
DIRECTIONS IN COMPUTER ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

*Bill Wresch, University of Wisconsin,
Stevens Point*

This presentation categorized the primary approaches people use in computer assessment of writing.

The first group is the "Usage Police." Programs such as Right Writer and Grammatik review a text and identify "errors" such as homonym confusion, passive voice, and minor grammar mistakes. I pointed out that accuracy is still a problem with such programs, with students being told something is wrong even when it may be correct. A bigger problem is triviality. While confused homonyms may be a nuisance, they are hardly central to the task of writing.

The second group was "Stylists." A primary program here is HOMER, which looks for "bureaucratic" writing by checking for such traits as long sentences, heavy preposition use, passive voice, and nominalization. With this and similar programs, the computer has a model of "good" writing and marks elements that vary from this norm. The problem here is that students may take the computer too seriously and come to believe that nominalization or passive voice are never acceptable.

I named the third group "Visionaries." These programs reposition text so writers can more easily see for themselves what revisions are necessary. Example programs are Quill, Writer's Helper, and Writer's Workbench. An example activity is Writer's Helper's Outline module that automatically prints the first sentence of each paragraph so writers can more easily see if they moved logically from one idea to the next, or jumped around erratically. Other modules print sentences individually, print the first and last sentence of each paragraph, count word frequencies, etc. In every case the writer must take responsibility for deciding what revisions to make, if any.

I named the last group "Phone Operators," newer networks that allow writers to communicate with each other as they write. Such networks promote peer revision. This

approach once again uses the computer as a facilitator, but leaves responsibility for changes to writers themselves.