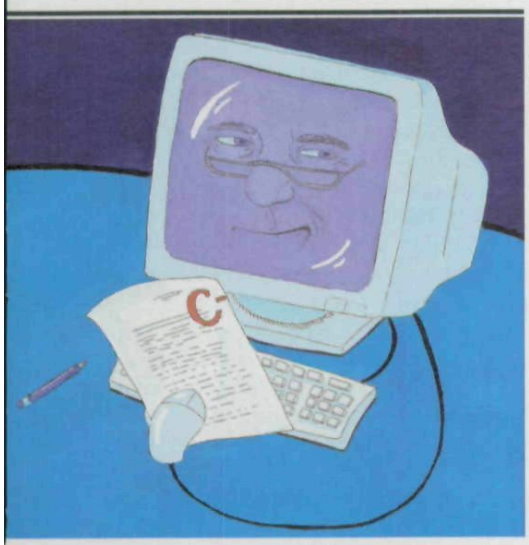
Making the grade



LARA TOMLIN

ONE OF THE CURSES of being a college prof is having to read all those boring and semiliterate term papers. Peter Foltz, a professor of psycholinguistics at the University of New Mexico, has invented a program called the Intelligent Essay Advisor to save him that tedium. His program uses a form of artificial intelligence known as latent semantic analysis. Before grading an essay, the program "learns" about a topic from an encyclopedia or textbook. Next the program is fed pregraded essays on the topic so it can determine what constitutes a good or bad essay.

"It surprised us how well it worked," says Foltz. The computer's grades match the grades Foltz would have given about 85% of the time—which is exactly how often any two human graders tend to agree with each other. The big difference: The whole process—reading, grading and giving feedback—takes the computer less than half a minute.

Foltz thinks the program has legs in the corporate world. This summer he formed Knowledge Analysis Technologies to develop Web-based software for testing companies, publishers, government agencies and corporate training programs.

Won't job applicants and trainees object to being screened by a lousy computer? Not if Foltz's students are any guide. "I told my last class they could take the grade the computer gave them or they could take my grade," says Foltz. "Every student chose the computer." –B.P.

Accentuate the negative

"We thought there must be a more direct way to lower expectations."

IN PURSUIT OF GOOD WORKERS, most employers paint glowing pictures of the job they are seeking to fill. Most employees therefore start off with high expectations. In the early Eighties Ohio State University psychologist John Wanous discovered companies could reduce turnover by *lowering* the expectations of new employees. Wanous developed something called the RJP, or "realistic job preview"—a kind of formula for corporations to use to temper the overly rosy expectations of new employees: No, you won't double your salary in three years; yes, you will work plenty of weekends—that sort of thing.

Companies that adopted the use of Wanous' RJP say they reduced turnover by as much as 10%. Hence, last year another prof created a management tool to make the new employee feel even worse. He is M. Ronald Buckley, a professor of management and psychology at the University of Oklahoma. "We thought there must be a more direct way to lower expectations," says Buckley.

Buckley's ELP, or "expectation-lowering procedure," strongly recommends resisting any impulse to put the proffered job in a good light. To test this theory, Buckley and his colleagues ran a yearlong study with 140 southwestern factory recruits. One-half received normal orientation on starting a new job: a handshake, an orientation book and maybe a viewing of the company promo film. The others got the cold-water treatment.

After one year, fully one-third of the optimistic dreamers had moved on; only a sixth of those who got the cold-water treatment had left. "The ELP is a psychological flu shot," says Buckley. "Expectations can be problematic at work."

Yeah, but who wants to be told that there is almost no hope of promotion, and the work is boring? –B.P.

DAVY LIU