

Word Witch on:
PROOFREADING

Read widely and often. Good proofreaders read many books. Ignorance may be bliss, but it won't make you a better proofreader.

FOUR IMPORTANT RULES:

Adopt the copy editors' creed: First do no harm.

Unless you're absolutely positive about something, look it up

Use the adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Do not assume and take nothing for granted.

1. TOOLS:

Proofreading is a learning process. You're not just looking for errors that you recognize; you're also learning to recognize and correct new errors. Keep stylebooks and dictionaries close at hand as you proofread.

Use the AP and Tulsa World stylebooks to check for meanings and usage before the dictionary. If those fail try other style books such as the New York Times' or Chicago Manual of Style.

Use AP's official dictionary, Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th edition, to check any words of which you are unsure, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses and irregular forms.

For backup, use online sources such as Dictionary.com and Merriam-Webster online.

2. TECHNIQUES:

Proofreading includes checking for libel, fairness, clarity and other issues in addition to spelling, grammar, definitions and factual accuracy.

Don't try to proofread for everything at once. Make a number of passes through the paper. to proofread for layout, accuracy, spelling, grammar, names, numbers, watching for a different problem or concern each time.

If you try to identify and correct too many things at once, you risk losing focus, and your proofreading will be less effective.

A. Layout

Folio. See if the date, page numbers, folios appear in the same place on each page and are correct. See if the dates given match the correct days of the week.

Heads. See if all headlines and subheads are in the Tulsa World style and consistent throughout. Headings are prone to errors. Therefore, you should first proof the body of the text. Then go back and proof the heads and subheads. A spelling error in 60 point is worse than the same in 9.5 point.

Paragraphs. See if all the paragraphs are indented. Does each paragraph follow clearly and logically from the one before it? If not, insert some type of transitional device between each sentence. Break up paragraphs that are too long. Short paragraphs put air around what is written and make it look inviting; one big chunk of type can discourage the reader from even starting to read.

Body type. Check the font sizes. If there is a story with different heads, make sure they all match up throughout. Make sure that words in italics or bold are consistent throughout the text.

Spacing. See if your word spacing is off or if automatic justification has caused "bad breaks" in copy.

Jumps. Make sure jumplines and page numbers match the corresponding words and pages. See if the styles follow our guidelines.

Cutlines. The main people in the photograph should always be identified. Double-check to be sure names are spelled correctly. Then triple-check them against the photographer's caption AND any references in the story. Contact the photographer and reporter if necessary.

Use parentheses to set off directions from the captions to the picture. "Jane Brown (above) ,...or Joe Black (upper left.)"

Don't repeat the reporter's exact wording from a story in a caption and/or headline.

Avoid using terms like "is shown, is pictured, and looks on."

Check photographer's name and make sure credit style is followed.

Informational graphics and pull-outs. Take care to read type in very tiny font. Mistakes are easy to miss. Always triple-check numbers, headings, the first and last paragraphs, and the graphic artist's name.

b. Accuracy

Names. Double check even if you're sure a name is correct. If you have to check on particular names, cities or suburbs, oil/gas wells, universities, etc., find the name on its Web site or call to make sure it's absolutely correct.

See if proper names are spelled correctly and people are listed with their titles. Make sure spellings between text, headlines and cutlines match.

Numbers. If there are columns of numbers, or a table on the page, check the numbers down the columns rather than across. See if totals are correct and decimal points aligned. Inspect all figures, even dates. See if any number has been transposed.

Always call phone numbers to make sure they are right.

As deadline nears, priorities must be set. But in some stories, the math might be the most important thing to check; then, at least do a quick estimate: 47.93 percent of something is about half, for instance.

Facts. Check and double check any company names, telephone numbers or other factual information. Use the Tulsa World archives, almanacs or encyclopedias to check facts, or call a Tulsa World researcher.

C. Grammar:

Read slowly, and read every word.

Separate the text into individual sentences. Then read each sentence separately, looking for grammar errors.

Subject-verb agreement. Check each sentence to ensure that it has a subject and a verb. Isolate the main verb in each sentence. Make sure if the writer has used a singular subject, a singular verb is also used. Similarly, a plural subject needs a plural verb.

Pay special attention to any sentence that contains a clause or phrase with an internal verb that can cause confusion.

Tenses. Make sure the writer has not incorrectly jumped about in different tenses. Has the writer used the correct form of the verb to express the tense intended?

Dangling and misplaced modifiers. Be sure introductory phrases or clauses modify the subject of the sentence. Make certain internal modifying phrases are next to the word they modify and do not cause confusing images.

Pronoun reference and agreement. Skim the paper for each pronoun. When you find one, skim backwards until you find the noun it is replacing (called an "antecedent." The noun may be in the same sentence as the pronoun, or it may not.

a) Make sure that the noun and pronoun agree in number. Note that the pronouns "everyone" and "someone" are considered singular, and check to see that "every" and "each" have nouns after them that are singular.

b) If you can't find the noun that the pronoun is referring back to, or if you have difficulty finding it, take that as a signal that a reader might have difficulty too. Parallel structures Check the words or word groups used in a series, and check words or word groups joined by and and or. Make sure that each item in the series match in grammatical form.

Confusing words. Always double check words like "it's", "its", "if", "of" "who's", "whose," etc. Those words can often be interchanged and they need extra concentration to ensure they don't get mixed up. Search for language-usage problems. Memorize confusing words so you can mentally flag them as you are reading. For example, "your" instead of "you're," or "there" instead of "their," etc.

Left-Out Words. Read the paper aloud, pointing to every word as you read. Don't let your eye move ahead until you spot each word. Also, make sure that you haven't doubled any words.

Sentence Length. Compute the average number of words per sentence. How close is that number compared to the average of 22? If sentences are too long, break them into shorter units, being certain not to create a sentence fragment.

Fragments. Check to see whether a sentence contains an independent clause and forms a complete thought. Pay special attention to sentences that begin with dependent marker words (such as "because") or phrases such as for example or such as. See if the sentence might be just a piece of the previous sentence that mistakenly got separated by a period.

Run-On Sentences. Review each sentence to see whether it contains more than one independent clause. Start with the last sentence of your paper, and work your way back to the beginning, sentence by sentence. Do two sentences run together incorrectly without a period, conjunction or semicolon separating them? Break the sentence in two if necessary.

D. Spelling

If you are unsure of the spelling of a certain word, look it up.

Be especially careful of the words easily misspelled: "ei" and "ie" words, words that add "-ing" and "ed," and words with one or more sets of double letters.

If necessary, keep a list of frequently misspelled pairs, especially homonyms. Check a dictionary to see that each word is spelled correctly.

Running a spell-check program will catch most typos and run-together words quickly. Also handy for catching names spelled multiple ways.

E. Punctuation:

Is every sentence ended with a period, question mark, or exclamation point?

Commas. Are the writer's thoughts within sentences broken up correctly by commas for easier understanding? Make sure the writer has broken up series with commas correctly.

If commas are a frequent problem, go through the paper checking just that one problem. Skim the story stopping at every comma, See if there is a complete sentence on each side of it. If there is, you have a comma splice.

Should you use "that" instead of "which"? If you're not sure, look it up.

Skim for the conjunctions and, but, for, or, nor, so and yet. See whether there is a complete sentence on each side of the conjunction. If so, place a comma before the conjunction. Eliminate the final comma before a conjunction in a series.

Introductory Commas. Skim your paper, looking only at the first two or three words of each sentence. Stop if one of these words is a dependent marker, a transition word, a participle, or a preposition.

Listen for a possible break point before the main clause. Place a comma at the end of the introductory phrase or clause (which is before the independent clause).

Comma Splices. Skim the story, stopping at every comma. See whether there is a complete sentence on each side of the comma. If so, add a coordinating conjunction after the comma or replace the comma with a semicolon or period. These often occur in quotes, so pay special attention to these.

Quotations. See if any quotation marks are missing. Make sure commas and periods come within quote marks and semicolons and colons outside.

Semicolons. Series that have internal commas should be separated with semicolons, including after the last series, unless it separates the subject from the verb.

Dashes. Do not overuse as they break the flow of a thought. They can be used in place of colons if a series follows.

Apostrophes. Are they used correctly to indicate possession or contractions? If you're unsure, check a grammar book. Skim the copy, stopping only at those words which end in "s." See whether or not each "s" word needs an apostrophe. If an apostrophe is needed, you will be able to invert the word order and say "of" or "of the."

Capitalization. Has the writer capitalized names of persons, cities, countries, streets, and titles? Make sure a quotation is capitalized according to the sentence structure? Check to see if acronym use adheres to Tulsa World and AP style. Are there periods after abbreviations?

3.TIPS FOR PROOFREADING

Proofread the second half of the document first. That's where the errors tend to crop up. Then proofread the first half.

Proofread backwards. Begin at the end and work back through the document surface elements rather than the meaning of the document.

Place a ruler under each line as you read it. This will give your eyes a manageable amount of text to read.

Take a break between writing and proofreading. Set the document aside for at least 20 minutes, longer if possible.

Proofread at the time of day when you are most alert to spotting errors.

Proofread once aloud. It helps to read out loud, because 1) you are forced to slow down and 2) you hear what you are reading as well as seeing it, so you are using two senses. It is often possible to hear a mistake, such as an omitted or repeated word that you have not seen.

When you find an error, correct it and then reread the line.

Take care that you don't skip from one obvious error to the next, missing subtle errors in between.

Use a ruler or a piece of paper under the line you're checking. That will help you concentrate on the words better.

Point at the words, one by one, as you go along the line of text. Saying the word out loud as you point at it also helps.

Humility helps. Treat proofreading as an opportunity to learn, not show off, in addition to improving your publication's report.