Using the Grammar Checker in Word 2000

by Edward P. Bailey, Ph.D.

This handout tells you how to use the grammar checker in Word 2000 (an older version). You can tell which version of Word you're using by going to the main menu in Word and choosing Help > About Microsoft Word.
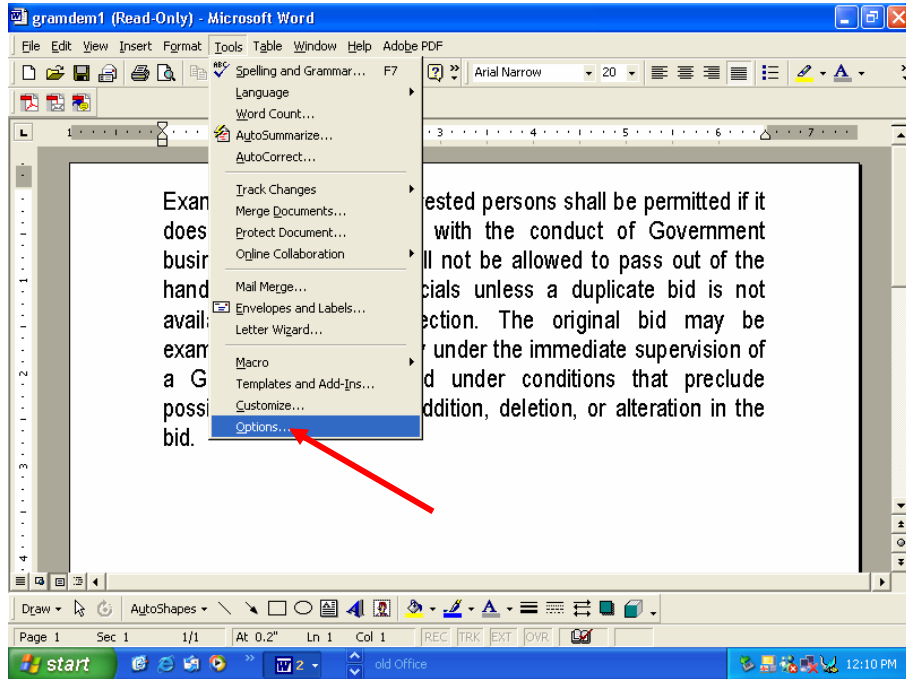
Here's what this handout covers:

- setting up the grammar checker

- running the grammar checker

- understanding the statistics

- copying the statistics

- rechecking a document

Let's take a look at these.

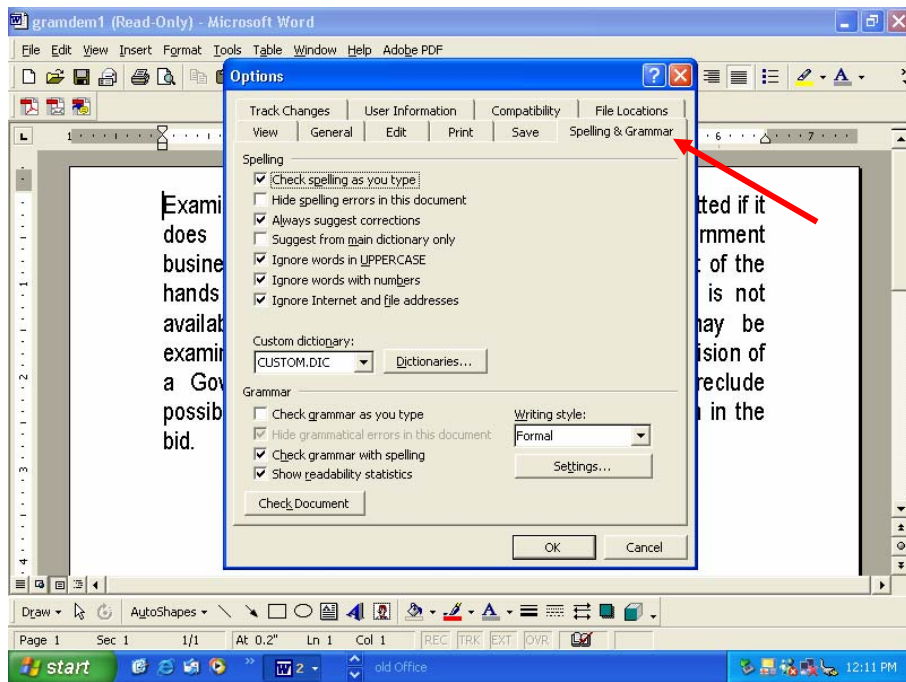### Setting up the grammar checker

The default settings in Word need a little tweaking. Here's what I suggest:

1. **On the main menu in Word, choose Tools > Options:**


You'll see a dialogue box.

2. **Choose the tab at the top labeled "Spelling & Grammar":**


You'll see another dialogue box.

3. Be sure the following checkmarks are there—if not, put them there (but <u>don't</u> close the dialogue box yet—there lots more to do!):

- **a checkmark in the box labeled "Check grammar as you type"**

- **a checkmark in the box labeled "Check grammar with spelling"**

- **a checkmark in the box labeled "Show readability statistics"**
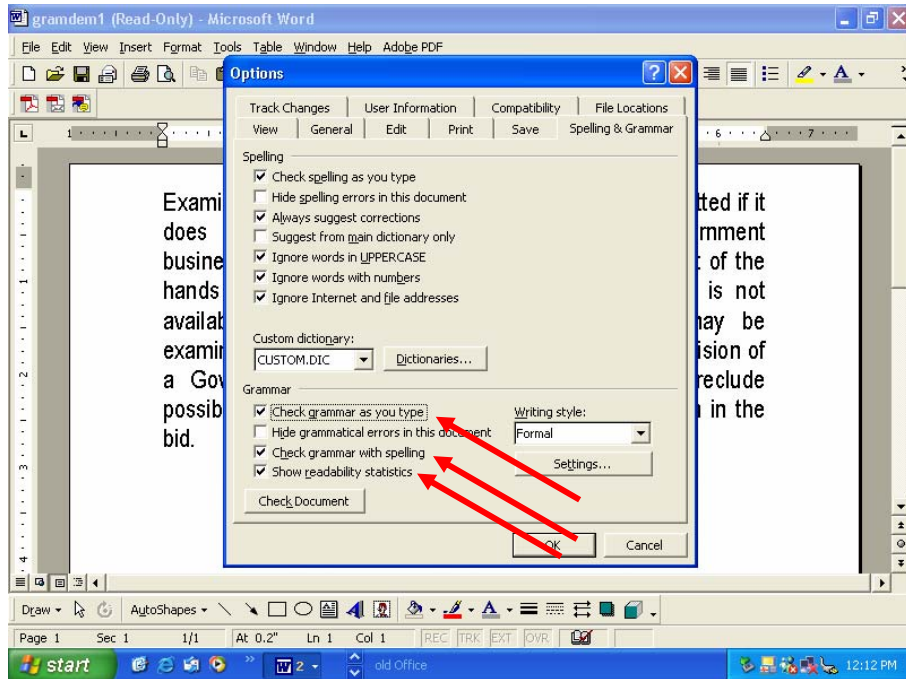
Note: The checkmarks on the top half of the pane have to do with spelling. The defaults (as shown) work well for me.

4. While still in the dialogue box, set the Writing style to Formal.
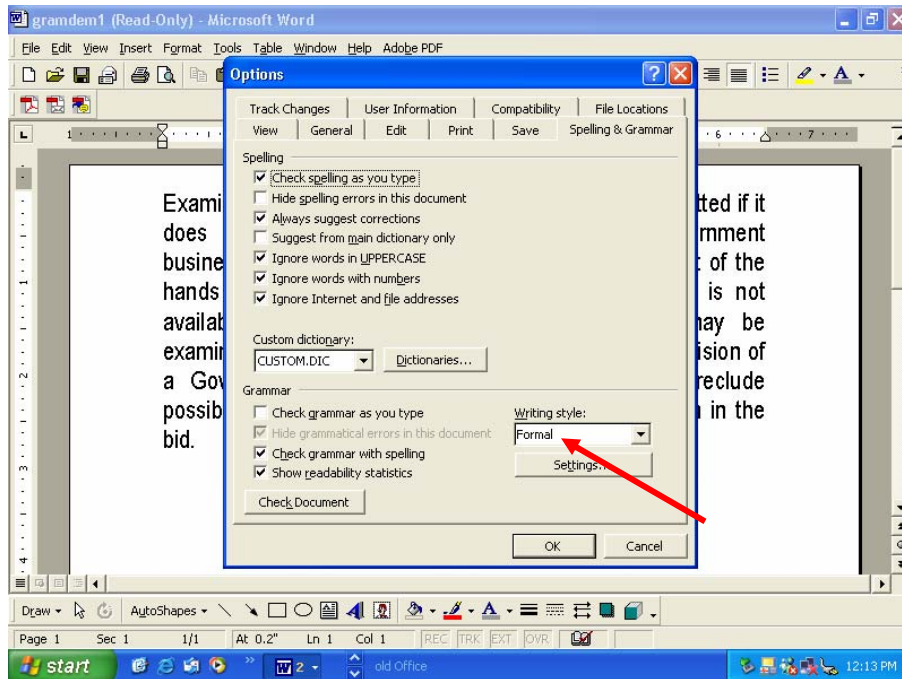
With the Formal setting, the grammar checker usually *shows* you which sentences are passive. With the Standard setting, it usually just *counts* them—but doesn't show you where they are. (Did I just say "usually"? As I explain later, counting passives is not always a proud moment for Word 2002!)

5. While still in the dialogue box, choose Settings.
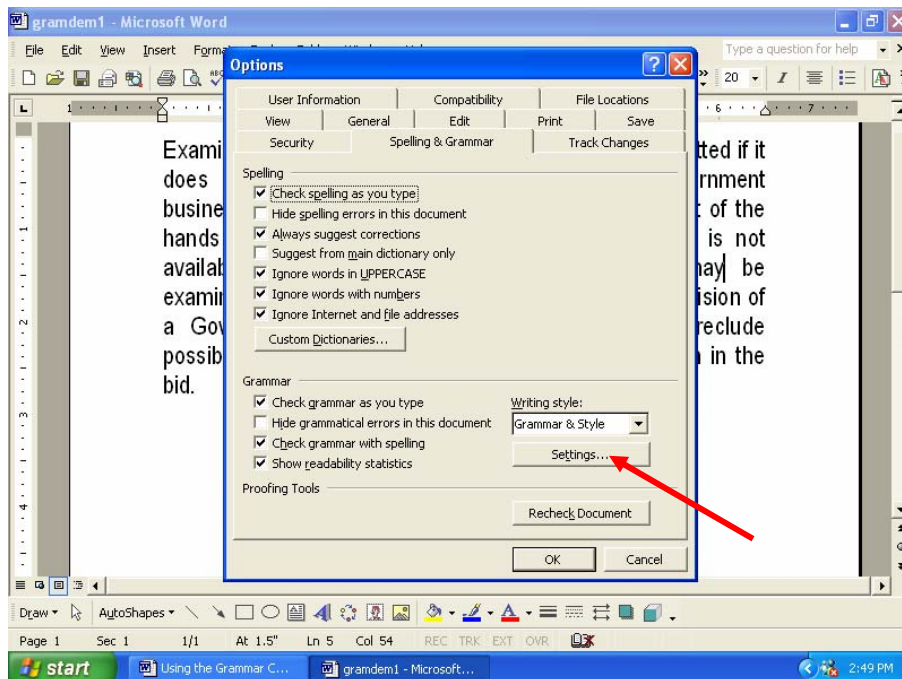
You'll see a number of options you can choose.

6. Here are the settings I recommend (and use myself):

- **Set "Comma required before last item" to "always."**

    This means Word will be sure you have a comma before the word *and* when you have a series (Example: apples, oranges, and pears). Putting the comma before the word *and* is standard practice for editors today. There's never any misreading if you use put one there; there sometimes is if you don't.)

- **Set "Punctuation required with quotes" to "inside."**

    Look at the period in the sentence you just read. That's where periods and commas go: inside quotation marks. Caution: The rules aren't so simple for other marks of punctuation. If you use this setting (which I recommend), it may not give you accurate advice for those other marks, but you don't use them as often.

- **Set "Spaces required within sentences" to "1."**

    One space after all punctuation is standard for typesetting, and it always has been. When you're using a computer, you're doing the equivalent of typesetting. If you learned to put two spaces after certain marks, that was for typewriters, which used fonts with a different design ("fixed pitch"). You're not using a typewriter now.

- **Scroll down to the Style section and remove the checkmarks before "Contractions," "Sentences beginning with And, But, and Hopefully," and "Use of first person."**

    Removing the checkmarks means Word won't point out those things as errors. Plain English encourages all of them, and so do I. And they're perfectly correct grammatically. (Hmmm—did I just do all of them?)
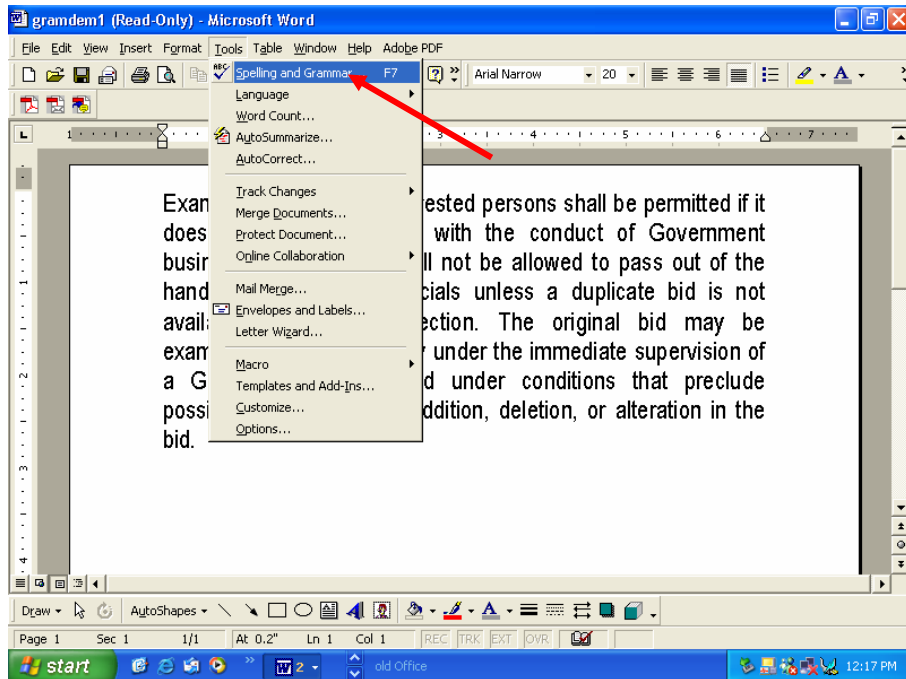
7. Finally … choose OK.

    This closes the dialogue box.

Running the grammar checker

Now you're ready to check your writing.

1. On the main menu, choose Tools > Spelling and Grammar:

The grammar checker will begin showing you any possible errors, misspelled words, passive verbs, etc.

Note: *You're smarter than your grammar checker. If it tells you something that doesn't make sense, remember—you're the boss! The grammar checker is much better than it used to be, but it's still wrong as often as not.*

Note: *If the grammar checker shows you only the readability statistics—without showing you anything else—there are two possibilities:*
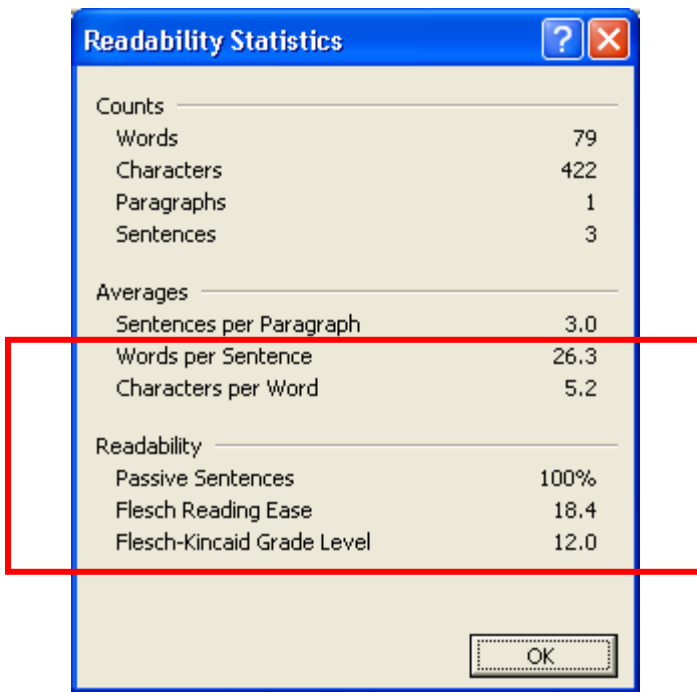
1. *The grammar checker didn't find anything (which is unusual).*

2. *You've already run the grammar checker once. If so, it doesn't show you everything again. If you want to see everything again, the last section in this handout ("Rechecking a document") tells you how.*

Note: *As you go through the grammar checker, you will see options such as "Ignore" and "Next sentence." Generally choose "Next sentence." If you choose "Ignore," the grammar checker pretends the sentence never existed, and that may mean your grammar statistics will be wrong.*

For example, if you choose "Ignore" for each passive sentence in your document, the grammar checker will tell you that you have 0% passives— even if your number is much higher. That's because it <u>ignored</u> those sentences!

Understanding the statistics

After the grammar checker finishes, you'll see your readability statistics:

I'm interested in the last five items. They're not perfect indicators, but they're very useful. Let's look at each one:

1. *Words per sentence.* Good number: under 17.

   This, of course, is your average sentence length. My recommendation? Stay under 17 words per sentence. If your average is higher, I guarantee you're causing your readers problems.

2. *Characters per Word.* Good number: under 5.2 (or so).

   This is a rough indicator of how hard your words are to read. Try to stay under 5.2 (or so). I say "or so" because simply counting the average number of letters per word doesn't always tell the story. For example, the word *unconstitutional* has a lot of letters, but it's an easy word, isn't it?

3. *Passive Sentences.* Good number: under 5%.

   Optimum isn't zero. But professionals use passive verbs sparingly—for good reason!

   Note: When it comes to counting passives, Word 2000 is—how shall I say this? Quirky!! Sometimes it shows 0% passives no matter how many you really have. Changing the Writing Style setting to Standard sometimes helps. Oh, well—Word 2002, the next version, solves the problem.

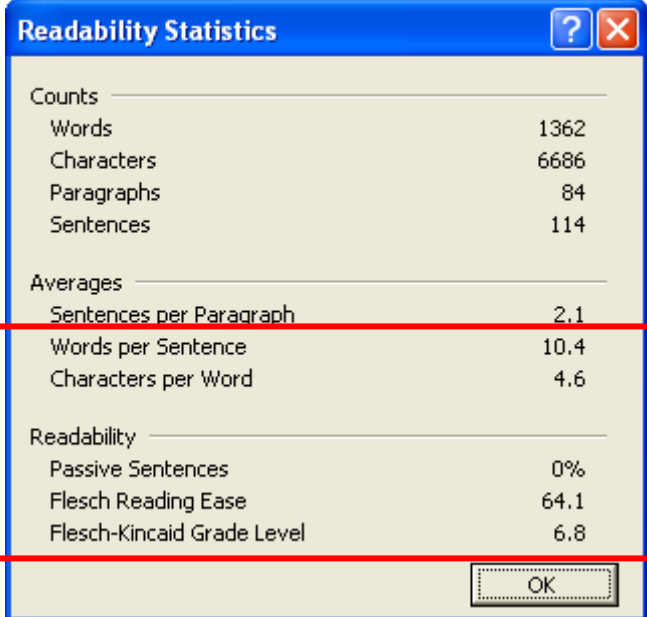4. *Flesch Reading Ease.* Good number: over 40.

This scale measures how hard or easy your sentences are to read. The scale is 1-100, and a *higher* number is better. Is 60 better than 20? Yes. Is 65 better than 60? No! Rudolf Flesch, the author of this index, calls it a rough indicator. Anywhere in the good area—40 to 100—is fine.

5. *Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level.* Good number: under 10.

   This scale also measures how hard or easy your sentences are to read. The scale, in practice, is about 4–19, and a *lower* number is better. Don't think of the number as really representing your grade level, educational attainments, or intelligence. It's none of those things—it's just a number!

   Note: *Word correctly calculates the numbers below 12. However, it won't ever give you a number higher than 12—even if the correct number is 15 or 16. But if Word rates your writing as a 12, you're already too high.*

By the way, here are the readability statistics for this handout. How do they look?

Copying the statistics

I sometimes ask my students to copy their readability statistics onto their document—like the illustration you just looked at. Here's how you can do that:

1. **Run the grammar checker until the readability statistics are showing.**

2. **Press (at the same time) Alt-Print Screen (that is, press the Alt key and the Print Screen key at the same time).**

    Pressing those keys will put the readability statistics into the Windows Clipboard.

3. **Close the Readability Statistics window.**

4. **Put your cursor at the end of your document—or wherever you want to copy your readability statistics.**

5. **On the main menu, choose Edit > Paste.**

Voila!

Rechecking a document

The grammar checker shows you everything—such as where your passives are—only the first time you run it. If you run the grammar checker again, you'll just see your readability statistics.
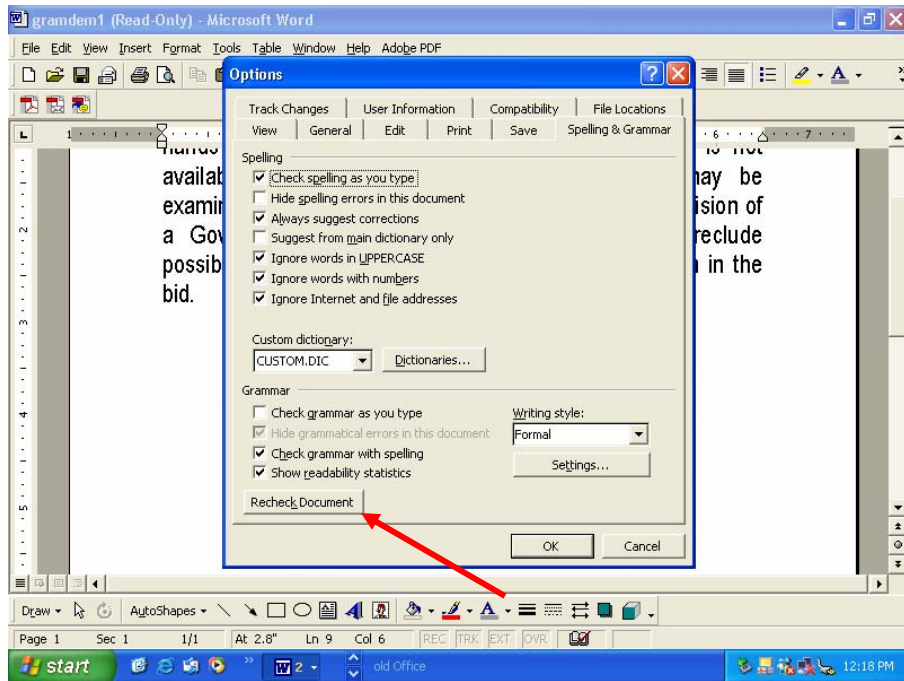
That may be fine. But if you want to see everything again, you have to let Word know. Here's how:

1. **On the main menu, choose Tools > Options.**

    You'll see the Options window.

2. **Choose the tab at the top labeled "Spelling & Grammar."**

3. Choose Recheck Document:

Word asks if you really want to do that.

4. Choose "yes."

The grammar checker will now show you everything again.

Note: You don't have to recheck your document every time to see where your errors are. If you set up the options for the grammar checker the way I suggested, Word will identify possible problem areas right on your document. It puts a green squiggly line underneath some of your words. That means you have a possible grammar error.