

How to Proofread an Essay

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Proofreading is the **final** step of the writing process completed only after the larger concerns of focus, development, organization, and coherence have been satisfied. We proofread to find grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors, omitted or extra words, and typos. However, proofreading is not the same as reading! Most writers can't simply "read over their writing" and find all their sentence errors. But if writers use an effective *system* for proofreading their papers, they are sure to spot more errors than had they only "read over" their papers. Proofreading takes time. You should allow an adequate amount of time for this step.

Start keeping a "Proofreading Log."

It's unrealistic for most students to think they'll be able to find all possible errors when they proofread. Therefore, it's more time efficient to know the kinds of errors you typically make and to be sure to check for those errors first. One way to gain this knowledge is to keep a log of all the grammar, punctuation, and sentence structure errors you make to discover which ones are repeated. When your teachers make corrections on your papers, record those errors on a log sheet. What's the solution for that kind of error, and what should you look for in your writing to spot that kind of error in the future?

Read your writing out loud.

When you read out loud, you slow your normal reading speed. This can help you find errors that you might miss when reading silently. (Note: Non-native English speakers may have more difficulty "hearing" problems in writing if they are inexperienced writers and readers. Still, reading out loud is a valuable activity to practice and learn from.)

Listen to someone else read your writing out loud.

Pay close attention while listening to another person read your writing. Note the places that give the reader difficulty. For example, s/he might stop in the middle of a sentence or falter over a word. That could be where a word is missing or misplaced. If the reader isn't reading fluently, that could signal problems with the text: sentence structure problems, grammar and punctuation problems, word choice issues, etc. (Occasionally, you might find a *content* problem while proofreading, but if your writing has gone through revisions before this step, any problems with content should have already been addressed.)

The Reader's Role. Whoever reads aloud should mark the places (words, sentences, sections) that give them difficulty or cause questions. The writer can then focus on those areas to see what the problem is, correct the problem, or question it.

When reading out loud would be disruptive, try an alternative strategy.

Sometimes it's not possible to read out loud, depending upon your circumstances. In that case, try anything that slows your normal pace of reading. For example, try sub-vocalization, where you pronounce each word under your breath. Another quiet strategy is to use a finger or pencil to point to each word and punctuation mark.

Let some time go by between writing your paper and proofreading it.

The more time you leave before proofreading your paper, the less you'll remember specific wording, which will help you focus more on the text.

Should You Proofread For Every Kind of Error?

Absolutely not! Writers should assess their own particular writing problems and focus on the proofreading strategies most useful for them. If writing sentence fragments or sentence run-ons is not your problem, then you don't need to waste your precious time proofreading for those kinds of errors. For writers who have a good command of sentence structure, it might be best to begin proofreading for stylistic problems. (See the section below titled "Proofreading for Stylistic Problems.") However, more inexperienced writers should begin with the more fundamental aspects of proofreading—those dealing with sentence structure and spelling.

Proofreading for Common Sentence Errors

Fragments

A fragment is a group of words written as a sentence, but it doesn't express a complete thought. The best way to check for fragments is to **read your paper backwards**, sentence by sentence. To determine if a sentence is complete, read the sentence, and then ask, "Does this make sense?" If you answer "yes," then your sentence is probably complete. If you answer "No, this doesn't make sense," then your sentence is probably incomplete. Fragments can often be corrected by connecting them to the sentence before or after the fragment.

Comma Splices

To find comma splices, start at the beginning of your paper and skim, stopping at each comma. Then read the part of the sentence that precedes the comma. Does that part of the sentence make sense by itself? If so, then read the part that follows the comma. Do those words make sense by themselves, too? If so, the sentence is probably a comma splice error, which is a particular kind of run-on sentence.

You can correct a comma splice in three different ways. First, you could add a coordinating conjunction directly after the comma to connect the two ideas. Second, you could replace the comma with a period. Third, you could replace the comma with a semi-colon if the two clauses are closely related to each other.

Run-ons

Run-ons are more difficult to detect than fragments and comma splices. They are sentences run together expressing two or more complete thoughts without correct punctuation or a correct connecting word. One good way to detect a run-on sentence is to **listen to your voice** as you read the sentence out loud at a normal pace. When your voice drops in tone and hesitates before reading more, that's a clue that you may have reached the end of a complete thought. Some run-ons can be corrected with a period or semi-colon separating the complete thoughts. Other run-ons are better corrected by adding a comma and coordinating conjunction.

Spelling and Typos

Of course, the Spell Check feature on computers can find many spelling errors, but you can't rely on it for all spelling. The most useful strategy to detect spelling and typo errors is to read your paper backwards from the end to the beginning, word by word. However, this is very time-consuming on a long paper, and it doesn't catch homophone errors (to, too, two) or errors such as *quit/quite/quiet*. (Your computer's Spell Check feature won't catch those errors either.)

The most helpful strategy for catching spelling errors is to know your own error pattern—the words that always give you trouble. Keep your own alphabetized log of words you misspell and use that as a reference for proofreading.

Proofreading for Stylistic Problems

Passive Voice

In a few disciplines, using passive voice is expected, but if your teacher doesn't specify that, using active voice is preferable; it can make your writing more readable and interesting. In a sentence with active voice, the "doer" of the action is the subject of the sentence.

Passive voice is created with forms of the verb *to be* (is, are, was, were, etc.) followed by a past participle: In this sentence, the doer of the action is NOT the subject.

Skim each sentence looking for forms of the verb *to be*. When you find one of those verbs, check to see if another verb follows it in past participle form. If so, then you can change the passive voice into active voice by making the "doer" of the action to be the subject of the sentence.

Example: *The essay was written by the student.*

"Was" is a form of the verb *to be*. "Written" is a past participle. Who wrote the essay? The student wrote the essay. That's expressing the same idea only in active voice.

Nominalization

Nominalization means that you've used the noun form of a word when the verb form would make your sentence more interesting or more concise. There are two ways to eliminate this problem. First, find the word "of" every time you've used it. Then check the word directly before "of." (It will be a noun.) Does that noun have a verb form? If so, rewrite the sentence using the verb form instead.

Example: *The teacher wrote an **explanation of** passive voice.*

Rewritten: *The teacher **explained** passive voice.*

The second way to eliminate this problem is to check for the verbs *have*, *make*, and *be*. If the nouns that follow them have verb forms, use the verb form instead.

Example: *Tony **made a suggestion** that we start the meeting at 3:00.*

Rewritten: *Tony **suggested** that we start the meeting at 3:00.*

Remove Expletives

"There" is an empty word when it starts a sentence. It helps make your writing boring. Find sentences beginning with "There are," "There is," "There were," etc. Rewrite them putting the subject in the subject position. ("There" can't be a subject!)

Example: ***There are** many people who believe we shouldn't go to war.*

Rewritten: *Many people believe we shouldn't go to war.*