

Grammarly Premium Has Some Great Tools, But Remember You're the Expert

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In the latest emailed weekly report Grammarly tells me I've checked 3,005,645 words since Jan 5, 2020, that I'm more productive than 99% of Grammarly users, more accurate than 86%, and use more unique words than 86%. In other words, I'm "building quite the voluminous vocabulary."

I chuckle at the report because, though I have a decent-sized vocabulary, most of the 3 million words I've checked, and the varied vocabulary, come from 3 in-house writers and a dozen freelancers who send their work to the in-house editor (me) and a half-dozen freelance editors.

Grammarly used to tell me I could unlock more features and advice with a premium subscription, but Big Leap bought me a premium subscription so I could use the plagiarism checker when I do the QA checks on other editors' work. (Someone else QAs mine.)

The plagiarism checker works well, pointing out phrases that appear in other websites, and giving links to the sites. I expect to find 1-2 percent plagiarism, sometimes higher, because there are a lot of common expressions like, "But what do you really know about it?" or "get you started on your road to recovery," especially if the expression is jargon, a technical term, or a common explanation, "the alcohol enters your bloodstream through your stomach and small intestine and then travels to the brain."

The plagiarism checker also works with content updates. It's good SEO practice to change things up from time to time. If a piece is not getting a lot of attention try adding to it, or updating it. The plagiarism checker will easily find the published piece, and tell you the percentage of plagiarism in the update, which you can use to determine the percentage of new content.

It's also good SEO practice to take pieces that are performing very well and repurpose them to create a second article or a group of articles. This is a good time to polish the piece, or phrase things differently, or look at them from a different angle, while still giving much of the same information. The plagiarism checker helps keep the duplicate phrasing under 10 percent, which keeps the search engine content that it's not seeing duplicate content.

There are a lot of things Grammarly does well, and I recommend it with the caution to remember that you are smarter than Grammarly. It's a tool, not a book of commandments. With that in mind, I'll spend the rest of the review talking about cases where Grammarly doesn't function well, because it's useful to try and understand why, rather than simply building up a folder of dumb Grammarly suggestions.

Why Do We Need Grammar Checkers?

Grammar checkers arose to address a problem with spell checkers, which were great at spotting misspelled words, but couldn't correct a misspelled sentence like this common sentiment, "Eye knead toulouse wait," because each misspelling is a correctly spelled word. It's just the wrong word for the sentence.

Grammar checkers were designed to look at the context of words to see if the words in a sentence fit the context, and make suggestions if they didn't.

But it can be hard to teach a computer program how to understand context. How would you tell the program that the example sentence is a series of puns? How do you define that context? Grammarly's only suggestion for the sentence above is to capitalize *Toulouse*. The sentence doesn't make grammatical sense, and while an algorithm for recognizing homophones might help, it would also need an algorithm for recognizing wordplay.

A grammar checker is more likely to look at context for what might be a misspelled word in sentences like these, but the context may not be wide enough:

"Cookies, candles, and cocoa. These three words completely encapsulate the essence of Christmas-time comfort. With six cookies, a vanilla cashmere scented candle, and Moonstruck hot chocolate, it's hard to not spread joy with this package."

Grammarly suggests *candies* for *candles*, which means it isn't looking at the rest of the paragraph for a mention of candles. It isn't looking at a wide context, it's looking at the cluster of 4 words *candles* is part of.

"Once you've completed training, you can start picking up shifts." Grammarly doesn't understand the idiom *picking up shifts*, as in finding a shift you can work. So it looks for a wider context, and suggests *upshifts* because the article is about a job hunting app called Upshift. But even outside the context of the article it suggests *upshifts*, a verb for shifting into a higher gear.

Sometimes it does look at homophones for context, but the suggestions don't always make grammatical sense, as in suggesting *Our* for *Are* in this headline: "Are Picket Fences Hard to Install?"

And sometimes the suggestions are unintentionally funny, as in this update to a well-known Christmas quote, from Harlan Miller, "I wish we could put up some of the Christmas spirit in jars and open a jar of it every month." Grammarly suggests *Christmas spirits*, which certainly fits the context of *jars*, but changes the character of the jars.

What Is Grammarly's Algorithm Looking For?

If an algorithm for recognizing wordplay seems a bit much, how about an algorithm for recognizing phrases, which might be as simple as lists of technical terms Grammarly could check against. One of the program's strengths is to note how often you use a word, which can be useful in SEO because you don't want to use a keyword too often, lest the search bot ding you for keyword stuffing. But it doesn't always recognize phrases, or why someone would repeat a particular phrase, which can be amusing. Consider this call to action.

"Get full compensation and fair treatment in your eminent domain case."

Grammarly advises, "The word *eminent* appears repeatedly in this text. Consider using a synonym in its place, such as *outstanding*, *prominent*, *notable*." Grammarly doesn't understand that the topic of the paper is a legal concept, *prominent domain*, and how to get fair compensation when the government exercises its power of *outstanding domain*. It's difficult to write about *notable domain* without using the phrase repeatedly. And Grammarly doesn't understand that *eminent* has a very different meaning when paired with *domain* than the synonyms it suggests.

I went into the Goals tab in the Grammarly app and changed the Domain goal from General to Business, but it still offers me the same three synonyms. It may simply need to expand its list of legal terms to check documents against. It has some, because when I used the phrase *stari decisis* it offered *stare decisis* as a correction.

Ungrammatical Suggestions

Agreement in Number

“Despite their small size, termites can cause a *lot* of damage.”

Grammarly flags *a lot* as wordy, and suggests *many*. That’s particularly intriguing because while *many* is a good synonym for *lots of*, *a lot* is singular, and *many* is plural. But even if the original had said “lots of damage,” *damage* is still singular, so *many damage* wouldn’t work; *much* would work fine, so it’s worth wondering why Grammarly doesn’t suggest *much* for singular nouns? Does Grammarly not understand the idiom *cause damage*, or is it not looking at adjective-noun agreement because it’s focusing instead on *a lot* as a wordy construction?

Verb Tenses

“We know roofing inside and out.”

Grammarly suggests changing the verb form to *to roof*. “The verb *know* is usually followed by the to-infinitive, not by a gerund. Change *roofing* to the to-infinitive form.”

This is simply nonsense. I know writing, I know editing, I know literary theory, I know grammar, I know Pleasant Grove, I know my wife, and I know that in none of those sentences does *know* require a to-infinitive. In all of them *know* takes a direct object that is either a noun, noun phrase, or gerund.

So again, what is in Grammarly’s database that causes it to think that *know* requires a to-infinitive? Is it basing its suggestion on an insufficient sample of how *know* is used?

Parallelism and Ellipsis

“During that time, they learned all they could about roofing.”

Grammarly flags this sentence as missing a verb, because it doesn’t understand ellipsis, that is, it doesn’t understand how we supply missing elements based on the parallel structure of a sentence:

The parallel structure in this sentence is *they learned all they could learn*, but because of the repeated *they* we don't need a second *learn* as part of the sentence. We recognize it as a missing element and supply it automatically, but Grammarly doesn't know where to look in the sentence for the missing element. It says, "This sentence appears to be missing a verb," and suggests *could think, could talk, could learn*. The first two wouldn't work. The third would, but isn't necessary.

Here, Grammarly doesn't present the missing element as a possible solution. "Before deciding whether TMS is right for you, there are some pros and cons of TMS therapy to consider."

Grammarly doesn't understand that the subject of this sentence is *you*, or that the writer may have figured "Before you decide whether TMS is right for you" was a bit wordy and the sentence could do without the first *you*. Grammarly looks later in the sentence for a subject, and suggests, "Before deciding whether TMS is right for you, TMS therapy should consider some pros and cons."

Pronouns

In the sentence discussed above, Grammarly's suggestion feels like an attempt to make a passive sentence active. In a passive construction the subject often ends up toward the end of the sentence, so the program looked there for a subject. But in many cases Grammarly doesn't know where to look for the subject, especially when the subject is far removed from the verb, or two elements that go together are separated.

This is particularly true with sentences starting with *this*. Grammarly consistently flags them as having an unclear pronoun referent, not realizing that the referent is the whole preceding sentence or phrase, that the referent is the situation just described, rather than a single noun. Things we understand readily are not readily apparent to

Grammarly's algorithm. Perhaps the programmers haven't figured out how to define that characteristic of language so they can code for it.

Of course, Grammarly would flag *that* as an unclear pronoun, and I can imagine readers saying, "What characteristic of language? Are you talking about ellipsis, or about our ability to understand that a pronoun referent doesn't need to be a single noun, it can be a phrase, a whole paragraph, a situation just described, or an idea?"

Not Recognizing Complete Sentences

"We at Big Leap love serving this community."

Grammarly: "This appears to be a sentence fragment."

But what makes it appear as a fragment? We all learned in grade school that a complete sentence has a subject, a noun that performs some action, a verb, or action word, and usually a word that receives the action. This sentence has a noun phrase, "We at Big Leap," a verb phrase, "love serving," and a direct object to receive the action of serving, "this community."

It's a simple sentence, so why does Grammarly's algorithm think it's a fragment? If I take out the prepositional phrase ("We love serving this community"), or the participle ("We at Big Leap love this community"), Grammarly recognizes either one as a complete sentence. There's something in its algorithm that prevents Grammarly from recognizing the sentence structure *Noun+prepositional phrase+verb+participle+pronoun+noun* as a complete sentence.

Comma Splices

"If you're feeling like seeing everything there is to see, there are even more options like Victoria's Secret & PINK, MAC Cosmetics, or Zales."

Grammarly sees this as a comma splice, joining two sentences with a comma rather than a dash or semicolon, or separating them with a period. More accurately a comma splice involves joining independent clauses with a comma. An independent clause has a

subject, a verb, and usually a direct object. “You’re feeling like seeing everything” can stand alone as a sentence. It doesn’t depend on any other element to be complete.

But if you put a subordinating conjunction like *if* in front of an independent clause it becomes a dependent clause. That is, it needs an independent clause to make it a complete sentence. I have noticed repeatedly that Grammarly doesn’t understand how a subordinating conjunction changes a clause from independent to dependent. I wondered if it might be expecting an if-then construction, and tried “If you’re feeling like seeing everything there is to see, then there are even more options,” but Grammarly still flagged it as a comma splice. Maybe it needs a list of subordinating conjunctions to check sentences against. (Oops, I’ve just ended my sentence with a preposition. Grammarly will point it out.)

Not Recognizing What Word a Word Modifies

I don’t know what to make of Grammarly’s response to this advice about how to avoid falling back into old habits after rehab:

“If sitting around a campfire drinking beers with your buddies is what you once did, then a weekend camping trip is probably not a good idea.”

Grammarly underlines the phrase “a campfire drinking beers,” but not to complain about the campfire flaming drunk. Instead, it says “The indefinite article **a** may not be required with the plural noun **beers** in this sentence.” But **a** doesn’t modify the plural *beers*, it modifies the singular *campfire*. An article applies to the noun that comes right after it. I don’t know why Grammarly doesn’t understand that in this case, why it’s associating the article with the direct object of *drinking* rather than the noun immediately following the article, *campfire*. For some reason the structure of this sentence is causing Grammarly to apply the wrong rule.

Comma Advice

“I think commas are vastly overused,” my high school AP English teacher said. She later joined the faculty of the university across the street, where one of my professors told us

a lot of linguists felt commas were often more like breath markers than anything else. If you think your sentence requires a pause use a comma. If you don't, don't.

Those linguists either did or did not teach Grammarly's programmers. Sometimes its advice feels like the rules Miss Nelson felt were vastly overused (so it recommends a comma where none is needed), and sometimes it feels like the programmers don't understand the function of a comma to pause the sentence, or don't understand when a sentence needs a pause (so it recommends removing a needed comma).

There are so many fun sober activities you can choose from, you won't have to feel like you're missing out."

"You appear to have two independent clauses improperly joined with a comma." Not so. The sentence is an ellipsis for "There are so many fun sober activities you can choose from, **that** you won't have to feel like you're missing out." *That* is missing from the sentence because it doesn't need to be there. We understand the sentence without it. Grammarly would be more perceptive if it said something like, "Consider adding *that* to connect these clauses."

There's another problem with the comma advice in this sentence. Grammarly wants to add a comma after *fun*, but two adjectives in a row don't always require a comma. In this case the phrase *fun sober activities* contrasts with the idea of fun drinking activities, so *fun* describes *sober activities* rather than *fun* and *sober* both describing *activities*.

Passive Voice

Grammarly also has a dread of the passive voice, or at least it loves to call it out, but it often mistakes the simple past or perfect past tenses as passive voice, and it doesn't have the option to mark passive voice suggestions as incorrect.

"If you are found not guilty, you will be released from police custody,"

This is flagged as passive, but it's a future tense form that's difficult to put into active voice, especially if you don't know who will do the release, and whether to say, "The court will release you from police custody," or "The police will release you from custody."

However, I didn't save examples of Grammarly flagging simple past tense phrases as passive voice, and I haven't seen that flag recently, so the programmers may have figured a better way to identify passive voice than to look for past tense verbs. (See below for how to turn off passive voice checking.)

Compound Words

Forming new words by combining a common two-word phrase into one is one of the joys of English, like combining *every* and *one* to make *everyone*, referring to all members of a group, generally a group of living beings. But the original two-word phrase still remains, with a different meaning, as in "each and every one." It can be difficult for people to know when to use one or the other, and sometimes for Grammarly, which suggests "each and everyone." In the list below the items after the equals sign are Grammarly's suggestions.

built in 1772 = built-in

Drop in body temperature = drop-in

Be careful. It may be a cold = maybe

I survived a bout with flu = about

We need everyone to buy in to this = into

But toning and building strength = buttoning

it's now here for good = nowhere

Alternate Suggestions

One of Grammarly's strengths is its alternate suggestions. Often they're good, but often not.

Consider the common warning about a possible side-effect of certain medications, "may result in birth defects."

Grammarly notes that some people may be uncomfortable with the phrase, or find it offensive, and suggests "congenital abnormalities," but that's 9 syllables, three times as long as the phrase it would replace. The length and the fact that the mouthful *congenital abnormalities* isn't widely used in common speech make it feel like a euphemism rather than a phrase aware of the sensitive nature of the topic.

For this phrase, “Not only is learning music a great brain exercise,” Grammarly says, “The word *great* is often overused, Consider using a more specific synonym to improve the sharpness of your writing.” It suggests “an excellent,” but that’s as overused as *great*. I mark most of Grammarly’s alternatives to overused words as “Incorrect suggestion.” But there is value in Grammarly pointing them out, because sometimes the sentence can do just fine without them.

I looked in the app for somewhere to turn off suggestions I don’t find useful, and couldn’t find one. But today I got a new feature announcement “to help multilingual speakers write more fluently and naturally in English,” which sounds very useful. Looking at the instructions for turning on that feature I learned where to turn off others.

Login to [Account.grammarly.com](https://account.grammarly.com), choose **Customize** on the side menu, then the **Suggestions** tab. Just switch any options you don’t want to Off. I switched off “Split infinitives,” and “Sentence-ending prepositions,” and might switch off “Passive voice” and “Oxford Comma” to see how that affects my editing.

The ability to turn off suggestions you don’t need or want is another of Grammarly’s strengths. As you use the program you’re sure to find a slew of bad suggestions because it’s difficult to tell a computer how idioms or metaphors or many other features of language work. It looks to me like Grammarly pays a lot of attention to word order and wordiness, and doesn’t always understand linguistic subtleties.

One more strength, particularly suited to programs, is noticing discrepancies in punctuation and spacing. If you’re using typographically correct curly quotes in one place and ASCII straight quotes in another, Grammarly will tell. Similarly, it will tell you if you have an extra space. Both are apparent to a trained eye, but this feature allows you to train your eye on more important things. And making corrections is easy, you just click on the correction and Grammarly makes it. You don’t have to position your cursor at the error, backspace and type in the correction. Sometimes I will leave a large correction to Grammarly, if I know Grammarly will pick it up and correct it the way I would.

Conclusion

Unless you're a professional editor or writer, or a teacher wanting to check plagiarism, you may not need the premium version. Try the free version, and see how it works for you. If it works well and you want to know more, unlock more features with the premium version.

Grammarly is a fine tool, but it's only a tool. If you don't like a suggestion spell checkers or grammar checkers or other checkers give you, go with your sense of what sounds good to you.

You've been using language your whole life, and you're an expert user, whether you're an expert in grammar or not.