Many writers have tried electronic style checkers, such as Grammatik or Correct Grammar, which are sold either as standalone utilities or are included as components of word-processing programs. And most who have tried them have given up on them: their advice is more often wrong than right, and the "errors" they perceive often aren't errors at all.

Still, the idea of getting help with revisions from your computer is appealing. Fortunately, you already have all the tools you need: they're standard features of your word-processing program. Most useful of all is your word processor's "search," "find," or "locate" function.

Whenever I finish a story or novel, I start a seek-and-destroy run for the word "very." It's almost never necessary, and can usually be eliminated: "the alien was very menacing" reads just as effectively as "the alien was menacing." A few other good search-and-replace candidates: "utilize" should almost always be replaced with "use," "fro" is almost certainly a typo for "for," "in order to" should be changed to just "to," and "the fact that" can be replaced with just "that."

Next, seek out adjectives and adverbs. The easiest way to do that is with a search for "ly" followed by a space. If you needed an adjective or adverb to modify another word, perhaps you didn't chose the right word to begin with. For instance, if your "ly" search turns up "really large," substitute "huge" or "gigantic." If you've found "pounding loudly" substitute the more vigorous "thundering."

Next, track down anything you overuse. Me, I tend to employ too many em-dashes and semicolons. I could search for each occurrence and review it in context, but I prefer instead to do a global search for those punctuation marks, replacing them with a highlighted version (depending on your word processor and display, you could replace them with italicized versions that show up as inverse video, or boldface versions that show up in a different intensity, or, if you work in a graphics-mode program, select a different color before each one, and then return to black afterwards). I then scroll through my document, and can see where I have too many of them close together. Afterwards, I just reverse the process, doing a global search-and-replace to turn the ones I've left intact back into their normal print attributes.

Also worth hunting down are exclamation marks. One can exclaim only short words or phrases, such as "Drat!" or "My God!" (Try to exclaim, "But it turned out that the alien planet they were on was really Earth!" It can't be done, and writing it that way just makes you seem histrionic.) And if you find two or more exclamation marks in a row -- Holy cow!!! -- eliminate all but one of them. One thing you should not track down, though, is the word "said." Almost all of your speech tags should be of the form "he said" or "she said." Only beginners constantly look for alternatives to the serviceable, invisible "said."

(For all his virtues, Stanley G. Weinbaum was a beginner when he wrote his classic 1934 story "A Martian Odyssey," which has a character named Putz ejaculating

his lines ...)

Finally, do a search-and-replace to check your profanity, and make sure it's appropriate for your market. The "Drat!" and "My God!" I used above are okay for a column like this, but if you're writing real adults in real situations, you may want something harsher. (On the other hand, in polishing my novel Starplex, I realized that it would likely appeal to teenagers as well as the adults I had in mind when I wrote it, so I tracked down all the scatological and copulatory profanity, and substituted milder terms.)

What else can your computer do to help you? Plenty. Most writers notice during proofreading if they've started two consecutive sentences the same way. But it's also bad form to start two consecutive paragraphs the same way, and that's harder to spot. Again, your computer can come to your rescue. Set your right-margin to the highest value your program allows (and, if you're using a non-graphical program, select the smallest point-size for your text that you can), then reformat the document. You'll end up with almost all of your paragraphs as single long lines, scrolling off the right-hand side of the screen. You can then compare how each paragraph begins. Doing that on the file containing this article would have made it obvious that two consecutive paragraphs above start with "Next." If you didn't notice that yourself, this technique is for you.

Of course you know you should use your spell checker, but -- please! -- learn to trust it. If it tells you that a word in your manuscript is spelled incorrectly, it probably is. If the spell checker doesn't offer an alternative, then look it up in a dictionary. I was amazed recently to see a manuscript from an author who has ten books in print in which "congratulations" was consistently misspelled "congradulations." Doubtless years ago, the first time her spell checker had flagged the error, she'd assumed her spelling was correct and the database lacked the word, so she added the incorrect form to her personal dictionary.

(Speaking of spelling checkers, one of the most common questions I get asked by Canadian writers is whether they should use Canadian spellings when submitting to an American market. The answer is no: use Canadian spellings when submitting to the Tesseracts anthologies or other Canadian markets; British spellings (which aren't the same thing) when submitting to Interzone or other British markets; and American spellings when submitting to Analog or other U.S. markets.)

One thing your word processor can't do for you is properly count the words in your manuscript. The standard at most publications is to use "printers' rule," which counts every 65-stroke manuscript line as ten words, regardless of whether the line happens to be full (after all, the word count is supposed to give the production editor an idea of how much space the piece will take up in the publication). Actual grammatical word counts usually are ten to twenty percent below the value given by "printers' rule." If you can set an infinite or zero page length in your word processor, then the line count multiplied by ten will give you the word count according to printers' rule; otherwise, multiply the number of lines per page by the number of whole pages, add the number of lines on the partially full first and last pages, then multiply by ten.

Still, your computer's word count may be your most important motivator. The best way to make it as a writer is to set yourself a daily target figure and not stop working until you've reached it (my own is 2,000 words; for most full-time writers, the target is between 1,000 and 2,500). Every few minutes, I do a word count to see how much more work I have to do until I can knock off for the day -- which, having now reached that figure, is precisely what I'm going to do right now. But don't you quit writing today until you've reached your own word-count goal ...