

# **How to Proofread and Edit Your Writing**

## **A Guide for Student Writers**

Proofreading is a pain. There's no doubt about it. It can be tedious and boring--if you approach it as correcting errors. But proofreading isn't correcting errors so much as it involves reviewing the paper for ideas and for readability. It allows you to read your draft, to consider what you've written, and to change your mind. It's an opportunity to clarify--for yourself as well as for your reader--what you've said and to make some choices. Proofreading is in your control, no one else's. No one, really, can proofread for you because the kinds of changes that come from proofreading are changes in your

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## **General Strategies for All Proofreading**



Consider the relationship between the thesis and your paragraph glosses on your sheet.

that the draft needs more development. This is the time to decide where might need to add paragraphs that go into more detail about a point.

### **Repeat as necessary**

Notice that while proofreading for revising you might spot a difficulty that sends you back to the beginning of the proofreading process. You might expect that. It doesn't mean you've made a mistake but that you're getting good at making choices. Revising is circular, recursive. Making a change at one place in the draft sends ripples through the entire draft. A writer with flexible strategies is sensitive to the changes and builds on them.

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## **Section II: Proofreading for Editing a Near-Final Draft**

Proofreading for editing--for spotting and fixing sentence-level problems--involves two kinds of reading and demands at least two passes through the paper:

- In the first way of reading, you're watching for problematic sentences. These are sentences that do not necessarily have mechanical or grammatical "errors" in them, but are, in some way, awkward. (Teachers mark them AWK or "unclear"). In this reading, you're reading for meaning.
- In the second way of reading, you're watching for mechanical and grammatical "errors," and so you're reading not for meaning so much as for form. These are non-negotiable errors--errors that will call attention to themselves as errors in the paper you're writing. It is commonly said that such errors cause "a breakdown in communication." This isn't really true; most readers can and do read through sentence-level errors and more or less understand what's being said. But these are the kinds of errors that, for the most part, annoy readers, and that--fairly or unfairly--mark the paper as sloppy.

### **AWK or Confused Sentences and Paramedics**

AWK sentences often come about when you're working with unfamiliar and complex ideas, or when you're writing an unfamiliar kind of paper. Dealing with AWKward or unclear sentences often demands applying the revision strategies in the first part of this handout to the problem section of the paper. Or, you can use the Paramedic Method of editing to help you find the problem and re-build the sentence. Make an appointment with a writing assistant to get some training in paramedic editing.

As mentioned before, keep in mind that in proofreading for editing, you're not trying to change every sentence that you've written. If you find you're doing so, you might need to proofread for revising! Editing a draft for everything is tedious and boring. Use the adage, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." If a sentence or a paragraph seems adequate, leave it. Keep yourself focused on the difficulties you encounter.

## **Strategies for Editing for Mechanical and Grammatical Errors**

By divorcing the words from the context of the sentence by reading backwards, you'll be

are being teased and that the primary information is being withheld until time or condition are established, there will be a break point where you should insert a

And it works for sentences that use be-verbs (forms of is). Here's the original:

Because drafts come to the writing assistants in read-only versions, the possibility of micro-editing is more limited than it is in face-to-face tutoring, and writing assistants are prompted to make more holistic comments and suggestions than they are in face-to-face settings.

And here's the sentence with the verbs (in past tense) and their subjects marked:

Because **drafts** to the writing assistants in read-only versions, **the possibility of micro-editing** more limited than **it** in face-to-face tutoring, and **writing assistants** to make more holistic comments and suggestions than **they** in face-to-face settings.

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This sounds tough, but think of it as if it were basic math. If you want to add fractions and whole numbers, you must first convert the fractions to decimals or the whole number to fractions. Parallel structure works the same way. To link elements in parallel (subjects, verbs, adjectives and adverbs), you need to make them match in form. ! \* I like working, sleeping, and to ski. non-parallel ! I like working, sleeping, and skiing. parallel -ing forms ! I like to work, to sleep, and to ski. parallel to + verb forms

## **Editing for missing words**

Read your paper backwards. Start with the last sentence, then read the second to the last, and so on.

If you're plagued with the problem of letting your mind get ahead of your hand, it will probably happen to you as a reader, too, especially when you're reading your own work, so you shouldn't expect to catch missing words with a line-by-line reading. You need to slow yourself down, paying attention to the presence (or absence) of each word. If you prefer to read straight through, use a strategy to slow your reading pace, such as placing your pencil on each word as you read it, or using a piece of paper to cover all the lines below those you are currently reading (This is what professional proofreaders do.) Any strategy that will help you be a careful reader rather than a speed reader will be useful.

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<http://cal.bemidjistate.edu/wrc/handouts/ProofAndEdit.html>

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