

PROOFREADING

This handout is available in an alternative format on request

Proofreading is the process of identifying and correcting errors at the sentence level so it is done once you've made sure the content and organization are working. To proofread, you comb through your composition carefully to pick out mistakes in the mechanics (the spelling, grammar, diction).

GENERAL STRATEGIES FOR PROOFREADING:

1. You can't possibly check for everything at once until you are an expert writer. Read each sentence out loud – if it sounds funny, there's probably a grammatical error.
2. What are the errors you usually make? If you are just learning about proper syntax (sentence structure), you might need to watch for sentence fragments, comma splices and run-on sentences. Pay attention to feedback from your instructor and identify your problem areas. Use specific strategies for finding your problem areas in your composition.
3. Learn how to fix your mistakes by studying that specific area of grammar. Refer to grammar guides. Soon you won't be making these errors anymore and proofreading will be easier.

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES:

ACTIVE VOICE:

Look for the passive tense in your verbs: "The snow was shoveled by me." Replace with active verbs: "I shoveled the snow." Be direct.

ECONOMY:

Wordiness: Make every word count and delete or replace extraneous words, Be plain ("They want...") not fancy ("They are desirous of..."). Move swiftly to the point and don't use extensive introductions like "The issue which I'd like to address at this point is..."

Repetition: Watch for words or phrases that repeat and replace them with synonyms. Are you making the same point over and over?

COMPLETE SENTENCES:

Sentence Fragments: Make sure each sentence contains an independent clause, paying extra attention to sentences beginning with "because," "such as," "for example" and similar dependent markers.

Comma Splice & Run-on Sentences: Find sentences that have more than one independent clause. Make one clause into a dependent clause with a comma and conjunction, or split into two sentences. Find sentences that are very long, or that contain too many ideas that can stand on their own, and divide into shorter sentences.

AGREEMENT:

Pronoun Reference: Check each pronoun (it, this, they, their, them) – can you find the noun that it refers to? If you can find the noun, make sure it agrees in person and number with the pronoun.

If not, replace the pronoun with the noun.

Subject/Verb Agreement: In each sentence, identify the main verb and its subject – are they the same number?

VERB TENSE:

In each sentence, check the main verb – is it in the right tense (past, present, future) and have you used the right form of the verb for that tense? Is the tense consistent throughout the paper so that it is clear to the reader what is in the past, what is in the present, and what is in the future?

SENTENCE CLARITY:

Misplaced Modifiers: Make sure all modifiers are placed next to what they are modifying. If they are out of place, move them to the right place.

Dangling Modifiers: Find modifiers that are not connected to what they are supposed to be modifying. These modifiers can't just be moved. Rewrite the sentence to make a better connection.

PARALLELISM or PARALLEL FORM:

Find repetitions that flag parallel sentence structures and make sure the same grammatical order is followed.

DICTION:

Make sure the words are chosen well. Eliminate words you are not completely familiar with (or check their meanings in a dictionary). Identify clichés, euphemisms, jargon, and sexist language, and replace with fresher, more precise terms. Look for words that seem out of place (a big fancy word in a casual, colloquial composition or a slang word in a formal composition) and replace.

SPELLING:

Skim over your composition word-by-word. Do any look funny? Pay special attention to words you have misspelled before and words that are often confused with similar words. Check a print or on-line dictionary for correct spellings.

PUNCTUATION:

Period, question mark, exclamation mark: Does every sentence end with a punctuation mark? Is the punctuation appropriate?

Comma: Are there commas at the end of introductory phrases? Are there commas in lists? Are there commas separating dependent clauses from independent clauses? Get rid of commas that split a subject from its verb, that connect two independent clauses without a conjunction,

Semi-colon and colon: Are semi-colons used properly to join independent clauses or to link long items in a series? Are colons used properly to introduce statements or emphasize single words, lists, and quotes?

Dash: Dashes should not be used in formal writing.

Parentheses & square brackets: Are these used sparingly? Are parentheses used to enclose extra information? Are square brackets used inside quotations to include material that is not part of the quote?

Quotation marks: Make sure all direct quotes have quotation marks around them. Make sure that periods and commas are within the quotation marks and semi-colons and colons are outside.

Apostrophes: Make sure they are only used to indicate possession (Mary's) or to make a contraction (won't from will not).

NOTE: Check a grammar handbook for explanations of the terminology used in this handout.