection of how real readers like your teachers or bosses will assess you.
+ Grammarly’s full report summarizes your errors into a convenient graph. Focus on the “Correctness” errors.
+ For practice, pick one error, like “comma misuses” or “incorrect noun number,” and identify similarities between the sentences that have the same error.

5. If you don’t understand Grammarly’s feedback, schedule a session at the Writing and Media Center.

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+ Composition rules are really hard to learn on your own.
+ Grammarly tries to explain rules, but several composition and writing center scholars argue that Grammarly explains grammar rules with unnecessary complexity (Dempsey, “Closing the Grammarly Gaps”; Galletta et al., “Does Spell-Checking Software Need a Warning Label?”).
+ WMC Communication Consultants are trained to meet you where you are in your writing journey, including where your grammar and usage knowledge is.
+ Communication Consultants can translate, critique, explain, and build upon Grammarly’s feedback.

A digital version of this handout can be found at wmc.dso.iastate.edu/resources