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# Communicator

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# Who edits the editors?

**John Revington** finds out if the StyleWriter 4 editing software has a place in our technical communication world.

If you ever wished that you could have your own tame subeditor to check your work, find those easily missed mistakes, and offer advice, then perhaps StyleWriter 4 is for you.

This review takes a closer look at how well this editing software performs in the demanding world of technical communications.

## What is StyleWriter 4?

StyleWriter 4 claims to be the 'world's most powerful copy-editing software' ([www.editorsoftware.com](http://www.editorsoftware.com)). While this is no modest claim, the latest version of this software certainly offers a rich set of features, many of which are unique, in a single powerful package.

You can run the program as a standalone application, or launch it from the StyleWriter 4 icon on the Word toolbar. It 'reads' the document you're working on, analyses it using a vocabulary of 200,000 'graded words' and some 50,000 word and phrase 'rules', and displays its findings, advice, and statistics in its own window.

Using highlighting and a range of colour codes, StyleWriter 4 neatly and clearly sets out the results of its analysis, particularly with regard to:

- style checking (for example, categories such as passive verbs, clichés and jargon, complex words, legal terms)
- proofreading (for example, commonly confused or misused words, hyphenation, sexist writing)
- readability (see Nick Wright's article in this issue of *Communicator* on page 36 about a new readability measure — the Bog Index)
- likely reception by three kinds of audience, and 20 different writing tasks
- your own house style (you can add your own style rules and categories, and delete others)
- measurements and statistics (for example, Passive Index, average sentence length, 'Bog' and 'Pep' readability measures).

## Why would you want to use StyleWriter 4?

As technical communicators, we face a broad range of writing tasks. Sometimes our work is little more than correcting a few typos, or improving the grammar in a short document. At the other end of the scale is the challenge of a large, poorly written, technical manual aimed at a non-technical audience — not an uncommon situation in our world.

At every point along this wide scale, StyleWriter 4 has plenty to offer, even to the most experienced technical communicator. None of us knows it all, nor can we spot every

mistake. To have that tame subeditor at your shoulder will undoubtedly improve the language quality of your document and bolster your confidence.

This program helps you write straightforward (plain) English according to established language rules and conventions. This in turn helps your readers understand complex or technical documents more easily, and helps you meet the promise of being an effective technical communicator.

It offers a structured, objective, yet flexible way to edit documents, as well as acting as a tutor, helping you learn about the complexities of our rich language.

## A typical editing process

I've used different versions of StyleWriter on many kinds of document, from personal emails to scientific papers, for nearly three years. Most of the time the software's advice has been both positive and enlightening, even when I had checked and re-checked simple documents, and was sure about the quality of their language.

Typically, editing a document with StyleWriter 4 starts by launching it from Word's toolbar. By default, it analyses the whole document, although it also gives you a choice of analysing selected text, or text copied to the clipboard from other sources, such as a PDF.

When the program displays its findings and its advice, the fun starts.

Figures 1 and 2 outline the approach I've found to be most productive when editing a document using StyleWriter 4:

1. 'Eyeball' the text in the main panel (lots of different colours and lots of highlighting means there's lots of work to do!).
2. Look at the three main calculations at the bottom of the results window to get a sense of the quality of the writing according to plain English rules (Bog [readability] Index, average sentence length, and Passive Index).
3. Explore the bar charts and the corresponding, colour-coded text in the left hand panel (each bar represents a sentence).
4. Look at the detail of a secondary window which displays the plain English 'transgressions' in various categories (such as how many passive verbs or jargon terms there are in the document).

The number of suggested edits that display in the window is often quite overwhelming, so the next step is to decide what edits to make: change all passive verbs, delete some unwanted jargon, and simplify a few complex words? These

decisions often depend on the time, quality, and cost constraints of the project — what changes can I afford to make in the time available? — as well as on the document's readership.

### The results windows

Figures 1 and 2 show StyleWriter's results windows for an unedited document, and indicate the editing sequence described above.

### Two contrasting examples

Rather than showing the results of StyleWriter on familiar content (The Economist and BBC content tends to be excellent; financial and compliance reports are often poor), I aimed the software at two pages of ISTC's in-house writing, and at a random article from the web.

Figures 3 and 4 show the statistical analyses of these two contrasting pieces of writing.

The Word template the *Communicator's* commissioning editor sends to contributors has two pages of guidelines and instructions for using the correct styles when submitting copy to the journal. The resulting analysis, as we might expect, is excellent (Figure 3).

The second example (Figure 4), is the random web article.

### Final thoughts

Having used StyleWriter on several thousand pages of business and technical documentation, I realise I have come to rely on it, not just for its sharp 'eye' and consistent advice, but also as a tool to measure the value we, as technical communicators, can add to our client's or to our internal documentation.

### Conclusions

If the idea of having an unbiased, ever-alert, and knowledgeable companion to help you improve your writing appeals to you, then StyleWriter 4 is definitely worth befriending.

At first you may find the volume of advice is daunting, but you have many choices for how deeply you edit, and they are all under your control. You can even ignore its advice, if you think that's wise. That flexibility alone makes a compelling reason to have this editing tool on your desktop.

With a 14-day trial download and a price of £104+VAT you can't go wrong. **C**

### References and further reading

Cameron, T (2011) 'PerfectIt – a step in the right direction', *Communicator*, Spring 2011: 26

Cutts, M (2007) *Oxford Guide to Plain English*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.

StyleWriter 4 demos and 14-day trial download from: [www.editorssoftware.com](http://www.editorssoftware.com) accessed April 2011

Wright, N (2011) 'Designing a better readability formula', *Communicator*, Summer 2011: 36

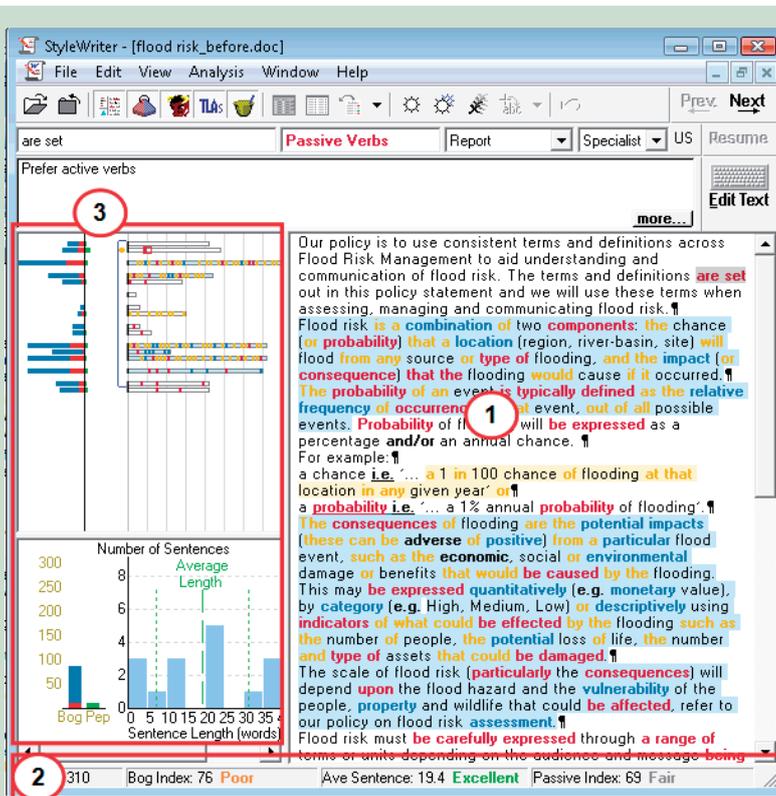


Figure 1. StyleWriter's results window for an unedited document

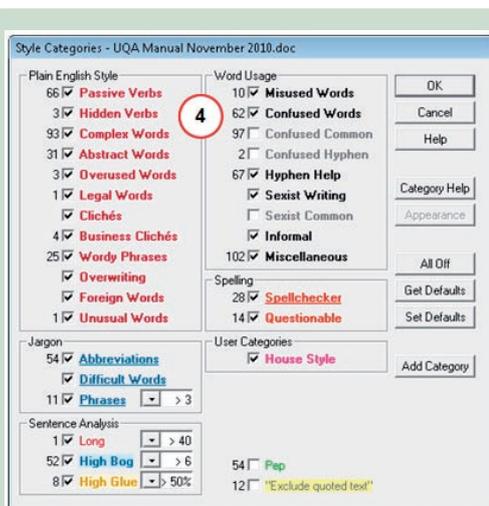


Figure 2. A secondary window showing which plain English rules have been 'broken'.

Measure	Original	Target	Redraft	Rating
Total Words	1,362			
Average Sentence	13.7	11 to 20		Excellent
Passive Index	5	up to 25		Excellent
Style Index	35	up to 30		Good
Bog Index	19	up to 30		Excellent

Figure 3. Result for ISTC's instructions in its writer's template.

Measure	Original	Target	Redraft	Rating
Total Words	837			
Average Sentence	28.2	11 to 20		Bad
Passive Index	52	up to 25		Fair
Style Index	151	up to 30		Dreadful
Bog Index	99	up to 30		Poor

Figure 4. StyleWriter's result for the web article

**John Revington**  
MISTC has a special interest in lighting up the sometimes dark communication path between subject matter experts and readers whose first language may not be English.  
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