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Proofreading your own work: a student's guide to doing it well

The writing process is a long one. You researched, planned, typed and edited. You've written thousands of words and you are happy you have fulfilled the requirements of the assignment.

Now you need to proofread your essay, dissertation or thesis. It is essential to prevent you losing valuable marks, and it will help you make sure you are communicating your ideas clearly and effectively.

You will need:

- Your department's style guide (or your university's style guide)
- Access to a printer and paper
- At least one coloured pen, preferably a bright colour
- A ruler
- A notebook or notepaper.

Writing and Editing

When you are writing and editing, there are elements you should keep in mind that will reduce the work you have to do when you get to the proofreading stage.

➢ Make sure you have structured your argument in a logical way. Organise your ideas in a manner that makes sense and is easy to follow.

➢ Make sure your paragraphs are linked. The reader should be able to understand how the paragraphs relate to each other.

➢ Make sure you haven't made any unexplained assumptions. Don't refer to any concepts or use any terminology you haven't explained; write out abbreviations or acronyms in full the first time they are used.

➢ Make sure your citations and references are accurate. If you don't cite your sources correctly it may lead to accusations of plagiarism. This applies even when you have paraphrased without a direct quote.

Step One

The first step is not to proofread. Instead you should save your work and do something else.

If you have enough time, leave your writing for a day or more. If not, don't panic. Take as long as you think you can allow yourself.

The important thing is to take a break. Don't jump straight into proofreading after writing or editing.

I would advise turning off your computer and going somewhere outdoors. The change of scenery will take your mind off the work and the fresh air should help you focus. If you can't go outside, do whatever it is you like doing to relax – baking, knitting, painting, etc. Do something you can focus on instead of thinking about your writing.

Taking the break should create distance, and distance should help you to spot errors. When your words are no longer fresh in your mind, you can look at your work from a different perspective. And that's when you should start proofreading.

Step Two

When you are ready to start proofreading your work, print it off. It's easier to spot errors on paper than on-screen.

ADVICE: Pay attention to your department's style guide. Make sure you use the correct font, font size, margin size and line spacing.

Make sure the text is black. The colour pen you use to mark corrections and amendments will stand out best against black letters on white paper. Check your department's style guide to make sure you have presented any graphs, charts and illustrations properly.

Hold the pages out in front of you, pin them to a board, stick them to the wall, or get someone else to hold them up. Physical distance will help you to spot any errors in format, layout or style. Instead of looking at the words, look at the overall appearance of the text on the page. Compare the pages to each other to check for any inconsistencies.

You should look for the following potential errors:

- Inconsistently styled or spaced headings.
- Inconsistently styled or spaced bullet points.
- Misaligned, inconsistent or incorrectly sized margins.
- Misaligned or inconsistently sized columns or rows in tables.
- Inconsistent indentation of paragraphs (or not to the required style).
- Inconsistent line spacing or line spacing that is not to the required style.
- Incorrect or inconsistent use of fonts and font sizes.

Step Three

Before you start proofreading the text, decide how you are going to break it up into manageable pieces. Proofreading a chapter and then taking a break might be a good way to maintain focus, but it will depend on the length and style of your assignment.

Before you begin reading to spot errors, read the text through at least once to make sure it all makes sense. Don't be afraid to read out loud. Errors will be more obvious when you say them rather than when you read them. As you read, it may be worthwhile to imagine someone else listening to you. Consider whether they would understand what you are trying to convey or whether they would be able to follow the logic of your argument.

Step Four

Use a bright colour ink to mark your amendments and corrections. I would advise using red – it stands out well. If you don't like using red ink, choose something that won't be easily missed or hard to read later.

You may find it helpful to use a ruler to guide you as you read line by line. This will help focus your eyes on a small amount of text.

> **ADVICE**: Look over some of your work that has already been marked. Are there any mistakes that you make regularly? Make a checklist to remind yourself of errors you have made before.

Read slowly; don't be tempted to skim through the text. When you spot an error, make sure to mark the amendment clearly to avoid any confusion later. If you are in any doubt about anything, check it. It's worth spending a few minutes looking something up to make sure that it is correct or according to style. You don't want to worry about whether you should have checked when it's too late to do so.

As you proofread, make notes about the style you have used. Did you intend to use *-ise* word endings? Note that down to remind yourself to look out for any rogue *-ize* endings. Have you chosen different spellings for the same word or hyphenated inconsistently? Choose your preferred form and make a note of it to refer to as you progress through the text.

Common Errors

Here are some common errors to keep in mind as you proofread:

- **Mixed *-ise* and *-ize* word endings**. Some words can take either suffix, e.g. *realise/realize*. This also applies to forms such as *analyse/analyze* and *realisation/realization*. They should all be consistent.
- **Incorrect use of apostrophes.** Apostrophes indicate omitted letters or possession. It is particularly common for people to misuse *it's* and *its*. *Its* is a possessive pronoun; *it's* means 'it has' or 'it is'.
- **Incorrect or mistyped small words**. It is really easy to hit the wrong key and then not notice you have accidently used the wrong word. Words that are often typed by mistake include *on/of/off* and *it/is/if*.
- **Incorrect use of *of*.** It is common to see constructions such as *would of*, *should of* and *could of*. You should use *would have*, *should have* and *could have*.
- **Inconsistent use or capitalisation of abbreviations.** Note the style you are using for abbreviations and then use it throughout. This may particularly apply to whether you are using full stops (e.g. *p.m.* or *pm*).

- **Confused words.** Many words are similar, or have similar spellings and pronunciations but different meanings. Commonly misused words include *affect/effect* and *refute/rebut*. It is also common to see words such as *we're/were/where/wear* and *they're/there/their* used as if they mean the same thing.
- **Not using complete sentences**. Your sentences should make sense when standing alone and express a complete thought.
- **The subject and verb don't agree**. Plural subjects require a plural version of the verb; single subjects require a singular version of the verb – e.g. *people have* and *a person has*. If the sentence is complex, try removing any extra information until you only have the headword of the noun phrase and verb left – this should make it easier to determine which version of the verb you need.
- **Incorrect forms of irregular verbs.** Many common verbs do not form their past tense or past participle by adding *-ed*. For example, the past tense of *begin* is *began* and the past participle is *begun*. If you aren't sure if you have used the correct form, it is worth looking it up. You can find a comprehensive list of irregular verb forms on my website: http://proofreaderhannah.com/resources/
- **Comma splices.** A comma cannot hold together two independent clauses (or two complete thoughts). You can use a semicolon, insert an 'and' or rewrite the sentence.
- **Incorrect use of commas, semicolons and colons.** Don't drop commas in wherever you would take a breath as you read. Research the guidelines for punctuation use so you know when and how to use commas, semicolons and colons.
- **Incorrect use of hyphens, en dashes and em dashes.** As above, it is worth researching how to use these if you aren't sure. In general, hyphens attach parts of words and you should use en dashes in number ranges (e.g. 50–60).
- **Missing or inconsistent quote marks**. It is easy to not notice missing opening or closing quote marks. You should also make sure your use of double and single quotation marks is consistent.
- **Missing parentheses.** Make sure brackets appear in pairs.
- **Double spaces**. Double spaces after full stops have gone out of style. It is also easy to accidently enter an additional space between characters.
- **Incorrect or inconsistent use of capitals**. If you aren't sure which words should be capitalised, you should do some research to find out. If you have carried out significant editing, make sure you have correctly added or removed capitals where sentence structures have changed.
- **Incorrect references.** Check you have used the correct citation style within the text and that you have cited the correct source. You should also make sure footnotes, endnotes or citations match the references and vice versa. Remember the reference list should be presented alphabetically.
- **Incorrect headings and titles.** Make sure headings, titles and captions are present and correct. You should also check that chapters have been named consistently and appear in the contents page correctly.
- **Incorrect details.** These can include mistyped dates, missing numbers in sequences or tables, and misspelled place names. It is worth checking if you aren't sure about something.

I have addressed many common errors on my blog. You can find more information by visiting my website here: http://proofreaderhannah.com/

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you would like professional proofreading support. However, you must make sure that your university and department allow the use of proofreading services – not all of them do!