



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## USING SPELL-CHECK TO RELIEVE THE MONOTONY

With everything that's going on in the world—terrorism; war and threats of war in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and North Korea; potential bioterrorism; the sagging economy; partisan politics; slashed budgets; layoffs; corporate scandals—there needs to be some relief valve for teachers and students. I've come across plenty to laugh about in the last few years, and some of my sources originate from our reliance on computers. When people hear English teachers laughing and giggling in their offices, it's not because they've been grading papers too long and have been reduced to incoherent, jabbering lunatics over student writing. Rather, it's because they've come across yet another example of twisted creativity.

As an English teacher, something I'd never attempt is being a stand-up comedian. However, when properly presented, there are hilarious, yet valuable, lessons focusing on commonly confused words (non-spell-checkable words) that can be both educational and entertaining. And, these lessons can serve as welcome breaks from other more tedious lessons and assignments that often create boredom in students and dread in teachers. Focusing on unintentional gaffs in writing is a good way to raise students' awareness that computers contain an imperfect spell-checker and to warn them to use this feature cautiously.

The problem with relying on the spell-check function is that students must get close enough to the desired word for the dictionary to suggest the right word. Anything else and some inappropriate or incorrect words pop up and present themselves as correct (but wrong) choices. Some of the most common examples are *to/too*, *there/their/they're*, *its/it's*, *your/you're*, and *affect/effect*. These are some of the words we have come to expect students to miss or misuse. However, there are others that come as complete surprises.

For example, in my Freshman Comp I class, a young lady, writing about planning her wedding, kept using

the word *eidetic*. I reached for the dictionary and discovered that the word means "involving accurate and vivid recall." By right-clicking on the word, the computer thesaurus came up with a list of 26 words—beginning with "egis, ego, egocentric" and ending with "eke out, eke out a living," and "elaborate." The correct word she was looking for was "etiquette." In the same class, a student wrote in his journal that he liked composing on the computer because his handwriting was not *ledge able* (legible). He went on to say that computers were high-tech and that's the way it's *so post* (supposed) to be when you're in college.

Another example came from a student who was writing about his experiences as a bass fisherman. He strongly warned me to "always take *incest* (insect) repellent on a camping trip" so the mosquitoes would not bite. This same student, in another writing sample, talked about trout fishing and said that he "*defiantly* (definitely) wanted to spend more time trout fishing in Colorado next year."

The most widely recognized programs at our school are the diesel technology internship programs. In my Technical Writing I class, students write an internship report about their cooperative work experiences with sponsoring companies. One student wrote that his most important tool purchase was a *nomadic* (pneumatic) ratchet that really made his work go faster. Besides the diesel programs, our school also has a well-recognized culinary arts program. I wonder how surprised the chefs in Hospitality Services were when they saw, in writing, that a student was applying for a job as a *Sioux* (sous) chef. Sounds right, but obviously, it is the wrong word—and all thanks to the spell-checker.

Once in awhile, a student's arguments about the correct word must take precedence. For example, a student whose family hunted wild hogs and made a family gathering out of it, wrote about "the big *tushes* on wild Russian boars" in his descriptive essay. Immediately, I decided that he had made an improper choice while using the spell-checker. When I questioned the term and asked him if he meant the ham part of the hog, he argued that regardless of what a "tush" was any-



where else, in his part of the country, it was the long, curved dental appendage (tusk) that curled up out of a boar's mouth. OK, I give up.

One of my all-time favorites was from an internship student, Damon Carlton. After he had finished writing his resumé in my technical writing class, he ran the obligatory spell-check. He summoned me to look at his resumé and proudly showed me that his name had been spell-checked and changed to "Damn Cartoon." The entire class got a good laugh out of that one. Another student, talking about his high school athletics, boasted, "I *resold* (wrestled) at the state championships three years in a row." Still another student complained about the *recluse* (reckless) driver she had encountered as a part of "parking lot rage" near the dormitories.

I present my "stand-up routine" by writing examples of non-spell-checkable words on the whiteboard and having students give me the meanings. As a group, most classes can get through the stand-up part of the exercise. What follows is a little more difficult for them. My study guide contains a series of exercises; each exercise is one page long, contains two or three paragraphs and approximately 35 errors. Students are required to read through the paragraphs, circle the incorrect words, and write in the correct word. Generally, I'll count this exercise as a quiz grade.

The entire exercise, including the brief stand-up routine, can help students discover why they cannot rely on the spell-checker to bail them out on potentially misspelled words. They learn that I expect them, as college students, to take responsibility for using appropriate words and spelling them correctly—obviously, the computer cannot be held responsible for this task. This lesson is nonthreatening and helps students realize that it's very impotent that they take responsibility for their work.

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