

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Experimenting with Style: Cyborg Voices

*Benjamin Hojem and Rhiannon Scharnhorst*

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# Experimenting with Style: Cyborg Voices

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## Overview

From Aristotle's *correctness* to Quintilian's *purity* to Campbell's *nationality*, rhetorical instruction in the formal qualities of writing has long emphasized stylistic "virtues" that serve to exclude language variants and their speakers. With this history in mind, how should we understand the capabilities and affordances of generative AI (GAI) and natural language processing? Do these digital tools serve to further exclude the languages and voices of those marginalized "missing people" (Owusu-Ansah), or are they akin to a universal translator, enabling all writers to present their ideas in a standardized English? Rather than lecture our students on the xenophobia of Ancient Greece, this activity invites students to draw their own conclusions on how these programs affect their writing.

The activity will begin with a look at how technology, like Microsoft Word's grammar check, has historically impacted writing styles. This discussion primes us to consider the ethics and influence of modern editors. Students will then experiment with popular style tools that emphasize different "virtues" like the Hemingway Editor (conciseness), Helen Sword's "Writer's Diet" (clarity and active voice), Grammarly (grammar conventions and tone), and Google's generative AI tool Gemini. By submitting their own work to the tools and reflecting on the suggested changes, they'll gain firsthand experience of how these editors influence stylistic choices (positively and negatively). This comparative approach will reveal the limitations and pitfalls of these tools as well allow students to consider their responsible implementation.

By experimenting with these editors, students will gain a deeper understanding of style, and the role technology plays in the writing

process. Our overall objective is for students to see that human judgment and confidence in one's writing voice(s) are crucial. While editors can ensure grammatical correctness, we must be critical of their potential to homogenize writing. These tools have a tendency to edit towards a plain, standardized style rather than provide the range of styles that classical rhetoricians associated with eloquence. Nor do they encourage the intentional deviation from convention that John Genung and Donna Gorrell define as the essence of style. Thus, we hope this activity empowers writers to invest in their own distinct and flexible style.

This activity could be used to introduce students to GAI or revision strategies; as an activity to precede or follow lessons in rhetorical grammar, rhetorical figures, or other approaches to describing formal constructions; or as part of a dedicated course on style.

### Time Commitment

One class session

### Materials

Students will each need a device with internet access as well as pieces of prior writing they've done that they are willing to submit to online style editors.

### Activity Process

- Prior to the activity, students will read an article or essay exploring the impact of Microsoft Word's grammar and spell check on style. Some examples include "The Surprisingly Subtle Ways Microsoft Word Has Changed How We Use Language" by Victoria Woollaston (a more accessible option for first year writing students); or "The Politics of The Program: MS Word As The Invisible Grammarian" by Tim

McGee and Patricia Ericsson (a denser scholarly article for advanced students).

- Next, students will discuss the reading at the beginning of the in-class activity in small groups. Some guiding questions might include:
  - What are some of the subtle ways Microsoft Word has influenced our language usage patterns or writing habits?
  - In what ways could Word's design reinforce certain linguistic biases or make it harder to deviate from standardized language norms?
  - How might writers' reliance on Word's style checkers and writing advice tools shape their own style, tone, and authorial identity over time?
  - Based on what you've learned so far, how might the use of generative-AI and style editors influence your own writing practice?
- Students will then be given a list of free, online style editors to work with (see Appendix for suggestions). They will input a short piece of their own writing to each tool and keep a copy of each of the suggested changes or actual changes made to their work. Along with each tool, students will write brief reflective notes on what they see.
- Returning to their small groups, students will discuss the various editors, how their individual writing has been changed, and how their group views the suggestions of the various tools. These discussions can then transition into a full

class discussion on the value of individual style, the role of human judgment in writing, and how these tools homogenize language.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the influence technology has on the writing process
- Recognize ideologies behind stylistic norms
- Think critically about the biases behind computer-assisted editing and generative-AI tools
- Consider the value of their own stylistic choices

## Learning Accommodations

- Instructors should provide any links and discussion questions in advance of class.

## Works Cited

- Christiansen, Francis. "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" from *Style and Rhetoric in Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Paul Butler, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010, pp. 147–154.
- Gorrell, Donna. *Style and Difference: A Guide for Writers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2005.
- McGee, Tim and Patricia Ericsson. "The Politics of The Program: MS Word As The Invisible Grammarian." *Computers and Composition*, vol 19, no 4, December 2002, pp 453-470.
- Owusu-Ansah, Alfred L. "Defining Moments, Definitive Programs, and the Continued Erasure of Missing People," *Composition Studies*, vol 51, no 1, spring 2023, pp 143–148.
- Ray, Brian. *Style: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and*

*Pedagogy*, Parlor Press and the WAC Clearinghouse, 2015.  
Woollaston, Victoria. “The Surprisingly Subtle Ways Microsoft Word Has Changed How We Use Language.” *BBC*, 23 October 2023, <https://bbc.com/future/article/20231025-the-surprisingly-subtle-ways-microsoft-word-has-changed-the-way-we-use-language>.

#### Further Reading

Brody, Miriam. *Manly Writing: Gender, Rhetoric, and the Rise of Composition*, SIUP, 1993.

Corbett, Edward. “Teaching Style,” from *Style and Rhetoric in Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, ed. by Paul Butler, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010, pp. 209–218.

## Appendix

Suggested list of online style editors and generative-AI tools

- Hemingway App: <https://hemingwayapp.com/>
- The Writer's Diet: <https://writersdiet.com/writing-test/>
- Grammarly: <https://www.grammarly.com/>
- Gemini: <https://gemini.google.com/>
- Claude: <https://claude.ai/>
- Copilot: <https://copilot.microsoft.com/>
- ChatGPT: <https://chat.openai.com/>

Please note that this collection prioritizes tools that students can use without creating accounts. However, signup requirements can sometimes change, so it's always a good idea to double-check before assigning them.