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 thing. The 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 pull-up menu system inside most word processing programs as a stand-alone application.

We found the tools to be useful and helpful. If not as complete or as flexible as some of their stand-alone counterparts, the grammar checker is based on the Houghton Mifflin Correct-Tex system, which is the same base engine used in the Correct Grammar products reviewed here. (Not surprisingly, it doesn't give much in the way of well-checking text as those products do when used as the standard business style. Although you can modify the rules within this checker, you do not have the flexibility of capacity of the bigger product. Some sentences, for example, are just too long and complex for the Toolkit to try to figure out and correct.

The American Heritage dictionary has a small thesaurus and spelling correction. It's fully expandable if you add your own word lists and add words with alternate spellings and meanings. The Thesaurus shows parts of speech, definitions, pronunciation, and alternate 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 U.S. stands for, and explains the meaning of "PIW," for example. It does a fine job, but again it has a limited database. Unfortunately, however, The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations is something of a gag bag of quotation plucked from a limited list of key words. The selections are spectacular sometimes, but there is always something of interest.

Finally, Writer's 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 in memory, and that requires 128K 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.

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