

Proofreading Strategies

Finding Common Errors

Proofreading is primarily about searching your writing for errors, both grammatical and typographical, before submitting your paper for an audience (a teacher, publisher, etc.). Use this resource to help you find and fix common errors.

Purdue OWL (2010) Finding Common Errors. Available at: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/02/>
(Accessed: 25 January 2012)

Proofreading can be much easier when you know what you are looking for. Although everyone will have different error patterns, the following are issues that come up for many writers. When proofreading your paper, be on the lookout for these errors. Always remember to make note of what errors you make frequently—this will help you proofread more efficiently in the future!

Spelling

- Do NOT rely on your computer's spell-check—it will not get everything!
- Examine each word in the paper individually by reading carefully. Moving a pencil under each line of text helps you to see each word.
- If necessary, check a dictionary to see that each word is spelled correctly.
- Be especially careful of words that are typical spelling nightmares, like "ei/ie" words and homonyms like your/you're, to/too/two, and there/their/they're.

Left-out and doubled words

Reading the paper aloud (and slowly) can help you make sure you haven't missed or repeated any words.

Fragment Sentences

- Make sure each sentence has a subject. In the following sentence, the subject is "students": The students looked at the OWL website.
- Make sure each sentence has a complete verb. In the following sentence, "were" is required to make a complete verb; "trying" alone would be incomplete: They were trying to improve their writing skills.
- See that each sentence has an independent clause; remember that a dependent clause cannot stand on its own. The following sentence is a dependent clause that would qualify as a fragment sentence: Which is why the students read all of the handouts carefully.

Run-on Sentences

- Review each sentence to see whether it contains more than one independent clause.
- If there is more than one independent clause, check to make sure the clauses are separated by the appropriate punctuation.
- Sometimes, it is just as effective (or even more so) to simply break the sentence into separate sentences instead of including punctuation to separate the clauses.

Example run-on: I have to write a research paper for my class about extreme sports all I know about the subject is that I'm interested in it.

Edited version: I have to write a research paper for my class about extreme sports, and all I know about the subject is that I'm interested in it.

Another option: I have to write a research paper for my class about extreme sports. All I know about the subject is that I'm interested in it.

Comma Splices

- Look at the sentences that have commas.
- Check to see if the sentence contains two main clauses.
- If there are two main clauses, they should be connected with a comma and a conjunction like and, but, for, or, so, yet.
- Another option is to take out the comma and insert a semicolon instead.

Example: I would like to write my paper about basketball, it's a topic I can talk about at length.

Edited version: I would like to write my paper about basketball because it's a topic I can talk about at length.

Edited version, using a semicolon: I would like to write my paper about basketball; it's a topic I can talk about at length.

Subject/Verb Agreement

- Find the subject of each sentence.
- Find the verb that goes with the subject.
- The subject and verb should match in number, meaning that if the subject is plural, the verb should be as well and vice versa.

Example: Students at the university level usually is very busy.

Edited version: Students at the university level usually are very busy.

Mixed construction

Read through your sentences carefully to make sure that they do not start with one sentence structure and shift to another. A sentence that does this is called a mixed construction.

Example: Since I have a lot of work to do is why I can't go out tonight.

Edited version: Since I have a lot of work to do, I can't go out tonight.

Parallelism

Look through your paper for series of items and make sure these items are in parallel form.

Example: Being a good friend involves good listening skills, to be considerate, and that you know how to have fun.

Edited version: Being a good friend involves knowing how to listen, being considerate, and having fun.

Pronoun Reference/Agreement

- Skim your paper, stopping at each pronoun.
- Search for the noun that the pronoun replaces.
- If you can't find any noun, insert one beforehand or change the pronoun to a noun.

If you can find a noun, be sure it agrees in number and person with your pronoun.

Apostrophes

- Skim your paper, stopping only at those words which end in "s." If the "s" is used to indicate possession, there should be an apostrophe, as in Mary's book.
- Look over the contractions, like you're for you are, it's for it is, etc. Each of these should include an apostrophe.
- Remember that apostrophes are not used to make words plural. When making a word plural, only an "s" is added, not an apostrophe and an "s."