

Proofreading Tips and Techniques 1

Things to Remember:

- Double space your lines as you write – it makes corrections clearer and easier for your rater to read. You can always revert to single space if you run out of paper.
- Give yourself at least 5 minutes at the end of the hour for proofreading. 10 – 15 minutes are better.
- Many people give themselves a disadvantage when they try to use words they do not know (and, especially, those that they cannot spell). Big vocabulary that you are not familiar with will not impress your rater. If you don't know the word, do NOT use it.

How to Proofread:

As you write, circle, star, or otherwise mark any words and phrases that you think may be wrong (not the correct word, a cliché, the grammar is bad, etc). Just make sure that the notation you use is tiny – you don't want your paper filled with lots of crazy marks that makes the essay unreadable. You can quickly return to these concerns once you finish writing your essay. When you think of a better way to say what you meant, write it above the circled words and cross out the wrong words.

Read your essay backwards. Start with the last sentence and read it. Then, read the second to last sentence, the third to last sentence, etc. This does several things. First, it allows you to focus on the sentence itself, instead of everything that surrounds it. It also prevents you from getting caught up in the flow of your own essay. If you are caught in the flow, your brain remembers what you meant to say and it begins to supply/fill in words and ideas that are not actually in the sentence.

If a sentence confuses you, ask yourself what you really meant to say. In Writing Center tutorials, often what the student verbally says is better and clearer than their words on paper. So, look away from the essay, ask yourself what you meant to say, and then write down that sentence instead. Don't waste time trying to figure out and fix the grammar in a confusing sentence.

Know what problems you tend to have, and focus your proofreading on those areas. A Writing Center tutorial can definitely help you in this area. Write a new essay under test conditions using a Regents' approved topic (www.gsu.edu/~wwwrtp) or write the essay on the Writing Center Regents WebCT course, and make an appointment for a tutorial.

Reread the essay to make sure that your argument is strong and clear. Also, read each topic sentence (the 1st sentence of each paragraph) to make sure that it is argumentative and that it clearly states what the paragraph will do. Read your introduction to make sure that you can identify your thesis and that it is an argument.

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What to Look for:

Sentence Fragments

Each sentence must have a verb (the action) and a subject (the doer of the action). If your sentence does not have both of these (it will sound odd and incomplete when you read it), then it is a fragment and you must revise it. Figure out which part you are missing and add it in. Also, several sentence fragments are caused by subordinating words that make the clause dependent: "If the dog jumped over the fence." See page 620 in *A Writer's Resource* for a list of subordinating words.

Homonyms

There/Their/They're

There: an adverb that indicates location; contains "here". *That house over there.*

Their: possessive pronoun that means "ownership." *Their house is on the river.*

They're: contraction of "they" + "are." *They're making a bad decision.*

Accept/Except

Accept: a verb (a=action); *I accept your decision.*

Except: means "but" or "aside from the fact that" (a form of "exception")

I invited my entire class except Bobby.

Affect/Effect

Affect: a verb that means "to influence" (a=action). *The story greatly affected me.*

Effect: a noun that means a "result". *The effect of the crash was horrendous.*

Too/To/Two

Too: "also," "in addition." *I too hope she finds her father.*

To: indicates movement; a preposition. *We went to the party.*

Two: the number. *I would like two cheeseburgers.*

Its/It's

Its: a possessive pronoun. *The dog wags its tail.*

It's: a contraction of "it" and "is." *It's cold outside.*

Lose/Loose

Lose: a verb that means "to misplace." *The children lose the soccer ball again.*

Loose: an adjective that means "not tight." *The loose dress looked silly.*

Passed/Past

Passed: a verb that is the past tense of the verb "to pass." *Time passed swiftly.*

Past: a noun that means "former time." *It's all in the past.*

Precede/Proceed

Precede: "to come before" ("pre" means "before"). *Laura preceded me into the church.*

Proceed: "to go forward." *Let us proceed with the trial.*

Proofreading Tips and Techniques 3

Defining Pronouns

If you have too many “this,” “that,” “it” etc., then the reader loses the meaning of those words. Look at this sentence:

This shows that Harry had already taken care of it.

What is going on in the sentence? The meaning is unknown because the pronouns are not defined (i.e., we don’t know what they refer to). So, take the time to define the pronouns for your reader. A better sentence would be:

This fear Sharon felt shows that Harry had already taken care of the murder.

See the difference? “This” has been followed with concrete details of what “this” refers to, and “it” has been replaced with the definite noun “the murder.” The “this” problem crops up most when you begin a sentence with “this.” If you do so, follow “this” with a phrase that defines “this.”

Subject/Verb Agreement

In each clause of a sentence, the subject(s) and verb(s) must “agree.” That is, a singular subject is paired with a singular verb, and plural subjects are paired with plural verbs.

Generally, while plural **subjects** in English end with an “S,” their corresponding *present tense* verbs do not.

Dogs *run* through the street.

Jeff and Matt *go* to the store.

Similarly, while a singular **subject** does not end with an “S,” its corresponding *present tense* verb does.

The **dog** *runs* through the street.

Jeff *goes* to the store.

When a singular subject completes multiple actions, each verb is singular:

The **potato chip** *smells* good and *crunches* in my mouth.

Be careful when you have multiple subjects completing the same singular action, for a plural verb must always be used:

A sheet of **paper**, a **pencil**, and **lip gloss** *fall* out of the book bag.

Similarly, when you have multiple subjects and multiple verbs, each verb must also be plural:

The **mayor** and the **governor** *argue*, *spit*, and *yell* during the conference.

Consistent Voice

Either all 1st person (I, we, me, my, mine, etc.), or all 3rd person (he, she, it, they, their, etc.). Do not switch between the two. Cross out any “you,” “your,” “you’re” that you find. When you cross them out, make sure to re-word the sentence so that it makes sense.

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Overused Words

Try to think of synonyms for word you use more than 3 times in a paragraph. Raters look for variety of vocabulary. (Remember the “character” paragraph in the Examples workshop? Don’t do that). Also, do your best to define abstract words (qualities and/or ideas without physical properties) like “character,” so that it is clear that you know what you mean.

Commas

Comma splices or a lack of commas can greatly impair your rater’s ability to read and comprehend your sentence. Commas separate different meanings and parts within the same sentence. Most readers will not be able to simply “get” the meaning of the sentence if the commas are wrong. Here’s an example:

Woman without her man is nothing

Punctuation changes the way this sentence can be read.

Woman! Without her, man is nothing.

Woman, without her man, is nothing.

The meaning of the sentence is completely reversed depending on the punctuation used and its placement within the sentence. See now why this is important?

So, some comma rules to remember:

Use a comma to separate 2 independent clauses (sections that contain both a subject and a verb) joined by a conjunction (and, but, or, so, yet, etc.). The comma comes before the conjunction.

Charlie **ate** a chocolate bar, and he **found** a golden ticket.

Use a comma to set off transitional expressions (adverbs like *however*, *therefore*, and *moreover*; and transitional phrases like *for example*, *on the other hand*).

As a matter of fact, he had a nervous breakdown.

Brian Wilson, **for example**, was unable to cope with the pressures of touring.

He is still considered an important rock and roll figure, **however**.

Use commas to separate items in a list. Notice that commas do not begin the series or come after the series finishes.

I bought a ball, a pair of cleats, and a jersey.

I went to the store, picked up some eggs, and baked quiche.

Americans work longer hours than German, French, or British workers are expected to work.

Use a comma to set off a contrasting comment, such as those beginning with *not*, *unlike*, or *in contrast to*.

Comedy, **unlike tragedy**, often has trouble with gaining respect from critics.

Use commas for appositives (noun or noun phrases that are used to rename, but are not necessary to the sentence).

Lisa, **my friend**, attends college in Philadelphia.

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Dictionary

You can use a dictionary or a hand-held spell checker for the last 15 minutes of the exam (a thesaurus or a handbook are not allowed). Make sure to mark all words you think may be misspelled so you can easily find and fix them. The proctor will notify you when you may pull out the dictionary.