

Editing and Proofreading

What this handout is about

This handout provides some tips and strategies for revising your writing. To give you a chance to practice proofreading, we have left seven errors (three spelling errors, two punctuation errors, and two grammatical errors) in the text of this handout. See if you can spot them!

Is editing the same thing as proofreading?

Not exactly. Although many people use the terms interchangeably, editing and proofreading are two different stages of the revision process. Both demand close and careful reading, but they focus on different aspects of the writing and employ different techniques.

Some tips that apply to both editing and proofreading

- **Get some distance from the text!** It's hard to edit or proofread a paper that you've just finished writing—it's still too familiar, and you tend to skip over a lot of errors. Put the paper aside for a few hours, days, or weeks. Go for a run. Take a trip to the beach. Clear your head of what you've written so you can take a fresh look at the paper and see what is really on the page. Better yet, give the paper to a friend—you can't get much more distance than that. Someone who is reading the paper for the first time, comes to it with completely fresh eyes.
- **Decide what medium lets you proofread most carefully.** Some people like to work right at the computer, while others like to sit back with a printed copy that they can mark up as they read.
- **Try changing the look of your document.** Altering the size, spacing, color, or style of the text may trick your brain into thinking it's seeing an unfamiliar document, and that can help you get a different perspective on what you've written.
- **Find a quiet place to work.** Don't try to do your proofreading in front of the TV or while you're chugging away on the treadmill. Find a place where you can concentrate and avoid distractions.
- **If possible, do your editing and proofreading in several short blocks of time.** Your concentration may start to wane if you try to proofread the entire text at one time.
- **If you're short on time, you may wish to prioritize.** Make sure that you complete the most important editing and proofreading tasks.

Editing

Editing is what you begin doing as soon as you finish your first draft. You reread your draft to see, for example, whether the paper is well-organized, the transitions between paragraphs are smooth, and your evidence really backs up your argument. You can edit on several levels:

Content

Have you done everything the assignment requires? Are the claims you make accurate? If it is required to do so, does your paper make an argument? Is the argument complete? Are all of your claims consistent? Have you supported each point with adequate evidence? Is all of the information in your paper relevant to the assignment and/or your overall writing goal? (For additional tips, see our handouts on understanding assignments and developing an argument.)

Overall structure

Does your paper have an appropriate introduction and conclusion? Is your thesis clearly stated in your introduction? Is it clear how each paragraph in the body of your paper is related to your thesis? Are the paragraphs arranged in a logical sequence? Have you made clear transitions between paragraphs? One way to check the structure of your paper is to make a reverse outline of the paper after you have written the first draft. (See our handouts on introductions, conclusions, thesis statements, and transitions.)

Structure within paragraphs

Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence? Does each paragraph stick to one main idea? Are there any extraneous or missing sentences in any of your paragraphs? (See our handout on paragraph development.)

Clarity

Have you defined any important terms that might be unclear to your reader? Is the meaning of each sentence clear? (One way to answer this question is to read your paper one sentence at a time, starting at the end and working backwards so that you will not unconsciously fill in content from previous sentences.) Is it clear what each pronoun (he, she, it, they, which, who, this, etc.) refers to? Have you chosen the proper words to express your ideas? Avoid using words you find in the thesaurus that aren't part of your normal vocabulary; you may misuse them.

Style

Have you used an appropriate tone (formal, informal, persuasive, etc.)? Is your use of gendered language (masculine and feminine pronouns like "he" or "she," words like "fireman" that contain "man," and words that some people incorrectly assume apply to only one gender—for example, some people assume "nurse" must refer to a woman) appropriate? Have you varied the length and structure of your sentences? Do you tend to use the passive voice too often? Does your writing contain a lot of unnecessary phrases like "there is," "there are," "due to the fact that," etc.? Do you repeat a strong word (for example, a vivid main verb) unnecessarily? (For tips, see our handouts on style and gender-inclusive language.)

Citations

Have you appropriately cited quotes, paraphrases, and ideas you got from sources? Are your citations in the correct format? (See the UNC Libraries citation tutorial for more information.)

As you edit at all of these levels, you will usually make significant revisions to the content and wording of your paper. Keep an eye out for patterns of error; knowing what kinds of problems you tend to have will be helpful, especially if you are editing a large document like a thesis or dissertation. Once you have identified a pattern, you can develop techniques for spotting and correcting future instances of that pattern. For example, if you notice that you often discuss several distinct topics in each paragraph, you can go through your paper and underline the key words in each paragraph, then break the paragraphs up so that each one focuses on just one main idea.

Proofreading

Proofreading is the final stage of the editing process, focusing on surface errors such as misspellings and mistakes in grammar and punctuation. You should proofread only after you have finished all of your other editing revisions.

Why proofread? It's the content that really matters, right?

Content is important. But like it or not, the way a paper looks affects the way others judge it. When you've worked hard to develop and present your ideas, you don't want careless errors distracting your reader from what you have to say. It's worth paying attention to the details that help you to make a good impression.

Most people devote only a few minutes to proofreading, hoping to catch any glaring errors that jump out from the page. But a quick and cursory reading, especially after you've been working long and hard on a paper, usually misses a lot. It's better to work with a definite plan that helps you to search systematically for specific kinds of errors.

Sure, this takes a little extra time, but it pays off in the end. If you know that you have an effective way to catch errors when the paper is almost finished, you can worry less about editing while you are writing your first drafts. This makes the entire writing process more efficient.

Try to keep the editing and proofreading processes separate. When you are editing an early draft, you don't want to be bothered with thinking about punctuation, grammar, and spelling. If your worrying about the spelling of a word or the placement of a comma, you're not focusing on the more important task of developing and connecting ideas.

The proofreading process

You probably already use some of the strategies discussed below. Experiment with different tactics until you find a system that works well for you. The important thing is to make the process systematic and focused so that you catch as many errors as possible in the least amount of time.

- **Don't rely entirely on spelling checkers.** These can be useful tools but they are far from foolproof. Spell checkers have a limited dictionary, so some words that show up as misspelled may really just not be in their memory. In addition, spell checkers will not catch misspellings that form another valid word. For example, if you type "your" instead of "you're," "to" instead of "too," or "there" instead of "their," the spell checker won't catch the error.
- **Grammar checkers can be even more problematic.** These programs work with a limited number of rules, so they can't identify every error and often make mistakes. They also fail to give thorough explanations to help you understand why a sentence should be revised. You may want to use a grammar checker to help you identify potential run-on sentences or too-frequent use of the passive voice, but you need to be able to evaluate the feedback it provides.
- **Proofread for only one kind of error at a time.** If you try to identify and revise too many things at once, you risk losing focus, and your proofreading will be less effective. It's easier to catch grammar errors if you aren't checking punctuation and spelling at the same time. In addition, some of the techniques that work well for spotting one kind of mistake won't catch others.
- **Read slow, and read every word.** Try reading out loud, which forces you to say each word and also lets you hear how the words sound together. When you read silently or too quickly, you may skip over errors or make unconscious corrections.

- **Separate the text into individual sentences.** This is another technique to help you to read every sentence carefully. Simply press the return key after every period so that every line begins a new sentence. Then read each sentence separately, looking for grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors. If you're working with a printed copy, try using an opaque object like a ruler or a piece of paper to isolate the line you're working on.
- **Circle every punctuation mark.** This forces you to look at each one. As you circle, ask yourself if the punctuation is correct.
- **Read the paper backwards.** This technique is helpful for checking spelling. Start with the last word on the last page and work your way back to the beginning, reading each word separately. Because content, punctuation, and grammar won't make any sense, your focus will be entirely on the spelling of each word. You can also read backwards sentence by sentence to check grammar; this will help you avoid becoming distracted by content issues.
- **Proofreading is a learning process.** You're not just looking for errors that you recognize; you're also learning to recognize and correct new errors. This is where handbooks and dictionaries come in. Keep the ones you find helpful close at hand as you proofread.
- **Ignorance may be bliss, but it won't make you a better proofreader.** You'll often find things that don't seem quite right to you, but you may not be quite sure what's wrong either. A word looks like it might be misspelled, but the spell checker didn't catch it. You think you need a comma between two words, but you're not sure why. Should you use "that" instead of "which"? If you're not sure about something, look it up.
- **The proofreading process becomes more efficient as you develop and practice a systematic strategy.** You'll learn to identify the specific areas of your own writing that need careful attention, and knowing that you have a sound method for finding errors will help you to focus more on developing your ideas while you are drafting the paper.

Think you've got it?

Then give it a try, if you haven't already! This handout contains seven errors our proofreader should have caught: three spelling errors, two punctuation errors, and two grammatical errors. Try to find them, and then check a version of this page with the errors marked in red to see if you're a proofreading star.

Additional resources

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Especially for non-native speakers of English:

Ascher, Allen. *Think about Editing: An ESL Guide for the Harbrace Handbooks*. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2006.

Lane, Janet, and Ellen Lange. *Writing Clearly: Grammar for Editing*. 3rd. ed. Boston: Heinle ELT, 2011.

For everyone:

Einsohn, Amy. *The Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

Lanham, Richard A. *Revising Prose*. 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2006.

Tarshis, Barry. *How to Be Your Own Best Editor: The Toolkit for Everyone Who Writes*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998.



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