proofreading

Proofreading is one of the last steps in the writing process, but it is also one of the most important. This handout will give you tips on how to effectively proofread your work.

Revision, Editing, and Proofreading

People often use the terms "revision," "editing," and "proofreading" interchangeably, but they have specific meanings worth delineating.

Revision

When you revise, you focus on the "big picture" of your paper. This process includes scrutinizing the argument your paper is trying to make and making sure that your overall organization leads to your intended conclusion.

Note: For more information on revision, please see our handout on this topic.

Editing

When you edit, you improve your text at the sentence level. To do this, try reading the draft out loud. Edit with your audience in mind: refine your sentences until they are clear, concise, and cohesive. Pay special attention to issues with voice, verb tense, pronoun reference, and parallelism.

Note: For more information on editing, please see our handout on this topic.

Proofreading

When you proofread, you look for errors with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. This is best done on a hard copy of the manuscript. As with editing, you will probably want to read the text out loud. You might even want to consider reading the text backwards, which helps defamiliarize it in your mind and makes typographical errors easier to catch.

How to Proofread

Take a Break

If possible, take a break between writing and proofreading. By doing this, you are more likely to see the words as they are on the page instead of how your brain thinks they should be.

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SMC Campus Center
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www.umaryland.edu/writing
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Consult Your Style Guide

While most elements of grammar and punctuation are standardized, smaller stylistic matters can vary from discipline to discipline. For example, your style guide might have specific guidelines for acronyms and abbreviations.

Also make sure to follow your style guide's conventions on margins, spacing, font size, and headings.

Proofread a Printed Version

It is much easier to spot errors on paper than on a computer screen. Working with a printed version also allows you to mark up and interact with your text in ways not possible digitally.

Put Each Sentence on Its Own Line

Before you print, consider putting each sentence on its own line. When we read paragraphs, we often skip over parts of individual sentences. Putting each sentence on its own line lessens this problem.

Read Your Work Backwards

Often, our brains will fill in missing words or skip over mistakes because we know what we were trying to write, even if it didn't translate to paper. By starting at the end of your paper and reading the sentences in reverse order, you will catch more errors than by reading the paper from beginning to end.

Use a Ruler to Focus Your Attention

Place a ruler beneath the line you are reading. This will help you concentrate and prevent you from skipping ahead. If you do not have a ruler, you can also use a piece of paper.

Read Your Work Out Loud

Reading your work out loud often forces you to slow down and catch mistakes that you would otherwise skip over.

Have Someone Else Read Your Work

If you've been working on a project for too long, you might become desensitized to potential errors. Give the writing to a friend, relative, or classmate and have them read it over.

What to Look For

Spelling Errors

Do not rely on your computer's spell checker to catch all of your spelling errors. Practice spelling words that you habitually misspell.

Grammatical Errors

Verb Tense: Pay attention to how you use verb tense, especially if you mix tenses in a sentence or paragraph. Additionally, irregular verb forms (e.g., "swim," "swam," "swum") often present challenges to native speakers and English learners alike.

Note: For more information on verb tenses, please see our handout on this topic.

Subject-Verb Agreement: Make sure that singular subjects correspond to singular verbs and plural

subjects correspond to plural verbs. Certain types of subjects and verbs can cause confusion, so remember these rules:

- Verbs with indefinite pronouns containing "one" or "body" (e.g., "anyone," "nobody") are singular.
- Linking verbs agree with subjects, not objects (e.g., "His favorite food **is** pancakes.").
- Verbs with compound subjects joined by "and" or "both...and" are plural.
- Verbs with compound subjects joined by "or," "nor," "either...or," or "neither...nor" agree with the closest subject.

Note: For more information on subject-verb agreement, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Pronouns Errors: Be sure to look for common pronoun errors:

- Using contractions formed from pronouns instead of possessive adjectives and vice versa (e.g., "it's" vs. "its," "they're" vs. "their," "you're" vs. "your," "who's" vs. "whose")
- Confusing the subject form of a pronoun with the object form, especially in comparisons (e.g., "he" vs. "him," "I" vs. "me," "who" vs. "whom")

Note: For more information on pronoun erorrs, please see our [handout](#) ib this topic.

Articles: If you are learning English, articles (i.e., "the" and "a/an") can be especially challenging, so make sure you are using them correctly.

Note: For more information on articles, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Punctuation Errors

Commas: The majority of punctuation errors involve commas. When proofreading, look for these errors:

- Comma splices
- Missing Oxford commas in lists
- Restrictive clauses **with** commas
- Non-restrictive clauses **without** commas
- Unnecessary commas with compound subjects or compound predicates
- Missing commas in dates and place names
- Missing commas with direct address
- Missing commas between dependent and independent clauses

Note: For more information on commas, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Colons: Pay special attention to how you use colons with lists. Remember that colons must follow a complete sentence.

Note: For more information on colons, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Semicolons: Make sure the sentences joined by your semicolons are actually complete ones.

Note: For more information on semicolons, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Apostrophes: Apostrophes are used to form contractions and to show possession. If your style guide frowns on contractions, make sure you remove them. Apostrophes are usually not used to form plurals—if you have formed a plural by using an apostrophe, it is more than likely incorrect.

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Note: For more information on apostrophes, please see our "Possessives" and "Plurals" handouts.

Dashes and Hyphens: Make sure that you have hyphenated compound words and that you are not using a hyphen in place of a dash.

Note: For more information on dashes and hyphens, please see our handout on this topic.

Missing or Repeated Words

When typing, our fingers often don't work as quickly as our brains. This can result in skipping words—usually articles or prepositions—that are necessary for the sentence to be complete.

Omitted: Billy likes play baseball.

Similarly, we may type so quickly that we don't realize we've typed the same word twice.

Repeated: Billy likes to to play baseball.

Homophone Errors

Pay special attention to homophones—words that sound the same but have different meanings—when proofreading. The following words are often confused:

Homophones			
advice/advise	affect/effect	allot/a lot	allowed/aloud
all together/altogether	allude/elude	allusion/illusion	cell/sell
cite/sight/site	coarse/course	discreet/discrete	elicit/illicit
emigrate/immigrate	hear/here	incite/insight	know/no
lead/led	passed/past	patience/patients	principal/principle
stationary/stationery	than/then	wait/weight	weather/whether

Note: For more information on homophone errors, please see our "Usage Errors" handout.

Proofreading Marks

When proofreading your peers' work, using standardized proofreading marks helps them understand your suggestions. See the chart on the **back of this handout** for more information.

References

Fogarty, M. (2008). *Grammar girl's quick and dirty tips for better writing.* New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

Straus, Jane. (2008). *The blue book of grammar and punctuation: An easy-to-use guide with clear rules, real-world examples, and reproducible quizzes*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Proofreading Marks

Mark	Meaning	Example
	Delete	The the cat is outside.
∧	Insert	He tall. (is)
⌃	Insert Comma	...red, white and blue.
⌄	Insert Apostrophe	Put water in the cats dish.
⌄⌄	Insert Quotation Marks	She said, Hello.
⊙	Insert Period	She is a doctor
⊙	Insert Colon	I need three things ink, ham, and oil.
⊙	Insert Semicolon	The cat is lazy it sleeps all day.
#	Insert Space	What do you call it?
=	Insert Hyphen	...her day to day life.
⊣N	Insert En Dash	1986 2058
⊣M	Insert Em Dash	...rhetoric persuasive language is...
≡	Capitalize	His name is robert Paulson.
/ or lc	Set in Lower Case	She went to School.
(bf) or ∿	Set in Boldface	Place key information in bold.
(ital) or ___	Set in Italics	Have you seen Star Wars?
⌣	Close Space	It is th e best movie ever!
¶	Start New Paragraph	...best option On the other hand...
∿	Transpose	Where are you form?
stet	Ignore Correction Mark	He is a lawyer. stet