

Proofreading Techniques

1. What is proofreading?

Proofreading is a way of catching errors in your paper before you hand it in so that your paper will be clearer, more correct, and more acceptable to your instructor and to anyone else who reads it.

2. When should I proofread my paper?

In general, any time is a good time to proofread your paper before you hand it in.

Here are some specific times when proofreading would be a good idea:

- a. If you write multiple rough drafts, select the “last” rough draft to be the one that you proofread carefully.
- b. You could proofread each sentence after writing it, or you could wait until you finish a whole paragraph and then go back and proofread the entire paragraph.
- c. Each time you edit or add any words to your paper, (even if it is only one or two words), check over the revised part to make sure that it is correct.
- d. Most importantly, however, be sure to proofread your entire paper just before you print it out. Proofreading your whole paper carefully should always be the very last thing you do before printing out the final draft. Remember to double-check any last-minute changes for correctness before you print out the final version of your paper.

In fact, it is often a good idea to proofread your “final” paper again after it has been printed out. There’s no such thing as “too much” proofreading!

3. How do I proofread my paper?

Here is a summary of some of the more famous “tried-and-true” techniques for proofreading your paper:

- a. *First, if time permits, proofread your paper after being away from it for several hours or even for a few days.*

Take a break before proofreading your paper. After some “down time” of rest or doing other activities, then come back to your paper and begin proofreading it. You’ll be more refreshed and better able to catch your errors.

- b. *Next, print out your paper before you begin proofreading it.*

Studies have shown that trying to proofread a paper while it is still on the monitor screen is not nearly as effective as proofreading it in hard-copy form.

You’ll miss a lot of errors by trying to catch them on the screen, so print out a hard copy of the paper before you begin proofreading it.

- c. *When you begin to proofread, have a pen or pencil in hand to mark the errors or rough spots as soon as you find them.*

Mark your paper freely and quickly as you proofread. Don't be shy about circling words, checking awkward-sounding phrases, or putting question marks beside unclear passages. These markings will help you when you go back over your paper to fix up things.

- d. *Read your paper aloud, slowly and carefully.*

When you discover a word that you have accidentally skipped, you'll catch the omission if you are reading your paper aloud. You'll also be better able to determine if a word or sentence "sounds" right if you hear the sound of each word as you say it slowly and carefully.

- e. *Give your paper to someone else to proofread.*

Often the author of a paper is too familiar with his or her paper to catch errors like a skipped word or an awkward-sounding sentence. Someone else—a friend, a roommate, or the like—will be more distant from your paper and will therefore be more objective toward it and thus be better able to detect minor errors in it. However, do not let that person make any written changes without your approval. Ask the reader to give you only a verbal assessment of your paper, which should be your work, not someone else's, and should reflect only your ideas expressed in your words.

- f. *Proofread your paper backwards!*

This sounds crazy, but it actually helps to detect correct word order and to catch missing words.

- g. *Use the spell check.*

Although it is not perfect, a good spellchecker will usually catch most typos and misspelled words. So, while your paper is still in the computer, run a spell check. Many modern spellcheckers will even ask if you are using the correct form of a homonym, like *to*, *too*, or *two* or *there*, *their*, and *they're*.

- h. *Use the grammar check with great caution and reservation!*

Many students rely too much on grammar checks. Contrary to what some students seem to believe, computers cannot actually think. They are merely machines that have been programmed to react to certain electronic stimuli. Although most spell checks are very useful for detecting misspelled words, many grammar checks actually misinterpret grammatical situations and even tell students to do the wrong thing to correct an error in grammar or mechanics. Use grammar checks rarely if at all, and,

when you do use them, don't believe everything they tell you. You might be better off using a grammar handbook or asking your instructor for help.

4. What are some typical errors to watch out for when I proofread?

Among the more commonly made errors in students' papers are the following:

- Sentence errors (fragments, run-ons, comma splices)
- Commas (misplaced, incorrectly use, missing)
- Incorrect homonym use
- Misspelling
- Typos
- Transposing letters (*from* vs. *form*)
- Confusing similar words (*affect* vs. *effect*, *then* vs. *than*)
- Incorrect use of capitals or omitting correct capital letters

Although it takes extra time and effort, good proofreading is a valuable skill for a writer and should be used frequently to help produce an excellent paper.