

Ginger Software Suite of Writing Services & Apps

Robert Swier

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

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| Product Type | Ginger Software offers products for browsers, desktop computers, and mobile devices. |
| Language(s) | English |
| Level | All levels |
| Activities | Proofreading, editing, revising writing, translating |
| Media Format | Downloadable application or browser extension |
| Operating System(s) | Ginger Page for Windows XP SP2 or later; Ginger Browser Extension for Chrome and Safari; Ginger Page for Apple iOS 7.0 or later; Ginger Keyboard for Android 4.0.3 or later. |
| Hardware Requirements | 18.8 MB on iOS. 48 MB on Android. Size not specified for Windows or for browser extensions. Sound required for use of text-to-speech or video tutorials. |
| Supplementary Software or Hardware | Adobe Flash required on Windows. All devices require constant internet connection. |
| Printed Documentation | Help and tutorial documentation available on website. Printed documentation not available. |
| Price | Subscription service. Limited free usage tier available. Basic service from \$8.30/mo. Premium service from \$14.60/mo. Yearly plans and student discounts also available. For multiple license purchase options, contact producer. |

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General description

Ginger Software produces a suite of products that help users improve their writing in terms of grammar checking, proofreading, translating, accessing reference tools such as dictionaries, utilizing text readers, and accessing a “personal trainer” to review past grammatical errors. Ginger’s offerings represent one of several examples of a relatively new category of big data statistical writing improvement products. In contrast to grammar and style checkers of years past, which relied largely on hand-written rules and statistical models built with limited data, current products such as those offered by Ginger Software dramatically scale up the amount of data used in the development process. The results promise greater accuracy and coverage of a wider range of phenomena, and cloud-based implementation facilitates access from across a wide range of devices. The current Ginger suite includes Ginger Page for Windows (including add-ins for Microsoft Office), Ginger Page for iOS, Ginger Keyboard for Android, and browser extensions for Chrome and Safari. In this review, these products will collectively be referred to as Ginger, unless a specific product is being discussed. As Ginger is a cloud-based service, these offerings serve to provide access to the service from different platforms.

All software offerings from Ginger Software provide a clean interface. Figure 1 shows the simple standalone text editor in Ginger Page for Windows, and Figure 2 shows the integration with Microsoft Word.

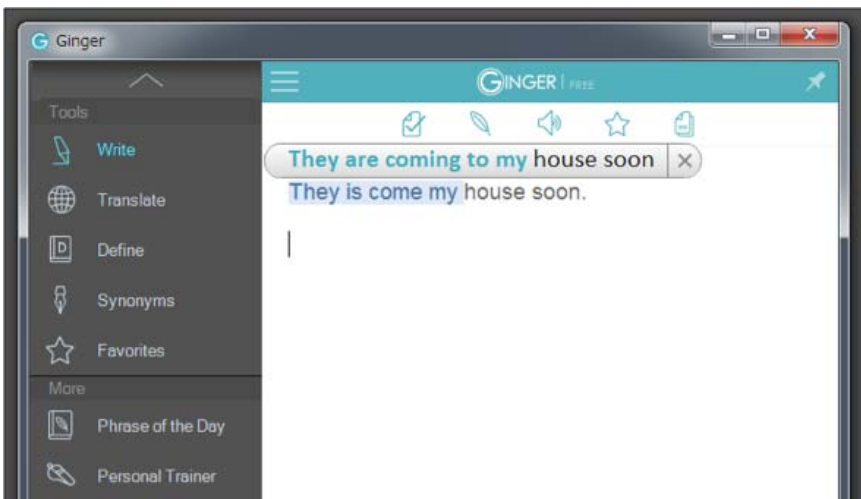


Figure 1: Ginger Page for Windows, showing an ungrammatical sentence and the suggested correction. Various writing tools are accessible from the menu bar, including the main text editor (known as “write”).

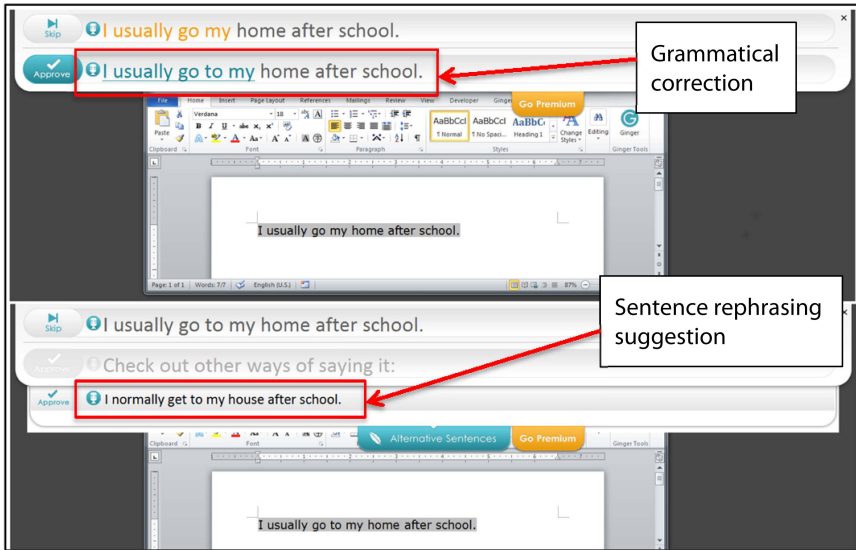


Figure 2: Two screenshots showing Ginger’s integration with Microsoft Word. The upper screenshot shows a grammatical correction and the lower shows a subsequent sentence rephrasing.

The mobile app version of Ginger Page is similar to the Windows version in terms of features and interface, although it is adapted for a touch screen and onscreen keyboard. Potential errors with grammar or spelling are highlighted in the text, and proposed corrections are shown above the keyboard. In landscape mode, a panel alongside the text is also available to display a translation, dictionary, or thesaurus tool. The text may be easily copied to the clipboard or exported to other applications, such as Mail, Notes, or Facebook.

Ginger Software makes rather bold claims about the capabilities of its products. For instance, users are told they can “write like a native speaker” and “your mistakes will no longer be overlooked” (Ginger Software, 2015). While this can be regarded simply as marketing, it does provide some indication of Ginger Software’s primary target audience: Internet users and business professionals—especially those who are non-native speakers of English—who are looking for a fast and simple way to improve the quality of their writing. Although the marketing materials do not seem to appeal directly to educators in second language acquisition, licensing options for schools are available.

The website provides a clear description of the available services and how to access Ginger on each of the supported platforms. A help section is available that includes frequently asked questions and options for contacting technical support. Video tutorials are available from the menu in the app or software.

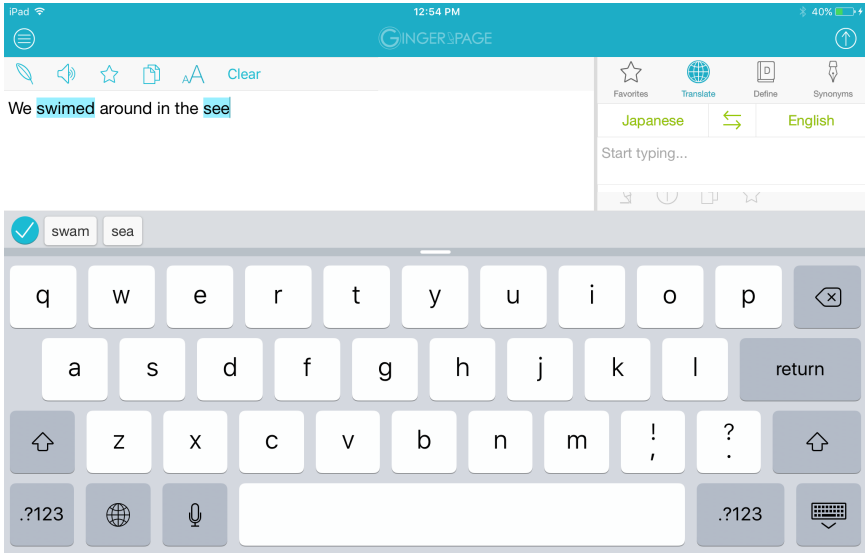


Figure 3: A screenshot of Ginger Page for iPads and iPhones.

Evaluation

Technological features

Installing the software is very easy. Mobile users may download Ginger apps from the App Store and Google Play. The Windows application and browser extensions may be downloaded from Ginger Software's webpage directly. None of the products require configuration during installation, although Android users may need to enable Ginger Keyboard in the settings menu on their device. As Ginger's service runs in the cloud, an internet connection is required, and users must log in with an email address and password. In casual use over a period of several weeks, the applications for Windows and iOS, and the browser extension for Chrome, all functioned reliably. Although the user's text must be sent to Ginger Software's servers for processing, the service performed quickly and seamlessly. Regarding privacy, the user agreement indicates that although the company collects information from the text, Ginger Software does not retain information that links that text with individual users.

The user interface of Ginger Page is simple, well designed, and modern, with a similar style and functionality maintained across each platform. The main features, tutorial videos, and settings are accessible from a side menu, with a single main window that displays the current selection. For instance, selecting the *write* tool switches the main window to a text editor with access to the grammar correction and sentence rephrasing tools; *define* switches to

the interface for the dictionary, and so forth. While this is helpful in keeping the overall interface simple, users cannot simultaneously view the content of the text editor and look up word definitions, synonyms, or translations. Windows users, however, may use Ginger's integration with Microsoft Office to access the grammar checker and sentence rephraser directly from within Word or another application which can then be viewed alongside Ginger Page. Alternatively, tablet users may view the text editor and other tools simultaneously in landscape mode.

As text is entered, the system highlights words or phrases it identifies as containing spelling or grammatical errors. A single correction for each highlight is shown above the keyboard on mobile devices or revealed by hovering the cursor over the highlighted text on desktop systems. Users may accept each of the corrections individually or all corrections at once. If Ginger has incorrectly flagged something as a misspelling, it can be added to a personal dictionary, causing that term to be accepted as correct in the future. If Ginger has incorrectly flagged something as ungrammatical, however, users must ignore the highlight, as there is no option to clear the highlight without changing the sentence. Finally, clicking or tapping the rephrase tool activates a process that guides the user through the entire text one sentence at a time, offering a list of zero to upwards of ten options for rephrasing each sentence. Both the grammar checker and sentence rephraser are currently restricted to either American or British English.

Ginger's free usage tier places a weekly limit on the amount of text that can be conveniently checked across all of its products. After the limit is reached, users may continue to use the service, but must manually enter any changes into the text. Basic and premium subscriptions are available on monthly or yearly payment plans, with the basic tier offering unlimited grammar checking and the premium tier adding unlimited sentence rephrasing as well as access to the text-to-speech feature on Windows and the personal trainer. Discounted pricing for students and multiple license purchase options are available.

Linguistic accuracy

An important consideration for any grammar checker is the accuracy of its error detection and the suitability of the suggested corrections. Ginger performs well on many types of errors. In casual testing, the grammar checker was able to reliably identify and correct many small errors that are common to some second language writers of English, such as subject-verb agreement (**Two horses is running* → *Two horses are running*), missing prepositions or articles (**I want to buy car* → *I want to buy a car*), and most misspellings. However, sometimes Ginger corrects an ungrammatical sentence by changing the

meaning significantly. For instance, **I cried the baby* is corrected to *I carried the baby*, instead of *I made the baby cry*. Likewise, **I looked the movie* is corrected to *I liked the movie*, though *I saw the movie* is more appropriate. The grammar checker also sometimes fails to mark ungrammatical or otherwise problematic sentences, such as **Let's play snowboarding* and **I want to traveling*.

Ungrammatical sentences that are not flagged by the grammar checker can sometimes be improved by considering suggestions from the sentence rephraser. For instance, the top suggestions for **I want to traveling* are *I want to be traveling* and *I want to go traveling*, correctly addressing the error in the original sentence. The rephraser is also often able to suggest well-worded alternatives for sentences with no grammatical issues at all. For instance, suggestions for *I want to be a better soccer player* include *I want to be a soccer player in the future*, inviting the writer to consider expanding the sentence with a prepositional phrase. However, the suggestions may also be unhelpful. The sentence *They met on the road*, for example, is rephrased as *They met at a church just down the road*. For **I'm good at swimming best when I was a primary school student*, the grammar checker does not detect any errors, and the sentence rephraser unhelpfully suggests **I'm well at swimming best when I was a primary school student*.

Although this is not a comprehensive evaluation, Ginger appears to be a powerful tool for evaluating and improving some writing. But the task of automatically correcting grammar is extremely difficult, and increases in difficulty with sentence length and grammatical complexity. Users should understand that Ginger is not perfect, and that this will affect the ways students and teachers may best take advantage of such a system. It also indicates that perhaps the company's marketing claims should be more modest.

Pedagogical features

Grammar checkers provide a facilitative technology for writing by analyzing text to point out errors and offer possible suggestions. As with most grammar checkers, Ginger points out errors as soon as they are identified. Users will probably wish to resolve these immediately. However, Ginger's linguistic accuracy is such that users cannot simply accept every suggestion and expect that their writing has automatically improved. Instead, students must engage in a more deliberate process and should feel that they understand the meaning of any suggested corrections before choosing to accept them. The primary pedagogical role of the software, then, is to serve as a tool to encourage students to edit their writing. Additionally, students can be expected to take advantage of Ginger's other support tools during the writing process, such as reviewing word meanings with the dictionary, considering synonyms with the thesaurus, and checking bilingual word meanings with the automatic translation

tool. Mobile users, as well as Windows users who purchase premium access, may review word pronunciations and hear their text read aloud using the text-to-speech feature. Those who have purchased premium access may also review a record of their past errors with the personal trainer. Learner training will be an important consideration for optimum use of Ginger.

Teacher fit (approach)

Much of the work investigating the use of automatic grammar checkers in second language education was conducted in the early 1990s, an era in which systems that dealt with natural language largely depended on the use of handwritten rules. Several studies from that time investigated the development of pattern-matching rules specifically for errors likely to be made by learners, and considered the use of such systems in language instruction (Levy & Garton, 1994; Liou, 1991). However, the performance of these early systems was marginal at best, and some researchers expressed doubts as to whether they were suitable for use with students. Brock (1990), in particular, found that students seemed overly willing to accept erroneous feedback from grammar checkers, and that the use of such systems may encourage students to adapt their writing to fit the peculiarities of the grammar checker, rather than seeking to produce high-quality writing. Levy and Garton (1994), on the other hand, adopted a slightly more positive perspective, suggesting that university-level language learners are often able to correct errors by themselves once they have been pointed out, and that grammar checkers capable of marking even some errors could be useful to students if combined with an active process of critical thinking and revision. This view has been supported in later work, with Burston (2001), for instance, finding that an automatic grammar checker worked well with advanced students of French when combined with self-monitoring strategies.

While Ginger and other current systems represent a significant improvement over the rule-based systems of the past, teachers should continue to exercise caution when introducing them into a second language writing curriculum. In particular, teachers should ensure that students understand the limitations of these systems and view any feedback as first-pass suggestions that should be verified before being accepted. The students should, in other words, view the suggestions as focused invitations to consider revising their writing. Within such a framework, tools like Ginger may be effective at increasing motivation and promoting learner autonomy, and may, as Liou (1991) suggests, allow teachers to devote more energy to higher level feedback tasks. It is worth noting that, in this respect, grammar checkers are closely related to automatic writing evaluation (AWE) software, such as Criterion® (Burstein, Chodorow, & Leachock, 2004) and My Access (Elliot, 2003), which have also been suggested as a means of partially alleviating the writing feedback workload (see Warschauer & Ware, 2006,

for an overview). AWE systems can provide higher level feedback than grammar checkers (e.g., identification of thesis and concluding statements), but unlike grammar checkers, AWE systems are often limited to particular domains, such as persuasive essays about particular topics.

Finally, tools such as Ginger are far more accessible and cheaper than in the past. Teachers interested in encouraging students to use Ginger will likely find that a one-time demonstration is sufficient for most students at high-school level or above to master the various features, although additional guidance may be necessary to ensure that students apply critical thinking when considering any revisions. The installation procedures are simple enough that most students would be able to install the software by themselves, opening possibilities for home use or contexts where students use their own devices in class. Usage possibilities range from individual writing and revision (either in or out of class), to collaborative applications where students work together to evaluate and revise their writing.

Learner fit (design)

Ginger's service will work well with a wide variety of English language learners at various proficiency levels, but learners who have the maturity and training to evaluate its suggestions carefully will see the best results. Adjustment to learners' individual interests and proficiency levels happens automatically, as suggested corrections will not be dramatically more or less sophisticated than what the learners have written by themselves, and will tend to be very similar in content. Other than choosing between American and British English, there are no options for adjusting linguistic parameters, such as the target level of formality, so learners will need to carefully self-monitor their writing. As Ginger is a cloud service, learners may use the same account to access the service from multiple devices, and content such as the personal dictionary and personal trainer are synced across devices. The straightforward and modern user interface will be appealing to most learners, including those who lack advanced computer skills. Though it is labeled entirely in English, the interface is unlikely to present any barriers to learners who are capable of independent writing in English. Finally, the software is easily adjustable to a variety of working styles, with students having several options for choosing when and how to view corrections and rephrasings. Learners involved in collaborative writing projects, for instance, may choose to review errors together and discuss appropriate revisions.

Summary

Ginger Software produces a suite of products that provide a variety of types of writing services, from grammar checking and sentence rephrasing

functionality to text reading. Although the service cannot provide perfect linguistic accuracy, it may serve as a useful tool to motivate students to engage in more attentive revision of their work. However, teachers should ensure that students receive adequate guidance on the limitations of the system and its proper role in the writing process.

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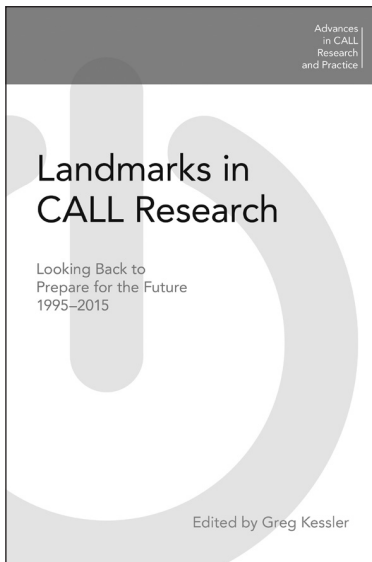
Reviewer information

Robert Swier is a PhD student in second language teaching and learning at Kyoto University.

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