



A Guide to Proof-reading

Qualities of a proofreader

An effective proofreader will need a combination of:

- An eye for detail
- Knowledge of spelling, grammar and punctuation
- Reference books for the times when you are unsure of the rules
- The ability to work on your own
- Concentration
- The desire to get things right

Whenever possible proofreading should be done on paper, for two reasons:

1. Mistakes are easier to spot on paper.
2. The final document is going to be produced on paper, and the proofreader needs to be able to see how it looks in that medium. Part of the proof-reader's job is to check the layout and styling of the text, and errors in these areas may not show up until the text has been printed.

All too often we rely on software tools to check for spelling and grammar. Yes, spell checkers are valuable and certainly worth using, but they are not an alternative to proofreading. However, spell checkers have blind spots, they will not pick up mistakes that happen to create other words. For example:

Those who rely on spell chequers would bee wise two sea weather there tests wood prophet from proofreading.

How many spelling errors can you see in the above text?

The approach to proofreading requires a bit of practice. There are three main differences to proofreading than reading for pleasure.

1. A proofreader will read considerably slower than normal. Every word must be viewed as inaccurate.
2. When reading a book you concentrate on the content, you are following a story or you extract information from the text, you don't look closely at individual letters and punctuation marks. But as a proofreader you are looking to spot errors, not to enjoy the story. Having said that, it is not a complete reversal, as you must also think about the content, about what is being said, to ensure that it makes sense.

3. As a proofreader you are responsible for checking everything on the page, not just the main text. You should check the layout, the styles of the headings, the page numbers, any cross-references, and so on.

Consistency is another area to be reviewed carefully. You will need to ensure the document is consistent, things like dates, numbers and abbreviations that can be written in more than one way appear in only one of those ways throughout the text.

Common consistency issues:

Dates – can be written in a number of ways e.g. 1 June 2014, 01 June 2014, 01-06-14, June 1st 2014, 1st June 2014

Numbers – can be written as words or as numerals. Most commonly used and known is that of using words for numbers from one to nine and numerals thereafter. There are exceptions however, if a number begins a sentence it should be written as a word, even if it is above nine. Should the numeric be a precise measurement, then it should be given numerals, even when below ten.

Measurements – space or no space? For example 5.2 mm or 5.2mm? In most organisations there would be no space.

Abbreviations – nowadays it is fashionable to omit full stops within abbreviations and initials. For example BBC, eg, am, Dr A Hewitt

Spelling – British or American? – unless the document is intended for an American audience, prefer British spellings.

....ise orize?

such as organise and apologise can be speltise orize. The ...ize is always used in America, and old English construction. However, British writers often preferise. Whichever convention is used, some words must endise. These include advertise, compromise and exercise.

Alternative spellings – leaving aside the American spellings, there are some words with alternative spellings. These can include:

Acknowledgment	Acknowledgement
Connection	Connexion
Dispatch	Despatch
Focused	Focussed
Judgement	Judgment

Hyphenation – some words such as ‘well-being’ and ‘non-attendance’ should always be hyphenated. Others, such as ‘prerequisite’ and ‘sunshine’, never are. Some can be either hyphenated or not. These can include ‘no-one’, ‘market-place’ which are equally correct as ‘no one’ and ‘market place’. If in doubt use a dictionary.

Bold – is often used for headings and highlighting certain words or phrases within the body of a text.

Quotation marks – there is no difference in meaning or use between single and double quotation marks, they do exactly the same job. One or other however, should be used consistently.

Troublesome words – there are a number of words that are misused or confused with others. The list below is just an example, you might want to add to them as you come across other examples:

Affect (verb)	Effect (noun)
Born (birth)	Borne (carried)
Complement (add to)	Compliment (praise)
Dependant (noun)	Dependent (adjective)
For ever (for all time)	Forever (continually)
Inquiry (an investigation)	Enquiry (a question)
License (verb)	Licence (noun)
Meter (instrument)	Metre (measurement)
Principle (concept, moral)	Principal (chief)
Stationary (not moving)	Stationery (paper)

Commas – commas provide pauses in sentences. If you are to avoid ambiguity bear in mind the use of commas. For example:

‘can we eat Granma’?
 or
 ‘can we eat, Granma’?

Semicolons – gives a stronger pause than a comma, but weaker than a colon or full stop.

Colons – indicates the strongest break short of a full stop.

Question marks – are only used in one situation, after a direct question.

Exclamation marks – should be used sparingly and used after true exclamations:

Oh no! Goal!
 Or can be used to emphasise a command or statement:

Go away!

It can also be used to indicate surprise:

We got the contract!

Apostrophes – misused more often than any other punctuation mark. Apostrophes have three uses:

1. **Possession** – if a word is singular, add 's to make it possessive – Brian's car. This is relevant even if the word ends with s – Bridget Jones's Diary.

If a word is plural, and has an s to make it plural, add an apostrophe after the s – The boys' faces.

However, take care over plural nouns that don't have a final s – The men's coats **not** the mens' coats.

Possessive pronouns do not need apostrophes to make them possessive – His job was well paid. Theirs was a happy marriage.

2. **Omission** – the apostrophe takes the place of a missing letter – don't you like your dinner? It's your favourite.

Some tips and techniques to bear in mind when proofreading:

- Run a ruler or a piece of paper down the page to isolate the line you are reading from those that follow. This makes the errors more noticeable.
- Take care over long words, errors can easily hide within them.
- Bear in mind that when you notice one error and stop to correct it, is the moment you are most likely to miss another one. Look at that section a second time.
- Take care when checking text you are very familiar with. It is easy to read what you think it says rather than what it actually says.
- Once you think you have completed proofreading the document, read it backwards, as any spelling errors missed, will probably be picked up this way.