

# Proofreading

Proofreading means examining your text carefully to find and correct typographical errors and mistakes in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Here are some tips.

- \* Before You Proofread
  
- \* When You Proofread
  
- \* When You Want to Learn More

---

## Before You Proofread

- \* Be sure you've revised the larger aspects of your text. Don't make corrections at the sentence and word level if you still need to work on the focus, organization, and development of the whole paper, of sections, or of paragraphs.
  
- \* Set your text aside for a while (15 minutes, a day, a week) between writing and proofing. Some distance from the text will help you see mistakes more easily.
  
- \* Eliminate unnecessary words before looking for mistakes.
  
- \* Read what is actually on the page, not what you think is there. (This is the most difficult sub-skill to acquire, particularly if you wrote what you are reading).
  
- \* Proofread more than once. If possible, work with someone else.

---

## When You Proofread

The following rules and examples, taken primarily from *The St. Martin's Handbook*, 3rd ed., by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, may help you find and correct some of the most common surface errors in your writing. If you have questions about these rules, consult any good grammar book.

1. Familiarize yourself with the errors you commonly make by looking over writing that has already been marked. Make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them.
  
2. Carefully and slowly read your writing **OUT LOUD**. Often your ear will hear what your eye did not see.
  
3. Read your writing **BACKWARDS**, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence. This technique interrupts the logical flow of the prose and neutralizes any impression of correctness arising from your knowledge of what you meant to say.

4. Use your dictionary to check any words of which you are unsure, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms.

\* Work from a printout, not the computer screen. (But see below for computer functions that can help you find some kinds of mistakes.)

\* Use the search function of the computer to find mistakes you're likely to make. Search for "it," for instance, if you confuse "its" and "it's;" for "-ing" if dangling modifiers are a problem; for opening parentheses or quote marks if you tend to leave out the closing ones.

\* If you tend to make many mistakes, check separately for each kind of error, moving from the most to the least important, and following whatever technique works best for you to identify that kind of mistake. For instance, read through once (backwards, sentence by sentence) to check for fragments; read through again (forward) to be sure subjects and verbs agree, and again (perhaps using a computer search for "this," "it," and "they") to trace pronouns to antecedents.

Ö End with a spelling check, using a computer spelling checker or reading backwards word by word. But remember that a spelling checker won't catch mistakes with homonyms (e.g., "they're," "their," "there") or certain typos (like "he" for "the") and certain other kinds of mistakes: see [Spelling Chequer\\*](#)

---

Hints for successful proofreading:

Most errors in written work are made unconsciously. There are two sources of unconscious error:

1. Faulty information from the kinesthetic memory. If you have always misspelled a word like "accommodate", you will unthinkingly misspell it again.
2. A split second of inattention. The mind works far faster than the pen or typewriter.

It is the unconscious nature of the worst that makes proofreading so difficult. The student who turned in a paper saying, "I like girdle cakes for breakfast" did not have a perverted digestion. He thought he had written "griddle cakes" and because that's what he was sure he had written, that's what he "saw" when he proofread. If he had slowed down and read word by word, out loud, he might have caught the error. You have to doubt every word in order to catch every mistake.

Another reason for deliberately slowing down is that when you read normally, you often see only the shells of words -- the first and last few letters, perhaps. You "fix your eyes" on the print only three or four times per line, or less. You take in the words between your fixation points with your peripheral vision, which gets less accurate the farther it is from the point. The average reader can only take in six letters accurately with one fixation.

This means you have to fix your eyes on almost every word you have written and do it twice in longer words, in order to proofread accurately. You have to look at the word, not slide over it.

In proofreading, you can take nothing for granted, because unconscious mistakes are so easy to make. It helps to read out loud, because 1) you are forced to slow down and 2) you hear what you are reading as well as seeing it, so you are using two senses. It is often possible to hear a mistake, such as an omitted or repeated word that you have not seen.

Professional editors proofread as many as ten times. Publishing houses hire teams of readers to work in pairs, out loud. And still errors occur.

Remember that it is twice as hard to detect mistakes in your own work as in someone else's.

---

#### If You're Not Sure How to Identify or Correct a Mistake

- \* Use a handbook
  - \* Consult a Teacher/Tutor/Academic Support Personnel
- 

<http://www.cwrl.utexas.edu/~bump/RHE309K/proofreading.html>