

Proofreading- Where do I begin?

Though everyone has a unique proofreading process, there are some general strategies that can be helpful to most writers. Begin improving your proofreading skills by trying out the guidelines listed below.

General Strategies

- Take a break! Allow yourself some time between writing and proofing. Even a five-minute break is productive because it will help you get some distance from what you have written. The goal is to return with a fresh eye and mind.
- Leave yourself enough time. Since many errors are made by speeding through writing and proofreading, you should take your time to look over your writing carefully. This will help you to catch errors you might otherwise miss. Always read through your writing slowly. If you read at a normal speed, you won't give your eyes sufficient time to spot errors.
- Read aloud. Reading a paper aloud encourages you to read every little word.
- Role-play. While reading, put yourself in your audience's shoes. Playing the role of the reader encourages you to see the paper as your audience might.
- Get others involved. Asking a friend or a Writing Lab tutor to read your paper will let you get another perspective on your writing and a fresh reader will be able to help you catch mistakes that you might have overlooked.

Personalizing Proofreading

In addition to following the general guidelines above, individualizing your proofreading process to your needs will help you proofread more efficiently and effectively. You won't be able to check for everything (and you don't have to), so you should find out what your typical problem areas are and look for each type of error individually. Here's how:

- Find out what errors you typically make. Review instructors' comments about your writing and/or review your paper with a Writing Lab tutor.
- Learn how to fix those errors. Talk with your instructor and/or with a Writing Lab tutor. The instructor and the tutor can help you understand why you make the errors you do so that you can learn to avoid them.
- Use specific strategies. Use the strategies detailed on the following pages to find and correct your particular errors in usage, sentence structure, and spelling and punctuation.

Contributors: Jaclyn M. Wells, Morgan Sousa, Mia Martini, and Allen Brizee.

Summary:

Proofreading is primarily about searching your writing for errors, both grammatical and typographical, before submitting your paper for an audience (a teacher, a publisher, etc.). Use this resource to help you find and fix common errors.

Finding Common Errors

Proofreading can be much easier when you know what you are looking for. Although everyone will have different error patterns, the following are issues that come up for many writers. When proofreading your paper, be on the lookout for these errors. Always remember to make note of what errors you make frequently—this will help you proofread more efficiently in the future!

Spelling

- Do NOT rely on your computer's spell-check—it will not get everything!
- Examine each word in the paper individually by reading carefully. Moving a pencil under each line of text helps you to see each word.
- If necessary, check a dictionary to see that each word is spelled correctly.
- Be especially careful of words that are typical spelling nightmares, like "ei/ie" words and homonyms like your/you're, to/too/two, and there/their/they're.

Left-out and doubled words

Reading the paper aloud (and slowly) can help you make sure you haven't missed or repeated any words.

Fragment Sentences

- Make sure each sentence has a subject. In the following sentence, the subject is "students": The students looked at the OWL website.
- Make sure each sentence has a complete verb. In the following sentence, "were" is required to make a complete verb; "trying" alone would be incomplete: They were trying to improve their writing skills.
- See that each sentence has an independent clause; remember that a dependent clause cannot stand on its own. The following sentence is a dependent clause that would qualify as a fragment sentence: Which is why the students read all of the handouts carefully.

Run-on Sentences

- Review each sentence to see whether it contains more than one independent clause.
- If there is more than one independent clause, check to make sure the clauses are separated by the appropriate punctuation.
- Sometimes, it is just as effective (or even more so) to simply break the sentence into separate sentences instead of including punctuation to separate the clauses.

Example run-on: I have to write a research paper for my class about extreme sports all I know about the subject is that I'm interested in it.

Edited version: I have to write a research paper for my class about extreme sports, and all I know about the subject is that I'm interested in it.

Another option: I have to write a research paper for my class about extreme sports. All I know about the subject is that I'm interested in it.

Comma Splices

- Look at the sentences that have commas.
- Check to see if the sentence contains two main clauses.
- If there are two main clauses, they should be connected with a comma and a conjunction like and, but, for, or, so, yet.
- Another option is to take out the comma and insert a semicolon instead.

Example: I would like to write my paper about basketball, it's a topic I can talk about at length.

Edited version: I would like to write my paper about basketball because it's a topic I can talk about at length.

Edited version, using a semicolon: I would like to write my paper about basketball; it's a topic I can talk about at length.

Subject/Verb Agreement

- Find the subject of each sentence.
- Find the verb that goes with the subject.
- The subject and verb should match in number, meaning that if the subject is plural, the verb should be as well and vice versa.

Example: Students at the university level usually is very busy.

Edited version: Students at the university level usually are very busy.

Mixed construction

Read through your sentences carefully to make sure that they do not start with one sentence structure and shift to another. A sentence that does this is called a mixed construction.

Example: Since I have a lot of work to do is why I can't go out tonight.

Edited version: Since I have a lot of work to do, I can't go out tonight.

Parallelism

Look through your paper for series of items and make sure these items are in parallel form.

Example: Being a good friend involves good listening skills, to be considerate, and that you know how to have fun.

Edited version: Being a good friend involves knowing how to listen, being considerate, and having fun.

Pronoun Reference/Agreement

- Skim your paper, stopping at each pronoun.
- Search for the noun that the pronoun replaces.
- If you can't find any noun, insert one beforehand or change the pronoun to a noun.
- If you can find a noun, be sure it agrees in number and person with your pronoun.

Apostrophes

- Skim your paper, stopping only at those words which end in "s." If the "s" is used to indicate possession, there should be an apostrophe, as in Mary's book.
- Look over the contractions, like you're for you are, it's for it is, etc. Each of these should include an apostrophe.
- Remember that apostrophes are not used to make words plural. When making a word plural, only an "s" is added, not an apostrophe and an "s."

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Suggestions for Proofreading Your Paper

One of the most difficult parts of the writing process is proofreading. It is easy for us to see what we want to see, not necessarily what our readers will see. These suggestions should help you take a step back and view your writing more objectively.

Suggestions for Editing (Proofreading) your Paper

Read your Paper Aloud

Any time your text is awkward or confusing, or any time you have to pause or reread your text, revise this section. If it is at all awkward for you, you can bet it will be awkward for your reader.

Examine your Paragraphs

Examine the overall construction of your paragraphs, looking specifically at length, supporting sentence(s), and topic sentence. Individual paragraphs that are significantly lacking length or sufficient supporting information as well as those missing a topic sentence may be a sign of a premature or under-developed thought.

Track Frequent Errors

Keep track of errors that you make frequently. Ask your teacher or visit the Writing Lab for assistance in eliminating these errors.

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Revising for Cohesion

This material (adapted from *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, by Joseph Williams) will help students revise sentences for cohesion.

Two principles

- Begin sentences with short, simple words and phrases that (a) communicate information that appeared in previous sentences, or (b) build on knowledge that you share with your reader.
- In a paragraph, keep your topics short and reasonably consistent.

Exercise: Diagnosis, Analysis, Revision

Diagnosis

1. Underline the first few words of every sentence in a paragraph, ignoring short introductory phrases such as "In the beginning," or "For the most part."
2. If you can, underline the first few words of every clause.

Analysis

1. Read your underlined words. Is there a consistent series of related topics?
2. Will your reader see these connections among the topics?
3. Decide what you will focus on in each paragraph.
4. Imagine that the passage has a title. The words in the title should identify what should be the topics of most of the sentences.

Revision

1. In most sentences, make the topics the subject of verbs.
2. Put most of the subjects at the beginning of your sentences. Avoid hiding your topic by opening sentences with long introductory clauses or phrases.

Sample Passage

Topics are crucial for readers because readers depend on topics to focus their attention on particular ideas toward the beginning of sentences. Topics tell readers what a whole passage is "about." If readers feel that a sequence of topics is coherent, then they will feel they are moving through a paragraph from a cumulatively coherent point of view. But if throughout the paragraph readers feel that its topics shift randomly, then they have to begin each sentence out of context, from no coherent point of view. When that happens, readers feel dislocated, disoriented, and out of focus.

Questions to ask yourself as you revise

Sentences

Do your sentences "hang together"?

1. Readers must feel that they move easily from one sentence to the next, that each sentence "coheres" with the one before and after it.
2. Readers must feel that sentences in a paragraph are not just individually clear, but are unified with each other.

Does the sentence begin with information familiar to the reader?

Does the sentence end with interesting information the reader would not anticipate?

Paragraphs

Will your reader be able to identify quickly the "topic" of each paragraph?

Note: it is easier to see coherence and clarity in other people's writing. Why? Because by the time we reach a final draft, everything we write seems old to us. Improving on this takes practice.

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Steps for Revising Your Paper

When you have plenty of time to revise, use the time to work on your paper and to take breaks from writing. If you can forget about your draft for a day or two, you may return to it with a fresh outlook. During the revising process, put your writing aside at least twice—once during the

first part of the process, when you are reorganizing your work, and once during the second part, when you are polishing and paying attention to details.

Use the following questions to evaluate your drafts. You can use your responses to revise your papers by reorganizing them to make your best points stand out, by adding needed information, by eliminating irrelevant information, and by clarifying sections or sentences.

Find your main point.

What are you trying to say in the paper? In other words, try to summarize your thesis, or main point, and the evidence you are using to support that point. Try to imagine that this paper belongs to someone else. Does the paper have a clear thesis? Do you know what the paper is going to be about?

Identify your readers and your purpose.

What are you trying to do in the paper? In other words, are you trying to argue with the reading, to analyze the reading, to evaluate the reading, to apply the reading to another situation, or to accomplish another goal?

Evaluate your evidence.

Does the body of your paper support your thesis? Do you offer enough evidence to support your claim? If you are using quotations from the text as evidence, did you cite them properly?

Save only the good pieces.

Do all of the ideas relate back to the thesis? Is there anything that doesn't seem to fit? If so, you either need to change your thesis to reflect the idea or cut the idea.

Tighten and clean up your language.

Do all of the ideas in the paper make sense? Are there unclear or confusing ideas or sentences? Read your paper out loud and listen for awkward pauses and unclear ideas. Cut out extra words, vagueness, and misused words.

Eliminate mistakes in grammar and usage. Do you see any problems with grammar, punctuation, or spelling? If you think something is wrong, you should make a note of it, even if you don't know how to fix it. You can always talk to a Writing Lab tutor about how to correct errors.

Switch from writer-centered to reader-centered. Try to detach yourself from what you've written; pretend that you are reviewing someone else's work. What would you say is the most successful part of your paper? Why? How could this part be made even better? What would you say is the least successful part of your paper? Why? How could this part be improved?