The Writer's Toolkit: more than just your average grammar checker

For writers who don't need the fanciest of grammar checkers, but who do need the help of some other writing tools, Systems Compatibility Corp.'s Writer's Toolkit may be just the item. This program, which can run as a TSR (Terminate and Stay Resident), includes a grammar checker, dictionary, thesaurus, abbreviation finder, dictionary of quotations, and manual of grammar and style. All of these tools can be made available through a pop-up menu system inside most word processing programs or as a stand-alone application.

We found the tools to be useful and helpful, if not as complex or as flexible as some of their stand-alone cousins. The grammar checker is based on the Houghton Mifflin CorrecText system, which is the same basic engine used in the Correct Grammar products reviewed here, but surprisingly, it does almost exactly as well checking text as those products do when used in the standard business style. Although you can modify some of the rules within this checker, you do not have the flexibility or capacity of the bigger product. Some sentences, for example, are just too long and complicated for the Toolkit to try to figure out, and it says so. The grammar checker will also let you check partial documents. To run a quick check, Writer's Toolkit is quite successful.

The American Heritage dictionary has definitions, anagrams, wildcard look-up and spelling correction. It's fully especially if you want to check a word, or work crossword puzzles, or such other word games. The dictionary shows parts of speech, definitions, pronunciation, and alternative word forms.

The Roget's II Thesaurus finds synonyms and usage notes. It works fine, but is rather limited in scope.

The Houghton Mifflin Abbreviation program finds what state MI refers to, what "etc." stands for, and explains the meaning of "POW," for example. It does a fine job, but again it has a limited database. You can add your own abbreviations, however. The Concise Columbia Dictionary of Quotations is something of a grab bag of quotations related to a limited list of key words. The selections are peculiar sometimes, but there is always something of interest.

Finally, Written Word III offers advice and discussion about grammar rules, style issues, punctuation, various formats for letters, and similar advice, for example. Although this is extremely basic, it is useful nonetheless.

Of all these programs, the dictionary and grammar checker are probably the most useful, and the abbreviation finder and quotation dictionary are the least useful, although opinions will vary depending on need. The program operates well, but is slow to respond because it must go to the disk for all of its information. The grammar checker is mostly in memory, and that requires 512K minimum. The other utilities work in about 70K.

All in all, the Writer's Toolkit is a useful product, although it is no substitute for the best of the grammar checkers tested here and not very useful for Windows users. Systems Compatibility plans to have a Windows version of this product available November 1.

The product will basically be the same, with a couple of enhancements. The Windows version of The Writer's Toolkit will contain a seventh tool — a Dictionary of Common Knowledge — that will contain a reference guide of general information. The Windows product will support all Windows applications via the clipboard, and it will support 40 DOS word processors. In addition, the Windows version will be capable of running directly under Word for Windows, WordPerfect for Windows, and AmiPro.

The Writer's Toolkit's dictionary and thesaurus are not as thorough as those in full-fledged word processing programs — its quotation dictionary is a pale imitation of the real thing in book form, its abbreviation program is of limited usefulness, and the principles of grammar are perhaps more easily used in print form. The grammar checker is the best part. The program has various modes and permits you to select text from its screen and import them into a wide variety of word processing programs. The Toolkit supports most known word processing programs for the IBM PC/MS DOS world.

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