Aim of this factsheet

To help you to develop effective proofreading strategies in order to submit the best possible version of your work.

Introduction

Effective proofreading skills can improve the overall standard of your work, and should be one of the final checks that you undertake when working on your assignment. However, it is also important to allow time to make changes, so reading your work at the last minute is less helpful than proofreading a few days before your deadline.

Proofreading is the very careful reading of your assignment in order to:

- check for spelling, punctuation and grammatical errors, omitted words and word endings.
- ensure that your work is in the correct format and is consistent throughout, including layout, text font and size.
- carefully check your reference list: are all sources that you cite included? Are all items in your list appropriately referenced?

As well as checking for errors, proofreading is also about the ‘sound’ of your assignment; this process can help you to polish your work and ensure that you make your points as effectively as possible. Does your work sound right in terms of flow, structure and clarity? Are the sentences too short, too long or at all confusing?

1. When and where you proofread

- Ensure that you can really focus on proofreading. Proofreading that is done when you are tired and sitting with other people (or in front of the TV) is unlikely to be effective. Minimise any distractions, find a place that you can really focus, and try not to do it at the end of an evening’s writing when you are tired and unlikely to spot all errors.

- Set aside time for proofreading and revision when developing a time plan. Aim to complete your work ahead of your deadline: if you are still writing on the day you submit, there will not be enough time to proofread effectively and make the necessary changes (and then proofread again!). As well as planning how much time you will spend on stages such as researching and writing, you should include proofreading as a separate stage in the process.
Take a break from your work before proofreading it. This will enable you to look at your work with fresh eyes, and make it more likely that you will notice any mistakes. It can be difficult to spot errors in our own work if we have not had a break from it: you are likely to read what you think you have written, rather than what is really on the page. You must therefore plan for this break, as well the proofreading itself, in your time plan.

2. Proofreading techniques

The key to effective proofreading is to be able to read your work with a fresh perspective. There are a few different techniques that you can apply, some of which are outlined below. You may find it helpful to try them all out and see what helps you the most, or you may wish to work through this list for each assignment in order to make sure your work is as polished as possible!

General proofreading tips

- One of the best strategies for proofreading is to read your work aloud, and not just silently read through it. This forces you to pay attention to the words on the page, and if you have any sentences that do not make sense, or any cases of repetition, you are more likely to find them. For this to work as well as possible, read aloud at a steady pace. Do not race through it: if you go too quickly, you are likely to skip things or change words to make it make sense without realising it.
- You may find it helpful to read your work aloud to somebody to see if they think it makes sense. Alternatively, you could record yourself on your phone and listen back; do this after a break (or the next day) in order to be able to more easily judge whether or not you are being clear and making points as effectively as possible.

Proofreading tips with a paper copy

Reading a printout of your work may help you to pick out more errors than if you read it on a screen that you have been typing onto for the last few hours or days. Once you have printed a copy, try the following techniques:

- As you move down the page, use a blank piece of paper or a ruler to hide the line that comes next. This can help you to make sure you read each line, and that you do not skip anything or repeat it.
- Read your work a paragraph at a time, to check if the meaning of your points is clear and whether or not the paragraph makes sense as a whole. Have you made your points effectively, and have you backed them up with evidence? Does the structure of the paragraph work?
- Travel up the document sentence by sentence from the end, so that you focus on whether individual sentences make grammatical sense without being distracted by the overall meaning of the paragraph. Some people read down and then up their essays, which can be very helpful in spotting errors.
Computer or device proofreading tips

Make use of the software and tools available to you when proofreading. These include:

- Spell checkers: whether or not you are confident in spelling, be sure to use a spell checker on your completed work. Be aware, however, that the spell checking facility will not catch every error: you may have used a ‘correctly’ spelled word – just not the appropriate one in this context. See the note on homophones and confused expressions later in this factsheet. Also be aware of whether your software is using a US English or UK English dictionary.

- You may find text-to-speech software useful, as this reads text documents aloud and you are then more likely to hear errors. Text reading tools are increasingly available as part of word processing software.

3. Other things to look out for

- **Homophones** – these are words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings. For example their/there/they’re; whose/who’s; too/to/two.

- **Misspelled words that you may use frequently** – such as accessible, business, privilege or achieve.

- **Confused expressions** – these can include commonly mixed-up words like affect/effect; principle/principal; stationary/stationery.

- **Word repetition** – try to vary your vocabulary so that your writing is not repetitive, for example when introducing theorists into your writing. Rather than, for example, “Brown (2008) states... On the other hand Smith and Jones (1999) state... Evans (2017) also states that...”, consider the alternative terms you might use to introduce theories and quotes. These include suggests, asserts, proposes, claims, repudiates, considers and identifies.

For further advice on the above, see our libguides pages and factsheets on Commonly Confused Words and Terms and Definitions.

Checklist for proofreading your work

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Things to check</th>
<th>Completed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Spellings – including names, titles, academic and technical terms</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Abbreviations – full name/term must be written out in full with the abbreviation in brackets the first time it is used; can then use abbreviation throughout rest of document</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Formatting – check that your font, font size and spacing are consistent throughout your assignment (for example, Arial font size 12, line spacing 1.5)</td>
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<td>4. Word repetition – if you find repetition, try to vary your language (but make sure it still makes sense!)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Things to check</td>
<td>Completed</td>
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<td>5. Correct, precise academic vocabulary</td>
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<td>6. Punctuation</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Facts and figures</td>
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**References and further reading**


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