

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Perfect your documents with consistency tests

by Erin Brenner

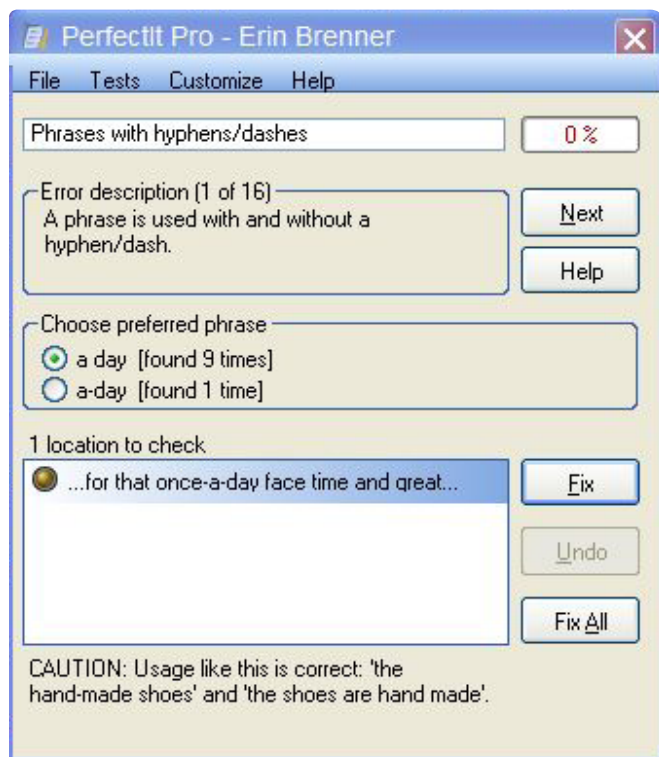
I recently attended **Communication Central** in Baltimore. The conference brought together many communication professionals, mostly editors, to talk about our work and how we can do it better.

Several sessions were devoted to using Microsoft Word more efficiently to help us edit faster and more consistently. In addition to using wild cards with Find and Replace and running macros, you can purchase add-in software for Word. Like spell checkers, these add-ins are only as good as their users. When used correctly, they can help copy be more consistent and editors be more efficient and thorough. When you spend less time on the mechanical editing, you can spend more time on language and content editing, resulting in cleaner, more concise copy in less time.

Recently, I've been trying out one of these software add-ins: **Intelligent Editing's PerfectIt**. This consistency checker runs up to 27 different tests on a given document, including hyphenation, abbreviation, heading, and table tests. (Full disclosure: Intelligent Editing offers a discount to *Copyediting* members, but we have no financial relationship with the company.)

How PerfectIt works

PerfectIt operates similarly to a spell checker, and the company has wisely fashioned the interface like a spell checker's.



PerfectIt's user interface is similar to a spell checker's.

After you load PerfectIt into Word, you'll find the software under **Add-Ins** in the toolbar in ribbon versions of Word or in the **Tools** menu in older versions. Select the software. Within the window that opens up, select **Start** to begin testing.

Once the tests are running, just below the menu bar you'll see the name of the test, the percentage of all tests completed, and a brief description of the current test. In the image at the bottom of the preceding column, PerfectIt is running a hyphenation test and has found instances of *a day* and *a-day*. When I select *a day*, I see all the instances inconsistent with it. I can click on each location to check them or go by the snippet offered. I can then choose **Fix** or **Fix All**. If I don't need to fix any of the instances, I just click the **Next** button to the right of the error description box.

When all tests are completed, PerfectIt can create a list of abbreviations, update the table of contents, accept all the tracked changes, and finalize other details in the document.

Test results

Although Intelligent Editing recommends running PerfectIt on documents of at least a thousand words, I ran tests on both long and short documents.

Document (word count)	Errors caught
Press release (469)	1 hyphenation error
Blog post (954)	All tests passed
Award entry (2,773)	1 head error, 1 abbreviation error
Research report (6,859)	2 hyphenation errors, 4 abbreviation errors, 1 table error
Nonfiction book (25,951)	6 hyphenation errors, 1 spelling variation, 1 capitalization error

PerfectIt caught errors in nearly all the documents I tested, even the shortest one. It caught the most errors in the longest document, which was to be expected. The tests were quick, too. It took just eight minutes to run PerfectIt on the book, well worth the time to fix all those errors.

Advanced features

I ran all my tests without customizing the software, and I was pleased with the results. Yet if you customize the software, you can fine-tune your results and help the software run faster. You don't have to run all 27 tests, for example. The nonfiction book I edited was written in a colloquial style, so contractions were acceptable. Going into the **Tests** menu, I can deselect that test under **Spelling consistency** and save myself the bother of skipping past 26 different contractions and all their instances.

You can also create custom style sheets. A style sheet is a predetermined list of terms to watch for or skip. The system

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can warn you of a common misspelling of an industry term, for example, and suggest the correct term. You can create your own style sheets, specific to client, topic, industry, or whatever makes sense to your workload.

Even better, though, you can use someone else's style sheet. Intelligent Editing offers a **forum** where staffers and users can post their style sheets for others to use with the software. A few of them include

- Computer Terms (almost 200 terms)
- World Health Organization (WHO) Style Sheet, constructed from chapter 5 of WHO's style guide
- Convert UK Spellings to US (over 1,700 terms)
- American Anthropological Association Style Guide

You can also use the forum to offer feedback and ask questions about PerfectIt, get news about software updates, and participate in general editing discussions.

But should I use it?

I wish PerfectIt had been available when

I worked for a marketing research firm a few years ago. For two years, I faithfully added hundreds of industry terms and company names to an Excel spreadsheet. It was faster to search my spreadsheet than to redo the research each time (and it was often months before a specific term came up again), but I could have created a PerfectIt style sheet and let the software do the work for me in a fraction of the time.

I really like using PerfectIt. It lets me do one final pass for consistency on a document before I hand it over to a client. It's as easy as running a spell checker, and I'm delivering cleaner copy by using it.

You can try a limited version of PerfectIt—**Online Consistency Checker**—for free. It will run five tests on an uploaded document of up to 10 MB, giving you a quick sense of what PerfectIt can do. Documents are automatically deleted from the company's server once the tests have been performed. You can also download a free 30-day trial to see how the software might help you.

The one caveat in all this is that currently PerfectIt is available only for PCs. If you're a Mac user and interested in using PerfectIt, there is a **workaround**, and the company would like to hear from those who want a Mac version.

What other tools or efficiency tips do you want to know about? Send us an e-mail at technicallyspeaking@copyediting.com. ■

THE QUIZ ANSWER

The Quiz is on page 1.

The Quiz sentence contains one error.

The question is whether the elements should be formed into a list (books, readers, and writers) or whether there is another intended meaning. Fact-checking reveals that the author intended a list of three elements, but that leaves us with a parallelism problem.

For items to be parallel, each item must be the same part of speech. Here's what we've got:

- *books*, a noun
- *those who read*, a noun phrase
- *write them*, a verb phrase

It's a safe guess that the writer's intention was to have the two verbs, *read* and *write*, share *those* [people] *who* and *them* [books]: those who read them and those who write them. However, the first item, *books*, isn't meant to be part of that phrase. The items aren't parallel.

We could make the ideas a two-item series:

books and those who read and write them

That's OK as far as it goes. But the sentence is part of some marketing materials, and it's always best to be as clear as possible, especially for a mass audience. We can clarify the meaning and keep much of the writer's original wording:

books, those who read them, and those who write them

Our best bet, though, is to be concise and direct:

books, readers, and writers

Would you have done something different? E-mail editor@copyediting.com, and we'll print your solutions in a future issue. ■

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