

I'm John Sturtevant, and this is Say What?! A weekly podcast with quick tips to help you communicate clearly at work, at home, and everywhere else you go.

Welcome to Say What?! Episode 10.

This week, we continue our series: Ten Quick Tips for Terrific Email

And today's Quick Tip is: Are you under a spell?

Many of you are bewitched by the magic that lives inside your computer.

You know the one I mean. It grants you a wish every time you misspell a word. The Mystical Invisible Spell Check.

Spell Check was born around 1971 at Stanford University.

It quickly evolved and became integrated into all kinds of software.

And although it does seem magical, it has its limitations. Yet, many people rely on Spell Check as if it works flawlessly.

And when we rely on Spell Check rather than ourselves, it can actually make us a bit more careless.

Because we tend to pay less attention to what we write and assume spell check will fix our mistakes.

But it doesn't, not always.

For example, spell check can't help you with proper names like people or places.

A few months ago, I received an email about an upcoming event in Houston.

The email described an event at the Houston Conventions and Center.

The writer's Spell Check didn't recognize Conventions should be Convention, nor did it know to eliminate the word "and" between the two words - Houston Conventions and Center.

Even more importantly, the Spell Check didn't know the actual name of the facility is the George R. Brown Convention Center, not the Houston Convention Center.

Had the writer paid closer attention to the sentence, the incorrect name would've been evident.

Spell Check also won't detect the incorrect use of homonyms, like *their* as in "that is their dog", and *there*, as in "it lives at the house over there."

Or *it's* with an apostrophe meaning it is or it has, versus *its* without the apostrophe meaning the possessive form of it.

There are thousands of other examples of words in English that can easily confuse the Mystical Spell Check.

Spell Check also doesn't know what you intend to write.

So let's say you're writing about having a coffee in Italy, and you type expresso instead of espresso.

Spell Check would probably correct your expresso to express. And while you may have downed that small cup of dark coffee in a quick gulp, express is not what you intended.

So, let's look at ways to compensate for Spell Check's limitations, and help you ensure what you wrote is actually what you meant to write.

First, read your writing out loud.

I'm not a very good proofreader. I'm primarily an auditory learner. So finding errors visually doesn't come naturally to me.

I'll talk more about visual, auditory, and tactile learners in a future podcast.

Since proofreading isn't my strength, I listen to the words instead, by reading what I write out loud.

That allows me to listen to how I organize my ideas, hear the style and tone of my writing, and catch misspelled words.

Also give your writing to someone else to read.

That could even be your husband or wife. My wife is a visual learner, and a great proofreader. She always catches mistakes I miss.

Exchanging your writing with a work colleague is a great idea too. Your coworker can help identify errors in your content, assess the logical flow of your ideas, and find typos.

Of course you won't ask a coworker to read every email you write. But adding that sort of process for reports, proposals, and other more detailed documents is a great practice to develop in your organization.

Another idea to consider, especially with longer, or more critical documents is to use a professional editing and proofreading service.

One of the best I know of is ProofreadNow. The document you upload to their site is reviewed by two professional editors.

I'll post a link to ProofreadNow on the podcast page on my website.

And finally, you don't always have access to the same kind of spellcheck you're used to on your laptop.

Messaging on your iPhone for example. Autocorrect or predictive text are not the same as Spell Check.

If you want to send a message while using Skype or Zoom, spell check won't help you there either.

You're better off learning to pay attention to what you write to be sure what you wrote is what you meant.

So this week, after you craft that project-winning proposal, ask a coworker to review it, or send it over to ProofreadNow.com before you deliver it to your new client.

And after you finish that critically important email to your manager, read it out loud before you send it.

Who knows? You might just become enchanted with the idea.

That's Say What?! for this week. Thanks for listening!

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