

## Editing and Proofreading Strategies

Editing is the correction of mechanical errors like grammar, punctuation, and spelling; and of mistakes such as omitted or repeated words and typing errors. When you proofread you double-check that all these errors, as well as spacing and formatting problems, have been corrected. In the writing process, editing and proofreading come last, after revising. When you proofread, you are not just looking for errors in this paper; you are also identifying your bad habits to avoid them in future writing.

### Review old papers

Pull out old papers and review the instructor's comments. Which errors seem most frequent? Comma splices? Fragments? Word choice errors? Make a list of your own most troublesome areas. You will read separately for each one. (See below, [Look for one thing at a time.](#))

(Note: If your instructors have frequently suggested that it is your clarity, your organization or your argument that is the problem, you may need to go back a couple of steps in the writing process to revise first. You may not be ready to edit.)

### Create distance

Psychological distance from the text is the reason a second proofreader can find errors you have missed. A second reader doesn't have any strong ego-involvement in the writing and can be more objective. A second reader doesn't know as much about your thoughts as you do, and therefore stumbles over unclear or awkward places that you might skim past.

Nevertheless, proofreading is primarily your job, so to create some distance, set your text aside for a while (fifteen minutes, a day, a week—whatever you can afford) before editing or proofreading. Watch TV, do your math, ride a bike. Avoid thinking about your paper. Then, when you come back to it, you will be more likely to catch errors.

Of course, you can't afford to do this with a last-minute paper. So don't wait until the last minute.

### Use your ear

If your mind is wandering, read aloud, but slowly, one word at a time. Sometimes your ear catches errors that your eye misses. Be vigilant to make sure you read what you actually have written, though, not what you meant to have written. Don't read *says* if you wrote *say*.

### Work from paper

Watching yourself typing on a computer screen does not constitute proofreading. Proofread from paper. If you are fatigued, try enlarging the font or changing fonts temporarily. Seriphed fonts like Times are easier to read on paper than sans-serif fonts like Ariel.

Read slowly, one word at a time. To force yourself to slow down, use a pointer, a blank sheet of paper or ruler to cover up lines. This may keep you from skipping past errors.

### Look for one thing at a time

You should read your paper several times, each time editing for one particular error. For example, if you know you have a history of creating fragments, read once looking only for fragments. Correct them as you go. If you know you tend to mix up *there* and *their*, read separately for just that error. Here are other common errors to watch for on separate reads:

To catch **spelling or word choice** errors, read each word individually from the end of each line to the beginning. Computer spell checkers won't catch sound-alikes such as *they're*, *their*, and *there*, or errors such as typing *he* for *the*. (Spell checkers are interactive—you have to choose the right word each time it stops. There's no getting around it—you have to learn the difference between words like *were* and *where*. A grammar handbook or dictionary can help.)

If you confuse **plurals and possessives**, skim looking only for words that end in *s*. If a word ends in *s* because it is plural, there should be no apostrophe. If the word indicates possession or is a contraction of two words, it needs an apostrophe. *Its*, as in *The radio station is holding its fundraiser*, is analogous to *his* or *hers*—no apostrophe.

If you tend to make errors in **subject-verb agreement**, go through one sentence at a time and identify the simple subject and main verb in each. Do the subjects and verbs go together? You can't write, "Experts says" or "Everybody know."

For **pronoun** problems, skim line by line and stop at each pronoun. Find the noun that the pronoun replaces. If you can't find it within the sentence, or at most within a sentence or two preceding, replace the pronoun with a noun. If you find the noun the pronoun refers to, but there are other nouns nearby and it might be unclear which you're talking about, replace the pronoun with a noun. Be sure every noun agrees in number and person with its corresponding pronoun. Look especially for *they*, *their*, and *them*—they are plural pronouns and must refer to plural nouns. *Anyone*, *everyone*, and *everybody* are singular. You can't write, "Everybody has *their* books." (Well, you can say it; you just can't write it.)

**Fragment** errors are sometimes heard better than seen. Read your paper aloud. Stop at every period and take a breath; can your ear find the fragments? Pay special attention to sentences that begin with subordinating words, such as *because*, *if*, or *when*. Watch for phrases like *for example* or *such as* or phrases starting with *-ing* adjectives. Decide if a fragment might be just a piece of the preceding or next sentence. If so, connect it. Or add the missing subject or verb or remove the subordinating conjunction.

**Run-on** sentences are not long sentences; run-ons are punctuated wrong. In particular, a comma is not strong enough to join two independent clauses. If you tend to create these comma splices, start with the last sentence of your paper and work your way back to the beginning, stopping at every comma. Is there an independent clause on both sides of the comma? If there is, the comma must be accompanied by a coordinating conjunction or replaced by a semicolon or a period.

An **omitted comma** can result in another kind of run-on. To find omitted comma errors, skim for the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, *nor*, *so*, and *yet*. See whether there is a complete sentence on each side of the conjunction. If there is, place a comma before the conjunction.

To find **introductory comma** errors, read the first few words of each sentence. Look for subordinate conjunctions such as *because* or *when*; transition words such as *nevertheless* or *however*; phrases such as *serving four years in the Navy*; or prepositional phrases such as *in contrast* or *about two years ago*. Place a comma at the *end* of the introductory word, phrase or clause, and *before* the independent clause.

**Awkwardness** can result from **parallel structure** errors. Find these by skimming for key words that signal parallel structures: *and*, *or*, *not only...but also*, *either...or*, *both...and*.... Make sure that the items connected by these words are in the same grammatical form: *golf, basketball, and soccer* is parallel; *golfing, basketball, and to play soccer* is not.

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