

Bibliography Update

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The Scholar's Software Library

Bryan Pfaffenberger

Program:

Rightwriter, version 2.0
Rightwords (Dictionary extension utility), version 2.0

Available From:

Decisionware
2033 Wood St.
Suite 218
Sarasota, FL 33577
(813) 952-9211

Price:

Rightwriter: \$95.00 (add \$4.00 for shipping and handling; 30 day money-back guarantee)
Rightwords: \$29.95
Educational discounts available for both programs.

Requires:

IBM PC or PC-compatible with 128K RAM; compatible with *WordStar*, *WordStar 2000*, *PFS:write*, *SuperWriter*, *Lex*, *Perfect Writer*, *EasyWriter I and II*, *DisplayWrite 3*, *Microsoft Word*, *Volkswriter Deluxe*, *Writing Assistant*, *EagleWriter*, *Edix/Wordix*, *Volkswriter*, *MultiMate*, *WordVision*, *PC-Write*, *WordPerfect*, *XyWrite II Plus*, *EDLIN*, *Spellbinder*, *Lex*, and all standard ASCII file format programs

Applications:

Word choice checking, readability analysis, writing style analysis

What distinguishes good writing from bad? One is tempted to say, "That's obviously a matter of taste." Yet, to a surprising extent, authorities on good writing agree on how to write well. We are told by such authorities as Strunk and White: avoid the passive voice. Don't let your sentences get longer than 20 or 22 words. Write with concrete nouns and active verbs. Don't hedge, use nominalizations, or overqualify. Avoid fancy words, and change your ribbon often.

If the characteristics of good writing can really be stated in such precise terms, then it's possible to create computer software that will judge writing quality. That's precisely the idea behind *Writer's Workbench*, a mainframe-based, style-analysis program devised to "read" a document to determine whether it measures up to good writing standards. Since computers can't really read, the program contains a nifty bag of programming tricks that simulate what human editors do. The program finds errors, for instance, in word choice, punctuation, and spelling. When it's finished, it prints out a detailed critique of the document's style and makes specific suggestion for improving it.

Writer's Workbench is a big program that requires the equally big UNIX operating system, and it hasn't yet appeared on microcomputers. But don't despair. A firm in Florida has released a \$95 program, *Rightwriter*, that brings the best of *Writer's Workbench* style analysis to the IBM PC environment.

WRITER'S WORKBENCH ON A DESKTOP

Rightwriter doesn't do everything *Writer's Workbench* can do. It offers only a subset of *Writer's Workbench* features. But it's a dandy subset. Included are the *Writer's Workbench* features that probably play the greatest role in helping writers improve their work. For instance, *Rightwriter* detects overly long paragraphs and sentences, marks sentences with too many clauses, points out the overuse of expletives ("there is," "there are"), identifies a wide variety of word choice problems, and more—much more (Table 1).

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Table 1: Writing Problems Detected by *Rightwriter*

Paragraph Problems
Paragraph too long
Punctuation Problems
Inverted punctuation
Quotation introduced by "that"
Semicolon misused
Single word enclosed by quotes
Unnecessary comma
Sentence Problems
Incomplete sentence
Misuse of semicolon
Passive voice
Sentence begins with "but"
Sentence too complex
Sentence too long (over 22 words)
Too many sentences begin with adverbs
Too many sentences begin with "it" or "there"
Too many sentences contain multiple clauses
Too many sentences begin with pronouns
Word Choice and Grammatical Problems
Ambiguous phrases ("more comprehensive surveys")
Cliches ("busy as a bee")
Colloquial phrases ("bogged down")
Double negative phrases ("not absent")
Hedging ("almost always," "it would seem")
Incorrect phrases ("their is," "muchly")
Legalistic word ("whereas")
Needlessly long words ("utilize," "domiciled")
Offensive usage
Pronoun misused ("Each brought their")
Redundant phrases ("very unique")
Repeated word ("the the")
Sexist usage
Split infinitive
Tense or person disagreement ("she do")
Too many modifiers used
Too many weak words used
Too much jargon used
Trite phrases ("a case in point")
Wordy phrases ("accounted for by the fact")
Vague phrases ("fascinating," "there is evidence that")

Like *Writer's Workbench*, *Rightwriter* works by reading a document created with your word processor. (It works with almost all popular word-processing programs.) After automatically analyzing the document, *Rightwriter* produces a marked-up copy of it, adding a detailed critique. You may view the marked-up file onscreen or print it using your word processor or DOS.

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Inserted directly into the text are critical remarks such as "WEAK, CONSIDER REPHRASING: in my opinion." The program flags overly complex or long sentences, a wide variety of word choice errors, some punctuation mistakes, overly long paragraphs, instances of the passive voice, and even split infinitives.

In the critique appended to the marked-up copy, *Rightwriter* lists the results of four quantitative indexes of writing quality (*Readability Index*, *Strength Index*, *Descriptive Index*, and *Jargon Index*), an analysis of sentence structure and, if desired, a list of uncommon words. Figure 1 shows a *Rightwriter* analysis of a freshman paper:

<< ** SUMMARY ** >>

READABILITY INDEX: 14.2

Readers need a 14th grade level of education to understand.

STRENGTH INDEX: 0.32

The writing can be made more direct and to the point by using:

- the active voice
- shorter sentences
- less wordy phrases
- more common words
- fewer weak phrases
- less ambiguous wording

DESCRIPTIVE INDEX: 0.42

The use of adjectives and adverbs is within the normal range.

JARGON INDEX: 0.00

SENTENCE STRUCTURE RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Most sentences contain multiple clauses.
Try to use more simple sentences.
10. Many sentences start with "there".
Try using other words besides "there"
14. Consider using more predicate verbs.

Fig. 1: *Rightwriter* Critique

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THE READABILITY INDEX

The Readability Index uses the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula, a U.S. Government standard (Grade level = $.39$ [Avg. No. Words/Sentence] + 11.8 [Avg. No. Syllables/Word] - 15.59). It reports readability by grade level. A score of 11.08 , for instance, indicates that readers need an eleventh-grade education to read the document.

A minor complaint: readability scores shouldn't be taken too seriously as a guide for revision, but the *Rightwriter* manual doesn't make this point clear. High readability scores mandate a search-and-destroy mission for overly long sentences and polysyllabic words; eliminating them raises the score dramatically. Yet the result may well be just as incomprehensible as the turgid prose of contemporary French philosophers. Readability is, above all, a matter of coherence. If a high readability score stimulates a search for needlessly long sentences and words, that's fine. But revision efforts should strive for coherence rather than low numbers on the Readability Index.

THE STRENGTH INDEX

The Strength Index, expressed as a number ranging from 0 (weak) to 1 (strong), provides another—and more useful—angle on readability. The Strength Index uses a proprietary formula to calculate a document's "strength of delivery of the document's message," as the *Rightwriter* manual puts it. It considers such factors as the use of passive voice, lengthy sentences, wordy phrases, uncommon words, cliches, negative words, unusual abbreviations, weak phrases, and ambiguous phrases. If the Strength Index falls below 0.5, *Rightwriter* makes specific suggestions for revising the document (Figure 1).

THE DESCRIPTIVE AND JARGON INDEXES

The Descriptive Index measures the ratio of adjectives to nouns and adverbs to verbs. Ranging from 0 (terse and choppy) to 1 (overly florid), this index provides a useful measurement of modifier usage. The Jargon Index measures the use of nominalizations, "buzz words," abbreviations, and acronyms.

SENTENCE STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

A sentence structure analysis follows the four style indexes. The program counts the number of compound sentences and sentences with multiple clauses, comparing them to the number of simple sentences. It also checks for monotony in sentence usage, such as beginning too many sentences with nouns, verbs, prepositions, connectives, pronouns, adverbs, or expletives ("it is," "there are"). Use of superlatives and exclamations is measured as well.

THE UNCOMMON WORD LIST

The final element in the critique is the Uncommon Word List. *Rightwriter* compares each word in the document to a disk-based dictionary of familiar or common words. It lists words that do not match the dictionary in alphabetical order, and you're encouraged to decide whether to replace them with more familiar terms.

RIGHTWORDS

Rightwriter's dictionary of common words stems from a list developed by the United States Army and Navy. Aimed at the average recruit, the list does not contain many words in common use by other audiences. For this reason, a paper written for an academic, technical, or professional audience will contain many words judged uncommon by *Rightwriter*, and the program will probably give the paper a low Strength Index score. Yet this score is inaccurate. Writing for these audiences, a writer can reasonably expect readers to know commonly used words in a profession or specialty.

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Rightwords addresses this problem by giving you a way to add words to *Rightwriter's* dictionary. To use the program, you simply use your word processor to create a word list. An anthropologist, for instance, might include such words as paleolithic, neolithic, and ethnography. Then *Rightwords* adds the words to *Rightwriter's* dictionary. These words will no longer appear on the Uncommon Word list, and their use will not lower the Strength Index. Included with *Rightwords* are seven ready-made extra word lists, covering such fields as business, electronics, navigation, and aeronautics.

EVALUATION

Any business or professional writer will find *Rightwriter* well worth the money, so long as the program's limitations are well understood. As the manual correctly points out, running *Rightwriter* is an adjunct to text revision. *Rightwriter* can't find all (or even most) writing problems, and some of its recommendations may be inaccurate or inappropriate. Running *Rightwriter* is no substitute for hand revision.

In only one way does *Rightwriter* fall short of earlier efforts to bring *Writer's Workbench* to the PC, such as *Punctuation & Style* (Oasis Systems) and *Grammatik* (Wang Electronic Publishing). *Punctuation & Style*, a word choice checker that lacks style analysis features, uses an ASCII text file for a dictionary. You can add your own terms to it easily, and they show up when the program looks for word choice problems such as wordy phrases. Writers like this feature because they can "customize" the program. *Rightwriter's* word and phrase dictionary is so big and complex, however, that it's stored in a specially compressed file, and you can't add new words or phrases to it. (You can add new words to the Uncommon Word dictionary with *Rightwords*, of course, but that's a separate dictionary.)

With *Rightwriter's* limitations clearly in mind, however, most writers will find *Rightwriter's* critiques helpful and even illuminating. (*Rightwriter* alone will do nicely for business writing. *Academica* and professional writers will want to purchase the *Rightwords* accessory.) As an index of *Rightwriter's* usefulness, consider this: I've several style analysis programs, including a variety of readability checkers, *Punctuation & Style*, and *Grammatik*. They whirl about on my hard disk, unused and forgotten. *Rightwriter* is another matter. I use it as often as I use my spelling checker, and for precisely the same reason: *Rightwriter* consistently demonstrates its value.

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Manuscript Submissions Welcome

The *Newsletter* welcomes article submissions that pertain to word-processing, text-analysis, and research applications in professional writing situations. Also, hardware and software reviews are accepted, but please contact Jim Schwartz, Hardware/Software Review Editor, before submitting them (call Jim at 605-394-1246). Manuscripts either may be submitted as hard copy or on 5¼" diskettes using *WordStar*, *WordStar 2000*, or standard ASCII code. If submitting disks, please make sure they are formatted either in MS-DOS, PC-DOS, or a popular CP/M format (Kaypro, Zenith, etc.) The Editors reserve the right to edit manuscripts, if necessary. If you want your manuscript or diskette returned, please send enough postage to cover the return along with a self-addressed envelope. Address all correspondence to the Editors, *Research in Word Processing Newsletter*, South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, 501 E. St. Joseph, Rapid City, SD 57701-3995. The Editors may also be reached on *CompuServe* (70177,1154).