

Product Information

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List Price: \$70

System Requirements

System 7.1 or later

About 1 MB of free RAM

Though you would never know it from the name, Online Army Knife (OAK) is a universal spell checker. This means that it is available in every application that supports copy/paste and that you can use the same user dictionary for all applications. Plus, there is only one interface to learn and one set of keyboard commands to memorize. In addition to two different methods of spell-checking, OAK includes numerous Internet-related utilities and a real-time glossary.

Batch Checking

OAK's primary tool—its knife—is its spelling checker. There are two different methods of spell-checking: batch and real-time. OAK's batch mode is the best spell-checker I have ever used. Most spell-checkers are linear. That is, they search until they find an unknown word. Then the user is prompted to ignore it, correct it, add it to the dictionary, etc. Then the checker searches for the next unknown word and prompts you again. You continue this inefficient process of reading the word on-screen, deciding what to do about it, and waiting for the spell-checker to display the next word. It takes a long time.

n contrast, OAK scans your whole document at once. It creates a list of unknown words (removing duplicates) and displays them in its batch window. Pressing <spacebar> marks an item in the list. After marking several items, you can decide what to do with them. First mark the words that need to be corrected and click on "Correct in Context." This brings up the "In-Context" window, which shows suggestions for the word and works much like a normal spell-checker. The difference is that it only prompts you with the words you marked. After you finish correcting the marked words, you return to the "Batch Processing" window. Words that you've corrected are removed from the list. Next, you can mark words that should be added to OAK's user dictionary and click "Learn" to add them all. You wanted to ignore the remaining words anyway, so can just close the Batch window and return to your document. The order of these steps is unimportant. You can do any combination of correcting, ignoring, and learning words.

pell-checking with OAK is fast. The initial scan was nearly instantaneous for every test document I tried. The batch method of spell checking is much faster than the normal way, plus the "Batch" window and "In-Context" windows can be completely controlled via the keyboard, for added speed. And, because you can use OAK in any program, you quickly adapt to its interface and keyboard commands.

Real-Time Checking

In addition to batch spell-checking, OAK offers real-time checking. This is similar to, but better than, SpellCatcher's interactive mode. With real-time checking active, OAK displays a floating "Unknowns & Suggestions" window. While you type (no matter what the program), OAK checks to see if you're spelling words correctly. When you make an error, OAK (optionally) beeps to notify you. Questionable words are listed on the left side of "Unknowns & Suggestions"; suggested corrections are on the right. Double-clicking on a correct word in the suggestions list makes the correction in the original document. Unfortunately, this only works immediately after making an error. Since OAK inserts the correction at the cursor's position, you cannot go back and make corrections with real-time checking.

here's no way for OAK to know whether you've gone back to correct a word manually. For instance, if you were typing the word "through" but first typed "throg," then clicked between the "o" and the "g" to add a "u," OAK wouldn't know you'd fixed the word on your own, and it would still flag it as unknown. However, OAK is reasonably smart about the arrow keys, so if you had "arrowed" back to make the correction, OAK would know what you had done.

Automatic Corrections

In addition to the above methods of spell-checking, OAK automatically can fix common mistakes such as transpositions and lowercase letters at the beginnings of sentences. It also supports real-time glossary substitution. You can make common typing mistakes into glossary entries so that, for instance, "teh" will automatically be changed to "the." The glossary can also be used to enter boilerplate text such as addresses and e-mail signatures with only a few keystrokes. My only complaint is that it does not support application-specific preferences for whether these automated services are active.

Other Tools

Like every Army Knife, OAK comes with a host of additional tools, many of which are accessible from the OAK Options floating window. They include:

- A simple grammar checker that can correct doubled spaces and flag commonly misused words (like “you’re” and “your”). Unfortunately, it can only flag words; it has no idea whether or not your usage is correct.
- Net Conversion: Converts characters and wraps text for transmission over the Internet.
- Encryption: Uses a proprietary algorithm to scramble text so it can only be deciphered with the appropriate password.
- URL Finder: Sifts through text to find Uniform Resource Locators.
- Tools for viewing and playing common Internet graphic and sound formats.
- Memo: A simple styled-text editor with support for OAK’s net conversion and encryption abilities. It can also speak text using Apple’s PlainTalk.
- Key Saver: Records your keystrokes to a file so that, in the event of a crash, you can recover work, even if you hadn’t saved.
- Crossword Wizard: Helps you with crossword puzzles.
- UltraLaunch: Can automatically launch selected applications and/or documents at specific times.

Nice Touches

OAK’s spelling checker is smarter than most. It correctly ignores e-mail addresses and URLs. It’s also smart about ordinal numbers (like 1st, 2nd, and 25th). It can even correct comma placement in numbers like 6,5536 and tell you to add an extra zero at the end of dollar amounts like \$6.5.

Another nice touch is that if you’re in OAK’s suggestion window and begin typing a correction, OAK dynamically improves its suggestions with each letter you type. Often, it comes up with the right correction before you’ve finished typing, in which case you can just type <return> to accept it.

At first, OAK is a bit confusing because it offers so many seemingly unrelated tools. In addition, the real-time and batch spell-checkers do not work like any you’re accustomed to (after getting used to them, you’ll find them an improvement, I think). Fortunately, OAK comes with a fantastic manual that explains all the program’s functions—both in a series of tutorials and in reference form. The manual is personal and humorous; I actually enjoyed reading it.

Online Army Knife vs. Spell Catcher

Although they serve similar purposes, Online Army Knife and Casady & Greene's Spell Catcher are very different products. OAK is an application, so it does not cause extension conflicts. It uses about 1 MB of memory when open, which is more than Spell Catcher, but uses very little when the application is not open. A small control panel called Mission Control intercepts the keyboard commands that activate OAK's spell-checking. (You can also copy text to the clipboard and spell-check it from within OAK's menus.) In contrast, SpellCatcher adds a special menu to each application's menubar.

Spell Catcher generally makes better suggestions than OAK, but, so long as you're a decent speller, OAK's increased speed more than makes up for this.

The main advantage Spell Catcher has over OAK is that it is better at maintaining formatting and styles of a document. Although OAK usually works flawlessly, it occasionally messes up style and ruler settings. Unlike Spell Catcher, it lacks compatibility module files, and cannot make its changes using an application's find/replace command; instead it always uses the clipboard. This is somewhat less reliable in heavily styled documents and means that you cannot always spell-check whole documents that contain graphics. (Instead you must check the document in pieces that do not include graphics.)

Finally, I found Spell Catcher's text-manipulation tools more useful than OAK's assorted utilities, though this is certainly a matter of personal preference. Overall, OAK is the best Macintosh spell-checker available. It is amazingly fast, works in every application, and offers an innovative batch spell-checker, against which all others seem inefficient and downright backward. I recommend OAK to all Macintosh users.

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