

PROOFREADING

(including common grammatical and other errors)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, there is the word 'proof-reading' or 'proofreading' itself, which illustrates the fact that not everything in life, as here in spelling conventions, is always black and white. A glance in any good dictionary, for example at the use of hyphens (or not) after the prefix 'semi', will show the total lack of consistency in the language as a whole. The word 'proofread' has undergone a process of transition (rather like 'on-line / on line / online'); both Chambers and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) now have it without the hyphen. It should therefore be spelt as one word but, as in all other issues concerning academic writing, whichever spelling you choose, remember to be *consistent* in its use.

Reading and proofreading

A good starting point is to realise that there are various types of reading, each having a different purpose. We usually read for content, in other words to acquire the information the text contains; reading for a higher education programme is mostly of this nature. Where something needs to be read quickly but superficially or where only the salient points of a text are needed, it may also take the form of skimming or gist reading.

Proofreading, however, is a different process. Here, the emphasis is on the *medium* rather than the *message*; it is the more mechanical process of checking through a document for errors of

- spelling,
- punctuation,
- grammar,
- sentence structure,
- repetition (of words, phrases or ideas), but also
- errors of fact

and to check that the work is divided into paragraphs of suitable (but varied) length, each as far as possible devoted to a discrete idea or aspect of the subject. It is also about accuracy and therefore clarity of meaning, since the more inaccurate the medium the more its clarity will be compromised.

The importance of proofreading

It is important to acquire the habit of proofing work before submitting it for assessment or publication. This checking process can take place as one writes and some people are able to do this. Even then a final check needs to be done, though this will be relatively quick.

Most people, however, find it better to proof their work at some point after the writing process is complete, before gradually acquiring the skill of performing the checking process as they write. This enables the writer to concentrate on one thing at a time; first *what* is being said (the content, the ideas, the argument ...), followed later by *how* it is expressed (proofreading).



Pre-requisites

Three qualities are necessary before any checking process can begin:

- The right attitude; in other words, you must *want* the piece of work to be as accurate as possible and not be satisfied submitting it without checks;
- Concentration, and therefore good observation, so that as little as possible is missed;
- As good a knowledge of and as high a competence as possible in the English language.

As a result of the last bullet point above, the proofreading process is therefore about finding errors we know about but do not spot and checking for words or other written forms we are unsure of (e.g. spellings). The greater the lack of knowledge of the language, the more errors are likely to be missed.

WHAT THE PROCESS INVOLVES - SOME TIPS

1. **DO NOT** rely on the computer's spelling and grammar-checker to do the work for you. It is extremely unreliable. Underlining of words suggests errors – green for grammatical errors and red for spelling errors. Remember that a computer is a mindless machine and no match for the human brain; the software often underlines words in green where there are no errors and, conversely, fails to spot blatant errors. By all means run the software but remember that you will still need to check the work yourself afterwards.
2. If your document is not too long, try printing what you have typed; often errors can be seen on paper but not noticed on a computer screen.
3. If you are studying for a British qualification in a British institution, you must follow British English spelling and punctuation conventions (except, of course, when quoting from an American or other foreign publication). This means that you should make your word processor's default language setting 'English UK'.
4. Leave time between the end of the writing process and the start of proofreading. This time gap is important to clear the mind so that it can approach the same topic more refreshed and therefore with a better chance of spotting errors.
5. Try proofing **backwards!** Read your work from the end to the beginning, either sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph. What this does is to destroy the flow of argument, sequencing of ideas or chronology, thus forcing the brain to look only for 'mechanical' errors in the text.
6. Watch for repetition of certain words or phrases - ring the changes by either using pronouns to replace the otherwise repetitive noun (this is their main function) or use an alternative word or synonym.
7. The human eye often skims words; that is, we see only parts of words, usually the beginnings and endings, but complete the rest, by assumption, from memory or context rather than by sight. This is why we often fail to spot spelling mistakes, for example. A similar process is at work when we look at a picture or any scene - we do not register every detail unless we consciously make ourselves do so. 'Spot the difference' picture pairs rely on this mental strategy. Train yourself consciously to read (i.e. observe) all parts of every word.
8. Collaborate with another student, perhaps one studying a different discipline, and check each other's work. Another pair of eyes will often spot errors which your own have not.



Below is a list of common errors of grammar, spelling syntax and style or register; you may like to use it whilst proofreading your work but it is by no means exhaustive. Many of these have been adapted with the kind permission of the Writing Centre (2004) Common Grammatical Errors, Belfast: St. Mary's University College.

Grammatical and other errors: a checklist

Creating unfinished sentences or combining them incorrectly with the following sentence

Sentence Fragment: The sentence does not contain either the subject or the verb, or contains an incomplete thought:

- When you write an essay. (Incomplete thought)
- Peter, the son of a fisherman. (No verb)
- Went shopping. (No subject)

Fused sentence: The placement of two sentences together, as if they were one sentence:

- The new wave is not new it is a repetition of old ideas. (Full stop, colon, semicolon, or comma followed by co-ordinating conjunction needed after new).

Comma splice, dash splice: Two sentences incorrectly joined by a comma — a 'run-on' sentence and quite a common, but very fundamental, error:

- The new wave is not new, it is something old. (Full stop, colon or semicolon needed after new)

Fixing Comma Splices

Check for **punctuation**, especially 'run-on' sentences - read through the work slowly, either out loud or 'aloud' in your head, as if you were giving a speech, pausing at appropriate moments for appropriate time intervals. Learn to recognise where a sentence ends and where a new one should start. Locate the comma and if there is a complete sentence on either side, replace it with a full stop or consider the other possibilities set out below:

Wrong: Aldgate is concerned, the 'new wave' is not really new.

This may be corrected in the following ways depending upon your meaning:

Rewrite as two sentences: Aldgate is concerned. The new wave is not really new. (Indicates two separate, relatively independent thoughts)

Use a colon instead: Aldgate is concerned: the 'new wave' is not really new. (Indicates what follows the colon is of especial importance or defines, lists or gives further details on what precedes it)

Use a semicolon: Aldgate is concerned; the new wave is not really new. (Indicates two closely related thoughts of equal importance)

Use a conjunction: Aldgate is concerned, but the new wave is not really new. (Meaning indicated by the conjunction chosen)

Use a dependent clause: Aldgate is concerned that the new wave is not really new.



9. Misuse or omission of the possessive apostrophe. Distinction between plurals, possessives and contractions.

- Example of possessive: Jekyll's house, **not** Jekylls house
- Example of plural: The cinema of the 1950s, **not** The cinema of the 1950's
- Example of contraction: It's often said, **not** Its often said
- Singular possessives ending in 's'. Here, there are two options; 'James' car' or 'James's car'.
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See also Study Skills study guide "Apostrophes" on the website

<http://www.grimsby.ac.uk/highereducation/documents/quality/skills/Apostrophes.pdf> for further explanation

11. Spelling errors

- Typographical errors (teh for the)
- Homonyms (words which sound the same but are spelt differently - and therefore mean something different. There are literally hundreds of these in English (and other languages) and a list of the most commonly confused ones, along with a quiz, can be found on the Study Advice Service website www.hull.ac.uk/studyadvice)
- Authors' names
- British v. American spellings (e.g. labour, labor; centre, center etc; see point 3 above). When quoting word for word, however, you must remain faithful to the original spellings
- Characters within novels
- Technical terms (e.g. prosopopoeia, dysthymia)
- Frequently misspelled words (e.g. grammar, accommodation)

12. Use paragraphs appropriately

- Paragraphs should be unified; that is, they should cover only one topic
- Paragraphs should be coherent; that is, they should develop ideas in a logical way
- Paragraphs should make use of argument (logical reasoning, comparison and contrast) and evidence (facts, incidents, examples, quotations).

13. Deploy commas only where there is a natural pause when read

Setting off introductory material

- However, I am of a different opinion. (Introductory word)
- Depending on his condition, he may have to remain in hospital overnight. (Introductory dependent clause)

Items in a list

- He bought chillies, avocados, salsa and tortillas. (A list of nouns, adjectives etc where 'and' replaces the final comma)
- It was an old fashioned costume. (A series of adjectives preceding a noun or noun phrase)

Connecting independent clauses

- I went to the store, and I bought a copy of The Full Monty. (Independent clauses joined by and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet – the so-called Oxford comma (before 'and') is optional)

Setting off non-essential elements

- My uncle, who fought in the Great War, is over 100 years old. (Non-essential)
- The relative who fought in the Great War was my uncle. (Essential)



14. Deploy tenses consistently and according to convention

- Use past tenses when referring to historical events: 'Coleridge wrote *The Ancient Mariner* in 1797.'
- Consider analysing texts and studies as if they occur in the present: 'The study maintains there is no benefit to separate injections for measles and mumps.'

15. Follow the conventions for capitalisation. So, initial capital letters for:

- the names of continents, countries, towns, historical events: Africa, the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic Period...
- the names of proper adjectives: English, European...
- but **not** directions (east, west) or seasons (summer, winter), unless they refer to particularly named regions e.g.: 'In the West, computers dominate.'

See Study Skills study guide "Capital Letters" on the website

http://www.grimsby.ac.uk/highereducation/documents/quality/skills/Capital_Letters.pdf for a fuller explanation.

16. Make appropriate word choices

- Know the proper meanings and usage of technical terms
- Know common word pair errors, e.g. 'lose' and 'loose'
- Avoid informalities - not 'Immunisation is really brilliant' but 'Immunisation is effective'
- Do not use slang, 'regional' or sub-standard English: e.g. 'youse', 'ain't' or 'I aren't'

17. Consider avoiding split infinitives

- 'To go boldly where no one has gone before' **not** 'To boldly go where no one has gone before.'

The split infinitive seems to have become a fixed 'rule' of American English. British academic convention, however, usually avoids this, putting the adverb either before or after the infinitive. Nevertheless, there are a few occasions when a phrase reads or sounds better when the adverb does split the infinitive, so this is not a rigid rule.

18. Use colon, semicolon and dash correctly

- Use a semicolon to separate two sentences of equal importance but very closely related:
 - 'I would like to go home now; my daughter would like to go home, too.'
- Use a colon to separate two sentences when the first sentence announces the importance of the second:
 - 'Do not go home that way: the traffic is tied up because of a bomb scare.'
- Use a colon to introduce an important list:
 - 'Please bring the following: okra, brown rice and tabasco sauce.'

19. Watch for subject - verb agreement.

- A misspelling and a punctuation error are to be found in each of these sentences

Note also that words such as 'data', 'criteria' and 'phenomena' are plural; thus:

- The data suggest that...
- 'Criteria such as [...] are just as important to ...' but
- 'This criterion is ...' when referring to one criterion only.

20. Watch for **noun-pronoun agreement** - learn to locate this common error. A singular pronoun **cannot** refer to a plural noun or a plural pronoun to a singular noun. For example:

- '**A** student needs a card before **they** can enter the library.' is wrong: it should be,



- 'A student needs a card before **he or she** can enter the library.' or, the less cumbersome plural form,
- 'Students need a card before **they** can enter the library'

An exception to this is the so-called 'collective noun', for example:

- 'Arsenal are winning easily; they are playing the better football.' But one should say:
- 'The government is considering ...'

21. Avoid the use of:

- superfluous vocabulary which adds nothing to the meaning - redundant verbiage - e.g. to meet (up with), to miss (out on), to continue (on with), to return (back) etc etc. These are often acceptable spoken English but **not** academic English
- colloquial expressions (e.g. 'go down') instead of a more academic one (e.g. 'reduce' or 'decrease')



FURTHER ADVICE (All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of writing)

Below is a list of addresses for further advice and where you will find some interesting proofreading exercises at various levels of difficulty. Please note that the Study Advice Service does not endorse these, but lists them in the hope that they will be useful in raising awareness of issues when proofreading work. Some sites contain American English spellings and conventions which should be avoided if studying for a qualification in a British University. In all cases, the guidelines of your department should be followed.

- The site of the Royal Literary Fund provides excellent advice on all aspects of academic writing and can be found at: <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/writing/essayguide.cfm> This has sections *inter alia* on drafting and editing and is a comprehensive guide to the process.
- The BBC's 'Skillswise' site has a good section on proofreading. Go to: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/writing/proofreading/>. There are factsheets, a three-level quiz and worksheets. Most of the advice is at a fairly simple level but nevertheless very useful to help eliminate basic but all-too-common errors. The target audience seems to be school pupils and their teachers but the quizzes are useful to do. The site in turn recommends the Plain English Campaign's website. Go to: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>
- See also <http://www.copyediting.co.uk/> and click on 'Proof-reading test' on the left of the screen for a more difficult text. Much can be learned from this exercise and answers are provided.
- Have a look also at <http://www.parapal-online.co.uk/flashcheck.html>. This site contains exercises of a proofreading nature, particularly number 7. You will need Flash Player 5 or 6 but this is freely downloadable from the internet
<http://www.adobe.com/shockwave/download/index.cgi?P1.Prod.Version=ShockwaveFlash>.

Most people would agree about most of the 'errors' but, as usual, there are some about which they would argue. One such is the spelling of 'program'; British English convention confines this spelling to a computer program, using the traditional spelling of 'programme' for all other types, eg TV programmes. Nevertheless, they are useful and interesting exercises if only to raise awareness of the importance of thinking about the accuracy of what one writes.

- <http://www.uefap.com/accuracy/accfam.htm> contains much useful advice and many exercises to attempt. There is a table of useful proofreading exercises, divided into areas of study, parts of speech and error domains. The exercises are interesting to do, though it is not always immediately obvious how one should go about completing some of them.
- University of Manchester Academic Phrasebank (<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk>) is an extremely useful site for those wishing to write more academically. It contains lists of phrases, accessible from the left-hand column, for use in different parts of an essay or report.

