



Figure 1 Logos for the Academic Resource Center and The Writing Center

PROOFREADING

What exactly is *proofreading*? Is it integral to the construction of the paper? Should I be concerned with it from the moment I start writing? Can I just not do it? The answers to these questions—all NO—illustrate how proofreading serves an important role in essay writing, but not an overly critical one. Instead of analyzing the content of an essay, this process deals with what are known as the mechanics of writing.



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Figure 2 Cartoon of a person writing

Mechanical errors include areas like grammar, spelling, and punctuation. These are known as simple mechanical errors because, like any machine, these parts are regularly fixed. There are set rules and guidelines for making these types of corrections such as ending a sentence with a period or beginning a sentence with a capital letter.

With any writing assignment, make sure you give yourself enough time to work through your paper at a steady pace, allowing you enough time to enjoy writing your assignment and proofreading it, as well.

◇ GETTING STARTED

Before you begin proofreading, reflect on the kind of errors that you tend to make. What are the typical problems that your instructors have pointed out to you in the past? Do you still make the same mistakes? Have you made the same mistakes in this paper? Check with your instructor or a tutor in the Writing Center if you are not sure as to whether or not you're identifying all of the areas you should be focusing on.

◇ GRAMMAR

- Check sentence structure [*See SUMMARY PARTS OF A SPEECH handout*]

Is there proper subject/verb agreement used? [*See SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT handout*]

Check pronoun agreement by making sure that all pronouns have *antecedents* [*SEE PRONOUNS HANDOUT*]

Check to see that adjectives and adverbs are not missed [*SEE ADJECTIVES & ADVERBS handout*]

Are articles used properly? [*See ARTICLES handout*]

- Make sure the verb tense is used correctly.

Sentence: Different verb tenses within the same sentence can sometimes be appropriate, but not always.

APPROPRIATE: I am going home but will stop there first.

INAPPROPRIATE: I ran to the park and eat candy. [Should be *ate*, not *eat* since the action happened in the past]

Paragraph: The set-up of the sentences influences the tense of the verbs.

PAST TENSE: My mother called me and told me that I needed to come home.

TENSE CHANGED TO PRESENT: However, I am not going home. I need to pick up a few things first.

TENSE CHANGE TO FUTURE: Afterwards, I will go home, [TENSE CHANGE TO PRESENT] but I am sure I am going to be in trouble when I do.

[See the VERBS WITH-ED-ENDINGS and consult tutors for more detailed usage concerns.]

- Do you spend too much time in passive voice? *[See the PASSIVE/ACTIVE VOICE handout in the Writing Center.]*

- Beware of run-on sentences. Do not try to use too many ideas in a single sentence. Break them up into separate sentences or consider using the semi-colon if they are closely related. *[The Writing Center has helpful handouts on the RUN-ON SENTENCE, SEMI-COLON, COMMA, and FRAGMENTS.]*

- Check how sources (if any are being used) are cited within the text and on the Works Cited page. *[See the MLA/APA Format handouts in the Writing Center.]*

◇ **EDITING TECHNIQUES**

- Read out loud as you check for coherence and logic.
- Read sentences from last to first to determine that each sentence is complete in order to spot run-ons and fragments.
- Scan your paper looking at pronouns, verb-tenses, and prepositions, and articles.
- Go over selected areas of a text at a time, not the whole document.
- Have someone read over your paper and/or read aloud to them for feedback.
- Take a break while editing to come back to your paper refreshed.

◇ **SPELLING**

One of the last steps in editing is to check that spelling is used both correctly and appropriately. This requires nothing more than following preset rules of spelling and using the resources available. Concerning spelling issues, the **Spelling and Grammar** check software in Microsoft Word is a great tool for quickly locating spelling errors. Despite its

speed, it is not foolproof. Statistics shows that it catches roughly 30% of all errors within a paper; however, spell checkers cannot determine word usage. If you use the incorrect word *but* spell it correctly, the computer will recognize it as being correct. [E.g. *Incorrect*: I will **by** a car. / *Correct*: I will **buy** a car.] Should you encounter problems, a dictionary is another effective tool.

◇ PUNCTUATION

The final editing task (saved specifically for last) is checking punctuation. As with spelling, the **Spelling and Grammar** check can effectively find some, but NOT all, of your mistakes; however, there are some trusted techniques you can use on your own.

- Work your way BACKWARDS through your essay so that the content of your essay does not distract you from the mechanics of proper punctuation.
- Check ALL ENDING PUNCTUATION MARKS.
- SCAN your paper for COMMA USAGE.
- Go from comma to comma, paying close attention to them while you read.
- Pay attention to CONJUNCTIONS, and make sure that they are preceded by commas where needed.
- Check the first several words of each sentence for dependent clause phrases like “BECAUSE,” or “FOR EXAMPLE,” that need to be followed by a comma.
- Make sure that a clause has not been detached from a previous sentence and attached onto the next one by mistake.
- For further information, every punctuation mark is discussed in detail in a corresponding handout. ***[See the PUNCTUATION, APOSTROPHE, COMMA, SEMICOLON, and any other punctuation-related handouts.]***

A Revision Checklist for Essays

Organization

- Is there a clear and informative title that applies to the content within the paper?
- Is there a clear introduction, body, and conclusion?
- Does the introduction provide sufficient background for the reader? Are the “who,” “where,” “why,” “what,” and “how” questions addressed?

- Is there a thesis statement? Is the purpose of the essay clear?
- Does the essay move from general to specific?
- Are there good transitions between related ideas?
- Is the overall organization murky or clean? In other words, does the writer avoid introducing new material in the conclusion or switching subject in the middle of a body paragraph?
- Does every paragraph address the subject matter of the thesis in some way?

Content and Style

- Does the essay show that the writer has a knowledge of the audience?
- Is the length appropriate and adequate?
- Has the writer used sufficient examples and detail to make his or her points clearly?
- Has the assignment been addressed?
- Has the writer avoided insulting the reader?
- Is the tone of the essay professional and appropriate?
- Is the language convincing, clear, and concise?
- Has the writer used fresh language and a creative approach?

Research and Sources

- Are all sources credible?
- Is the research accurate, unbiased, and complete?
- Has the writer fully interpreted the findings?
- Has the writer commented on each source used?
- Is the analysis based on hard evidence?
- Is the analysis free of faulty reasoning?
- Is the documentation in the Works Cited page and body of the essay correct?
- Are all quotations introduced? Is the flow of the essay seamless?
- Are all long quotations set off from the text using block quotes?
- If material was paraphrased, are the sources still mentioned?
- If necessary, are limitations clearly spelled out?
- If included, are recommendations based on accurate interpretations?
- Have all facts been checked for accuracy?
- Have any potentially libelous statements been eliminated?

- Does the paper adhere to MLA or APA format both within the text and on the Works Cited page?

Proofreading

- Has the writer checked that subjects and verbs agree?
- Do all pronouns have clear antecedents?
- Has the writer checked that adjectives and adverbs have not been missed?
- Has the writer avoided using passive voice?
- Is the paper free of run-on sentences?
- Has the writer checked all ending punctuation marks?
- Are all commas used correctly?
- Are conjunctions preceded by commas when necessary?
- Has the writer checked the first few words of each sentence for dependent clause phrases?
- Has the writer scanned the paper from comma to comma?
- Has the writer tried reading the paper backwards to check the mechanics?
- Has the writer used a list of his or her common mistakes?
- Has the writer used Spell Check to help correct spelling in the essay?
- Are the pages numbered correctly?
- Is the title capitalized correctly?
- Has the writer used the correct margin and font?

SPECIFIC TYPES OF PAPERS

Argument Papers

- Is the claim or proposition clearly stated?
- Are all assertions supported by evidence?
- Is the evidence (facts, interpretations of facts, opinions) appropriate?
- Is the evidence's arrangement logical?
- Is the evidence carefully documented?
- Is the reasoning sound, avoiding all logical fallacies?
- Are controversial or ambiguous terms defined?

- Are opposing arguments considered and refuted?

Literature Papers

- Does the writer use examples from the text to support his or her own interpretation?
- Has the writer avoided a simple plot summary as the basis of the essay?
- Are parts of a work clearly and accurately indicated? Writers must refer to sections or parts by saying “the scene where...” or “at the end of Chapter 1.”
- Does the writer use the present tense to describe events from the story?
- Are titles properly punctuated?
- Has the writer referred to author properly, initially using the full name then subsequently using the last name?

Exercise:

Try using the techniques described in this handout to proofread the following paragraph.

Sylvia got to school 30 minutes early, it was the first day, and she wants to be sure she would have enough time to find her first class. She checked her schedule and realized that her first class was English. She couldn't find room on her own, so she asked one of the teachers for directions. “Room 201 is just down the hall,” she was told by the teacher with a smile. Sylvia thanking her and found it easily. Her English teacher's name was Ms. Murray and she seemed very nice. “I know that you all are probably worried about starting new year of school,” Ms. Murray told them, “but I promise you that we make it through this year together if you work hard and pay attention in class, the year will be easy for you. Who knows? It might even be enjoyed by you?” Sylvia smiled as she left the classroom at the end of the period. She knew she were going to like Ms. Murray's class.

For answers to this exercise, please consult with a Writing Center tutor.

This handout is based on the following resources:

Clouse, Barbra Fine. Working it Out: A Troubleshooting Guide for Writers. 2nd Ed. New York: McGraw-Hill 1997.

Hacker, Diana. A Writer's Reference 2nd Ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1988.

OWL: Online Writing Lab. "Editing and Proofreading Strategies for Revision" handout. Purdue University, 1995-2003. <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/general/gl_edit.html>
Perrin, Robert. The Beacon Handbook. 3rd Ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993
"Revision Checklist for Essays." Winter Park Campus Communications Student Support Center. Valencia Community College. Web. 11 May 2011.
<valenciacc.edu/wp/cssc/documents/RevisionChecklistforEssaysTipSheet.pdf>.

For Further references please see the following books:

Hall, Donald and Sven Birkerts. Writing Well. 8th Ed. New York: Harper Collins, 1994
Reinking, James A., Andrew W. Hart and Robert von der Osten. Strategies for Successful Writing: A Rhetoric, Reader, and Handbook. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Halls, 1993.

All of the above sources are available in The Writing Center.