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Modern devices can affect writing

By Wayne Smith

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In 2008, the human genome is mapped, new subatomic particles are discovered in large scale colliders, and long-range strategies are envisioned for how humans might one day live on Mars.

Similarly, notebook computers outsell desktop computers, broadband Internet access is available just about everywhere, open source software challenges commercial software, and every 14-year-old owns a cell phone.

But for some technologies, the pace of change can be much slower.

According to Diana Hacker's "A Writer's Reference," a popular writing handbook for students, the following items are neither detected reliably nor detected at all by spelling and grammar checkers in contemporary word processors:

"Writing context and culture, appropriate style of discourse, degree of 'assertiveness,' faulty parallelism, misplaced and dangling modifiers, homonyms, missing words and omitted verbs, shifts in verb tense or mood, coordination and subordination, sentence variety and fragments,

run-on sentences, common redundancies, unnecessary wordiness, jargon and abbreviations, clichés, sexist language, irregular verbs, pronoun agreements and references, missing or misused commas, semi-colons, apostrophes, hyphens, quotation marks, capitalization, and problems with emphasis."

In my classes, I have seen a larger number of inadvertent homonym errors in student writing in the past few years. Speculating for a moment, it is possible that the increased use of iPods and similar portable devices have increased the "hearing" of words at the expense of the "seeing" of the words.

This phenomenon, in turn, leads to a larger number of homonym errors - errors that, unfortunately, spelling and grammar checkers cannot identify, much less correct.

Research is also starting to show similar writing impacts might be due to the use of technologies that encourage writing in shorter chunks, such as e-mail, instant messaging and text messaging.

Writing well remains a difficult human endeavor. This is just as true for professionals, managers and executives as it is for student learners. Formal, quality writing, regardless of transmission medium, requires time commitment and focused effort.

Even in 2008.

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