CHAPTER 12.

AUTOMATED FEEDBACK PROGRAMS PROVIDE INVALUABLE GUIDANCE THROUGHOUT THE WRITING PROCESS

✨ *AUTOMATED FEEDBACK IS ONE RESOURCE WITHIN A LARGER WRITING ENVIRONMENT*

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Automated writing feedback programs, like Grammarly, QuillBot, and others, advertise their products as transformational to the composition process. Embedded within word processing applications, smartphones, and web browsers or accessible online, these programs scan an individual's writing and attempt to identify basic grammar and usage errors, offer stylistic "enhancements," and provide a suite of additional support, including adjustments for tone and AI-generated ideas and phrases for composition. According to Grammarly, they make it easier "to raise your grades and meet your goals with real-time writing feedback for school and beyond" (Grammarly, 2024).

These programs rely on pattern recognition and predictive algorithms to generate feedback and suggestions. In fact, automated writing feedback offers corrections that are not based on an understanding of grammar and meaning in the way that humans process the written word, resulting in suggestions and corrections that alter the meaning of sentences—sometimes contrary to a writer's intentions. Other suggestions may lack the nuance of common social parlance which makes certain expressions commonly acceptable, even if incorrect according to supposed standard rules. While automated feedback can be instant and scalable, it can result in factual inaccuracies, diminished linguistic possibilities, and a short-circuiting of necessary parts of the writing process.

Despite these problems, such tools can be useful, if viewed with a healthy skepticism about their suggestions and how they fit within steps of the writing

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process. Even when benefiting from these programs, writers should continue to develop critical literacy around the limits and constraints of incorporating generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into the writing process. As individuals and institutions adopt these tools, we propose that writers view these programs as a limited tool among many writing resources and not as a totalizing writing companion. We encourage students and faculty to consider all available resources to match their needs to the classroom and beyond.

LIMITS OF AUTOMATED FEEDBACK

According to educational technologist Justin Reich (2020), "For the most part, new technologies don't rearrange practices in schools. They reinforce them" (p. 152). Like other digital writing technologies from early word processors to reference management software, these new technologies can reinforce bad ideas and practices, especially when these assumptions are held at the administrative level, where many often champion innovation with under-vetted educational technologies.

Instant writing feedback collapses the complex, temporal experience of writing as a record of thinking, reflection, and learning across time. Their pervasive presence within a browser or word processor and their constant prompting give rise to several problems:

They reduce writing to content delivery, forcing writers to think about style and substance as distinct from disciplinary context. In many cases, such as emails and direct communication, this is not a problem. In most academic situations, though, disciplinary thinking requires discursive knowledge above and beyond mere content. For example, the term "queer" can be flagged for concerns about tone and audience. As with other terms related to sexuality, its usage is dependent upon context and disciplinary norms which automation cannot comprehend.

They presuppose fully formed ideas that instant feedback and prompts will make "clearer" and "more engaging," forcing writers at the drafting stage to focus on error correction and polishing ideas before they may be fully formed. Anecdotally, this has been one of the biggest complaints from advanced writers. While drafting, students have found the suggestions to interrupt the composition process and force them to acknowledge or ignore automated feedback about sentences and ideas in flux. This instant feedback denies the necessary time for reflection and insight. Beginning and developing writers may be less aware of such an impact. In this way, these programs push students to circumvent the "shitty first draft" stage of writing that Anne Lamott (2005) sees as essential to the writing process.

They homogenize the richness of the English language. Writing becomes surveilled by an arbiter of correctness and coerced by prescriptive norms of Standard

Written English. As Shyam Sharma (2026) details, GenAI perpetuates biases rooted in Western colonialist logics, which play out on the linguistic level. Linguistic variations are marginalized; code meshing and code blending discouraged; non-Western logic unrecognized. Basic forms of communication might desire such flattened language, but few writing classrooms aspire to mere pedestrian usage alone. This critique echoes poet Jaswinder Bolina's claim that large language models are efficient at learning "bland patterns of words" and producing "cliched and predictable writing and thinking" (2023)—the kind of writing we most often want our students to move past when learning to express their own thoughts.

Notwithstanding the issues above, research has shown particular promise for automated writing feedback programs in supporting English-language learners, who require more prescriptive and basic corrections. In their book *Automated Written Corrective Feedback in Research Paper Revision* (2023), Quin Guo et al. show Grammarly's effectiveness in flagging errors for ESL/EFL students. They recognize Grammarly's usefulness in providing corrective feedback on lower-order writing skills, which would allow instructors to focus on higher-order skills like genre and organization. Yet, Guo et al. (2023) note that automated writing feedback programs are still "under-researched," including a gap in research about the quality of the feedback over its accuracy. This falls in line with larger discussions about automation, which effectively assists in basic skills, but less in higher-order ones. For example, Reich (2020) notes the popularity of the language-learning app Duolingo, which provides an easy and convenient gamification of vocabulary and basic grammar, despite many users struggling to learn a language's more complicated subtleties just through the app's automated and gamified pedagogy.

Much of this discussion occurs among folks who may themselves be squeamish around issues of grammar and usage. Grammar instruction has often been relegated to developmental education or devalued as a remedial skill. Even writing faculty in the ideal conditions of small classes and reasonable course loads tend to be hesitant about spending class time on grammar and sentence-level issues, let alone those faculty whose labor conditions include four or more sections of writing classes with more than twenty students per class. As a consequence, the idea of automating sentence-level feedback could be attractive for those hesitant around adjectives, dangling participles, and the passive voice, not to mention faculty in other disciplines who do not make time to teach writing skills.

GENERATING A HEALTHY, RHETORICALLY-INFORMED SKEPTICISM

For our part, writing instruction across the disciplines can instill a wider understanding of the composition process that empowers students to use automated

feedback tools in a narrower, but more precise way. This includes a healthy, rhetorically-informed skepticism about automated feedback in order for students to maintain the integrity of their voices and the originality of their ideas. This also means that instructors should engage students about how an assignment may be directed towards certain audiences' expectations about language, knowledge, and disciplinary conventions that GenAI tools may botch.

For the sake of consistency and convenience in this section, we'll focus on the program Grammarly specifically, although our recommendations can apply broadly to other automated writing feedback programs and GenAI writing tools.

Students' over-reliance on Grammarly foregrounds the notion of "correctness" in a way that impedes the shaping of their ideas and unique expression. Guo et al. (2024) suggest that "Grammarly use did not facilitate (and might even hinder) research paper revision for errors that Grammarly failed to identify" (p.77). Moreover, the issue of rhetorical effectiveness in communicating ideas to a human audience gets taken out of focus, when it should be the foremost concern in the act of writing.

In the moment of typing these very words in this paragraph's draft, for example, the Grammarly pop-up report on the screen indicates nineteen "alerts" (and counting) regarding correctness, clarity, engagement, and delivery when Grammarly's default settings are enabled. Some of these suggestions are helpful in pointing out typos and clearer use of prepositions. Other suggestions are thoroughly unhelpful, urging that certain sentences be rewritten to avoid passive voice (employed intentionally in this very sentence) and the unclear antecedent of the pronoun "this" in the parenthetical statement here. For some writers, these proliferating "alerts" may only heighten the anxiety of the writing process while providing unhelpful suggestions that manipulate the writing in ways that might work counter to the writer's goals.

In any classroom where the production of writing is central, Grammarly could be leveraged as a supplemental teaching tool to help make students more aware of their syntax, semantics, tone, and style. Because Grammarly can be turned on and off readily, its purposeful strategic deployment at certain moments can prompt our thinking more productively about writing and the writing process. We propose that programs like Grammarly can be used as a pedagogical tool in these possible ways:

Require students to use Grammarly only in the final, proofreading stage as an additional "proofreader" of their writing, but not during the earlier drafting stages. This compels students to own their ideas during the drafting process, to know what they're talking about, and to think about their intended meaning, all without idea-bulldozing GenAI intervention. If Grammarly presupposes fully formed ideas with grammar and wording as mere barriers to clearly transmitting these ideas, then

Grammarly can be used as a functional proofreader in the final draft without interfering in the development of students' original ideas. In the interest of polishing the finished product, Grammarly could help catch unintended errors like typos, missing words, and incorrect use of prepositions—a more in-depth version of Microsoft Word's Spell Check and Grammar Check. This could also equip students to refute Grammarly's unhelpful and misleading suggestions with more confidence, if the writer understands why certain choices they made are worth keeping.

Conversely, require students to use Grammarly during the drafting process, requiring them to write about their engagement with Grammarly in both accepting or dismissing its suggestions. This could be an added component of an existing writing assignment, much like a cover letter or process memo: a written analysis of the writer's experience of the composition and editing process in which the student takes screenshots of Grammarly's suggestions and critically evaluates them.

Critically evaluate Grammarly's functions in the writing classroom. Grammarly's "Settings" menu could be the focus of a fascinating discussion on technological influence upon writerly notions of rhetorical effectiveness. The "Set Goals" settings on the Grammarly dashboard lets the writer adjust their writing to better meet a few target options: Audience (General, Knowledgeable, and Expert), Domain (Academic, Business, General, Email, Casual, Creative), Tone (Neutral, Confident, Joyful, Optimistic, Friendly, Urgent, Analytical, Respectful), and Intent (to Inform, Describe, Convince, Tell a Story). Adjusting any of these settings will change Grammarly's allowance of certain types of sentence construction and word choice. All writing teachers know that none of these are discrete categories, and that labels like "Expert," "Academic," and "Casual" have their own social baggage. Moreover, affective terms for "Tone" such as "Confident," "Joyful," "Friendly," and "Respectful," if deployed uncritically, could shape writing in some truly bizarre ways. Students could analyze just how Grammarly's allowances and suggested corrections change when they adjust the settings, and whether or not these are more helpful suggestions for meeting the writer's rhetorical goals. This could work alongside the practice of counterstorytelling as outlined by Aamir Zulfiqar and Sue Hum (2026).

Situate Grammarly's use as one possible resource among many potential others on campus such as faculty support, the writing center, the campus library, and instructor-supporting technology centers. Many faculty, especially those who are not writing specialists, might see Grammarly as a de facto writing tutor when no other help is available. Those who are writing specialists already know that writing centers offer much more than a simple proofreading scan of a draft. But the convenience of Grammarly belies its limits, and this convenience could discourage students from finding better, more substantial help elsewhere,

such as writing center tutors, who, as Kristi Girdharry (2026) notes, could help students gain a deeper understanding of automated feedback. Students should understand that Grammarly is a part of the larger ecosystem of writing support on a college campus, then, while knowing that other types of interpersonal support could benefit them even more.

CONCLUSION

While automated feedback tools have their limited use and scalable deployment, ceding sentence-level issues of writing to automation risks falling into a kind of wishful systems thinking. For Georgina Voss (2024), systems thinking entails imagining a problem and its solution solely in terms of software engineering and systemizing. In doing so, an automated systems-based approach to the human activity of writing will continue to marginalize anything for which the system cannot account. Reich (2020) echoes this point directly in terms of writing pedagogy: "People do not write to have computers dump our craft into a bag of words; we write to reach other people or ourselves. Writing to satisfy the syntactic criteria of a software program drains the meaning out of the activity of writing" (p. 187).

At the core of GenAI literacy, we have the opportunity to recognize and honor the human values at the center of any meaningful writing experience. This is not merely defending existing writing practices but analyzing these tools and understanding the ideological positions of these technologies. This involves slowing down. Looking away from the computer screen. Seeing the communities within which we write. And demonstrating what we value by affirming a human-centered writing process.

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