Patricia J. McAlexander

CHECKING THE GRAMMAR CHECKER: INTEGRATING GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION WITH WRITING

ABSTRACT: *In his* Grammar and the Teaching of Writing, *Rei Noguchi recommends integrating grammar instruction with writing instruction and teaching only the most vital terms and the most frequently made errors. I found that I could follow this advice in my academic assistance composition classes by giving a short course in grammar followed by a grammar checker project. The project provided a review of the grammar lessons, applied many grammar rules specifically to the students' writing, and taught students the effective use of the grammar checker.*

Today we find in many college composition classrooms a changing attitude toward teaching grammar. Research during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s had suggested that grammar instruction, traditionally a major part of composition classes, had a negligible effect on student writing (Hillocks). At the same time, a large number of English teachers began to regard grammar and mechanical errors as superficial and unimportant: content (particularly self-expressive aspects) and organization were the major elements of writing. Thus, during these years a "new paradigm" of teaching developed, one which often neglected the correctness of a final *product* to focus almost exclusively on the writing *process* (Hairston).

Rei Noguchi, however, finds problems with this approach. In his 1991 *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing*, Noguchi argues that style is "just as global . . . as organization and content" (13) and that teaching grammar and mechanics can help students improve their style. Further, correctness is important, Noguchi points out, since "many readers, particularly in business and other professional settings, perceive . . . [errors] as major improprieties" (14). A reason for the "negligible" effect of much grammar instruction, Noguchi speculates, is that "students, though possessing sufficient knowledge of formal grammar, fail

Patricia J. McAlexander *is an Associate Professor in the English component of the Division of Academic Assistance at the University of Georgia, where she teaches courses in composition, grammar, and report writing. Her articles have appeared in such publications as* The Journal of Basic Writing, Research and Teaching in Developmental Education, *and* The Rhetoric Review.

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to apply that knowledge to their writing" (7). His conclusion advises moderation between extremes: composition faculty should teach grammar—but not at length and not for its own sake. Rather, they should integrate grammar instruction with writing instruction and teach only the most vital terms and the most frequently made errors (17-18).

Grammar Checkers: A Tool for Applying Noguchi's Advice

I consider Noguchi's advice sound, and today modern technology has provided a widely available tool that can be used to reinforce that link between grammar and writing: the grammar checker. Grammar checkers, now a part of most word processing programs, flag what they perceive as stylistic, grammatical, or mechanical problems in a document by highlighting or underlining them, and upon request comment on, explain, and sometimes suggest corrections for each problem. As a teacher of what is sometimes referred to as "remedial" English at the University of Georgia, I discovered that many of my students, no doubt concerned about their writing ability, were regularly using grammar checkers. A survey of my three composition classes at the beginning of the 1999 fall semester revealed that 40 of the 51 students, nearly 80%, used the grammar checker when writing—16 always, 24 sometimes, only 11 never. Is using a grammar checker a constructive and appropriate response to eliminating error? Not according to many publications on the subject. Several studies argue that, because grammar checkers have a low rate of identifying errors and because they erroneously flag and "correct" a number of already correct constructions, using them is, in fact, detrimental, especially for inexperienced or weak writers. These studies contend that the devices frustrate students, make them passive, isolate them from real human experience, distract them from the content of their papers, and teach them little (Gerrard; Pennington; Fischer and Grusin). Apparently, the authors of these studies would advise students—and certainly basic writers—never to use the grammar checker.

Much depends, of course, on the definition of "basic writers." Very inexperienced writers, such as those described throughout Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*, indeed may not be ready to use grammar checkers effectively. However, an increasing number of writers placed in compensatory composition classes today can be described as "intermediate," and this was true of my students. They were regularly admitted into the University of Georgia, many of them with SAT scores of about 1000. Student placement in academic assistance writing (non-credit pre-freshman composition) was based first, on their performance on an objective test covering grammar and style and second—for those who scored below a certain level—on a sixty-minute essay. Approximately 15% of incoming freshmen score low on the

objective test, and 25% of this group place into academic assistance English because of their scores on the essay.

These students clearly did need to improve their writing before entering "regular" composition, but as their SAT scores and admission to the University show, they had already achieved a certain level of competence. Not only were many already using grammar checkers, but, like most young people, they seemed motivated by technology. Further, I realized that grammar checkers, which I myself had once scorned, were improving—finally becoming, in the words of one expert, "worth using" (Lowe, 36). Thus I decided that, rather than simply advising students to ignore the grammar checker, I would give them instruction in using the tool efficiently. My experience doing so suggests that such instruction alleviates or eliminates negative effects. Further, using the grammar checker in the context of the composition classroom increases the students' knowledge of grammar. In this article, I describe a grammar checker project that I have begun assigning in my academic assistance composition courses.

Background for Instructors

To teach students about using the grammar checker, instructors must themselves understand the nature of the device and its resulting strengths and weaknesses. A number of sources provide material on this subject: a few of the more recent include Johnson (1992), Major (1994), Beals (1998), Hult and Huckin (1999), and the anonymous "Why Can't My Grammar Checker Automatically Correct My Mistakes?" (1999). Such sources plus my own experience yielded a number of insights. First, grammar checkers are fundamentally pattern matchers; hence they are most reliably helpful on formulaic problems, such as subject-verb agreement, active versus passive voice, excessively long sentences, fragments, comma splices, apostrophes. Sometimes they can also recognize such errors as pronoun agreement, semi-colon use, and parallelism. Second, checkers cannot catch errors that relate to content or meaning, because, of course, they cannot read for meaning. Thus they can do nothing with pronoun reference or modifier errors, and little with commas other than with formulaic "which-that" clauses and omitted commas after introductory transitional words and phrases.

According to some studies, checkers can flag correctly only about one third of a paper's problems—but that is not a bad percentage, given the complexity of language. Moreover, checkers usually offer some setting options that may actually increase this percentage. For example, Microsoft Word can be set to catch the omission of the comma before the "and" in lists and the placement of commas or periods outside of quotation marks. In addition, Word can be set to a particular level of

language—such as standard or formal. The formal setting will flag "errors" traditionally associated with academic writing, such as contractions, while the standard setting does not. Thus I advise my students to use the formal setting when writing college papers.

Once the grammar checker flags an error, its challenge is to suggest a specific and accurate correction. When the error is very formulaic, it can do so. For example, when it finds an apostrophe error as in the phrase "families upbringing," it can suggest, "Change to family's or families'." Often, however, checkers can give only a generic comment on an error, such as "sentence structure" or "passive voice." The wording of these comments varies among the different grammar checking programs. For the same error, for instance, some checkers will say "fragment," others "no main clause." Some say "No suggestions," others, "Consider revising." At times checkers misread patterns and as a result, flag and/or correct erroneously. For example, when a semi-colon was misused in "The next sentence; however, is harder," the Word 97 checker read the first three words as a complete sentence with a subject-verb agreement error and suggested that the writer say, "next sentences or nexts sentence." Grammar checkers may be improving (as shown by the fact that Word 2000 did not make this error), but misreading will never be totally eradicated.

One can see that students must know some basics of grammar and mechanics in order to use a grammar checker effectively. They need, for instance, to know which apostrophe suggestion to select and what "passive voice," "fragment," or "main clause" means. Second, they need to understand the overall nature of the grammar checker—the way its "mind" works—in order to use the tool effectively. Finally, they need enough self-confidence to reject incorrect flagging and advice as well as suggestions that do not reflect their own style. The grammar checker project deals with all three needs.

Grammar Checker Project: Part I

First, throughout the semester, I gave intermittent instruction in basic grammar terms and errors, with short quizzes on what I considered the most frequent and important errors. My choices were based in part on the standards of the university's regular freshman English course, which gives an "editing failure" grade of 20 to any paper that contains, in any combination, four of the following: fragment, fused sentence, comma splice, agreement (pronoun and subject-verb) error, and apostrophe error. I also taught punctuation (to help the students avoid those major sentence errors), pronoun reference and modifier errors (to improve clarity of writing), and parallelism (to improve style).

Then, toward the end of the semester, I assigned the grammar

checker project, designed to show students the nature of the checker and thereby to raise their efficiency and confidence in using it. The project had two parts. For Part I, I gave each student four to seven sentences that illustrated a specific type of error taught earlier in the semester. (Sometimes the sentences were from the actual quizzes the students had taken.) I also gave the students an answer key showing how to correct each sentence. The students were to "quiz" the grammar checker by typing the sentences on a word processor and seeing what its checker flagged and corrected. Then they were to report to the class on the grammar checker's "scores" in catching the error and giving advice. Most of the students used Microsoft Word 97, which was on my own office computer and in the campus computer labs. (See Appendix I for the assignment sheet and a sample of assigned sentences with Word 97's responses.)

Although Part I was designed to be not scientific research but a learning experience for the students, the "quiz" results did indicate fairly accurately the nature of the grammar checker: they showed that the checkers are strong in identifying many formulaic errors but cannot deal with errors involving meaning and content. Word 97's checker identified 60% to 100% of errors with fragments, comma splices, commas in lists (when set to do so), subject-verb agreement, passive voice, and apostrophes. It identified fewer errors—40% to 60%—in parallelism, colon use, pronoun agreement, and commas with interrupters (it can recognize the formulaic which-that errors). However, it caught only 25% of pronoun case errors and none of the errors involving modifiers, pronoun reference, the dash, and fused sentences. (See Appendix II.) When students gave their reports on the results of their grammar checker tests, we projected the "tested" sentences and the checker's responses on a large computer monitor for all to see, and discussed why the computer performed as it did. Through these discussions, students not only reviewed basic grammar errors, but also developed a greater awareness of what kinds of errors the checker could and could not identify and correct.

Grammar Checker Project: Part II

For Part II of the assignment, students analyzed the advice the grammar checker did give: as they worked on a word-processed paper outside of class, each student was asked to write out three examples of the checker's advice and describe his or her reaction to/use of the advice. Finally, they were to write a brief paragraph on the helpfulness of the grammar checker and how the tool might best be used. (See Appendix III.) When I had read their responses, I summarized them for my classes.

Most of the checker's responses as described by the students fell into three main categories: 1) incorrectly flagged errors and (of course) incorrect advice; 2) correctly flagged errors but "vague" advice ; and 3) correctly flagged errors and specific, correct advice.

Incorrectly flagged errors and incorrect advice. Many of the incorrectly flagged errors were obvious to the students. For example, in a sentence referring to a child's poverty, the student wrote, "It is a part of who he is." The checker said to change "it" to "he." The student of course knew that this response was not correct. In another situation, the student wrote, "People like Gregory are often misunderstood." The checker suggested changing "are" to "is." Again, the student easily rejected the advice. And when the checker wrongly advised putting a semicolon in place of a comma (as it did in the sentence "To grammar check an entire document, click on the ABC icon,") students generally remembered their lessons on semicolons and knew the checker was wrong. In these situations, most students simply moved right on: "All you have to do is click on 'ignore' and you're on your way." At other times they recognized that they had done something to make the computer misread and worked to fix the underlying problem. For example, a student wrote, "Despite all that we did to impress those who sang the National Anthem with us every weekday morning we had no effect." The computer flagged "that" and suggested putting a comma after the word. The student knew this advice was wrong, but then realized that the place she needed a comma was after "morning." "I felt the computer had helped me discover that there was a problem," she wrote. "It just did not know how to correct it."

Correctly flagged errors but "vague" advice. In category 2, the checker correctly flagged errors but its advice was not specific, often because all it did was describe the error in general technical terms. For the sentence, "Still he is not accepted by his society," for instance, all that the checker said was "passive voice." Similarly, the checker might simply tell students that they have a "split infinitive" or a problem with "sentence structure." To correct such problems, students need to know the meaning of the grammar checker's term; then they must determine whether they want to change their sentence and, if so, how to change it. In such cases, Microsoft Word's Help option—the "?" in the bottom left-hand corner of the grammar checker box—can be useful. When writers click on the "?," they get a brief rule and/or definition of the grammar term used in the advice, often with examples. Perhaps to enliven the images on the screen, this information is presented by an animated cartoon figure—a wriggling paper clip with bulging eyes. (For an illustration of the information and imagery offered by the "?," see Appendix IV.) Of course, this Help function does not solve all problems. Students must understand the additional information (which sometimes includes further grammatical terms), and they still must

determine whether the advice is relevant and apply it to their own sentence.

While my students sometimes complained when the checker correctly flagged errors without giving specific advice, it is interesting that teachers often use a similar method of marking errors in papers to be revised. Rather than "correct" each error so that the student passively copies the correction, the teacher merely labels the type of error and sometimes gives a grammar text reference. Students must correct the error on their own, looking up the rule if necessary. This marking technique can initially frustrate students, but if they are able to correct their errors independently, learning is more likely to occur. Likewise, although my students were often at first frustrated when the computer simply labeled an error with a grammatical term, they soon realized that it was not difficult to edit the flagged text. Some, before editing, remembered the term; some referred to the Help option and/or asked me what the term meant; some simply changed the flagged sentence so that the computer would accept it and recognized that the wording had in fact improved. A student who had written "There is no excuse for parents to not be involved in their children's lives" did not know what a "split infinitive" was, but changed the verb to "not to be involved." The computer accepted this wording, and the student acknowledged that the sentence did in fact sound better. And later when he asked me, "What's a split infinitive?," he was obviously interested in my answer. (I was glad for his interest, but did remind him of the Help option.)

Correctly flagged errors and specific, correct advice. Students prefer, of course, category 3: correctly flagged errors and specific, accurate advice. Even in this category, however, the students cannot accept all advice: they must decide whether the computer is in fact right, and, often, choose between suggestions the computer gives. A surprising amount of the computer advice fell into category 3, and most of my students recognized from our grammar lessons when the advice was correct and which suggestion to choose. When a student omitted an apostrophe, for example, and was given a choice of two ways to fix the error ("parents'" or "parent's"), he knew which to choose because he remembered the "rule." Similarly, when a student wrote, "Gregory's attempt to look clean and prosperous were not convincing," the checker told him to say either "attempt was" or "attempts were." The student immediately knew he wanted "attempt was," commenting, "Good advice." At other times, especially with stylistic advice, students tended to rely on the "sound" of the sentence, usually correctly. When the checker told a student to leave out the final "with" in the sentence "They want to play with children with whom they feel most comfortable with," she simply did so, recognizing that "it sounds less repetitious."

Finally, when students needed an explanation of the checker's advice and clicked on the "?," they often learned new lessons. When the checker said to add hyphens in the phrase "seven year old child" ("Generally hyphenate a number and its unit of measurement if they modify another noun," explains the Help option), the student followed this advice, commenting, "I didn't know that much about hyphens." Her past tense suggests that she now knew more. Reinforcement of previously taught rules and learning of unfamiliar ones resulted from advice in this third category, as did student awareness of wordy sentences and style in general. In fact, after the checker had repeatedly given them the same rules and stylistic advice, students often did not even request the computer's comments; they saw the underlining of their text and recognized the problem themselves.

Effects of the Grammar Checker Project

Overall, the students' efficiency and confidence grew as they became more familiar with checker behavior. Their Part II paragraphs on the use of the grammar checker were mostly positive. One student wrote, "I think the grammar checker is an awesome tool. Often I find myself overlooking careless errors. The grammar checker reminds me of those errors." Another student stated, "I have really enjoyed learning through the mistakes that Microsoft Word catches. Lately I have become more aware of the common grammatical errors I tend to make and have really cut down on these particular errors." Most students, however, also expressed awareness that the checkers were not perfect and that, as with any machine, they, the users, ultimately took responsibility: "One needs to use his/her own knowledge"; "One should not do everything the grammar checker suggests nor should one ignore it"; "Creativity and the laws of grammar [ultimately] rest on our shoulders."

Overall, I felt that my students had proved the articles on grammar checkers overly pessimistic in claiming that the devices make students passive, isolate them from real human experience, frustrate them, distract them from the content of their papers, and teach them little. As the student comments show, these writers were not passive, but active, in applying the checker's advice. They certainly did not seem to feel isolated: when necessary, they turned to humans (like me) with questions. Further, as these students became more familiar with the grammar checker, its abilities, and its language, they experienced fewer episodes of frustration. I saw no deterioration of content; the one definite change in the essays was that they had fewer errors. Most important, learning was taking place: as the checker applied grammatical terms and rules directly to their writing, students *recognized* rules they

had not *recalled* while composing, and were introduced as well to new rules and terms relevant to their work.

In summary, by the end of the semester, I realized that the grammar checker project had increased the students' understanding not only of the grammar checker but of grammar in general. I realized also that the project embodied the instructional technique recommended by Noguchi, for using the checker after a brief course of grammar instruction linked many aspects of that instruction directly to the writing process.

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takes?" *English Plus+ News* (1999). April 28, 1999 *http://englishplus.com/news/news0299.htm.*

APPENDIX I

GRAMMAR CHECKER ASSIGNMENT

Directions: These directions are for MICROSOFT WORD, so if possible, use WORD for this assignment. Microsoft Word 97 is available in most computer labs, including the Learning Center in 132 Milledge Hall. Program your personal computer or the one you are using for this assignment (you may need to re-program every time you use a lab computer) as follows:

1) Click on "Tools" at the top of the screen.

2) Click on "Spelling and Grammar."

3) Click on "Options" at the bottom of the menu.

4) Click on "Settings."

5) Click on the down arrow to the right of the top bar, labeled "Writing Style" (unless the word "Formal" already appears in the box). You will see a list of options. Select FORMAL (closest to "academic").

4) On the same menu box at the bottom, use the down arrow to select "always" for "Comma before last item" and "inside" for "Punctuation with quotations."

5) Click on "OK" and then on "close."

PART I

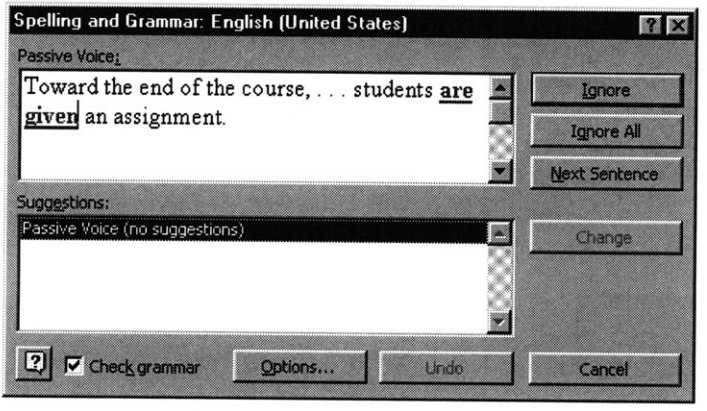
WRITTEN DUE: Monday, November 15 (MWF classes) or Tuesday, November 16 (T-Th class). ORAL REPORTS will be given during the following class. We will meet in the LEARNING CENTER to use a computer on the "big screen."

What to do: Type the sentences assigned to you on the word pro-

cessor. In each sentence, there should be ONE error of the type labeled. After typing each sentence, see what the checker underlines in green. UNDERLINE those words on the sentences on your assignment sheet. Then click on the ABC icon (second tool bar from top), see what the grammar checker says, and COPY what the checker says (see lower box on the screen). When you are finished with all your sentences, tally the number and percent of errors correctly flagged (underlined) and the number the checker actually corrected , and fill in the appropriate blanks on the question sheet. If you want to keep the checker's answers to check again later, select "cancel" when you are finished.

SAMPLE PART I

Active-Passive (though this is not really an "error")



UNDERLINE WHAT THE CHECKER UNDERLINES (if anything) and UNDER THE SENTENCE, COPY in the checker's comment (if any).

Toward the end of the course, . . . students are given an assignment.

Passive Voice (no suggestions)
CHECKER'S "SCORE":
How many actual errors are marked by green line? 1 of 1
(percent? 100%) (You may have a "wrong" green line.)

How many of the marked errors are accurately corrected? 0
__ (Makes a specific comment but does not suggest a specific change)

Note: If you do not understand "passive voice" (or any term in the grammar checker's comment), click on the "?" box in the lower left hand corner. Microsoft Word will give a rule and examples that may help you.

SAMPLE SENTENCES ASSIGNED TO STUDENTS AND WORD 97'S GRAMMAR CHECKER RESPONSES

(Each section marked by — was given to a different student.)

FRAGMENTS (See *Quiz #2)*

UNDERLINE WHAT CHECKER UNDERLINES (if anything) and UNDER THE SENTENCE, COPY in the checker's comment (if any).

1) Although Mary is good in English; she is not good in math.

2) The reason that I was late to class. *fragment. (no suggestions)*

3) Getting up early in the morning to swim twenty laps. *fragment (no suggestions)*

4) When the factory whistle blows at the end of the day.

5) Although Mary is good in English. *fragment (no suggestions)*

6) My dog has bad habits such as; chewing the furniture. *semicolon use (no suggestions)*

7) The next sentence; however, is harder than this one. *next sentences or nexts sentence*

CHECKER'S "SCORE":

How many actual errors are marked by green line? 5 ***of*** 7
(percent? 71% ***) (You may have a "wrong" green line.)***

How many of the labels give an accurate correction? 1

COMMA SPLICES (See *Quiz #2)*

UNDERLINE WHAT CHECKER UNDERLINES (if anything) and UNDER THE SENTENCE, COPY in the checker's comment (if any).

1) Mary is good in English, however, she is not good in math.

2) Some people would agree,
others would disagree. *comma use (no suggestions)*

3) Mary is not always happy, sometimes she is sad.

4) Apes are sociable animals, thus they
love to have human visitors.

CHECKER'S "SCORE":

How many actual errors are marked by green line? ___3___ ***of*** ___4___
(percent? ___75%___ ***) (You may have a "wrong" green line.)***

How many of the labels give an accurate correction? **2**

APPENDIX II

THE GRAMMAR CHECKER'S SCORES
ACAE Project
Part I

FRAGMENTS	71%
COMMA SPLICES	75%
FUSED SENTENCES	0%
COMMAS IN LISTS	67%
COMMAS IN COMPOUND SENTENCES	0%
COMMAS WITH INTERRUPTERS	40% (can do which and that clauses)
COMMAS WITH INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS	50%
QUOTATIONS	(can do periods and commas inside quotation marks if set to do so)
COLON	50%
DASH	0%
SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT	83%
PRONOUN AGREEMENT	50%
ACTIVE-PASSIVE VOICE	Will mark passive voices every time, but you may want to use the passive!
APOSTROPHES	60%
PARALLELISM	25%
MODIFIERS	0%
PRONOUN REFERENCE	0%

APPENDIX III

PART II

DUE with your final conference after Thanksgiving, though you can hand the written report in with Essay #6. You can use this form or type out your answers on a new sheet.

FOR THREE SENTENCES FROM ESSAY #6 OR AN EARLIER ESSAY:

For sentence one:

1) Give the sentence and underline where the checker underlined. (You can simplify the sentence.)

2) Tell what the checker said.

3) Tell your opinion of this advice. You might comment on some or all of these questions: How clear is the checker's advice? Is it or wrong (in your view)? Did you change your sentence because of the advice? How?

For sentence two:

1) Give the sentence and underline where the checker underlined. (You can simplify the sentence.)

2) Tell what the checker said.

3) Tell your opinion of this advice.

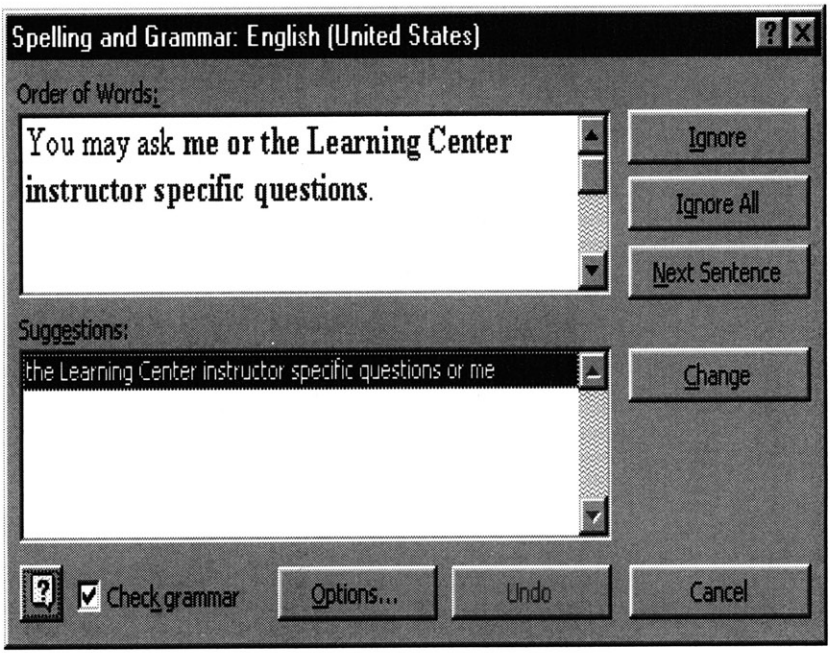
Sentence three:

1) Give the sentence and underline where the checker underlined. (You can simplify the sentence.)

2) Tell what the checker said.

3) Tell your opinion of this advice.

SAMPLE ANSWER:



1) Give the sentence and underline where the checker underlined. (You can simplify the sentence.) You may ask me or the Learning Center instructor specific questions.

2) Tell what the checker said. The Learning Center instructor specific questions or me

3) Tell your opinion of this advice. I did not like the checker's suggested wording, but I clicked on the "?" to see if it would give an explanation. The checker then gave this rule: "If you are connecting 'I,' 'we,' 'me,' or 'us' with a noun or another pronoun, place 'I,' 'we,' 'me,' or 'us' last." Thus I changed the sentence to "You may ask the Learning Center instructor or me specific questions." The checker did not underline this revised sentence, and I liked that wording better too.

NOW WRITE A PARAGRAPH:

Considering Part I (including class reports) and Part II of this assignment—and any other grammar checker experiences you've had, write a paragraph giving advice to someone on how helpful Microsoft's grammar checker is and how it might best be used. If you used this form, attach it.

APPENDIX IV

Sample Response to the "?" Option