

General Strategies for Proofreading and Editing

Proofreading and **editing** are the final steps in the writing process. Correct punctuation, grammar, spelling, sentence structure, style, and word choice are important to the reader because they drastically affect perceptions of the writer's authority and credibility.

General Strategies Before You Proofread

- **Make sure that you leave plenty of time** between writing and proofreading/editing. Leave your paper for a day or two, a week, or even 20 minutes. This will allow you to approach proofreading with fresh eyes.
- **Print out a hard copy.** Reading from a computer screen is not the most effective way to proofread. Having a hardcopy of your paper and a pen will help you.
- **Have a list of what to look for.** This will help you manage your time and not feel overwhelmed by proofreading. You can get this list from previous assignments where your instructor(s) noted common errors you make. You can also keep an error log to track your own patterns of error (see the attached page).

General Strategies While You Proofread

- **Don't rush.** Many mistakes in writing occur because we rush. Read slowly and carefully to give your eyes enough time to spot errors.
- **Read aloud.** Reading aloud helps you to notice run-on sentences, awkward transitions, and other grammatical issues that you may not notice when reading silently. There are three ways you can read aloud:
 1. Read aloud to yourself. Reading a paper aloud encourages you to read each word and can help you notice small mistakes.
 2. Read aloud to a friend and have the friend give you oral feedback.
 3. Have a friend read your paper aloud while you listen (but don't read along).
- **Read from the end.** Read individual sentences one at a time starting from the end of the paper rather than the beginning. This forces you to pay attention to the sentence itself rather than to the ideas of the paper as a whole.
- **Role-play.** While reading, put yourself in your audience's shoes. Playing the role of the reader encourages you to see the paper as your audience might.
- **After you have proofread the hard copy, use the *search in document* function on your computer** to look for common errors from your list.
- (That said), **don't rely on computer spelling or grammar checkers to find errors for you!** Spelling and grammar checkers don't catch all mistakes. For example, it would not catch the word choice error in the following sentence: *The hiking group realized they had forgotten to bring along a first-aid kit.*

When You Are Done

- Have a friend look at your paper after you have made all the corrections you identified. A new reader will be able to help you catch mistakes that you might have overlooked.
- Make an appointment with a Learning Specialist if you have any further questions or want someone to teach you more about proofreading.
- Ask your teacher to look at the areas you usually have trouble with to see if you have made any progress.

Finding Common Errors

Here are some common proofreading issues that come up for many writers. For grammatical or spelling errors, try underlining or highlighting words that often trip you up. On a sentence level, take note of which errors you make frequently. Also make note of common sentence errors you have such as run-on sentences, comma splices, or sentence fragments—this will help you proofread more efficiently in the future.

Spelling

- Do not solely rely on your computer's spell-check—it will not get everything!
- Trace a pencil carefully under each line of text to see words individually.
- Be especially careful of words that have tricky letter combinations, like "ei/ie."
- Take special care of homonyms like your/you're, to/too/two, and there/their/they're, as spell check will not recognize these as errors.

Left-out and doubled words

Read the paper slowly aloud to make sure you haven't missed or repeated any words. Also, try reading your paper one sentence at a time in reverse—this will enable you to focus on the individual sentences.

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are sections of a sentence that are not grammatically whole sentences. For example, "Ate a sandwich" is a sentence fragment because it lacks a subject.

Make sure each sentence has a subject:

- "Looked at the OWL website." is a sentence fragment without a subject.
- "The **students** looked at the OWL website." Adding the subject is "students" makes it a complete sentence.

Make sure each sentence has a complete verb.

- "They trying to improve their writing skills." is an incomplete sentence because "trying" is an incomplete verb.
- "They **were** trying to improve their writing skills." In this sentence, "were" is necessary to make "trying" a complete verb.

See that each sentence has an independent clause. Remember that a dependent clause cannot stand on its own. In the following examples, underlines indicate dependent clauses while brackets [] indicate independent clauses.

- "Which is why the students read all of the handouts carefully." This is a dependent clause that needs an independent clause. As of right now, it is a sentence fragment.
- "[Students knew they were going to be tested on the handouts,] which is why they read all of the handouts carefully." The first part of the sentence, "Students knew they were going to be tested," is an independent clause. Pairing it with a dependent clause makes this example a complete sentence.

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 two separate sentences instead of including punctuation to separate the clauses.

Examples:

- 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." These are two independent clauses without any punctuation or conjunctions separating the two.
- 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]. The two bracketed portions are independent clauses. They are connected by the appropriate conjunction "and" and a comma.
- Another edited version: "[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]." In this case, these two independent clauses are turned into individual sentences separated by a period and capitalization.

Comma Splices

- Look closely at sentences that have commas.
- See if the sentence contains two independent clauses. Independent clauses are complete sentences.
- If there are two independent clauses, they should be connected with a comma and a conjunction (and, but, for, or, so, yet, nor). Commas are not needed for some subordinating conjunctions (because, for, since, while, etc.) because these conjunctions are used to combine dependent and independent clauses.
- Another option is to take out the comma and insert a semicolon instead.

Examples:

- Comma Splice: "[I would like to write my paper about basketball], [it's a topic I can talk about at length.]" The bracketed portions are independent clauses. A comma alone is not enough to connect them.
- Edited version: "[I would like to write my paper about basketball] **because it's a topic I can talk about at length.**" Here, the bracketed portion is an independent clause while the underlined portion is a dependent clause. The subordinating conjunction "because" connects these two clauses.
- Edited version, using a semicolon: "[I would like to write my paper about basketball] ; [it's a topic I can talk about at length.]" Here, a semicolon connects two similar independent clauses.

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.
- An easy way to do this is to underline all subjects. Then, circle or highlight the verbs one at a time and see if they match.

Examples:

- Incorrect subject verb agreement: “**Students** at the university level usually **is** very busy.” Here, the subject “students” is plural, and the verb “is” is singular, so they don’t match.
- Edited version: “**Students** at the university level usually **are** very busy.” “Are” is a plural verb that matches the plural noun, “students.”

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.

Examples:

- “Since I have a lot of work to do is why I can’t go out tonight.” Both underlined sections of the sentence are dependent clauses. An independent and dependent clause make a complete sentence.
- Edited version: “Since I have a lot of work to do, [I can’t go out tonight].” The underlined portion is a dependent clause while the bracketed one is an independent clause. Thus, this example is a complete sentence.

Parallelism

Look through your paper for series of items, usually separated by commas. Also, make sure these items are in parallel form, meaning they all use a similar form.

- Example: “Being a good friend involves **listening, to be** considerate, and **that** you know how to have fun.” In this example, “listening” is in present tense, “to be” is in the infinitive form, and “that you know how to have fun” is a sentence fragment. These items in the series do not match up.
- Edited version: “Being a good friend involves **listening, being** considerate, and **having** fun.” In this example, “listening,” “being,” and “having” are all in the present continuous (-ing endings) tense. They are in parallel form.

Pronoun Reference/Agreement

- Skim your paper, searching for pronouns.
- Search for the noun that the pronoun replaces.
- If you can't find any nouns, 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.

Examples:

- “**Sam** had three waffles for breakfast. **He** wasn’t hungry again until lunch.” Here, it is clear that Sam is the “he” referred to in the second sentence. Thus the singular third person pronoun, “he” matches with Sam.
- “**Teresa** and **Ariel** walked the dog. The dog bit **her**.” In this case, it is unclear who the dog bit because the pronoun, “her,” could refer to either Teresa or Ariel.
- “**Teresa** and **Ariel** walked the dog. Later, it bit **them**.” Here, the third person plural pronoun, “them,” matches the nouns that precede it. It’s clear that the dog bit both people.

- “Teresa and Ariel walked the dog. **Teresa** unhooked the leash, and the dog bit **her**.” In these sentences, it is assumed that Teresa is the “her” in the second sentence because her name directly precedes the singular pronoun, “her.”

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."

Examples:

- “**It's** a good day for a walk.” This sentence is correct because “it's” can be replaced with “it is.”
- “A bird nests on that tree. See **its** eggs?” In this case, “its” is a pronoun describing the noun, “bird.” Because it is a pronoun, no apostrophe is needed.
- “Classes are cancelled today” is a correct sentence whereas “Class's are cancelled today” is incorrect because the plural form of class simply adds an “-es” to the end of the word.
- “**Lien's** markers don't work.” Here, Lien needs an apostrophe because the noun is a possessive one. The apostrophe tells the reader that Lien owns the markers.

Use an Error Log to Improve Your Editing

Error Log Template

Sentence with Error	Type of Error	Corrected Sentence	Notes and Resources
"Its over this afternoon."	Contraction/ apostrophe	"It's over this afternoon."	"It's" = it is

