

HOW BIG SHOULD A SPELLCHECK DICTIONARY BE?

This is a topic on which we can only agree to disagree. Broadly speaking there are two attitudes to the question about the optimum size of a spell checking dictionary. Some people want as large a dictionary as possible so that all words can be checked. Others argue that a dictionary should be as small as practical.

Just Words! belongs to the second group, but has a range of dictionaries to suit most tastes.

We all use some words more than others. A basic foreign language course teaches only a few thousand words. In our daily speaking and writing we probably use no more than about 20,000 words regularly. In other words even a small dictionary will cover most of the words we write. The optimal size of a dictionary is a balance between accuracy, memory size, checking speed and the inclusion of the most common words. Just Words! believes that the optimal size of an English dictionary is about 60,000 words although for some other languages a slightly larger dictionary is necessary. For example French has many more verb forms and German and Dutch more compound words than English.

The disadvantages of a large dictionary are:

- 1: The huge demands on computer memory and processing power.*
- 2: The difficulty for the compiler to ensure all words are correct.*
- 3: The possibility of spelling mistakes being missed because of similar words.*

To illustrate the last point is the list of dates on your wall a "calendar" or a "calender"? Both are valid English words. The most common of the two is calendar, which is the correct answer. Calender is a specialist word for a machine in which cloth or paper is pressed.

Most spell checkers allow you to compile your own word lists to complement the supplied one. You should use this for the more complicated words you use; for personal words such as addresses and surnames; and for professional words and jargon.