# Proofreading Strategies

Prepared by the Southeastern Writing Center. Checklist adapted from materials prepared by
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Proofreading means examining your text carefully to find and correct mistakes in grammar, punctuation, and spelling or typographical errors. The most basic rule of thumb for effective proofreading is to find ways to experience what you have written differently than how you wrote originally. That is, just reading silently from your computer screen or working from beginning to ending, allows you to get too caught up in the "flow" of your writing, to "read" what you intended to say, not what you actually did write. Reading again in this way nearly guarantees you will miss the mistakes you missed before.

Following are a several deliberate and useful strategies for re-experiencing your writing in a new way, thereby increasing your chances of finding the problems you missed earlier.

**First, even before you begin to proofread:**

1. *Be sure you've revised the more substantive parts of your paper.*
   Don't make corrections at the sentence and word levels if you still need to work on the focus, organization, and development of the whole paper, of sections, or of paragraphs. Continued work on those larger concerns often sorts out many initial mistakes as well as introduces new problems requiring detection and correction.

2. *Set your paper aside for a while (15 minutes, a day, a week) between writing and proofing.*
   Putting some distance between you and your paper will help you see mistakes more easily. This is by far the easiest way to see your writing with fresh eyes and new objectivity.

3. *Eliminate all the unnecessary material before looking for mistakes.*
   Most of us can benefit from writing more concisely, as our early drafts of papers tend to be loaded with unnecessary words and overly complex sentences. All that extra material just increases the chance of error and the chance that the errors we make will go undetected, so trim the "flab."

4. *Know what to look for.*
   Use your professors' comments on previous papers to make a list of the mistakes you need to watch for. Keep track of your most common problems. Know what specific problems you are likely proofreading for.

**Now, when you proofread:**

1. *Work from a printout, not your computer screen.*
   We're all more practiced at hard-copy reading, so rely on your strengths. (See the next page for some very useful computer functions that can help you find common mistakes.)

2. *Read your paper out loud to yourself or to a listener.*
   This is especially helpful for spotting run-on sentences and fragments, but you will also hear other problems that you may not see when reading silently. If you have a listener available (e.g., a Writing Center consultant), ask that person to note any mismatches between what you read out loud and what you have written. As an alternative, have a partner read your paper back to you. Make notes of any spots that cause your partner to pause or stumble; those are likely trouble spots.

3. *Use a blank sheet of paper to cover up the lines below the one you are reading at any given moment.*
   This technique keeps you from moving past mistakes too easily. It is slow, but this kind of deliberate one-line-at-a-time technique employs exactly the kind of careful discipline that distinguishes polished, experienced writers from easy-to-spot novices.

4. *Try reading your paper in reverse, working from the end back to the beginning.*
   It seems awkward, but like the preceding technique, this strategy of reading backwards helps prevent you from skimming too easily across what you have written.

5. *If you tend to make many mistakes, simplify your task by checking separately for different kinds of error.*
   Move from the most important to the least, following whatever technique works best for you to identify that kind of mistake. For instance, read through once (backwards, sentence by sentence) to check for fragments; read through again (forward) to be sure subjects and verbs agree, and again (perhaps using a computer search for "this," "it," and "they") to trace pronouns to their antecedents.

6. *Create your own proofreading checklist.*
   In addition to using the proofreading checklist attached to this handout, you should take the time to create a personalized proofreading checklist consisting of the mistakes you make most frequently. Begin by making a list of the mistakes that you and your instructor find in your paper. Then add these items to your customized proofreading checklist. In the future, when you proofread your paper, look for the problems listed in your proofreading checklist before referring to the attached checklist.

7. *Use the search function of your computer to find the mistakes you make most commonly.*
   Search for "it," for instance, if you tend to confuse "its" and "it's"; search for "-ing" if dangling modifiers are your problem; search for opening parentheses or quotation marks if you tend to leave out the closing ones.

8. *End with a spelling check.*
   Use a computer spell checker or read backwards word by word. But remember that a spell checker won't catch mistakes with homonyms (e.g., "they're" vs. "their" vs. "there") or certain typos (e.g., "he" for "the").

9. *Meet with a Writing Center consultant.*
   Writing Center consultants will not just proofread your papers for you, but they will be glad to show you their strategies for proofing and help you apply those techniques to your own writing.

# Proofreading Checklist

## Content
- [ ] Does my essay fulfill all the parts of the assignment?
- [ ] Do I state my thesis or main idea clearly so that there can be no mistake about my purpose?
- [ ] Have I adequately developed my thesis or main idea?
- [ ] Have I thought about my audience? Is my tone appropriate to my audience and purpose?
- [ ] Is my tone consistent throughout the essay?
- [ ] Are my examples and evidence accurate, relevant, and convincing?
- [ ] Do I have a principle of organization? Do I avoid repetition and digressions?
- [ ] Is my organization appropriate to my topic and thesis?
- [ ] Are my examples, evidence, and details in the best order?
- [ ] Do I adequately introduce and conclude my paper?
- [ ] Are my paragraphs well developed, unified, and coherent?
- [ ] Do I use transitions? Are my paragraphs linked together effectively?
- [ ] Have I written an appropriate title that reflects the main topic of my essay or paragraph?

## Correctness
- [ ] Have I chosen my words carefully? Am I sure of meanings?
- [ ] Is my language appropriate to my purpose, tone, and audience?
- [ ] Have I avoided wordy expressions, euphemisms, clichés, pretentious language, and slang?

## Grammar and Usage
- [ ] Are my sentences correct? Have I avoided fragments, fused sentences, and comma splices?
- [ ] Are my modifiers in the right place? Do I have any dangling modifiers?
- [ ] Do my subjects and verbs agree?
- [ ] Have I checked:
  - correct use and consistency of verb tenses
  - agreement of nouns, verbs, and pronouns
  - pronoun cases
  - pronoun antecedents
- [ ] Do I keep parallel constructions parallel?
- [ ] Have I avoided short, choppy sentences?
- [ ] Do I combine sentences effectively?
- [ ] Are my sentences varied in length and structure? Do I avoid monotony?
- [ ] Have I misused any of the commonly mixed homonyms such as *there*, *their*, *they're*, *to*, *too*, or *two*?

## Punctuation
- [ ] Does each sentence end with the correct punctuation mark?
- [ ] Does my punctuation make my meaning clear? Have I followed punctuation rules?
- [ ] Check comma usage:
  - Commas <u>precede</u> coordinating conjunctions (and, but, so, for or, nor, yet) in compound sentences.
  - Commas DO NOT separate two complete sentences. (This is called a comma splice).
  - Commas with nonrestrictive elements; no commas with restrictive elements
  - Commas with interrupting elements, with introductory phrases and clauses when necessary, between series items, between independent clauses.
- [ ] Have I checked
  - Correct use of periods and question marks.
  - Correct use (and not overuse) of exclamation points.
  - Semicolons and colons.
  - Correct use (and not overuse) of dashes and parentheses.
  - Correct use (and not overuse) of quotation marks.
  - Punctuation with quotation marks.
- [ ] Is all dialogue or written conversation properly punctuated?
- [ ] Have I used apostrophes to show possession or to mark contractions or to show missing numbers (as in '99)?

## Spelling and Capitalization
- [ ] Have I spelled all words correctly? Use the following tips:
  - Use spell check.
  - Circle words that might be wrong and look them up.
  - Check for frequently misspelled words in common errors list.
  - Check the spelling of all foreign words and proper names.
- [ ] Have I begun all sentences with a capital letter?
- [ ] Are all proper names, people's titles, and titles of published works correctly capitalized?

## MLA Documentation
- [ ] Have I formatted my paper according to the MLA guidelines (and/or teacher's guidelines)? Did I indent (5 spaces) the first sentence of each paragraph?
- [ ] Have I correctly cited the words and ideas of others in the text?
- [ ] Have I indented block quotes (more than 4 lines) 1 inch from the left margin?
- [ ] Are all sources cited in the paper included on the Works Cited page?
- [ ] Are all the sources cited on the Works Cited page used in the paper?