

Proofreading a College Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Remember that you can seek assistance with your writing from your instructor or the writing center. College writing in the United States differs from other forms of written English. Conventions of writing that are perfectly acceptable, or even preferred, for different audiences, e.g., television, newspapers, or billboards, are different than those prescribed by college writing styles.

You can't see most errors in your, or anyone else's, writing just by reading it 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. Writing errors need to be hunted down using specific techniques—those of proofreading.

WHAT IS PROOFREADING?

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

Proofreading is not a natural talent—it is a learned skill. Proofreading is not reading a sentence, paragraph, or paper from start to finish. You do, however, 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). Reading of this type 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. Reading in this manner has little to do with the formal process known as proofreading.

Proofreading is the process of getting all of the little details, mostly of a technical nature, cleared out so that your writing can be seen in its best light.

Learning to proofread can dramatically improve your writing and greatly reduce the number of errors you make while typing.

GENERAL GUIDELINES (How to)

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

Work from a paper copy, not a computer screen. Don't look for all types of errors at the same time.

If you can, get someone else to help you. Just make sure they know that you are 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, when checking for certain errors, it may be best to go through each sentence backwards, 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. Keep a dictionary, thesaurus, grammar book, and style manual nearby.

Read aloud.

Don't proofread right after you have finished writing. Take breaks during your reading. Allow enough time to proofread several times. If possible, let your paper sit for a full day between readings. Read slowly and carefully.

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 (Control Key + F Key) to quickly search the paper for each instance in which you have used those words.

When you correct one thing, it is easy for something else become incorrect (spacing, alignment, word agreement), so always look back over the surrounding text after you think you have corrected everything.

CHECKLIST (What to look for)

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. You may need to obtain a good grammar handbook, style guide, dictionary, or thesaurus.

For the sake of organization, the elements of this checklist have been grouped as follows: **Formatting**, **Documentation**, **Grammar and usage**, **Spelling**, and **Mechanics**. You should feel free to check for the particular errors you are looking for in whatever order works best for you.

Formatting

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

- Check that your layout (page margins, line spacing, heading style, page numbers, etc.) conforms to the format prescribed by your instructor.

TYPING TIP: Make sure you use the tools in your word processor to achieve the proper layout. In general, you should not be using the space bar, the tab key, or the return key to create your line spacing, to indent blocks of text, to create hanging indents for references, or to create running headers or page numbers.

- Keep an eye out for changes in font typeface or size.

TYPING TIP: The most recent versions of Microsoft Word default to type in the Calibri typeface, size 11, with line spacing of a little more than one line. Your college papers should almost always be written using the Times New Roman typeface, size 12, double spaced. You can change the default setting in Word to suit your needs.

TYPING TIP: When pasting text from an outside source, e.g., a web page or a journal article, you may find it useful to use Word's "Paste Text Only" paste option in order to avoid mixing typefaces/sizes.

- Check all text that is underlined, *italicized*, **bold face**, and any other special text format to make sure that it should or should not be formatted in that manner.

WRITING TIP: To emphasize a word, do not write in in all capital letters, use italics.

Documentation

Check that your citations and references or works cited list match each other, i.e., that for every citation in the body of the paper, there is a reference (or works cited entry) at the end of the paper, and that they are correctly formatted according to the writing style you are following. As stated previously, **never use the tab key or space bar to making the hanging indentation for your references or works cited list—Microsoft Word has setting to making hanging indentation.**

Grammar and usage

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. 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. 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.

Sentences.

Check that you have complete sentences, not just fragments, e.g., a phrase or dependent clause. For further guidance, review the brief guide from the OWL—the Purdue University Online Writing Lab <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/620/01/>

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>).

The following are 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.
- 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 a grammar

book. QUICK TIP: The word *its* is the possessive form of the word, *it*. The other word, *it's*, is the contraction, meaning, *it is*.

WRITING TIP: Most college papers should not contain contractions. Do not use less formal wording such as the words *can't*, *don't*, or *isn't*. Instead, use *cannot*, *do not*, and *is not*.

Usage.

College writing involves using a great number of words—words that many people simply aren't accustomed to writing. Keep a dictionary or grammar book (one which includes a usage section) handy, or use an Internet search engine such as Google, to check that you are using the correct word.

- Pay special attention to words that most frequently give people trouble, e.g., accept/except, affect/effect, every day/everyday. Special note: *all right* should always be spelled as two words, never as one word.
- Check the spelling and usage of any words that you are not absolutely, positively, one hundred percent certain of—certain both that the spelling is correct and that it is the right word, or form of the word.

Spelling.

Keep a good dictionary handy. Recommendations: *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Fifth Edition (ISBN 978-0553583229), about \$7. *The American Heritage College Writer's Dictionary* (ISBN 978-0547857855), about \$18. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fifth Edition (ISBN 978-0547041018) about \$42.

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.

Look for easily misused words, e.g., to/too/two, threw/through, where/were, their/they're, it's/its, know/no.

QUICK TIP: These are a few words (they are not actually words) that often show up in the early stages of college writing—learn not to use these:

- *Alot*. This is never a word. Use two words to say that you like ice cream *a lot*.
- *OK*. This is an abbreviation for the word *okay*. If you want to write *okay*, use the word, not the abbreviation.
- *Thru*. This should only be used as a word on a sign at *Jack in the Box* restaurants. The word you probably want is *through*.

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. Example: In Microsoft Word, proofing options you may prefer to turn/keep on include:

- 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 the red (for spelling) and green (for grammar) squiggly lines underneath text that Word desires to bring to your attention.

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 Publishing 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.

QUICK LESSON: Two widely misused abbreviations are *i.e.* and *e.g.* Many times the writer will choose the wrong one to use and/or will not punctuate it properly. A good explanation can be found here <http://www.write.com/writing-guides/general-writing/common-mistakes/ie-versus-eg/>.

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—usually all of the major words of the entire title should begin with a capital letter, this is known as *headline style* capitalization.

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). Never use more than one exclamation point to end a sentence.

- 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.
- **Make sure there is the correct number of spaces between sentences.** Spacing is dictated by the writing style—for American Psychological Association (APA) style it is two spaces (*but elements of references are always separated by only one space*). Modern Language Association (MLA) prefers one, but states that two is acceptable. For Chicago and Turabian styles, it is one space.

Numbers

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

WRITING TIP: A sentence should never begin with a figure, e.g., 24. Numbers that start sentences need to be spelled out, but it is probably much better simply to rewrite the sentence so that it does not start with a number.

WRITING TIP: Writing numbers correctly can be challenging. These are two problem areas that often show up in the early stages of college writing:

- Learn to hyphenate all compound numbers between twenty-one and ninety-nine. Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, sixty-six, eighty-four, ninety-one.
- Learn when to hyphenate ages and when not to. “When the age is an adjective that comes before the noun and modifies the noun, or when the age is a noun, hyphenate” (<http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/education/grammar/are-you-using-hyphens-correctly>). I have a six-year-old daughter. My daughter is six years old. You act like a two-year-old. My computer is two years old.

Parenthesis and brackets

For every opening mark of punctuation, i.e., parenthesis or bracket, there needs to be a closing mark. **Microsoft Word will not check this**—you need to do it by hand.

Punctuation (other than marks mentioned elsewhere).

Suggestion: Reading aloud may be 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, the hyphen, parenthesis, the period, the question mark, quotation marks (single and double), the semicolon, and the slash.

PUNCTUATION TIP: In college writing in the United States, use a comma before the and at the end of a list. For example: Bananas, cherries, strawberries, and mango. Use of the final comma is often referred to as the *serial comma* or *Oxford comma*.

Quotations and quotation marks

Rules for quotations can be difficult to remember, so take extra care whenever you use them (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 quotation marks. In writing in the United States, 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. For example, the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th edition (page 94) defines a long quote as one that would be, “more than four lines when run into the text.” The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th edition (pages 170-171) defines a long quote as one of 40 or more words. The publication manuals (MLA, APA, etc.) detail how to present such material in your paper.
 - There are exceptions when quoting poetry and drama. Again, check your style guide.
- In college writing in the United States,, the quotation marks you will most frequently use are the double quotation marks. Quotations within quotations that are set off by double quotation marks should use the single quotation marks—this is the primary time to use 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.

Repeated or omitted words

The reader's brain tends to fill in 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 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 and Internet addresses

College papers should not use word division (dividing a word at the end of a line), a technique used in formally published materials. If, however, you are including long URLs (Internet addresses) in your paper (particularly in your references or works cited list), you may be forced to break them. Never make a URL a working link. Never add a hyphen when you break a URL. Modern Language Association (MLA) style and American Psychological Association (APA) style differ from each other in how they prescribe breaking a URL.

MLA (section 5.6.1) states to break a URL only *after* the double slash or a single slash. For **APA** style, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th Edition*, page 192, states to break a URL *before* a mark of punctuation (see example below)—a noted exception being okay to break it after *http://* which begins most URLs.

INCORRECT. Do not do this—do not force a line return before a URL to try to make the URL all fit on one line. For example:

Retrieved from

<http://www3.epa.gov/change/pdfs/climateindicators-full-2014.pdf>

CORRECT. Break a URL to use the entire line of text. For example (APA style breaking of a URL):

Retrieved from [http://www3.epa.gov/change/pdfs/climateindicators
-full-2014.pdf](http://www3.epa.gov/change/pdfs/climateindicators-full-2014.pdf)

SUMMARY

GUIDELINES

- Proofreading comes last—after writing, editing, and revising.
- Do what you can in a manner that works for you.
- Don't look for all types of errors at the same time.
- 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.
- Don't proofread right after you have finished writing. Take breaks.
- 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.

CHECKLIST

Formatting (correctness/consistency)

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

Documentation

- Check that your in-text citations and references or works cited list match each other, and are done correctly. Use the paragraph options of Microsoft Word to make the hanging indentations for your references.

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 and Internet addresses