Proofreading Secrets

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What makes a good proofreader?

Proofreading requires a combination of knowledge, skills, and personality traits.

1. A good proofreader is knowledgeable about

- language, including spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and style
- proofreading methods, techniques and strategies
- type characteristics and the basics of design
- publication production processes

2. A good proofreader has visual acuity—"eagle eyes"—and is capable of recognizing the difference between a hyphen and an en dash, a lower case l and a figure 1, a capital O and a 0 (zero). Typos such as "villige" (instead of "village") and "Warrren" jump out at a proofreader. A skilled proofreader can spot tiny misalignments and small disparities in space. If a word catches your eye because it looks odd, it might contain an error. **Examples:** Coporations Canada, amendmends.

3. A good proofreader is vigilant and able to concentrate intensely.

How fast is a good proofreader?

It depends on the copy. Factors include the style and size of font, the presence of tables, charts, or graphs, and the complexity of subject matter.

Expert estimates of proofreading speeds range from 2,000 to 4,000 words per hour, or 8 to 16 pages per hour. Expect to average 10 to 12 pages per hour for a not-very-

complicated document in good condition. A higher-education textbook would probably come in at four to six pages per hour.

A document that contains any of these elements will take longer to proofread:
- table of contents
- front matter: copyright page, preface, acknowledgements, etc.
- tables, figures, charts, graphs, illustrations
- text boxes, sidebars, pull-outs
- footnotes or endnotes
- a glossary
- bibliography or references
- forms
- index

Why not have the author proofread her own work?

Time: The author might not have time to carefully read through the document.

Skill: Many writers are not trained in how to proofread effectively.

Fresh Eyes: The author is too close to the material. She sees what she thinks is there, not what necessarily *is* there. "Mental spell check" fills in the correct spelling and word use. **Examples:** "you" for "your" and "there" for "their."

The author is likely to concentrate on the message of the piece rather than on other aspects such as pagination, repeated or missing words, or font details.

As Winston Churchill said during production of his book *Lord Randolph Churchill* (1905):

"I am seriously disquieted by a growing feeling that it [the punctuation] is permeated throughout by an absolute lack of system." He … advised that "the book should be read for punctuation solely once again before it goes to press." He considered that he could not undertake the responsibility himself with any sense of security in the result. As he explained, "I am incompetent to do this, for I know the book nearly by heart and cannot concentrate my attention by reading."

— Cohen, Ronald I., *Bibliography of the Writings of Sir Winston Churchill*, Vol. I, (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 129.

What does a proofreader look at?

Text Elements

1. Non-standard grammar or usage

What gets corrected depends on your level of authority. But the proofreader should spot any mistakes in grammar, and if not authorized to automatically correct them, flag them.

2. Punctuation errors and inconsistencies

Unless the sentence doesn't make sense, don't query or correct commas; do correct comma usage for consistency to serial or non-serial usage. Do ensure the consistency of punctuation such as single and double quotation marks and the use of punctuation inside or outside quotation marks. Be aware of missing twins: brackets, parenthesis and quotation marks. **Example:** […) should be (…).

3. Discrepancies in the mechanics of style

If no style sheet is provided, check for inconsistencies in such items as compound words, capitalization, number style, cross references, abbreviations, symbols, units of measure, treatment of proper names, and use of italics or underscores. Recognize the document's predominant style by looking for patterns. Know how much authority you have to alter or correct style. Sometimes these items are referred to as "editorial style," sometimes as the "mechanics of style."

4. Error in alphabetical or numerical sequence

Alphabetical and numerical sequences are breeding grounds for errors: be wary of folios, footnotes, illustrations, tables, lists, bibliographies, and so on. Be wary of *anything* that's numbered. If the author says, "There are six reasons for…," make sure that there *are* six reasons discussed in the text. These often change during the editing phases.

Other numbers to be wary of: if a text gives a person's birthday and current age, or their birth and death dates and their age at the time of death, add it up. Is the age correct?

Ask if you are expected to check telephone numbers and URLs.

5. Faulty references

This refers to footnotes, endnotes, illustrations, tables, figures, etc. In general, tables, figures, and illustrations should be placed after and as close to their first reference in the text as is practical. All referenced matter should correspond to its description (the superscript footnote 12 should refer to the content in the text of footnote 12). The sources listed in footnotes and endnotes should match their bibliography listings.

If the text says, "See Section 2.4," make sure that Section 2.4 is the correct reference. Be especially wary of actual page references, as in, "...as discussed on page 112."

6. Faulty headings

Sometimes the most inappropriate headlines, running heads, titles, captions, and so on aren't caught until the last minute.

Errors hide in titles. As a reader, you see a headline or title as introducing the material to come, so you turn on your alertness *after* you read the title. And in all-caps titles, the words lack their usual profile that would alert you to errors.

7. Errors in equations and formulas

Even if you are not skilled at math, you will be able to spot infelicitous spacing and incorrect breaks. Be aware of the differences between a hyphen, a dash, and a minus sign: the minus sign must be the same width as a plus sign and is set higher than a hyphen or dash.

8. Problems in tables, charts, graphs, and exhibits

Verify whether you are expected to check the math. Otherwise, look for inconsistencies in analogous items where there are no specifications for style or format (spacing, punctuation, abbreviations, capitalization, notation for unavailable data, and so on). And does the content make sense? If a forestry map shows lodgepole pines in Ontario and none in British Columbia, maybe the colour coding got reversed. Also, look for typographical faults (broken or crooked rules, misalignments, transpositions, and so on).

9. Errors in front-matter listings

Does the information in the table of contents match the chapter or section headings in the text, and does it give the correct page numbers? This can be wrong even in an auto-generated table of contents if the author or editor didn't update it after changing the text or if the heading styling didn't work consistently. Have the table of contents page beside you as you work, for easy checking as you go—or check it in a separate pass if you find it easier to concentrate on it that way.

10. Blanks, place holders, or editor's messages in text

Spaces or Xs are often inserted in place of page number references until formatting is completed. Have all the place holders been replaced by the actual numbers? If you have an electronic copy of the text, use "Find" to look for "XX" or whatever was used as a placeholder.

Did any editor's messages get left in the text? For example, watch book captions for statements such as "Can we get a clearer copy of this picture?" If you see something like "???" or "(to be confirmed)," flag it as a possible editor's message.

Visual Elements

To see and correct these errors, you may have to know what production process is being used.

1. Mechanical faults

Watch for blurred or fuzzy copy or uneven ink colour. Check for rivers or lakes (white spaces due to justification of text).

2. Spacing errors

Look for inconsistencies in analogous items, particularly when you have no specifications for indention, justification, line spacing, margins, column width and depth, word spacing, or letter spacing.

3. Positioning faults

Look for knotholes, stacks, and faults in horizontal and vertical alignment, as well as inconsistencies in the register, position of folios, running heads, and any displayed matter.

4. Word division faults

Three or more consecutive end-of-line hyphens constitute a ladder. Usually three is the maximum acceptable number; some editors limit it to two.

5. Widows and orphans

This refers to single words or short lines appearing all alone at the top of a page or column, or at the bottom of a paragraph, page, or column. At the top of a page or column, it's best to have at least half a line of type. Anything less than five characters long (not including punctuation) is too short.

6. Miscellaneous bad breaks

Other visual elements that might need correcting include a head that is not broken for sense, a text line that starts with a dash or ellipsis, and a short page that doesn't have the required number of lines (usually five).

7. Type style errors

You should be able to recognize deviations from specifications, including use of the wrong typeface—such as roman instead of italic—and the wrong point size. When specifications haven't been spelled out, mark or query inconsistencies in analogous items such as heads, running heads, and folios.

8. Poor graphics

Look for incorrect placement or sizing, poor reproduction, "flopped" (reversed) photos (if you can see any writing in the picture, such as signs or lettering on shirts, read it to see if it's reversed), and incorrect or missing captions or titles. Count the number of people named in the caption and the number of faces in the photo. If they're not equal, a name might be missing—or it's the wrong list of names.

In text describing screen captures in software manuals, make sure the content and wording match what's in the illustration.

Using checklists

Even short documents should be proofread in separate passes, because capturing visual and text faults requires—literally—a different point of view. Most visual faults are best seen by taking in the page as a whole or even viewing several pages side-by-side. Most text faults are more likely to be discovered by a line-by-line, word-by-word, or letter-by-letter review.

Even if you are an experienced proofreader who proofreads on a regular basis, write down checklists that group related items pertinent to the document to be proofread. Make anywhere from three to a half dozen systematic passes, depending on the length of the document.

Your first pass might review visual elements: format, alignment, indention, etc. Your second pass might be a word-by-word comparison reading. Your third pass might verify the sequence of references and their callouts, cross-references, etc.

For bilingual documents, add these to your checklist: are the contents, fonts, type sizes, graphics, etc. the same in both versions? Was *all* the content translated? Does each version mention where readers can obtain a copy in the other official language?

Example of a proofreading checklist (for a magazine)

- text
- illustrations and photos
  - quality of reproduction
  - correct ones?
  - credit line present
  - caption present

- captions (bold, ital, sentence case with period)

- cover photo credit at bottom of TofC.
  - Style: **Cover photo caption:** Photographer's name
- headings
- footers
- copyright notice
- masthead (URL and the "Moving?" notice are in that month's highlight colour)
- table of contents
- call-outs (sentence case, with period; ital., large-print, in that month's highlight colour, some with a credit, which is preceded by an em-dash)
- cover (date line on cover)
- beginning of articles (drop cap; first 2 to 4 words in small caps)
- ends of articles (coloured square, in that month's highlight colour, at the end on the last line of each article)
- text boxes (shaded in a paler tint of that month's highlight colour; heading is sentence case, with no period)
- author names, biographies, full by-line (in sentence case with a period)
- pagination

Preparing to proofread

Understand your level of authority, the client's priorities, the production stage, and all deadlines.
Know what dictionary, style sheet, style guides, and specifications are being used.
Verify that you have received the entire document.
Make backups or photocopies.
Gather whatever tools you require, including reference books: In addition to whichever dictionary is specified and whatever style sheet, if any, is provided, these are often necessary: *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *The Canadian Style*, and *Editing Canadian English.*
Decide how many passes you will make and what you will look at in each one.

How proofreading differs from reading

When we read, our eyes usually scan a page in a large "Z" pattern, or in a few "Z" patterns if the text is dense. Speed readers scan a page right down the middle of the text using their peripheral vision to capture a sufficient amount of text to grasp the meaning. To be able to read at a reasonable speed, our brains learn to recognize a word from a number of clues, including its shape or visual profile. Just like the self-correction function in Microsoft Word, our brains will automatically adjust "teh" to "the" without

our noticing it. To read "infrastructure," we see enough of the word to realize what it is, and then move on.

Here is one of the secrets of proofreading: turn off your brain's automatic correction function. Learn to *s-l-o-w d-o-w-n* so you can focus on every letter of every word, every punctuation mark, every element of the layout, and every cross-reference. You're not reading for meaning. You're reading to make sure that every required letter, punctuation mark, visual element, etc., is present. Read out loud (whether actually out loud, or in your head.)

Comparison proofreading

Comparison proofreading is a comparison between the latest version of a document (the live copy) with the previous version (dead copy). Comparison proofreading can be done solo or as a team.

Solo comparison proofreading

Place the dead and live copy side by side. (Live copy on the right if you are right handed.)

For close scrutiny of the text, use a straight edge (such as a ruler) to keep your place in the dead copy line by line, and use the non-writing end of your pen or pencil to follow the live copy, flipping it over to make corrections. (This avoids accidental marks on the copy.) Touching the page links you to it, which helps you to focus on the material. And you'll be confident that you've looked at every character and word.

Know how much dead copy you can accurately remember at one time to compare with the live copy.

Step 1: First, scan a paragraph of dead copy, then the matching paragraph in the live copy, to see if the quantity of text, fonts and numbers are the same.

Step 2: Then read the live copy carefully, checking for all errors.
Some proofreaders read aloud to aid concentration. Do read numbers or complex passages out loud. Read numbers as a sequence of digits; that is, read 1998 as "one-nine-nine-eight."

Another way to aid your concentration is to read the sentences in reverse order. This enables you to focus on the small surface details rather than on the intended meaning of each sentence.

Tricks of the trade

1. Practise lifelong learning
Learn from your mistakes; identify your weaknesses and compensate.
Practice—on everything you read.
Learn all you can about language and typography.
Make a list of words you misspell and learn how to spell them correctly.
Because things changes (e.g., the spelling of "website"; citation style for electronic references; software functions and techniques), keep up with the times.

2. Cultivate caution
Take nothing for granted: read everything.
Watch for new errors in corrected copy; correction frequently breeds new errors.
Double-check handwritten corrections and additions in the dead copy against the live copy to be sure none was missed.
Among the hardest typos to find are real words that are wrong in context. Unless you are somewhat aware of the sense of what you're reading, you'll miss these errors. If you are intrigued by the content of a document, read it once for pleasure, then proofread.

Never put anything that could spill on the same surface as your document.
If a hard copy doesn't have page numbers, pencil them in on the backs of pages. If possible, have a second copy available.
If you are proofreading on screen, make sure that you are familiar with the software before you start. And keep a backup copy of the original.

3. Use a variety of tools
Keep your place and focus your attention with a straight edge (a ruler or index card).
If you're interrupted, use a pencil mark, sticky note, or coloured sheet to mark the place where you stopped.
Use a magnifying glass to decipher bad handwriting and a magnifying ruler to proofread small point size.
Flag places you want to return to: put a small checkmark in the margin, use a paper clip or post-it note, or write down the page, paragraph, and line numbers.
If you're working on screen:
- use the highlighting feature to flag items or to mark your place
- before proceeding to a final proofread on paper, look through the document in Print Preview mode—you'll notice errors you didn't see in the working view.

For onscreen editing, use the zoom feature for different levels of proofreading.
Take earplugs to a noisy office.

4. Follow standard proofreading procedures, and develop your own pattern
When proofreading hard copy, use standard proofreading marks.
When checking the text for typos, read one word at a time—the opposite of speed reading. Read unfamiliar words letter by letter. Read out loud, especially if the content is complex.

Maintain a steady pace, not too slow, but not so fast that you miss errors. Know your attention span and take breaks accordingly, even if the break is simply raising your eyes and shrugging your shoulders.
Do different tasks separately. Set up a checklist of tasks. If possible, do things in the same order each time you proofread.

5. Keep notes
If no style is specified, keep notes, especially on capitalization, compounds, and numbers. If you have no spec sheet for head levels, type size, spacing, and so on, make your own from what you see.

Traps

These items are fraught with proofreading perils:

- heads and subheads
- typeface changes within a document
- the first few lines after a head
- front matter (title and copyright pages, epigram, dedication, …)
- strings of small words ("if it is in the best…")
- pages that have only a small amount of type
- proper nouns (especially made-up names or names whose variants all look normal)
- numbered lists, alphabetical lists—anything sequential
- lost lines, especially at bottoms of columns and pages and before or after graphics
- words that are repeated from the end of one line to the beginning of the next
- twins: parentheses, brackets, quotation marks, etc.
- acronyms and initialisms (read out the letters to make sure they're all there—and in the right order)
- bibliographies and reference lists—follow the style guide carefully
- all-caps text (such as headings)
- light text on a dark background
- recurring content, such as names or cross-references
- "a" or "an" before a line break. (When you see "a" at the end of a line, check the first word on the next line. Does it start with a vowel?)