

# Proofreading a College Paper: Guidelines and Checklist

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## CONTENTS

- Introduction . . . . . page 1
- Proofreading is and is not . . . . . page 2
- Guidelines(how to) . . . . . page 3
- Checklist (what to look for). . . . . page 4
- Whys and wherefores . . . . . page 10
- Real proofreading . . . . . page 10
- One-page summary . . . . . page 11

## INTRODUCTION

**Proofreading is not a natural talent, it is a learned skill.** Proofreading can be hard work—that may be one reason why writers tend to substitute plain-old reading for proofreading—that and the fact that they simply may not know how to proofread. This guide is designed to help you overcome those obstacles; it may not make proofreading that much easier, but at least it will teach you what it is and how to do it.

Way too often plain-old reading (reading a sentence, paragraph, or paper from start to finish) is substituted for genuine proofreading (or anything remotely resembling proofreading). Proofreading is not revising or editing; it is not a read through, beginning to end, to see if a paper makes any sense and is written well; it is not even a read through, start to finish, for the specific purpose of seeing if there are any errors. **You can't see most errors in your, or anyone else's, writing just by reading through.** Like a tiger hiding in the foliage, typographical and other errors are protected by the natural camouflage of their surrounding letters, words, and punctuation. Errors need to be hunted down using specific tracking techniques—those of proofreading. Let's learn how to go on safari!



## WHAT PROOFREADING IS AND IS NOT

Proofreading is not "reading your paper." Yes, you do need to be reading (not proofreading), revising, and editing your **writing** (the sum total of your paper's intellectual content and manner in which it is presented). This is done to ensure that you are effectively expressing ideas; conveying information in an interesting manner; and creating an essay that fulfills the purpose of your assignment. That type of reading has virtually nothing to do with the formal process known as proofreading.

Proofreading is getting all of the little details, mostly of a technical nature, cleared out so that your **writing** can be seen in its best light . . . without the distractions of typographical errors, etc. Proofreading takes place **after** you have finished writing, revising, and editing.

Learning to proofread can drastically improve your writing and greatly reduce the number of errors you make while typing. Once you are more keenly aware of the many issues involved in proofing, you may take the time to consider them more carefully as they arise during the writing process, e.g., the next time you type a number, you may pause to ask yourself, "Do I spell that out or use numerals?"

## GUIDELINES

Proofreading comes last . . . **after** you write, revise, and edit. If you are still working on wording, sentences, paragraphs, and larger aspects, you are not ready to proofread.

If you can, get someone else to help you. Just make sure they know that you are actually asking them to **proofread**. Asking someone to proofread is asking a lot of them, so you may be well served to pair up with someone for whom you can return the service, e.g., a classmate. If you desire them to read for content as well, i.e., to determine "Is the paper any good—does it accomplish its goal?," that's an operation which is distinct from and which precedes proofreading.

Proofread a line at a time, starting from the **end of the paper** (not the beginning). If you start at the beginning, you will start thinking about what the paper says (distracting your brain with the story). As noted in the checklist that follows, in checking for certain errors, it is best to go through each sentence backward, one word at a time.

Use a ruler or blank sheet in order to ensure that you can read only one line or sentence at a time.

Read aloud. **Read aloud. READ ALOUD.**



Don't proofread right after you have finished writing. If you do, your brain will tend to read what it thinks you just wrote, not what you actually did. Take breaks during your reading.

Allow enough time to proofread several times; if possible, let your paper sit for several days between readings. Read slowly and carefully. If you rush, you are defeating the whole purpose of proofreading.

Keep a personal checklist of errors that you frequently make, so that you can make a special effort to watch for them.

Learn how to use the word processor to help you look for your more frequent mistakes. For example, if you frequently misuse the words *its* and *it's*, you could use the *Find* option to quickly search the paper for each instance in which you have used those words.

Keep a dictionary, thesaurus, grammar book, and citation manual nearby.

**THIS IS KEY:** Don't look for all types of errors at the same time.

**Relax.** Do what you can in a manner that works for you. Remember that these are guidelines, not hard and fast rules.

## CHECKLIST



Don't be nervous or overwhelmed by the fact the checklist is several pages long; **the summary on the final page of this guide is only half a page long.**

Remember, this is **just a checklist** of items to look out for during the proofreading process; it is **not a guide to grammar and writing**. If you need a good grammar handbook, style guide, dictionary, etc., a guide to materials of that type is *A Guide to Writing Resources*, available online from *Troy University Libraries Tutorial*. The Tutorial can be accessed online from your TROY Library Web site.

For the sake of organization, the elements of this checklist have been grouped into one of five classes: **(1) Formatting; (2) Documentation; (3) Grammar and usage; (4) Spelling; and (5) Mechanics**. You should feel free to check for the particular errors you are looking for, in whatever order works best for you.

## 1. FORMATTING

**Formatting.** Some elements of writing are not a matter either of the words themselves or of punctuation, but rather are matters of alignment, layout, and consistency or inconsistency.

- Check that your layout (page margins, line spacing, heading style, etc.) conforms to the format prescribed by your instructor. **TYPING TIP:** Make sure you use the options in your word processor to achieve the layout, do not do it "by hand." Using the space bar, and the tab and return keys to force alignment is **NOT** the proper way to lay out a document.
- Keep an eye out for changes in **font face** or **size**.
- Check all text that is underlined, *italicized*, **bold face**, and any other special text format.
- Check for consistency in page margins, line spacing, outline numbering, and paragraph indentation.

## 2. DOCUMENTATION

**Documentation.** Check that your citations and references match each other, i.e., that for every citation in the paper, there is a reference at the end, and that it is correctly formatted.

**WRITING TIP:** Documentation is its own sub-set of writing skills, one that can be a challenge to master. Nevertheless, investing some time to improve your documentation skills can be very rewarding in the long run.

### 3. GRAMMAR AND USAGE

**Grammar.** Most major grammar problems should be addressed **before** you get to the proofreading stage. Nevertheless, the proofreading process is one that lends itself to spotting easily certain types of frequently occurring (and easily correctible) types of grammar errors; they are

*Subject-predicate agreement.* Examples: I am, he is, they are; neither of the pies was; our employees seek; our employee seeks; the jury has reached; the thieves have taken, etc. (In those examples, the subject was single-underlined and the predicate was double-underlined to point out which parts of the sentence you would be checking for agreement.)

*Pronoun-antecedent agreement.* Examples: The musician will start his performance; everyone should turn in his or her paper; the jury has reached its, etc. (In those examples, the antecedent was single-underlined and the pronoun was double-underlined to point out which parts of the sentence you would be checking for agreement.) **WRITING TIP: Most college papers should not contain personal pronouns**, e.g., I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, myself, etc., because they are usually not written from the first person perspective. Even if you were writing in the first person, you probably wouldn't use a personal pronoun; you would write something like "This writer believes that the process of strip mining..."

**Sentences.** Check that you have complete sentences, not just fragments, e.g., a phrase or dependent clause. Understanding and avoiding writing errors of this type are very important. For further guidance, I highly recommend the two-page guide from OWL, the Purdue University Online Writing Lab

<[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g\\_frag.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_frag.html)>.

- Check for run-on sentences. Run-ons can be corrected by creating separate sentences or by properly punctuating the original sentence.
- Check for unbalanced sentences, i.e., unparallel or non-parallel construction. "A balanced sentence is one in which related actions, events, or ideas appear in the same ('parallel') form" (<http://allaboutcommunication.com/GrammarTest.html>). Some examples of unbalanced sentences:
  - The factory produces cars, motorcycles, bicycles, and is closed every Tuesday.
  - Your job will include purchasing food, preparing meals, cleaning dishes, and punctuality.
  - Abraham Lincoln was a farmer, a lawyer, and is often described as "The Great Emancipator."

### **Plurals and possessives.**

- Check that possessives are properly formed.
- Check that plurals are properly formed.
- Take extra care in checking the plural and possessive forms of words that end in *s*. Again, keep that grammar book handy!
- In general, keep an eye out for apostrophes (consider using your word processor to search for them). If a word contains an apostrophe, it should almost always be in a contraction, e.g., *can't*, or in a possessive, e.g., *boys'*. To see other uses of an apostrophe, consult your grammar book. **WRITING TIP: Most college papers should not contain contractions.**

**Usage.** Keep a dictionary or grammar book (one which includes a usage section) handy.

- Make a special search for and check the usage of words that most frequently give you (and many other people) trouble, e.g., accept/except, affect/effect, lay/lie, like/as, which/that, who/whom (whoever/whomever, whosoever/whomsoever, etc.).
- Check the spelling and usage of any words that you are not absolutely, positively, 100% certain of—certain both that the spelling is correct AND that it is the right word (or form of the word).
- A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT: College writing involves using a great number of words—words that many people simply aren't accustomed to writing. There is no need to feel embarrassed or depressed if you don't know how to spell or use every form of every word (since no one does). Improving your vocabulary is part of what going to school is all about.

## 4. SPELLING

**Spelling.** Keep a dictionary handy.

- First, run a spelling checker. Don't automatically accept its suggestions (it is not always right). Try to LEARN from errors it catches.
- Second, check spelling by hand (eye, ear, and dictionary)
  - When checking for spelling errors, start at the end of the sentence and work backward, word by word.
  - Look for words that are spelled correctly but are simply the wrong ones (usually due to typing errors . . . sticky fingers, not the writer's spelling ability), e.g., *fir* instead of *for*. The spelling checker won't catch mistakes like that—*fir* is a word (a type of tree); it's just not the correct word. Everyone knows how to spell *cat*, c-a-t; it's just that sometimes it comes out on paper as *car* or *can*.
  - Look for easily misused words, e.g., to/too/two, threw/through, where/were, their/they're, it's/its, know/no. Again, these types of errors are mostly due to one's fingers or brain having a momentary hiccup during which they select the incorrect word.



Learn how to set the options on your spelling checker. **Many spelling errors can go unidentified due to less-than-ideal setting in your word processor.** It's true! Example: In Microsoft Word (Office 2003 edition), the options are accessed from the top menu by selecting Tools, Options, Spelling & Grammar. In Word, I personally prefer to select (check the check-boxes for)

- Check Spelling as you type
- Always suggest corrections
- Check grammar as you type
- Check grammar with spelling

**The two *as you type* options, if left unchecked, are the primary culprits in spelling errors being missed due to poor settings.** These are the settings that show red (for spelling) and green (for grammar) squiggly lines underneath text that Word desires to bring to your attention.

I think it is important NOT to check the box for "Ignore words in UPPERCASE." Why would I want to ignore them? I want those spelled correctly also.

In that same tab (Spelling & Grammar), there are also settings for "Writing Style." This allows you to have it check grammar only, or grammar and style. Along with the grammar and style setting is a button labeled "Setting." This allows you to select (or deselect) exactly which aspects of grammar and style you do or don't want it to check.

## 5. MECHANICS

**Abbreviations and acronyms.** These vary widely in their construction, capitalization, and punctuation; to get them right, you may need to look them up.

WRITING TIP: Some widely known acronyms may never need to be spelled out, e.g., NASA or UN; otherwise, acronyms should be spelled out the first time they are used. Example: The Government Printing Office (GPO) is the best place to purchase the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH), a publication of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). My library frequently purchases books from the GPO.

**Capitalization.** Check for the following:

- Every sentence should start with a capital letter.
- All proper nouns should be capitalized.
- Titles of books, journals, and other publications should be capitalized.

WRITING TIP: In addition to the items mentioned above, there are numerous rules regarding what does and does not get capitalized. You may want to refresh your memory about them before starting your proofreading. Fortunately, they are fairly easy to understand, and they can all be reviewed in just a few minutes.

**Ending punctuation and spacing.** Sentences should end with a period, a question mark, or an exclamation point.

WRITING TIP: Try to reserve the use of the exclamation point to things that are actually an exclamation (a sharp or sudden utterance or vehement expression of protest or complaint).

- Check that the punctuation mark at the end of the sentence is right next to the character preceding it, i.e., that there isn't any extra space.
- There should be one and only one space after each sentence.

WRITING TIP: Depending on the alignment of the text, it may be difficult to catch spacing errors. *Full justification* is when lines of text are even (flush) at both the left and right margins (such as the way this block of text is set). Instead of full justification, consider aligning the text to the *flush left*. Even if you desire to have your final document *fully justified*, you can temporarily align it left during the proofreading process (to check for spacing errors).



**Only one space . . . are you sure about that?** This statement surprises many people, so let me try to settle any doubts you may have on the subject. Remember, we are discussing only college papers, not novels, newspaper articles, or poetry.

From page 290 the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th ed. "Spacing and Punctuation. Space once after all punctuation as follows . . . after punctuation marks at the ends of sentences..."

From pages 93-94 of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. ". . . leave only one space after a concluding punctuation mark."

From page 452 of the *Hodges' Harbrace Handbook*, 16th ed. "Does each sentence have appropriate closing punctuation, and have you used only one space after each end punctuation mark?"

From page 61 of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th, ed. "A single character space, not two spaces, should be left after periods at the ends of sentences (both in manuscript and in final, published form) and after colons."

From page 296 of *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, AKA *Turabian*, 7th ed. "A period ends a sentence . . . and should be followed by a single space."

**Numbers.** Check your style . . . some numbers need to be spelled out, whereas others are represented by numerals (figures). The rules change depending on the writing style you are using, e.g., APA, MLA, etc.

**Parenthesis and brackets.** For every opening mark (parenthesis or bracket), there needs to be a closing mark.

**Punctuation** (other than marks mentioned elsewhere). Suggestion: Reading aloud (from the start of each sentence) can be especially helpful in determining where punctuation is or is not needed.

- Check that all marks are properly used.
- Determine if any are missing.
- Just to be clear, marks of punctuation include the apostrophe, brackets, the colon, the comma, the dash (including the em dash and en dash), ellipsis marks, the exclamation point, parenthesis, the period, the question mark, quotation marks (single and double), the semicolon, and the slash.

**Quotations and quotation marks.** Rules for quotations can be very difficult to remember, so be extra careful in those situations (and keep your style book handy). Here are a few WRITING TIPS to keep in mind:

- There are specific rules for determining whether a mark of punctuation goes inside or outside an ending quotation mark. The answer is usually, but not always, inside.
- Most, but not all, direct quotations require quotation marks.
  - There are exceptions for longer quotes. These exceptions are dictated by the style guidelines that your instructor expects you to follow, e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago, or Turabian. For example, the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* states what to do with a quote that is more than four lines of the paper; the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* defines a long quote as one of 40 or more words and dictates how to present such material. If you think you have a long quote, check your style guide.
  - There are exceptions when quoting poetry and drama. Again, check your style guide.
- Quotations within quotations that are set off by double quotation marks should use the single quotation marks. Quotations within quotations that are not set off by quotation marks, e.g., long quotes or works of drama, should be set off by double quotation marks. **What?!** If that sounded like double-speak, remember that this is not a how-to grammar guide. Learning how to do things like that is what a style guide is for . . . this note is just a *heads up*, a reminder of the types of things to look for when proofreading.

**Repeated or omitted words.** The reader's brain tends to fill in any missing words and to ignore repeated words—that is why it is important to look at every line one word at a time (not by reading the sentence). Reading aloud (slowly) is especially helpful in catching these types of errors. Although you will probably need to read sentences forward (from the start to the end) to look for *missing* words, starting at the end of the sentence and working backward, word by word, is the better way to spot *repeated* words (even though a good grammar check program should have already caught those).

**Spacing.** See spacing issues under the earlier entry for *Ending punctuation and spacing*. Look for additional spacing errors within the text.

**Word division.** Word processing has eliminated most word division (dividing a word at the end of a line), but if your paper does include it, check to make sure it is correct. If you are including long URLs (Internet addresses) in your paper (particularly in your citations), you may be forced to break them. Never add a hyphen when you break a URL (as you would when you break a word). If it is necessary to break a URL, do so just after a slash or just before a period.

**WHYS AND WHEREFORES. It is virtually impossible for a writer to find all the errors in his or her writing simply by reading it;** it just doesn't work that way. When you read, there are powerful and complex forces at work. Reading is more, much more, than just moving your eyes through sentences one word and mark of punctuation at a time. The movement of the eyes, and what your brain does with the information it receives from your eyes as you read, is an extremely complex process—one that does not lend itself very well (at all) to proofreading.

Try reading the following paragraph:

Aoccdnrig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteres are at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a tatol mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe.

While the information presented in the paragraph above is not entirely factual, it (hopefully) illustrates the point that when it comes to proofreading, reading start to finish isn't the best way to go. As stated earlier, proofreading is hard work, but if you desire to create well-written papers, there is no substitute for proofreading.

### **REAL PROOFREADING**

You mean all that wasn't really proofreading?! Well, yes and no. Yes, it was proofreading in that it is more or less what and how a professional proofreader does his or her job, but there is a little more to it than that. You may find it useful in performing your proofreading (or at least in better understanding the process) if you learn a little bit more about proofreader's marks. **Proofreader's marks** are symbols that indicate the location of errors and what is needed to correct them. There are only a couple of dozen marks, and preformatted charts can be printed from the Internet at no charge.

Recommended links:

- <http://www.espressographics.com/files/proofread.pdf>
- <http://www.ideography.co.uk/proof/proofmarks.pdf>
- [http://www.prt.wa.gov/default.asp?p=rc\\_strd\\_mark](http://www.prt.wa.gov/default.asp?p=rc_strd_mark)

**And finally, consider purchasing a book on proofreading (they're cheap). They can be a great tool for improving not only your proofreading, but also many other areas of your writing.**

## SUMMARY

### Proofreading a College Paper: Guidelines and Checklist



## GUIDELINES

- Proofreading comes last—after writing, editing, and revising.
- If you can, get someone else to help you.
- Proofread one line or sentence at a time from the **end** of the paper.
- Use a blank sheet in order to ensure that you can read only one sentence at a time.
- Read aloud. **Read aloud. READ ALOUD.**
- Don't proofread right after you have finished writing. Take breaks.
- Allow enough time to proofread several times (over a period of days, if possible).
- Keep a personal checklist of errors that you frequently make.
- Learn how to use the word processor to help you look for mistakes.
- Keep a dictionary, thesaurus, grammar book, and style manual nearby.
- **THIS IS KEY:** Don't look for all types of errors at the same time.
- **Relax.** Do what you can in a manner that works for you.

## CHECKLIST

### Formatting (correctness/consistency or inconsistency)

- Page margins, line spacing, heading style, indention
- Font face and size
- Underlined, *italicized*, and **bold face** text

### Documentation

- Check that your citations and references match each other.

### Grammar and usage

- Grammar, especially *Subject-predicate agreement* and *Pronoun-antecedent agreement*.
- Sentences (using complete sentences, but not run-ons).
- Plurals and possessives.
- Usage.

### Spelling

- Use a spelling checker program, your eyes, ears, and a dictionary.

### Mechanics

- Abbreviations and acronyms; Capitalization; Numbers; Parenthesis and brackets; Punctuation; Quotations and quotation marks; Repeated or omitted words; Spacing; Word division.